

A close-up photograph of a woman's eye, looking slightly to the side. The image is heavily saturated with red and pink light, creating a dramatic and intense atmosphere. The eye itself is a light color, possibly hazel or light blue, and is framed by dark, well-defined eyelashes. The skin around the eye is pale, contrasting with the vibrant background colors.

# *Deedee*

*Alison  
Lord*

Deedee

---

Alison Lord

AN [*e-reads*]BOOK

New York, NY

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, scanning or any information storage retrieval system, without explicit permission in writing from the Author.

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

Copyright © 1969 by Alison Lord  
First e-reads publication 2004  
[www.e-reads.com](http://www.e-reads.com)  
ISBN 0-7592-3493-0

# Table of Contents

---

Chapter One	1
Chapter Two	11
Chapter Three	17
Chapter Four	26
Chapter Five	39
Chapter Six	47
Chapter Seven	54
Chapter Eight	63
Chapter Nine	71
Chapter Ten	79
Chapter Eleven	89
Chapter Twelve	94
Chapter Thirteen	103
Biography	109

# One

---

Deedee walked down the Strip with the defiance of the young, her blue eyes flashing rebellion, her sleek young body sausage-skinned in brilliant blue stretch pants and matching sweater. Not until the evening, when the switched-on set — and the watchers — poured into the twelve blocks between Beverly Hills and L.A. for the weekend stampede, would this become her turf. But even now in broad daylight, it gave her a sense of identity to walk along the Strip. Especially today.

Why was she stalling? Why didn't she head straight for the three-balls? Hadn't she planned today long enough? Three years, almost! With a nervous little gesture carried over from pre-adolescence, Deedee reached behind her neck to lift the near-waist-length sweep of pale blonde hair away from her shoulders. The fur coat lay limply across her free arm.

"Been 'coon-huntin', doll?" A greasy character, triple her age, fell into step beside her.

"Beat it," she said bluntly, contemptuous of his intent and his age. It was true. You couldn't talk to anybody over thirty and make sense.

Deedee's thoughts returned to the project uppermost today. She would get the money for the coat, and she would make tracks for the pad she pinned yesterday. The super promised to hold it till five, with the deposit down. Freedom! She was off the hook! Even that lousy ten P.M. curfew the squares and the fuzz got together to cook up for the kids on the Strip wouldn't faze her any more. The birth certificate smuggled smugly in her purse. Let 'em just ask.

The November sun was brazen on her as she turned off in the direction of the hock shops. She'd have to rush to get back to the apartment in time to put down the month's rent and the month's security. Then

back to Holmby Hills, to collect a valise and pack what she'd need for the weekend. By that time Fran would be flying to Vegas again.

The columnists claimed Fran was making the scene with Vic Emerson. Emerson was a cool cat for a guy pushing forty. Was Fran sleeping with him? Deedee considered the possibility dispassionately.

Fran didn't remember this was her eighteenth birthday. Had she really expected her mother to remember? Corny. Okay, set the pad — have a place to take Jack before he got curious about Deedee Costello and found out she was really Deidre Evans. She didn't want any more of that. The nightmare was over.

Deedee clutched tightly now at the mink coat that lay across one arm. She held it with fresh respect because the mink meant cash today. She had been the only fifteen-year-old at Miss Leslie's School for Young Girls with a full-length autumn haze mink. The other kids figured it was Fran Constant showing off. How could they know it was conscience money?

A black lumber-jacketed late-teenager sauntered, whistling, through the door of the pawnshop. When he spotted Deedee, he stopped whistling.

"Oh, baby, you grab me," he crooned.

She brushed past him in disdainful silence. He figured the coat was a fabulous fake. She usually wore it with a jazzy leather belt tied about her waist. God, that sick delusion Fran had about how she felt about the mink! She felt like throwing up, that time she heard Fran on the phone with Carla Sanders. "Carla, she's so nutty about that coat, she even wears it when she goes out on a Honda to eat burgers!" Fran was too square to know that the gesture showed her contempt.

Deedee walked inside the pawnshop. This was like one of those old movies you watch on television. She walked to the counter, shoved the coat across. The man behind — sharp-eyed, rotund, suspicious — lifted the coat for a close inspection. His eyes turned her, as well as the coat, inside out.

"It's mink," Deedee said, her voice laced with defiance. "And it's mine." She fished in her purse for the sales slip. In one of the dorms where she lived these last three years, she had framed the sales slip, for kicks. "Here."

Fran had given her the sales slip with one of those sex-spiked, wistful laughs that had lifted Fran Constant to the top of the box office fifteen

years ago. "A little memento, baby," Fran had said. She was supposed to be impressed. How could she be impressed anymore?

The man put on his glasses to read the sales slip. Anticipating his next question, she pushed her birth certificate across the counter. Resentment churned in her because she saw his recognition of the name, the curiosity her presence in his hock shop evoked.

"Two hundred," he said finally, with a tiny sigh.

"It cost two thousand!" Her eyes widened in outrage.

"It's worn." He shrugged, looked again at the coat. Unexpectedly, compassion shone in his eyes. "Two-twenty-five," he compromised.

"Okay." She recoiled from his compassion and took refuge in contempt. Wouldn't he want to kill himself if he knew she would have accepted the two hundred? She'd never redeem the coat. Rip the stinking pawn ticket into confetti, throw it into the Pacific.

Fran should have remembered this birthday. Eighteen was special. Months from now, Fran would remember — and again, the truck would unload the avalanche of packages from I. Magnin's. Always too late.

Deedee held firmly to the crisp new bills recently acquired from the hock shop owner. She stared obstinately at the outstretched hand of her prospective landlady.

"A receipt," Deedee said. "I want a receipt."

"Sure." The fat, frowsy brunette, in slacks that clung to a broad rump, shrugged, her eyes pinned to the bills in Deedee's hand. "Got one right here."

The woman reached into the pocket of her blouse, which just managed to meet across the bulbous breasts and pulled out a crumpled receipt. She scrounged about atop the chest of drawers, for a pencil. She picked up a vintage movie magazine to use as a brace on which to write. Fran's picture was on the magazine cover. Fran still made covers, despite the rash of younger stars coming up.

"I keep a quiet house here, no loud parties, no fellows hanging around." While she wrote, the woman was trying to fit Deedee into a category. The slacks and sweater, bought at a popular department store, did nothing to set her apart from the other boppers who made the scene. Deedee had made sure of that. "Your rent's due the first of each month."

"Right," Deedee said coldly, waiting for the woman to leave.

This was *her* pad now. Forget about the quiet scene. From next door blared the raucous dissonance of a kazoo. Deedee had a clear picture of who lived in the house. The Strippies who came into L.A. searching for something new — kids who lived by their wits or their bodies. No phony illusions, Deedee told herself with pride. She'd been wet-nursed with illusions. Grown-ups pretend the real world doesn't exist. Kids don't buy that.

The woman left her alone. Deedee threw herself on the sagging studio couch and flung her hands above her head in a gesture of triumph. She could swing this joint with no sweat. All she had to do was show at the house two or three nights a week. Monday for sure. On Mondays Fran gave her her allowance. She could swing the rent, even with all the money she kept handing over to the garage for car repairs. If she ran short, she'd buy something on the charge plate, take it back two days later and get the cash. You had to use your head in the jungle.

Deedee sat up and looked about with impersonal evaluation. So the pad was creepy. Jack wouldn't care. He was beating his fists against the Establishment. They could sit here and talk straight through the night if they felt like it. He could sleep over. Nothing was going to go wrong. A smile touched the rebellious mouth. Fran didn't even know they were both on the pill. From the same bottle!

Jack didn't know she was Fran Constant's daughter, not any of the old stuff. He turned on for Deedee Costello, girl. Her eyes softened in reminiscence as she remembered how they'd met. She was standing on the corner waiting for the bus. Saturday night. The fuzz came moving in on them, pulling the curfew bit. She was petrified. All she needed was to land at the sheriff's station — bingo, headlines! Jack saw her panic, pulled her onto the cycle with him, breezed off before anything could happen. The curfew was just an angle to get the kids off the Strip. Kooky!

Jack and she sat on the beach and talked until daybreak. He didn't even make a pass. She wished he had. She explained about how her car was in for repairs — she didn't mention she didn't have a license. How could she get a license, until now? He put her on a bus, at her insistence. *Last* Saturday night he wanted to see her home. She couldn't let him. She'd die before she let Jack know who she was. He hated people like Fran. He was turned on about important things, like Vietnam.



Jack wouldn't stay in school on a full-time basis, but he was taking a course that particularly interested him. She didn't go off to college after high school graduation. Fran hadn't pushed her, after that first scene. It was okay with Fran if she hung around the house doing nothing but fussing with her hair and nails, or wasted day after day shopping in the stores for things she didn't want. All those awful years of boarding school had been enough. She'd had it. People always found out who she was, though the schools tried to keep it quiet. On the Strip, she was Deedee — no last name, no address needed.

Okay, back to the house, pack some things. Leave when Fran took off for the weekend. She was meeting Jack out in front of their hangout.

Deedee drove up the long, impressive driveway to the Holmby Hills house that Fran bought four years ago, when she married Hugo Berkstein, the Chicago industrialist. Husband Number Five. Fran gave up the gaudy Spanish hacienda for elegance, in deference to Hugo's background and bankroll. Later, Fran got the house in the divorce settlement, discreetly delayed a year because of the Big Stink.

In a way, Fran's line-up of ex-husbands helped them in court. The judge yelled, indignantly and at great length, about how too much luxury, too many fathers, and not enough parental attention, brought her there. How could he know it wasn't Deedee behind the wheel of that brand-new white Rolls Royce when it plowed down that eight-year-old kid waiting for the light to change — and ran away?

In a cataclysmic clarity, Deedee saw her mother when she walked into the house that night. Fran was hysterical. The lawyer — the one who took care of all the divorces and managed such headlined settlements — was yelling at Fran to shut up. And then their eyes lit on her, and the decision was made. At first, she hadn't minded going along. It made her special. It made her needed. Fran was an adult — a stinking drunk adult — when the white Rolls Royce, recognizable by half of Los Angeles County because of the gold encrusted initials on the doors, plowed up on the curb to kill that little girl. Fran would go to jail, convicted of vehicular homicide. Her career would be wrecked.

The trial turned Deedee sick. What a show, with reporters and photographers killing each other to get front-line positions! Fran looked gorgeous when she sobbed uncontrollably on the witness stand. Her newest picture, just premiering, broke box-office records.

That year, she was pushing up to Taylor's position. Fran had been as big as Gardner and Turner, a few years back, then, as with the other stars of that era, the position had become less solid.

Deedee shook her head, anxious to brush away the ghosts of those nightmare weeks, that had such an insidious habit of breaking into the present. Fran was forever on her back about going into analysis. She didn't see where all the years of being in analysis had done Fran any good.

Upstairs, Fran screamed in four-letter annoyance. Deedee was unperturbed. Fran screamed about everything. She hurried up the stairs and paused to tune in to the tirade in the master bedroom suite beyond her own room. Fran was on the phone, complaining to her agent about some coming movie deal. Fran still lived in the past.

Compulsively, Deedee walked towards the half-open door of her mother's sitting room.

"Baby, come in," Fran called. She pantomimed disgust with her telephone conversation.

Deedee moved just within the room. Kooky, the way Fran kept calling her "the baby" all these years. Maybe because it made *her* feel younger. Like the way Fran coaxed her to stay with the "Mommie" bit in court. But once the trial was over and she was placed on probation, she called her mother "Fran."

Fran looked terrific in that black suit, with her white, white skin and the famous auburn hair. Nobody would ever guess she was over forty. The studio bios claimed she was thirty-four. Was it true about Vic Emerson? Hedda said once, in a column, that Fran treated men like costume jewelry — they were something to be kept around until she was bored, then thrown away.

"That guy makes me sick!" Fran slammed the phone into place. "So I don't want to do TV — I'm still as big a draw as I ever was! Why shouldn't I get a cut of the gross?"

Deedee's eyes settled on the sleekly expensive beige luggage at Fran's feet.

"You're going to Vegas," she said pointedly.

"You don't mind, baby?" The blue eyes, more heavily made up replicas of Deedee's, opened wide in concern.

"I've got a packed schedule," Deedee said nonchalantly. What would Fran say if she yelled out. "Yes, I mind — it's my eighteenth

birthday — you ought to remember!” Fran would flip. And she would go to Vegas. “There’s a bash — one of the girls from Miss Leslie’s,” she fabricated routinely. “I’ll probably sleep over.”

“Have a fun weekend, baby,” Fran purred. She picked up her luggage, touched her lips cautiously to Deedee’s cheeks, and then was gone.

Deedee spent longer than she anticipated choosing the things she wanted to sneak out of her room for the pad. The transistor, her record player, some books because Jack was an intellectual and you were supposed to have more in common than bed. Right now, she wanted to build her whole life around Jack. He kept saying, “All I can be sure of is how I feel this minute.”

She squinted, visualizing the tall, still not fully filled-out frame, the features that were not Hollywood-handsome but which switched her on, the skeptical, restless, moody brown eyes. She could hear the eloquent voice.

“Baby, they teach us this stuff in school, and it’s all wrong! The world’s not like that. They’re lying!”

She hadn’t made out with anybody for almost four months. She felt like a virgin again. When she returned from the European tour that was her graduation present, she settled down into nothing. She knew nobody here, except friends of Fran’s. She never felt comfortable with them.

Late, she noticed. It was awful, driving into town if you hit the heavy traffic. Darn! She raced from the room, down the stairs, out through the side to the garage.

By the time she turned into the last three-mile stretch to the Strip, traffic was hardly moving. Half an hour earlier and she would have missed this! The weekend takeover was on. In a souped-up heap next to her, a group huddled over a fright-wigged character with a guitar, giving out their version of the current folk-rock number-one hit. Behind her, as the cars inched along, a load of Hells Angels — without their girls — tried to coax Deedee into joining their party. On the other side of her, the riders were absorbed in the business of eating burgers and swigging down soda pop. It was going to be a massacre these three miles. She would cut out, as soon as she could, park, stop off at the pad, then make for the Strip. Jack would be waiting for her.

She used up a solid hour making it out of that funeral cortege of traffic. Finally at the apartment, she scattered records across the coffee table, set the player on one end of the studio couch, set up books on a shaky bookcase. Now the place looked a little lived in.

The action on the Strip was in full swing. Cars moved along bumper to bumper. Milling crowds pushed obstinately. The discothèques, the strip joints, the teenage clubs echoed shrilly. Deedee brushed off a hand that closed in about her arm. There were creeps that made the scene who thought a ten-dollar bill would buy them in.

Deedee shoved her way towards her destination with a billowing eagerness to see Jack again, to know that he was watching for her — her alone in this wild, gorgeous mob. She spotted him, waited for him to find her. They pushed towards each other, met. His arms circled about her. In his tweed jacket with the leather arm patches, his green Levi's, his high suede boots, he looked beautiful to her.

"It's a wild weekend," he reported complacently. "The tribe's inside." He nodded towards the club his clique had adopted as its own. Before Jack, she had been a loner. Now she belonged. For the first time in her whole life, she belonged somewhere.

The electronic thunder inside was deafening. They found themselves footspace on the floor, began to writhe. Like Jack said, all you can be sure of is how you feel this minute. Right now, she felt sensational.

Twenty minutes later, they took a break for a Coke. Jack's arm stayed possessively about her. Their hips clung. In the midst of the mob, they were alone.

"What do you say we cut out of here and head for my pad?" She tilted her head in a provocative Fran Constant gesture. Make it sound cool, baby! "It's not far."

She was conscious of that kooky feeling down *there*, the urge to close in and claim. Last weekend they'd petted until Jack swore and raced off to the bathroom, in that kooky pad of his buddy's — what was his name, Rock? — where they'd gone to swill beer and listen to rock.

"Why hang around here any longer?" Jack demanded. "Let's beat it now." Alone, he meant — without the tribe. She caught the signals between Rock and him. Even though they'd just handed over five dollars for space inside here! Anyhow, they'd finished off the free

Cokes that went with the entrance fee. "Okay, baby?" His arm squeezed in about her waist.

"Sure thing," she accepted nonchalantly. Suddenly, her throat was dry. She was trembling.

Outside, in the near-day brilliance of the neon signs above them, Jack reached for her mouth. The crowds shoved past them as their lips fused, and she felt the male hunger of him against her lean, flat belly. Somebody made an obscene remark.

"Let's go," Jack ordered thickly, releasing her, reaching for her hand.

They made their way to the rundown, sleazy building of famished studio apartments, a carbon copy of dozens of others. Jack hesitated at the door.

"You go on up," he ordered. "What's the number? I'll be right back."

"Fourteen," she said. There was the flutter, down there, again. She wished he would grab her right here, this second! She wished she were out there in the bushes, flat on her back, and Jack was pushing his way in. "Jack —" She put a hand on his arm. In the bushes, now. She didn't want to wait a second.

"Relax, baby," he whispered. In the convenient shadows of the twenty-five watt bulb the landlord fancied in the corridor, his fingers closed in about her nipple that was pushing into erection against the snug knit top she wore. "I'll be right back."

Walking up the stairs to the apartment, she guessed Jack was going to pick up a bottle at the liquor store, or some cans of cold beer at the deli. Inside the shabby studio apartment, she hurried across to the cubbyhole that was the kitchenette and pulled open a cabinet door to make sure she had glasses. Half a dozen glasses, not one matching another. She reached for two, put them into the sink, turned on the water. She was conscious of a compulsive need to scrub the glasses.

The glasses sparkled as they sat waiting on the coffee table. A folk-rock tune that Jack particularly favored drifted in muted tones through the room. Deedee lay on the studio couch, eyes closed, mouth slightly parted, knees drawn up so that the soles of each foot rested on the couch. She was eighteen years old. She was clear of probation. She could be on the Strip without worrying about the 10 P.M. curfew the fuzz dreamed up. She was a woman. Why didn't Jack hurry?

The knock at the door was light, yet positive.

"Jack?" Her heart pounded against her ribs. Who else could it be?

"Jack," he confirmed.

"Come on in, it's open." She wanted him to walk into the shadowed room, see her this way. There was a shot of Fran in that last movie exactly like this. Fran looked about twenty-five. She always did when she got the right cameraman on the job. No wonder she yelled so loud for him. And sexy! Golly, Fran could look sexy, with that wistful hot look, the faintly parted mouth.

The door opened. Jack stood there, for an instant. Just looking. Flutter, flutter, she mocked herself silently. In another minute she'd jump him.

"Don't rewrite the scene," he ribbed, putting down the paper bag and the box on the coffee table. "Beer and chow, for later," he said, pointing towards the brown grocery bag. He wrested the cord away from the square, white box, lifted out its contents.

Deedee watched him set the white-iced, flower-decorated cake on the beat-up coffee table, before the waiting glasses. She inspected the circlet of tiny, red candles. Eighteen candles, encircling an audacious red scrawl that read, "Happy Birthday, Baby."

And she turned over on her face, and she cried.

# Two

---

Fran removed her dark glasses and settled back against the pillow. The magazines lay unopened across her lap. She always felt relieved when they were finally airborne. Len sauntered down the aisle, returning to his seat next to hers. He claimed he was going out to Vegas to talk turkey to Vic about a TV special. Balls! He was trying to shove that two-picture deal down her gullet.

"You're looking sensational, Frannie," Len said, with calculated approval, shifting the ice about in his drink.

"Len, don't start up with Riegal's deal again," she warned, keeping her voice cautiously low because the other passengers were aware that Fran Constant sat there on the plane with them. She enjoyed the faint aura of excitement her presence usually generated. "Tell Riegal it's like I said, or he can shove it up his ass."

"Baby, if you'd go along with a TV shot now and then, it'd be easier with these things," Len prodded cautiously. "You know what that does for the image."

"No!" she shot back furiously. "The way they grind them out, with no time for retakes, just anybody on camera. Just get the thing on film — nothing else counts. That's for the kids who haven't made it."

She wasn't going to be hounded into any TV tapings. Nor into accepting Riegal's offer, much as she needed the hundred thousand a picture he was dangling before her hungry eyes. Where did the money go? There was never enough! All she made through the years, and never enough. Why shouldn't she spend it, to buy a little fun for herself? What else did she have in life?

For an electric instant, her eyes tangled with a pair across the aisle. He recognized her. He was impressed. Young, but not too young. She

had a complex about that. Fran allowed herself the wistful-sexy look that was her trademark.

"You hold out too long, Riegal might shift to somebody else." After twenty-two years of Fran Constant, Len Franklin still proceeded with caution. "Let's don't lose it, baby."

"Who?" she challenged, the famous eyes flashing between the masterfully applied false eyelashes. She took pride in being as good as the professional makeup people. "Who, for that kind of money? Hepburn draws a million a picture. So does Taylor. Andrews is right behind them. Who can they buy for that kind of money, except some sexpot who's made it in TV? Riegal needs somebody established."

Fran lifted her head in defiance. The perfect profile positioned for the benefit of the good-looking, dark-haired man across the aisle, blatantly absorbed in every gesture Fran made. His eyes were almost green, Fran decided. For no reason at all she was intrigued.

Len sighed. He was thinking about his commissions on two hundred thousand, Fran guessed dryly.

"Think about it over the weekend," Len coaxed. "I have to fly back to L.A. first thing in the morning. I'll buzz you Monday."

"I'm taking a nap," she announced coldly. "Wake me when we hit Vegas."

Even at the Versailles, newest and most fabulous of the Vegas hotel-casinos, Fran Constant commanded the attention of every eye in the lobby — male, female, or neuter. This kind of reception was as necessary to Fran as formula for a newborn. The screen personality was switched on full wattage as Queen Fran bestowed smiles, a word here and there — and Len sweated in the background.

Len walked with her to the suite assigned to her for the weekend, with an obsequious bell captain personally in charge of her luggage. She was never presented with a bill at the Versailles. Either Vic paid the tab, or the hotel carried it. They loved her in the casino, Fran remembered with preening satisfaction. Last week, she coaxed Mel Heinman into the casino during Vic's second show. Mel dropped a hundred grand, which was just spending money to him. Her eyes glistened with respect for that kind of insouciance about money. Mel was sore as hell when she wouldn't climb between the sheets with him later.



"What am I doing here?" Fran demanded, startled when the bell captain stopped before an unfamiliar suite. She was always right next to Vic. Every weekend for the last six weeks, that Vic had been appearing at the Versailles.

"It's one of our nicest suites, Miss Constant," the bell captain said uneasily, casting a nervous glance in Len's direction. The bell captain had had experience with movie-star temperament.

"Len, call downstairs," Fran ordered tightly. "Find out."

The bell captain threw open the door. Fran walked inside, snorted disgustedly. "Len, it's a dive."

"Come off it, Fran," Len chided. Folded greenery passed from his hands to the bell captain's. "I'll bet there's not a half-dozen suites like this in the whole joint. It's VIP, right down to the can. So Vic's a few feet further down the corridor."

"Phone downstairs!" Fran shrieked, while the bell captain cautiously retreated.

Len shrugged and walked over to pick up a phone. Fran slid out of her jacket and skirt and kicked off the high-heeled pumps. She walked across to Len, to have him unzip her blouse.

"Careful," she ordered. "Alfredo spent four stinking hours on this hairdo. Don't louse it up for me."

She wriggled free of the blouse and stood there for a pensive instant in pantie girdle and bra. She hadn't told Vic she was coming this weekend. She'd said she had to stay in L.A. What in hell for? She squinted, trying to pin down the elusive reason for such a decision. Why had she thought it necessary to spend the weekend back in that hellhole? The town had gone to seed, these last few years. Rotten television, that was the trouble. Ruining everything at the studios!

She reached behind her, unsnapped her bra and let it slide loose. She regarded Len curiously. He was still in absorbed attention on the telephone. Didn't he ever get a rise, being around her this way? All these years, like they were brother and sister. He wasn't a fag — she knew enough of his private life to be sure of that.

Her bra lay across the white brocaded-covered Louis XV chair. She pushed her way out of the pantie girdle, stepped clear. The body was still okay. It ought to be, with the way that damned maniac pummeled her to death three times a week.

"Vic didn't tell them you were coming," Len reported. "You expect them to be clairvoyant?"

"Vic didn't know," she admitted, watching Len. To Len she was a commodity. So much commission on every deal. "I'll go tell him."

"Like that?" he grinned. "Try not to meet other guests."

"I'll dress," she promised with a silken smile.

"I'll go buy myself a drink," Len said. "I'll talk to Vic later."

Fran opened the valise and pulled out the black gown that had set her back fourteen hundred. It was worth it, she approved complacently. No bra, no girdle, just Fran Constant beneath. Vic kept talking to her about going back East with him, on to Rome while he did that movie over there. They would have a ball. He hadn't said anything about marriage yet. What was he waiting for? For her to make the move? It would be great for them both, career-wise. Zingo, right into the headlines. Who needed Riegal's stinking picture deal? Vic was making it faster than the IRS men could keep count.

Deedee would get tired of this hanging around the house jazz in another month or two. That was why Fran said nothing, gave Deedee her head. Poor baby, it could be so damned awful, growing up. But Deedee was protected — she wasn't growing up the way her mother did. There was nothing Deedee couldn't have, just by asking for it. By Christmas, Deedee would be crying to go off to college. Why not? All that campus fun.

What about fellows? Fran pulled the black dress over her head, settled it about the still voluptuous bustline that had been her entree into pictures. Had Deedee ever made the full trip? Christ, by the time she was eighteen she had been screwed so many times it was second nature to fall on her back and spread her legs.

Not Deedee, though, Fran told herself insistently, lifted up on high by a tidal wave of maternal love. Not her baby. Nobody in this world like Deedee. Maybe she would bring Deedee out here for a weekend. That ought to be a real gasser. She frowned in cautious consideration. Of course, everybody *knew* she was a little kid herself when Deedee was born. It wouldn't louse up anything with Vic, would it? Forget the Vegas bit, she decided briskly. The baby was too young, too tender, for this scene.

Fran found the shoes that went with the gown and stepped into them. She reached into the bodice of her dress, to pull her breasts into starring position in the built-in bra. She could still walk into any room,

execute the Fran Constant wiggle, and give any man with the potential an erection on sight.

She pulled out the small black purse, checked to make sure the key to Vic's suite was there. The key was gold-plated, with her initials set in diamond chips. Vicky could be such a bunny. She hesitated, the purse in her hand. She packed the bottle of Dexies, didn't she? She never traveled anywhere without the array of perfumes and pills. She wouldn't need anything tonight. Not with Vic.

The long, lushly carpeted corridor was deserted. Humming softly, Fran strolled towards Vic's suite. Vic made up for everything. For the jungle back there at the studio. God, what happened these last nutty years? Why did everything have to go so haywire? Why did they have to chase all over Europe to make pictures?

She wouldn't make one movie without old Appleton there behind the cameras! She wasn't a machine — she couldn't turn out the kind of performance that kept her at the top all these years with a frantic eye always on the budget. Frig the budget! So her last movie ran over nearly three weeks. It wasn't all her fault. It was that damn fag who kept sulking every time Bill Reid insisted on going home to his wife. He couldn't spare two nights a week.

Fran paused before Vic's door. It could be a real ball, married to Vic. How had she ever allowed herself to be sold on Hugo? Hugo didn't want a wife — he wanted a whore, on call.

A smile brushed her mouth as she touched Vic's bell. She had made old Hugo pay off handsomely. What was that corny thing he had said about her? She was still looking for the knight on the white charger, only this was the age of the astronaut and travel to the moon. He had said she was an anachronism in tinsel. She had had to go to the dictionary to look that one up.

Vic didn't answer. She listened and discerned the low tones of the hi-fi behind the door. What time was it? Two hours before the first show. Vic must be taking a nap. He usually did. She slid the diamond-chip-studded key into the lock and turned it. Her hand at the knob, she opened the door. The hi-fi was whispering something cultural. Vic liked to play the intellectual bit now and then. She'd wake him up, the way he liked best.

Vic wasn't in the bed, though it had been recently disarrayed. Her mouth parted in her well-known look of expectancy. Fran tiptoed to

the half-open bathroom door. Vic was there, in the tub. But the scene was not one she had anticipated.

"You lousy bastard!" she yelled. "I fly all the way out here to spend the weekend with you, and there you are, rooting like a pig!"

"Vic, get her out of here!" The blonde-from-the-neck-up movie starlet — aged twenty-seven and on her way up — shrieked indignantly. "Who does that old bag think she is?"

"Shove this up her ass!" Fran threw the key in Vic's direction. It fell short, to burrow in the lush antique gold carpeting. "The way I hear it, everything else has been up there!"

"You shut up, you fading old hag!" The lush blonde staggered to her feet. Vic sat on the edge of the tub, taking sanctuary in silence. "Don't you know when you're through?"

"Well see about that!" Fran bristled, hurt where it was most painful. She saw the blonde's gown, meticulously hung on a hanger and suspended over the shower enclosure. "Well see who's finished, you rotten little tramp!"

"Vic, stop that bitch!" The blonde's voice zigzagged stridently. "Vic!" Vic forcibly restrained her from physical attack.

"It's all yours, darling," Fran drawled, throwing the shreds of the gown into the shimmering, perfumed water of Vic's Roman tub. "Wear it well."

Fran stomped out of Vic Emerson's suite and down the corridor to her own. Forcing herself into composure, she dialed the desk.

"Quick, please!" she gasped, giving a more stalwart performance than in the picture which had won her an Academy Award nomination. "Call the fire department! Mr. Emerson's suite is blazing!"

Fran put down the receiver, lifted it up again and tried Len's room. He wasn't there. Seconds later, she located him, in the bar.

"Len darling," Fran cooed, "call up that old reprobate Reigal and tell him he's won again. I'll do the two pictures — but I want final approval on all publicity, every still, and I want Mannerheim to direct."

# Three

---

Deedee lay naked beneath the light coverlet that trailed across the opened-up studio couch and ended limply on the minuscule red shag rug. One pale gold thigh was right-angled across the back of Jack's knees. An arm encircled his shoulders.

Deedee's eyes were wide, staring somberly at his sleep-drugged length, stomach hugging the mattress, face burrowed in the pillow, whose feathers shed through its laundered-thin pillow case. Kooky, the way Jack talked in his sleep. It gave her the nuttiest feeling. Not about making it. Not right off. A kind of protectiveness, like she'd felt for the series of animals that moved in and out of her disordered life as a child.

None of the animals stayed. She'd go away to school, come home for a holiday, and the cat or dog or rabbit would be gone. She didn't want Jack to be gone. She wanted him to stay in her life. Nobody — nothing — had ever really stayed. Only Fran — but Fran was a mirage, too.

Jack stirred, stretched his long, muscular arms above his head, nearly knocking over the lamp. Deedee lunged to save it.

"Hi." She hovered above him as he swung over on his back, coming awake.

"Hi." His dark eyes met hers pleurably for a moment, then slid from her face to the half-white, half-gold, cherry-topped breasts and stayed here.

She was glad she had such a jazzy body. Right now, the way Jack was running the tip of his tongue across his lower lip, she knew he was getting switched on already. She fought down a giggle. Sexy, this

crouch — the way she'd sprung to grab the lamp when he tangled with it, and then froze in this position.

"Well?" she taunted, relishing the pulse going "put-t, put-t" down there. Conscious of the hard maleness jutting skyward from beneath the light blanket. Before Jack, she never thought about anything except herself when she was making it. How it was going to be for *her*. It was a kind of a triumph, like she was important, special, to have a fellow flipping for her. "You going to waste that?" she jibed, fingers reaching. Wow!

"Ignoramus," he chided. "Don't you know anything about a guy in the morning? That's a phony." He grinned, feeling male superiority. He thrust aside the blanket, lay motionless for an instant, relishing her flicker of arousal as her eyes lingered on him. "Don't go away," he ordered cheerfully. "I'll be right back."

She lay back against the pillow, in her mind reliving this weekend. Wistfulness was creeping in now. It was Sunday afternoon already. She'd have to go home tonight. Fran would be flying in from Vegas. What about that kooky item in the columns yesterday? Something about Vic Emerson and the starlet in his room, when the firemen burst in. She was wearing her skin and a pair of dangling earrings. Curiosity brushed Deedee. Where was Fran when Vic Emerson was playing with the starlet? Wow, Fran must have been livid when she read the column item!

In Deedee's tiny, makeshift bathroom, with the shower head that never worked properly and the distorted mirror in the medicine chest, Jack whistled as he went about his morning come-awake routine. Jack didn't talk much about his folks. Just himself. Like where was he going with his life?

Jack said parents were all liars — throwing all that jazz at you that wasn't real. They show us this world that doesn't exist — they *know* it doesn't exist. They show us Holmby Hills and pretend Watts isn't there.

Jack says if he gets drafted, he'll burn his card. I believe him — look at the way he cut out of college. He says he absolutely won't go into the stinking army. For what? To die in Asia somewhere, because we're such buttinskis? Let the Congressmen go fight their businessmen's wars!

Jack's bright. I'm not as bright as he is. If he'd stayed on at college, he probably would have graduated *summa cum laude*. He says his folks really blew their cool when he dropped out. But they didn't throw him out of the house — they still give him money. They don't want to lose him altogether.

Jack strode out of the bathroom, a towel draped about his neck, his hair wet from the splash of cold water. She'd never made it in the morning. It was supposed to be groovy. There it was again. The flutter-flutter down there.

The mattress sagged as Jack lowered himself down to the opened-up studio couch again.

"We're meeting Rock over at the beach," he reminded her. "Poor old Rock. His chick wired St. Louis for plane fare — she's cutting out."

"You have to go back to the stable tonight," she said, hating to think of the lush white and gold bedroom back at Holmby Hills that a decorator had gouged Fran for doing over last spring. Wow, she flipped when he touched her like that! He was learning what she liked, the little tricks. He *cared* enough to want to make it good for her. That was what gave her the idea that she was special for Jack.

Most fellows make a jazzy pitch in the beginning. Then you're spread-eagled and panting, and they forget you exist except for *that*. It's like you're a thing, not a being. But Jack's different. I guess I'm in love with him — that's what makes this so groovy. Not Fran's sentimental, four-star woman's movie kind of love. Our kind.

"You said you have to make the home scene, too," Jack said. They'd leveled with each other Friday night, about having to make some concessions to family, Jack flaked out at friends' pads three or four nights a week, showed at home the other nights. But he wouldn't be needing friends' pads now, would he?

"I'll be sleeping over here Monday night," she said after a moment, and waited for him to accept the unspoken bid. She didn't feel like eighteen when she was in bed like this with Jack. She felt like thirty. Wise. Remember that time last winter, when Fran forgot she was home for a weekend? Fran and that Italian director were carrying on like a pair of maniacs, Fran screaming like some kid who'd never made it before. There wasn't anything they didn't try. Fran said — on the telephone with Carla — that with the Italian

director, it was like the first time, every time. In a minute *she* would be ready to yell, with him touching her this way. "Jack?" Her voice was uneven. "Monday night?"

"Monday's a lifetime away," he evaded, riding above her. "It's now, baby. Now!"

Now wasn't going to be enough. She wasn't going to be like Fran, hopping from one shack-up job to another. All of a sudden, she'd grown up. Sex with love was the way it ought to be. Loving the guy made sex okay.

You couldn't talk to Jack about love. To him that would be the howl of the century, going back to the apes. He'd cut right out. She'd have to learn to be sharp, not to press him — or she'd have no chance with him at all. Why did he have to be so hung up on this now scene? Forgetting that it used to be her scene, too.

This was the way Fran must have felt, frolicking in the sack with the Italian director. You were supposed to be ashamed to think of your parents, doing this. Parents make sex seem dirty. It's not. What's wrong about going wild when you're making it? I want him. Now, this minute. I want him, in me!

"Okay," Deedee flipped, capitulating to now, her hand reaching between them. "So what's holding up the fireworks?"

By three o'clock Deedee and Jack were racing towards the beach on his Honda. She was still scared to death, hanging on behind him that way. The noise, the speed, the seeming instability terrified her. But with Jack, this was a fear laced with excitement, because her breasts were shoved hard against his back, her knees digging into his hips. There was something highly sexual about riding this way, she thought — willing now, this minute, to be forever.

They parked the Honda. Hand in hand, they sauntered along the white California sand, pushing through the Sunday afternoon hordes that usurped most of the area. Enjoying the pressure of his hand on her, Deedee wove fantasies about Jack and herself in a make-believe world. She didn't belong anywhere. She could cut out and nobody would really care.

Oh, Fran would carry on as if it was a starring movie role. Fran would hire detectives and play the scene to the hilt. Remember that time — that awful time that pushed into her memory when she most wanted to forget it — when the fuzz kept her at the police station, and



Fran went home alone? The people next door told Louella they could hear Fran crying hysterically all night long. Louella made a big deal of it in a column. Fran Constant, the distraught but beautiful mother, asking herself, "Why? Why?" But Deedee hadn't been able to cry. Even in court, she couldn't cry. She'd wished she could.

When she read about the funeral of the little girl — the child Fran killed — she cried. For months after, she'd had nightmares. The autumn haze mink hadn't blotted out the memory of the small coffin, the small, white body in the communion dress.

"There's Rock," Jack said exuberantly, and raised an arm in salutation.

Deedee made a big squeal about digging Rock. She didn't. There was something about him that turned her off. Maybe it was the colossal ego. He talked with such contempt about the movie people — once he even made a crack about Fran — when he was actually flipping his wig to be part of that scene.

"Hey, he's with a chick," Jack pointed out. "I guess he wasn't as shot down as I thought about the slick redhead's copping out."

The girl flaked out on a beach blanket beside Rock was small, curvaceously built, all but spilling out of a violently blue bikini. Rock's hand rested on the indentation that was her navel and stroked sensuously. He crouched there on the sand, beside the miniature Bardot, in his too-snug swim trunks — and you knew exactly where his mind was, Deedee thought in distaste, trying not to look. He took pride in their knowing. That was his way-out kind of rebellion.

"Man, you're late," Rock complained.

"What are you in a flap about?" Jack demanded breezily. "We got here, didn't we?"

"Meet Zoe," Rock introduced. "That means life, you know? Deedee, Jack."

"Hi." Zoe's eyes were wide now, staring up at them. Those eyes were a startling green, in a milk-white face that announced she was new to smog town. A secretive, very young, very wise face. Golly, Zoe must be about fifteen, Deedee guessed with a shock. Fifteen was light years behind her.

The two couples settled down on their island of sand in an atmosphere of beach-acceptable sexuality. Zoe half-lay against Rock, his hand dangerously close to the foothill of one breast. She kept wriggling back into him, until he grunted vocally.

"Where are you from, Zoe?" Jack asked. He felt like a dirty old man, Deedee knew, when she caught him staring at the way Zoe spilled out of her bikini top. You couldn't help staring now, the way Zoe was leaning over. Even she stared.

"From out there," Zoe said, with the little-girl smile that still managed to say that she'd been everywhere and done everything. "The square world."

"I'm low on bread," Rock announced casually. "But I'll be flush later. Got a job tonight — won't take long." His eyes were bold with a message for Jack. "I have to cut out to Holmby Hills."

Deedee started. Let her not bump into Rock, on her way home! All she needed was for him to find out about her, that she wasn't Deedee Costello, but Deidre Evans. She'd been in the papers so much, that time with the trial, that she had been practically a celebrity herself for a while. It was real neurotic, the way Rock read everything he could about the stars. He was always bragging about how he almost made it with this one or that. It was creepy. To the other kids, movie stars were mostly the older generation — like somebody's mother or father.

"You promised to take me to the bus terminal," Zoe reminded Rock. "My gear's still stowed there, in a locker." She leaned forward again, so low the quiescent nipples were on display. "I only got off the bus seven hours ago."

"There she was on the Strip, in broad daylight on a Sunday noon, looking for the action." Rock beamed at Zoe with a pride of possession.

"Let's peel and go in," Jack ordered Deedee with a show of energy, gazing appreciatively at the blue Pacific. "Then we'll head over to the Burger Pit."

The four of them perched on the pair of Hondas, sandwiched in between the carloads of teenagers, grandmothers, cops, that filled up most available parking space at the Burger Pit.

"Wow, we don't have burgers like this back home," Zoe giggled complacently, munching on a coastburger — salami slices, grilled smoked ham, dill pickles, plus a lavish spread of tomato-and-corn relish.

"You don't find a lot of things back home you're going to find here," Rock bragged. He was squinting at a clock that hung inside the Burger Pit but which was visible outside. "Look," he said restlessly. "I've got to go pick up that bread, or I'll be looking for a new pad

tonight. I got the message last night, from the cell mates. We're not exactly 'desirable guests' — we have to pay on the line."

"How long you going to be?" Zoe asked. She made a great show of cool, Deedee thought, but she was scared. God, Zoe made her feel like a tired old lady!

"Couple hours, the most," Rock shrugged. "Then we'll go over to the Strip and have a ball."

"We can't stay here for two hours," Zoe pointed out, her eyes bright as they surveyed Deedee and Jack.

"We can go over to my pad," Deedee offered, propelled into the suggestion by Zoe's glance. "Play some records, open up some beers." On the Strip, they wouldn't serve you anything stronger than Cokes, except in the strip joints — where you had to show your birth certificate if you were a kid. Jack was strong for beers — that was the campus bit. "Okay?" Deedee looked about their small circle.

"Okay," Rock accepted for the others. "I'll ride you over, Zoe. Come back later."

The two Hondas breezed out of the drive-in, back into the sluggish, late Sunday afternoon traffic, heading for Deedee's pad off the Strip. In a way, she wished Jack and she could be alone this evening, Deedee acknowledged inwardly. It had been such a groovy weekend for them. She hated going back to the tall, elegant house in Holmby Hills, even though she'd be able to cut out and sleep over Monday night. It wouldn't be such a blast, without Jack.

The two Hondas pulled up before the rundown house that was Deedee's second home. The two girls climbed down. Deedee waited patiently while Rock and Zoe wound up in a passionate kiss that elicited a raw comment from a pair of jeering strollers. Then the two cycles were roaring off in a burst of noise. Jack had to find a parking spot.

Deedee and Zoe went upstairs to the pad. Zoe stared about with wide-eyed approval. Deedee understood. It didn't matter that the place was a dive. It belonged to *her*. It shut out the ugly, adult world. Zoe dug this scene the way she did.

"Beer?" Deedee asked, then hesitated. Every now and then it hit her that Zoe was so God-awful young.

"Sure," Zoe accepted, without hesitation.

They sat cross-legged on the floor, listening to a recording by The Doors, the new album Deedee had bought yesterday because this was

the group Jack dug most. He said their music was demented, more acid than anybody else's. Everything Jack liked, she was going to like, Deedee told herself. She wanted to be so close to him, they were practically inside each other. Not just the making-it bit. Everything.

The door swung open. They hadn't bothered to lock it. Jack strolled in. There was a restlessness in him that Deedee hadn't noticed all weekend. That was the trouble. The weekend was almost over.

Jack talked a lot, but he didn't say much in personal terms. It was mostly abstract — like how he felt about the draft, the Establishment and all. What did he do, when he wasn't hanging around the Strip on the weekend? You couldn't hang around midweek, with the kooky curfew the fuzz kept trying to enforce. Of course, she remembered with fresh pride, she was over eighteen now; they couldn't pick her up just for hanging around. What did Jack do, when he wasn't making the Strip scene? He was taking that course — but what about all the other days and nights? What about his family?

"Have a beer," Deedee said, leaning across for a can already brought out in readiness.

Jack took the can of beer, drank thirstily. His face wore a rapt expression as he listened to the electronic excitement that was The Doors.

"Hey, I like that," Jack murmured, eyes half-closed.

"I had a groovy record collection back home." Zoe sighed. "Too bad I couldn't drag some of it along with me." Her face tightened now, into a young-old mask. "But at least I cut out — I'm not hung up back there."

"What about your parents?" Deedee asked. The fuzz were forever combing the Strip for runaway girls. Somebody was always walking up to you, shoving a snapshot into your face, and asking if you'd seen her — or him — around. "Your folks going to be on your back?"

"The usual." Zoe smiled bitterly. "They'll run to the Missing Persons Bureau, be outraged that I walked out on all the comforts of the Great Middle Class Society. What did they do wrong, all that jazz. I sent them a wire — collect — from Salt Lake City, telling them I was okay." She giggled, "So if they start looking, it'll be there, not in L.A. The main thing that's gonna bother them is what the neighbors will think about my cutting out. Wow!" She whistled expressively. "That's going to louse up their status!"

"You ought to get settled in somewhere," Jack warned. "You don't want to start checking the motels around midnight. They run the prices right up."

"When Rock comes back, he'll go over with me to pick up my gear at the bus terminal." There was a question in Zoe's eyes, and a flicker of doubt. "It'll have to be a cheap place — I'm low on cash, after the bus ticket. A kid back home told me you could find a place for two or three dollars a night."

"Rock camps around with other guys — he mentioned that," Jack reminded, reading Zoe's mind. She wouldn't find a crash pad there. "When he has bread, he spreads it around too fast to swing his own pad."

Deedee stirred uncomfortably. Jack was beaming a message at her.

"You can stay here," Deedee offered self-consciously.

It wasn't forever. She didn't mean that. She meant for *now*. Why did she feel like she was cutting the ground out from beneath herself? Because she wanted the pad for Jack and herself! But Jack was scared. Now, baby. *Now*. That was his creed.

# Four

---

Fran came awake slowly, reluctantly. Her head was fuzzy. Her mouth had the rotten taste of too much booze. Christ, her head was pounding! She stretched gingerly, trying to put herself into focus again.

She was at the Versailles, in what Len insisted was one of their VIP suites. Not next to Vic, though. That rotten bastard hadn't been expecting her this weekend. Low laughter welled in her as she thought about the scene when the characters broke down the door to Vic's suite and found that little tramp cavorting in the raw. Vic must have blown his cool on that bit!

Fran lifted herself on one elbow, squinted at the clock. Four-thirty. A.M. or P.M.? What day? Okay, figure this out. She arrived Friday night, had been drinking steadily ever since in the cozy privacy of her VIP suite. Vic hadn't tried to call her — he was too busy screwing that over-developed slut who'd been laid by everything in Hollywood.

She leaned over, lifted the phone receiver, dialed the switchboard. A hand rose, subconsciously, to the still firm, still full breasts, touched with a sensuous pleasure.

"Sweetie, what day is this?" she asked with the famous faintly throaty, faintly wistful voice. "I've been so bogged down with a virus I've lost count."

"It's Sunday, Miss Constant," the girl said sweetly. "Four-twenty-seven P.M."

"Thank you, darling."

Was the switchboard operator silently laughing at her? Did the girl know that Vic was cheating? Did the whole hotel know? Probably. Damn him! He probably had that slut sitting there at a ringside table

when he got up to sing. *Her* table. But nobody had picked it up in the columns yet. They were loyal to her, Fran thought with pride.

She tossed back the coverlet, cautiously slid long legs to the floor. She stared at the sleek firm length of the much-photographed thighs. So she was forty-three, but who would guess it? Thirty-four, the studio bio made her. She was as young as Vic. Nobody could say she chased after kids. That was Carla's bit.

Her mouth tasted lousy. Go into the bathroom, brush her teeth, call room service for breakfast. She felt giddy, the way she did when she was on one of the diet kicks. She'd better eat or she'd be sick as a dog.

She phoned room service, ordered a substantial breakfast, told them to leave it in the sitting room of her suite — she'd be showering. There was a time when the waiters used to fight to come up to her suite, just to look. She could still be as big as ever, if she wasn't so choosy about her pictures. Who needed to work like a horse? With the kind of money she earned, she didn't have to kill herself. Len was pleased because she was going ahead with the two pictures for Reigal. But when they were finished, she wasn't doing anything else unless it was filmed in Europe. That was the status symbol today.

Fran stood beside the bed, stripped off the black ballerina nightie that had been designed for her last movie. She always bought one dress or piece of lingerie from each movie. She was a sentimental slob that way.

Damn Vic, for cheating on her! She'd counted on this weekend being a blast. Vic and she made a spectacular pair. She'd planned on being there, ringside, each night of the weekend, for every show — and the columnists would buzz some more. She could concentrate on Vic, like for real. He kept saying he'd been through the marriage mill four times, that was enough for any man. But she'd be willing to take a flier again with Vic, even though it meant losing the gorgeous alimony.

She crossed to the closet, and pulled open the mirrored door segment with a need for reassurance. How many broads her age could stand before a mirror this way without cringing? She worked hard at keeping the body in shape. You had to look close to see the thin layers of fat that weren't there ten years ago, the tiniest sag of her bustline. Inner thighs still firm. They got enough of a workout, she thought with sardonic humor.

She made a point of never getting really tanned — just a delicate gold that set off the hair. She was pale blonde, these days, with the auburn washed right out. She couldn't afford any harshness any more. Everything was muted, except the heavy smudge of her eye makeup that took forty minutes to apply. Why did Vic have to screw that mammoth-busted sexpot? What was so special about hers? It was almost like being deformed, having a pair of tits like that.

Feeling mildly reassured, Fran detoured into the bathroom. No shower. A tub. She leaned over the VIP suite's Roman tub, adjusted the water to a tepid warmth, reached for the perfumed bath oil. Don't remember Vic in the tub, down the corridor in his suite. Vic had a thing about doing it in tubs.

They'd done it in tubs in Vegas and Palm Springs and Acapulco. She was more passionate now than when she was a kid. Why did Vic keep dodging every time she tried to talk seriously? Because he had to keep reassuring himself he was the greatest stud on the Coast, with career-minded tramps on their way up. It didn't hurt anybody's stocks, to make the columns with Vic Emerson.

The room was cloyingly sweet from the blend of the perfumed oils she'd poured into the tub, the array of cosmetics lined up on the dressing table, the steam rising from the water. Fran trailed a hand in the golden liquid. Just right. Why hadn't Vic called her? He knew she pulled that Friday night stunt. He was supposed to have such a wild sense of humor. What happened this time?

Screw Vic. Who needed him? She stepped into the tub, lowered the well-preserved torso into the perfumed liquid, its velvet softness caressing her. She needed Vic. She needed him, looking at her the way he would be if he was standing beside the tub now. Like he'd have a heart attack if he couldn't get in that minute.

Call Carla. Soak in here ten minutes, then go out and buzz Carla, back in Holmby Hills. Maybe Carla would hop a plane and come out and stay the rest of the week. Carla was blowing her stack because Tonio was doing that film in Rome. Carla couldn't go to Italy without running into a possible bigamy charge. The Italian courts didn't recognize her divorce from that creepy count.

The water lapped over her, soothing, coaxing away some of the tension. She listened attentively. Breakfast had arrived. She heard the sound of the silver, the dishes being arranged on the table for her. She



waited to hear the door closed. There, he was going out. She was aware now of a low rumble in her tummy because there had been nothing solid there since Friday night. Her head still throbbed slightly, but the nausea that threatened had subsided.

Enough soaking. She rose to her feet, stretched with a sensuous, catlike satisfaction, stepped from the tub onto the lush, wall-to-wall bathroom carpeting. She picked up the turquoise terrycloth robe that was a mini-mini length and slid into it. In wet, bare feet, she walked from the bathroom, across the tiny foyer into the sitting room. Fragrant coffee aromas assailed her pleasantly.

The food was hot and delicious. The Vegas “carpet joints” knew how to cater to their clientele, she thought with approval. She ate ravenously, pushing down guilt. Of course, she’d have to diet like hell before she started the picture for Reigal. The camera picked up ounces like they were pounds — and she was ten pounds over normal now. Great, away from the cameras.

Okay, buzz Carla. Carla was probably moping in that mausoleum of a house, that dated back to her Italian count period. What was that kooky remark Vic made about Carla? He said she’d graduated from cunt to countess, and back again. Vic hated Carla. Had he laid her? Had she turned him down? It would be interesting to find out. It was hard to imagine Carla turning down anybody. Or was Vic too old for her?

Fran swung her feet up onto a chair and leaned back with coffee cup at hand to dial Carla. The phone buzzed and buzzed. The couple that worked for Carla had Sundays off. Maybe Carla was out. Fran was just about to hang up when the sultry voice came sleepily over the phone.

“Hello . . .”

“Sweetie, did I wake you?” Fran was perfunctorily polite.

“Well, not exactly, darling.” There was something ribald about Carla’s chuckle. “I’m in bed, but I’m not sleeping — if that’s what you mean.”

“I’m livid,” Fran began, not very quick on the uptake after the weekend of drinking.

“I know,” Carla drawled. “I saw the column item.” So the columnists *had* picked it up. “Fuck the bastard.”

“That’s what I’d like to be doing right now,” Fran giggled. Her little-girl giggle that, somehow, struck a false note at forty-three. But

the overtones of amusement were speedily replaced by bitterness. "I caught them, Carla. There he was, in his infernal tub routine, crouched over that slob with his thing burrowing in those 44-D tits."

"What a waste," Carla clucked. "What'd you do, sweetie?"

"I phoned the switchboard and told the girl there was a fire in Vic's suite. A crew came up and broke down the door!" It would make a great story to tell around — when she was sure the Vic thing was over.

"He must have been livid," Carla drawled, "Oh, honey, *there*. Yes-s-s. Oh, I didn't mean you, Fran," Carla explained. "I was talking to Rock. Baby, yes!"

Fran was startled.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm in bed with a gorgeous nineteen-year-old," Carla said casually. "What would I be doing?"

"I'll get off the line." Sometimes, Carla was just too much.

"Why? We can talk." There was an edge to Carla's voice — she was enjoying the situation, Fran guessed. "Rock is kind of discommoded for talking, but I'm all right."

"Carla, you're out of your mind!" She felt strangely outraged, like being coaxed to become a voyeur.

"Not out of my mind yet, but I will be," Carla promised. "Rock, honey, you don't see any 'stay off the grass' signs, do you?"

"I'll call you later." Fran was repelled by the uninhibited sounds of passion Carla was siphoning into the telephone. "Have a ball." Obviously, she was.

Fran wished she hadn't called Carla. They began at the studio together, when there *were* studios. But Carla screwing with nineteen-year-olds made her too conscious of her age.

Dress, get out of the suite, down to the casino. She'd take the early morning flight back to LA. Show herself around the casino now, don't give Vic the idea she was teed off. Milt Corelli loved having her in his casino. Look at the bundles her companions had dropped on the tables in the last two years! She didn't bet herself, never more than five dollars. Gambling was for the suckers.

Fran slipped into bra and panties and pulled on a color-splashed minishirt, adroitly designed to show off the famous torso while disguising the fact that the body was no longer twenty-three. Ten

years ago, she wandered around the Vegas Strip hotels in a bikini, even in the casino, Fran reminded herself with sadistic self-torture. No more.

She spent over an hour on her hair and makeup, using infinite patience. The results were worth it. She was humming under her breath when she sauntered from her suite. Automatically, she assumed the Fran Constant “look.” The wistful, sexy stare — mainly myopia — the full, soft, parted mouth. Shoulders back, to emphasize the bustline. Still effective twenty years after she — and the studio wheels — had developed the Fran Constant “look.”

Vegas was supposed to swing around the clock. Actually, unless you were gambling or screwing, Vegas quickly became a bore. You couldn’t even go anywhere to dance, except on a postage-stamp floor. Everything was geared to send you into the casinos. Who needed to lie around a sweltering pool? You could do that in your own backyard. Who needed the floor shows? The same old bit.

She waited, impatient now for action, for the elevator. A faint smile of acknowledgement as faces turned to her with recognition and interest. The elevator opened at her floor. She walked inside, with the familiar sense of pleasure at being the cynosure of all eyes.

Fran strode swiftly from the elevator, across the lushly appointed lobby, toward the huge, air-conditioned nightmare that was the casino. The wide double doors opened automatically, by electric eye, at her approach. She smiled at the six-feet-four, two-hundred-fifty-pound guard on duty just inside.

Even on Sunday afternoon, the room was jammed. There was the familiar air of excitement, the brilliant lighting that made up for the complete absence of windows, the casino sounds that were unfailingly stimulating. No clocks in the casino — nothing to distract the player’s attention from the tables. Not even a place to sit, unless you sat at a table.

They’d done a jazzy job on redecorating last year. Corelli was supposed to have spent half a million on the casino alone. Marvelous paneling on the walls, hand-painted brocades, wall-to-wall carpeting, fantastic equipment. There were at least twenty tables.

Fran strolled, as usual, to the roulette table. Roulette appealed to women. She enjoyed the excitement her presence generated there — except in the veteran gamblers who were not deterred by an aging

Hollywood sex symbol. She gazed at the shining gold, the red and black, so dramatic against the green felt of the table.

A dinner-jacketed croupier recognized her, asked a question with his eyes. She shook her head — she wasn't going to play. Almost immediately, she spotted the tall, dark, good-looking character who'd been on the flight from Los Angeles. He couldn't take his eyes from the sight of her. Green eyes, she remembered now, that glistened with anticipation. She allowed herself a slight, encouraging smile.

The character was pushing his chair back, withdrawing from the action. The dealer wasn't going to be happy about that. Screw the dealer. Wouldn't Vic flip if she walked into the club for dinner, hanging on to this?

He wasn't good-looking in the Hollywood-leading-man fashion, but something about him magnetized her. He looked as though, if he got teed off at a broad, he might slug her. How old was he? Forty-ish, she decided. Close enough to her own age. Young enough to fit in with the image. Expensive clothes. He had a bankroll. What did he do, when he wasn't surveying the scene in Vegas?

She watched him collect a pair of drinks from the circulating pit waitress and walk toward her with glasses in tow. Quietly he pushed his way through the four-deep crowd about the table to stand beside her. There was that air about him that made people give way, toughness that earned respect, of a kind that was new to her. He could excite her, she decided with satisfaction. Vic was sharp — he'd recognize that in a minute.

"Drink?" he offered.

"Thanks." The soft voice, the sexy inspection. Right off, let him know she was interested. Why waste time?

They talked casually for a few minutes, about the roulette action. He introduced himself as Fernando Reagan.

"My mother is Italian, my father Irish," he said humorously, his eyes fastened to the much-publicized bustline. Fran had a feeling this Italian-Irish line had been used frequently.

"Wow!" She smiled, as expected. "That's a wild combination." His eyes said he was dying to give a demonstration.

"You like blackjack?" he asked, after the initial byplay.

"I seldom gamble," she admitted. When she did, she had a fey habit of picking up her bet and running off if she lost — no dealer

would dare stop her, when she brought in the high losers so often. "I like to watch."

"Come play with me. Bring me luck," he coaxed.

She allowed him to pilot her to the blackjack table. There were two empty seats. He pulled out a chair for her, the other for himself. She wished he'd settled on roulette — blackjack required skill.

Fran made a point of cutting out of each hand as speedily as possible, so Ferdie Reagan was paying a record cover charge for her presence at the table. Evidently, he could afford it. He was losing steadily, becoming more seriously involved in the game. Her foot began to tap restlessly under the table.

"I'm out with this hand," he promised, aware that she was ready to cut.

"I could use a drink," she said, when they were walking out of the casino.

He'd really flipped for her. Not fan-style flipped, man-woman flipped. She was still a lot of woman, even if Vic got himself all worked up over a Hollywood whore.

"The bar?" he asked, hoping for something better.

"My suite," she offered. "We can kick off our shoes and relax." Throw off their clothes and fly into bed. She was ready.

She'd flown out here Friday night, all keyed up over a prospective sex-romp with Vic — and then she found him that way. Talking to Carla over the phone had repelled her — yet her mind had a traitorous way of recalling Carla's voice in the heat of passion with that nineteen-year-old. Pride lifted her spirits. Passionate bitch, perpetually in heat. Vic called her. She liked that.

Ferdie was impressed by her VIP suite. A soft smile about her mouth, she phoned room service for drinks. What did Ferdie do for a living? Not a businessman. Not in the nutty movie or television scene. A look of muscle about him, beneath the expensive tailoring. A surface casualness that, she sensed, masked a ruthlessness. A kind of power. Fran respected power.

"I'll only be a moment," she purred, heading for the bedroom. "Let in the boy when he comes with the drinks."

Why louse up this marvelous dress, Fran reasoned practically. Besides, Ferdie was the sort of character who'd buy the movie seduction scene. The deceptively demure, high-about-the-neck,

falling-to-the-floor. Mediterranean-blue hostess coat. Silk jersey, with nothing beneath but Fran Constant. He'd know that, right off, the way her nipples pushed forward in bas relief beneath the material.

Barefoot, in the blue hostess coat, she stared appraisingly at her reflection in the mirror. There was something rawly sexy about being barefoot this way, the rest of her covered up, yet not covered up. The silk jersey outlining her nipples, falling snugly about her hips, nestling between her thighs. Perfume fairly heavy; Ferdie wasn't the subtle type. The male animal in the rough.

Outside, she heard the tinkle of ice cubes, muted sounds of vocal exchange. Their drinks had arrived. She waited for the door to close before she walked from the bedroom.

"You look like you were ready to shoot a scene in a new movie," he said, his first reference to her movie-star status.

"A private movie," she amplified, pleased at the look of arousal on his face. Why was she so conscious of the years? *He* didn't know she was forty-three. To the average man, she was thirty-four, still young enough to play the sex symbol. She'd quit pictures before she was shunted into older roles, or had to have a lift job. She'd be Fran Constant, superstar, or she'd retire. "Movies mirror life, don't they? Or the way most people want life to be." *Her* movies, always with the luxury setting, the gorgeous clothes, the aura of sex.

"Your drink," he said, crossing to her. "Do you always drink champagne?"

"Always," she lied. It sounded glamorous.

"Okay," he said, when she'd sipped appreciatively at the champagne. "Let's get on with the main event."

Fran's eyes glowed as she surveyed herself in the full-length mirror. She liked the mini-length evening dresses — the legs were always the last to go. She always had that young, refreshed look after a roll between the sheets. Right now, this minute, she could pass for thirty.

"Hey, baby —" Ferdie appeared in the doorway, self-confident now, proud of possession. "Let's go down to the club."

"In a minute." She picked up an eyeliner, fussed where it wasn't necessary. An eye on the clock. Plotting.

Ferdie had surprised her. She hadn't expected it to be so great. Between the sheets, Ferdie was in command all the way. She wasn't the movie star, wriggling with Fernando Reagan. She had the feeling

that, if she hadn't been so responsive, he might have slapped her into action. She'd tried practically everything — except being roughed up physically. No man had ever dared to try that.

They went together down the elevator, through the lobby, to the ornate new supper club that Vic was inaugurating. The room was mobbed. Fran wasn't worried. She'd phoned down earlier; a ringside table was being held for them.

Ferdie detoured, just before the entrance to the club, to the suite of offices that belonged to Milt Corelli. Startled, Fran allowed herself to be deposited in the reception room, to wait while Ferdie conferred with Corelli. Little bits about Ferdie were falling into a whole. Ferdie was part of this operation, the gangster hierarchy that controlled this newest addition to the Vegas jungle.

Ferdie was lousing up her entrance. She had timed it to coincide with Vic's appearance in the show. She bristled at the wait. Who the hell did Ferdie think he was, letting her cool her heels this way in a crappy reception room? That was the typical male. Each figured his thing was the key to the world. Let him in once, and he thought he owned you.

The door swung wide. Ferdie sauntered out. Inscrutable smile, a look of satisfaction in his eyes. Whatever had transpired behind that closed door pleased Ferdie.

"Okay, baby," Ferdie said briskly. "Let's go eat."

Vic was on, in the midst of his final number, when they were seated at a ringside table. Fran felt a flicker of satisfaction when she realized he was annoyed at her arriving at just this moment. He was wondering where she'd collected Ferdie, what was with them. Let him stew!

Vic went off in a flurry of fervent applause, to be followed by the inevitable line-up of near-nude dancers. Across the room, Fran spotted Bee Somers, who fed choice items to the columnists. There would be a squib tomorrow about Ferdie and her. Curiosity took root, mushroomed. Who, exactly, was Fernando Reagan? Not just a run-of-the-mill hood. He was a hood on the way up, she decided with a flash of humor.

They ordered dinner, with Ferdie growing amorous again beneath the table in the semidarkness of the supper club. Anyhow, she never drank enough in public to make an ass of herself. She shivered, recalling the time with Carla, in that way-out club in Rome.

Carla stripped to panties, to compete with the professional entertainers. The management thoroughly approved — until Carla straddled that young fag and tried to make it with him, right there on the nightclub floor. They dragged out a pair of screens, maneuvered Carla and her reluctant gay partner out of public view. Why did Carla get such a charge out of seducing reluctant young fairies?

"Your birthday?" Ferdie jibed good-humoredly, one hand stroking her thigh beneath the table.

"No," she said sharply, turning to watch the corny proceedings three tables away. A visiting fireman — obviously, a heavy better — was being presented with a birthday cake by a pair of six-foot nudies from the floor show. "Oh, God!" Realization shot through her.

"What's the matter?" Ferdie looked startled.

"It's the baby's birthday!" Sentiment flooded Fran. Tears welled in her eyes. One of the reasons she was a big money-maker among the women, despite the sex-symbol tag, was this ease at turning on the waterworks. "Ferdie, I completely forgot!"

"So you'll do something about it tomorrow," he said matter-of-factly, determined not to be deterred from the under-the-table operations.

"I have to fly back home with a birthday cake," Fran said, touching her eyes with a tissue lest the artistry on her eyes be spoiled. "What a stinking mother I am!"

"Where can you get a birthday cake in Vegas, this hour on a Sunday night?" he jibed.

"Fix it up with the chef, Ferdie," Fran commanded imperiously. "You've got the drag —" She saw him bridle with pride. "Get them to bake a cake for me, and I'll fly back with it on the dawn flight."

"Okay," Ferdie soothed. "I'll go out and see what I can work up. We'll have dinner, then go back up to your suite to wait for the cake." He grinned complacently. "Party night in Vegas."

Ferdie knew he was good, Fran realized. Okay, so you should be aware of your talents. One shot with Vic, and he was through for the night, no matter what his mind told him. That was the difference between guys and broads, she told herself with satisfaction. A guy was already on the downgrade by the time he was twenty. A woman kept going stronger and stronger with the years.

Ferdie went with her to the airport, to carry the birthday cake, he said. In the cab, the birthday cake was forgotten. Thank heaven for the



pill. Who could stop, in a taxi, to unpack for a diaphragm? Who, but a nut like Fernando Reagan, would have the brass to screw in a taxi to the airport?

It wasn't a regular taxi, Fran reminded herself self-consciously — as though this made a difference. The hotel limousine, put at her service. The driver was actually miles from them, his eyes glued to the ribbon of road ahead. Maybe he thought they were petting. He didn't know Ferdie had her dress up to her navel. Her coat, worn against the three A.M. chill, shielded them to some extent.

"You know what you do to me?" Ferdie whispered, and told her, in his four-letter gutter vocabulary.

"Why don't you shut up?" This was really Carla's scene, not hers. But all of a sudden, she wasn't caring if the driver turned around and *saw*. All she cared about was this thing, thrusting into her, making her feel young and desirable — and desiring.

They arrived at the Vegas airport just in time for her to board the plane. The weekend hadn't been a dog, after all, despite the stinking beginning. Who needed Vic Emerson? Ferdie Reagan was a whole new bag of tricks.

She promised Ferdie to buzz him from Los Angeles that evening, then climbed aboard the plane, settled in for the quick run back to town. She felt smug about remembering the kid's birthday. Hadn't she gone to all the trouble to have a cake made up? By the chef at the Versailles, no less. That might even be good for a column item.

The stewardess woke her as they were coming in and brought her the cake box that had been entrusted to her for safekeeping earlier. Fran had explained the cake was for Deedee's birthday. So the birthday was Friday — this was still the birthday weekend.

Sitting in the cab en route to Holmby Hills, Fran sentimentally reminisced about her pregnancy. Of course, she almost didn't have the baby at all — Ted and she already had a Mexican divorce when she realized she was pregnant. She went into that private sanitarium, arranged by the studio, for "exploratory surgery," and then backed down.

She had been more scared of the abortion than delivery. Besides, by then she wanted to have the baby. She saw herself eulogized as the gorgeous young mother. The studio bio hadn't pushed her age back as

much then as it did later. She was supposed to have been nineteen when Deedee was born. Now it was sixteen.

After that nutty night when Deedee was born, she swore never again. That bastard of a doctor, insisting he couldn't stop the pains without injuring the baby. It wasn't as though Deedee were premature — he could have helped. He enjoyed seeing her suffer. What she went through to get the figure back in shape! She'd been scheduled to go on a picture ten days out of the hospital — and made it.

She couldn't wait, now, to get home, to see Deedee's face when she woke her up to show off the gorgeous birthday cake. Tomorrow, she'd take Deedee over to Magnin's and buy her a whole new wardrobe. Why not? Reigal was paying a bundle for the new picture.

Fran overtipped the cab driver, a sign that she considered this a momentous occasion. He carried her luggage to the door, with overt respect for the elegance of the house. He cast a backward glance at the Fran Constant legs — touted almost as much as the bustline — as he sauntered back to the taxi. He'd probably brag to his wife later about having Fran Constant in his cab this morning.

"Baby," Fran trilled, breathless from the run up the stairs. "Happy birthday, baby!"

Fran thrust open the door with a wide smile, the square white box, festively beribboned, held aloft between her hands. But the bed was chastely made up. The white and gold bedroom was empty. Deedee wasn't home.

# Five

---

Deedee, wearing a brilliantly red bikini and a frown, peered at the contents of the refrigerator. Fix a sandwich, pull out a Coke, take them out poolside. Fran would be crawling out of bed soon — who could sleep with the vacuum cleaner carrying on upstairs? Did Fran know she wasn't home last night?

Deedee settled for ham and cheese and threw alternate slabs between two slices of bread. She knew Fran came home first because Fran always left a trail behind. Her purse in the foyer, shoes in the living room, coat across the bannister post. Maybe Fran didn't bother to check if she were home. Why did she feel so darn guilty about sleeping over at the pad last night again?

Okay, so she said she'd be home Sunday night — Fran and she didn't live by rule books. She hated to leave, when Jack decided — the last minute that way — that he'd stay over. Kooky, with the four of them there. Jack and her on the opened-up studio couch, Zoe and Rock on blankets on the floor. Zoe and Rock kept fooling around all night. Didn't Zoe ever get enough?

"Deedee?" Fran's voice, sounding injured.

"Yeah." Deedee swung around, instantly conscious of that tone in her mother's voice, and she became defensive, despite her show of casualness.

"Where were you last night?" Fran's voice deepening in reproach. "I rushed back from Vegas and you weren't home. I waited up forever," she pursued, the hurt quality growing in drama.

Deedee took a deep breath, decided to gamble.

"I phoned, half a dozen times, but you weren't home," Deedee lied. She was right — Fran hadn't got in till awful late. The giveaway was right there in Fran's eyes. "We went to bed around twelve."

"I had to wait for the chef to finish up," Fran leapt forward with an alibi quickly. "I had the chef at the Versailles make up a birthday cake for you, baby." She glowed with sentiment again. "You didn't think I'd forget your birthday?"

"I did," Deedee said offhandedly. "When was it — Friday?" Fran hadn't exactly remembered — she was still late, as usual.

"The cake's right here —" Fran was reaching up into a cabinet. "I left a note for Lottie not to go charging up there and ruin it." Fran located the box and tugged.

"Golly, it's gorgeous!" Deedee said with the expected enthusiasm when Fran displayed the chef's concoction. "Let's light the candles, right this minute!"

For a few minutes they were mother and daughter, involved in childlike pleasure over an ornate birthday cake.

"I'll have some breakfast when Lottie comes back downstairs. Then we'll go over to Magnin's and buy some goodies for you, baby," Fran murmured, pleased that she'd brought this off. "Something really special. What would you like?"

Deedee hesitated. "My own car," she said calmly. "And I ought to try for a driver's license." It made her nervous, the way she drove around town without a license.

The ugliness of the past rushed to the fore. Deedee saw it, mirrored in Fran's eyes. The ugliness of the white Rolls that Deedee was supposed to have driven, almost three years ago. The ugliness of the headlines, of the grief of the little girl's parents.

"I won't have any trouble getting a license, will I?" Deedee asked uneasily. It wasn't a question of her ability to drive, but of the court's reaction. They didn't say she could never drive again, did they?

Fran took a deep breath, expelled it.

"You'll get a car of your own, sweetie," Fran promised. "And there's no reason why you can't get a driver's license." Fran always swerved away from any direct confrontation with that era in their lives. "We'll drive over later and see what you like in the new cars." She smiled brilliantly.

"Groovy," Deedee approved. "I'll pop into the pool for a few minutes — I'll be ready when you are."

"What would you like, baby — a convertible?" Fran was playing the indulgent mother again, and enjoying it. The ugliness was swept under the rug again.

"Let's shop around." Jack wouldn't get kooky ideas if she showed up with a new car, would he? No, lots of kids — whose parents weren't movie stars — had their own cars. And a car of her own, not having to borrow from Fran or Lottie, would make it easier, getting between Holmby Hills and the pad near the Strip. "Something jazzy," Deedee said effervescently.

"White, maybe —" Why had she said *that*?

Wednesday afternoon, Deedee drove down the Strip in the new white convertible. Wild, the way Fran called people — and she got her license through in such record time! It shook Fran, though, to see her with the new car, to realize she was old enough for her license. An adult. Not "the baby" any more.

Deedee glanced at her watch as she swung off the Strip. Jack said he'd be at the pad at five. All that jazz on the phone last night — he wasn't honestly serious, about digging the hippie scene? That was for freak-outs.

There was a spot at the curb. Grab it, quickly. God, she had nerve, driving without a license! She loved driving — it gave her a sense of power, like thumbing her nose at the world. She went down there, took her test — like anybody else. Maybe people were forgetting Deidre Evans. Were they?

Anyhow, if her mother wasn't Fran Constant, she wouldn't have got the license through so fast. What would Jack say if he knew? No, don't start that — Jack turned on for Deedee Costello. Leave it that way.

Conscientiously, she locked the car. It was new and she was proud of it. She hurried down the street, thinking about Zoe and the pad. She wished she hadn't taken Zoe in with her — it took the edge off, somehow. There was something about Zoe that got her back up. Maybe it was the way she saw Zoe looking at Jack a couple of times. Like she was wondering how it would be to make it with him.

Zoe wasn't at the apartment, but evidence of her occupancy was everywhere. A bra lay on the floor, a blouse across a chair. The idiot,

she'd left the bed unmade. The room smelled strangely. Deedee sniffed suspiciously. Pot. Zoe had had a pot party here last night. Deedee was annoyed. Why had Jack made such a point of her inviting Zoe to stay? Damn, why didn't Zoe just bug out?

Deedee closed up the studio couch and picked up about the room till it was orderly again. Fran used to be an awful slob, even with the help to pick up after her — she was better now, with the analysis. Deedee suppressed a giggle — what had it cost Fran, how many thousands to that shrinker, to learn to be semineat?

She started at the light tapping on the door.

"Hi!" She pulled the door wide, a welcoming smile on her face. It seemed so long since Monday morning. It helped, talking with Jack over the phone — but seeing him was important.

"Hi, baby —" Jack playfully grabbed, kissed her. "Missed you."

"How was class?" Maybe she ought to take some classes next term. Not what Jack called gut courses — something that would really interest her.

"I don't know —" He frowned. "I'm about burnt out. The usual routine with me. Who needs it?"

"Hungry?"

"Haven't you noticed?" Jack grinned. "I'm always famished."

"I brought a load of stuff from home." Deedee walked over to the refrigerator. It would be fun to be married to Jack, to take care of him. They wouldn't need much to keep them going. The pad — Fran would keep up her allowance, to take care of that. They could take turns working, to buy food. But how could she say to Jack, "let's make the marriage scene"? He'd cut out, fast.

"Okay, chow time," Jack decreed briskly.

"What's bugging you?" she asked finally, when they were seated on the floor picnic fashion.

"The whole scene," he said discontentedly. "Where are we going? What's ahead for us?"

"Meaning what?" Her heart was hammering. Did he mean Jack and her, specifically — or the world in general?

"The Establishment, baby," he said patiently. "I listen to my old man, and I shudder. I don't want his bag. He's forty-seven years old, with an ulcer and one cardiac behind him. My mother makes the golf pro pitch, and anybody else interesting that comes knocking at the

door," he said brutally. "They've got the big house and the swimming pool and three cars — and they're pressured like no generation's ever been pressured before."

"So we don't buy it." Play it cool. Did Jack mean he was going to cut out? She'd go with him. Anywhere. Compulsively, she leapt to her feet. "I brought over another album of The Doors. An old one. It's groovy."

She lingered over the record player, worrying about Jack's mood. Suddenly, he was the focal point of her existence. She'd go ape without him.

"Baby, you building up to some hang-up?" Jack's hand closed in about her ankle. "You've got that look about you."

"Don't cut out, Jack," she said softly.

"Cool it," he soothed. "I'm not running."

He pulled her down on the floor beside him. It was going to be all right, for now. She felt warm, safe, with Jack holding her this way. For the first few minutes. Then the lights began to flash. The flutter-flutter down there. Jazzy with Jack. It always was.

"Who burned you, baby?" Jack crooned, positioning her against a mound of pillows.

"It doesn't matter anymore," she whispered insistently. Like Jack said — now, baby, *now*!

The record wailed out — "This is the end —" But it was only the beginning, wasn't it? The electronic madness built to a frenzy matching the frenzy in her. The record at top volume, the room quiet and dark, and Jack filling her with hot, sweet heat that her body — independent of her mind — moved to claim, to drain, to writhe ecstatically. Cool, man, cool!

Deedee made a point of going home early Thursday evening. Not that Fran probed about where she was Sunday night. In a way, Deedee wished that she *had* probed. But it was easier to accept explanations, wasn't it? Anyhow, Jack wasn't at the pad, and it was no ball hanging around Zoe, listening to her explore the sex pattern of her life. Zoe was a kook.

When she drove up the long, circular driveway to the front of the house, Deedee realized Fran was entertaining. A lemon-yellow Citroen sat out front. She cut past it to the detour that led to the garage. Maybe it was somebody from the studio. Fran was set for two movies again. Fran hadn't made a film in almost a year, and she was all nerved up about it.

Deedee parked the car in the garage, sauntered out into the night, feeling less up-tight than usual. She switched Jack on like mad — let him talk about going the flower people route — it was just talk. Anyhow, he wasn't talking about going up to Haight-Ashbury — just over to Salem. Maybe she'd even go with him to that Griffith Park love-in he was yakking about.

The house was all lit up. Fran was like that. There were lights in every damn room in the house, though all of them would be muted, flattering to Fran. She heard the television in the den. Fran loved watching her old movies on TV. Sometimes she thought Fran was more attractive now than she was in those old movies. Except when Fran was tired or the lights were too bright, or she had a cold.

Deedee walked into the house and listened to the sound of the television. An old movie, as she'd thought. A vague curiosity about the owner of the yellow Citroen prompted her to stroll down to the entrance to the den. You never know what kind of characters Fran brought home.

"Hi, I'm home," she called out to announce her presence. In case Fran wasn't expecting her.

"Hi, baby." Fran appeared in the doorway, that soft, sexy glow about her that said this was a special man she was entertaining. "Come over and say hello to Ferdie Reagan."

"Hello, Ferdie Reagan," Deedee flipped, and a kooky fire ignited low within her as her gaze dwelt on him. He wasn't one of Fran's usual types. She was repelled and fascinated at the same time.

"Some baby, Fran." He dropped an arm about Fran's shoulders as he inspected her. "I expected somebody with braces, on roller skates." He wasn't looking at her like that, though. It was a real male inventory he was taking, as though he could see right through the knit shift she wore to her skin.

"They grow up so fast these days, Ferdie." An edge of sharpness in Fran's voice as her eyes moved from Deedee to him, back to Deedee. Feeling the excitement between the other two.

For the first time, Fran was seeing her as competition, Deedee realized. Crazy! Fran looked at her, knowing what raced through Ferdie Reagan's mind. In his mind, he had her spread across a bed, long-nippled breasts hitting him in the eyes, thighs flexed in readiness.



Had Fran been making it with Ferdie? If she wasn't, she would be. She was all turned on. But right now, Deedee told herself with guilty satisfaction, Ferdie would be willing to turn in the older model for the young one. How old was he? With that kind of face, you couldn't be sure. Anything from thirty to forty.

"I'm going to flake out," Deedee said casually. "Early swimming date tomorrow morning."

"Good night, baby." Soft little voice, silken smile.

Deedee walked down the corridor again, up the stairs towards her white-and-gold bedroom. Fran was all worked up over the way Ferdie Reagan flipped for *her*. All of a sudden, Fran knew she was a woman.

In her bedroom, Deedee threw off her clothes and walked naked into the bathroom to shower. She surveyed her nudity with an impersonal thoroughness. Jazzy body. She'd known that by the time she was fourteen.

She'd never done it with anybody except kids — Jack was the oldest. Except for that creepy French instructor at Miss Leslie's. But he was a fairy, trying to prove — with her — that he was a man. What a washout that had been! But she'd learned from him. Like making it wasn't a one-position deal. Before that, she'd been scared to try the variations.

Deedee adjusted the shower spray needle sharp and hot and stepped underneath. She liked the water beating on her this way. It gave her a kind of sexual satisfaction, she analyzed. What would it be like, with Ferdie Reagan? Why did she keep thinking about him?

She wasn't going to see Jack again until Friday. He had to be home for dinner tomorrow night — some family affair. He rebelled, but he was going. Did he mean it, about burning his draft card if he was called up? There was a lot of that, over at the university these days.

Ferdie Reagan didn't think she was a kid. He looked as though he'd make a pitch, if they'd met somewhere else, away from Fran. Tough. He looked tough. And passionate. Zowie, he looked hot! Where did Fran collect him? Somehow, she was certain he wasn't an actor.

Enough of the shower. She stepped out, pulled a luxuriantly thick bath towel about the dripping body, patted herself dry. Zoe was beginning to bug her, the way she kept shooting those kooky little glances at Jack. What a screwed-up — and much-screwed — fifteen-year-old Zoe was!

Oh well, in another few weeks Zoe would have had it. The wire for bus fare, or plane fare home, would go out. Exit Zoe.

Deedee dropped the towel into a wet, turquoise heap at her feet and walked back into the bedroom with a defiant pleasure in her nakedness. It was early for her to flake out. Not even eleven-thirty. What about Fran and Ferdie, downstairs? They'd sit around and watch television for a while — and then they wouldn't be watching television anymore.

Deedee walked to the window and pushed back the drapes to look down at the pool. The moon was high and full, splashing light across one end of the contoured pool. The other end lay in darkness.

At first Deedee didn't see the pair swimming across the surface of the darkness. Not until her eyes grew accustomed to the shadows. Her gaze sharpened. She saw the jumble of swimsuits lying across a chaise. Fran's newest creation, and a pair of men's trunks.

Fran and Ferdie were in the pool. It wasn't too cold, even at this hour, with the pool heated the way it was. But Fran and Ferdie weren't concerned about swimming.

*How could they?* Screwing down there in the pool! Deedee's eyes were fastened to the squirming shadow in the water. That took talent — screwing and swimming simultaneously, she told herself with a determination not to blow her cool.

All at once ashamed of herself for watching that writhing shadow in the water, Deedee swerved aside and crossed to the bed. She tossed back the covers and slid between them. Sleep in the raw tonight. She did that, most of the time, anyhow.

Was it true, what people said — about men with big hands and big feet? If it was true, then Ferdie Reagan had about the biggest ever. What was the matter with her, thinking this way about Ferdie Reagan? She was hung up on Jack.

Then why did she lie here and wonder how it would feel with Ferdie Reagan on top of her?

# Six

---

Fran leaned back against the sofa, her bare feet comfortably propped on the huge marble coffee table. Her miniskirt had traveled upward over the still attractive thighs, to blouse length. She frowned as she read the final page of the shooting script Len had brought to her.

"It stinks," she said. "And who the hell is Mitchell Gordon?"

"Mitchell Gordon is the hottest thing in TV right now." Len refused to be disturbed. He knew she was aware of Mitchell Gordon — how could she *not* be, with his press?

"A kid," Fran said distastefully. "What happened to all the male stars?"

"He's, forty, claims thirty — and with your price the budget won't stand for a big male star," Len pointed out. "Besides, he'll draw at the box office. After this picture, Reigal won't be able to afford him."

"They're using me to build him up!" Fran's eyes shot off sparks as grievance took root. One foot tapped restlessly. "Some of the scenes — at least three — should be mine. They're not, Len!"

"The camera will make them yours, baby," Len soothed. "You know that. The guy's just a foil for you."

"Tell them to rewrite." Fran leaned forward now for the martini shaker.

"Frannie, ease off on that," Len suggested cautiously. "You start shooting in two weeks."

Deliberately, Fran filled her cocktail glass to the brim, brought it to her mouth, her eyes mocking Len. All he worried about was his lousy commission. She crossed one leg at right angles to the other, playing her never-ending game of trying to arouse Len. Anybody

who didn't know better would be certain he was a fag. Here she sat, with nothing under the minishift, everything on display — and he didn't bat an eyelash.

"Don't worry about me, Len," she purred. "Twelve pounds off before I meet the cameras. I've got that damned sadist of a masseuse over here every afternoon, pounding the hell out of me. I swim every day. I go to bed at nine sharp every night. Reigal will get his money's worth."

"I'll tell him to talk to the writers about those scenes," Len promised. He wouldn't, Fran thought — but it sounded good.

She didn't have to worry about Mitchell Gordon — she could bring him to heel fast enough. Or to bed, she amended with a little flurry of anticipation. With the leading man in your bed, you had less trouble on the set. Besides, it made it cozy when you were having a thing with your leading man.

Len, with an eye on his watch, made a swift withdrawal. He was right about the martinis, Fran acknowledged with a flash of caution. She picked up poundage like crazy when she was on a drinking bout.

What was going on with that son of a bitch Vic? Not one call! He was having himself a ball with that showgirl in his show, who was always stretched out for some wheel. And Carla said he was seeing Jody Jones, that wide-eyed little tramp who had a high-rating teenage TV series. Vic visualized himself as another Frank Sinatra — but Frank and Mia washed out, didn't they? The trouble with Vic, he thought he was a lousy fucking machine.

Fran listened intently. Len was driving away. Another car was coming up. That would be Phyllis, the masseuse. She rose, stifled a yawn, stretched. Phyl had a pair of hands like an ape, but she tooled off the pockets of fat. Fran walked out of the den, heading down the corridor to the stairs. Lottie would send Phyllis upstairs.

Fran lay limp beneath the sheet while Phyllis wound up the kneading session. Even while she swore at Phyl, calling her mentally a stinking dyke who got her kicks this way, Fran admitted she felt great after a session under those hands. All the kinks gone. Maybe she'd take up Phyl's suggestion, have a sauna built in downstairs. Amusement lit her eyes. Now that would be a new gimmick — come over and visit me in my sauna.

"That does it," Phyl said briskly, stepping back from the limp, sheet-wrapped body.

"You're murdering me," Fran complained. "I'll be black and blue tomorrow."

"No, you won't," Phyl refuted cheerfully. "At least, not from me."

For one heated instant, their eyes clashed. She was right, Fran decided triumphantly. A lousy dyke. That was one trick she'd never tried. How could you get a kick with another broad?

"See you tomorrow," Fran said softly, sitting up. She let the sheet slide to the floor, enjoying the painful rush of color that flooded Phyl's throat and traveled into her cheeks.

"Don't eat back all I pounded off," Phyl warned, pulling her eyes away from the naked display of breasts and pelvis and thighs.

"I won't," Fran said. "I've got a date with the cameras."

Phyl would run home now and make it tough for some sweet thing she was keeping, Fran guessed — all the time thinking about Fran Constant. A slight smile of satisfaction hovered about the petulant mouth as she slid down from the table, sauntered towards the bathroom for the hot shower that routinely followed the massage.

From the shower Fran took herself to the bed. She felt marvelous right now, all the kinks out, so relaxed. She stretched out flat, no pillow beneath her head, enjoying the way her body melted into the mattress, disguising any slight imperfections of contour.

The next two weeks were going to be rotten. It was always that way before she started a new film. She was staying away from the pills this time. They threw her whole system out of kilter. The picture was going to be great — it always was, wasn't it? She refused to let her mind dwell on the dogs. She'd be nerved up, right until the moment they started shooting — and then it'd be all right again.

She was in a half-sleep when the phone rang. It was her private wire, which meant it was Len or somebody close. Without moving her body, she reached out for the phone and brought the receiver to her ear.

"Hello."

"What are you doing, baby?" Ferdie. He'd been calling her daily from Vegas. He spent more time in Vegas than L.A.

"I'm in bed. Alone," she said with a sexy drawl. "Why aren't you here?"

"I can be there in twenty minutes," he offered.

"When did you get back from Vegas?" She snapped to attention.

"Last night." His chuckle was wry. "I went broke. It was time to cut out. Can I come over and be consoled?"

"Come over," she ordered. "We'll discuss consolation later."

"Right there," he said briskly, and hung up.

Fran swung over on her back and inspected the diamond and platinum watch that had set Hugo back close to two thousand. God, she must have been drowsing two hours! So Ferdie was back, and flat, he said.

What did Ferdie do, besides play the tables at Vegas? He had mysterious conferences with Corelli at odd times. Ferdie was like a road company version of those characters Bogey used to play. Too bad he couldn't act. With that magnetism, that appeal, he'd be a smash.

Fran made a lengthy procedure of getting dressed, spending most of the time on her face. She wore a turquoise silk jersey shift, with nothing under it but Fran Constant. A smile played about her mouth as she appraised her reflection in the mirror. Still a lot of woman.

She heard a car coming up the white-stoned driveway and went to the window to look out. Ferdie. Lottie would admit him, send him into the living room to cool his heels. He'd be hot enough when she brought him upstairs. She'd have Lottie make them up a batch of champagne cocktails. Ferdie got a kick out of drinking champagne.

Deedee's door was wide open. A record was wailing out into the stillness. Fran peered into the room.

"Hi, baby. I didn't know you were home." Deedee was really gorgeous, she thought with a flicker of pride. Her baby.

"I slept late," Deedee explained. "When I got up, you were sleeping."

"That masseuse. She kills me." Fran sighed elaborately. "What I don't do for the stinking career." Fran looked at the weekender that lay across Deedee's bed. "You going away for a weekend again?" She really ought to ask more questions — but when you did that, you just alienated the kids.

"A beach party," Deedee said casually. "It sounds like fun."

"Sweetie, you can throw a bash over here some weekend," Fran reminded her — forgetting that the one time Deedee had thrown such a brawl, when she was at Miss Leslie's, had been disastrous. Fran had

forgotten about Deedee's party, and had come home smashed with that Swedish director and his boyfriend, who wanted to make it a threesome with her. He also wanted to sell her on doing a movie in Sweden, complete with nude scenes. What was the matter with these kids today? What was sexy about walking before a camera stark naked? Look at the shot of Jane Fonda in *Life*, or was it *Look*? You couldn't really see anything, that was sexier than the ones showing the bare tits.

"I bought two new swimsuits at Magnin's, and charged them," Deedee reported seriously. "God, the prices were wild!"

"So I'm working," Fran shrugged this off cheerfully. "Have a fun weekend, baby."

Fran went downstairs and detoured into the rear of the house to tell Lottie to throw together the champagne cocktails. She was humming under her breath when she started back for the living room. A massage took years off her face. All that tension was pushed away.

Ferdie had the television on. They were like a pair of old marrieds, the way they could sit down and watch television all evening — with admitted side distractions. The first time he'd screwed her while watching the late show, she'd been furious. But after a while, he'd stopped watching.

Fran stopped dead at the entrance to the living room. Deedee stood there, talking to Ferdie. It wasn't what they were saying that disturbed her. It was the way they were looking at each other. Didn't Ferdie know Deedee was a kid? And that look on Deedee's face! She'd never seen Deedee like that. *What was the matter with them?*

"You didn't get off yet, baby?" Her voice was high-pitched, too convivial.

"I'm going now," Deedee said, without taking her eyes from Ferdie.

"You'll be back Sunday night," Fran said, overly sharp of tone.

"Sure," Deedee promised, looking at Fran now. "How much can I take of those creeps?"

Deedee sauntered off, conscious of Ferdie's attention to the swing of the curvaceous torso. Fran's eyes held a dangerous glint. In his rotten mind, Ferdie was laying Deedee!

"She's too young for you, sweetie," Fran drawled, when Deedee was out of the room and Ferdie had crossed the distance between them to pull her close.

"What are you trying to make me?" he clucked reproachfully. "An old lecher?"

"You lech after me," Fran said calmly.

They separated when Lottie came in with the cocktail tray. But she'd meant that, about Deedee. He wasn't putting his cotton-picking hands on the baby. What about Deedee, she wondered now? Was she a virgin? Probably not. Kids today were making it by the time they were fourteen. Her birth-control pills were disappearing with startling swiftness. Probably Deedee, filching from the bottle. At least, let Deedee be smart — don't get caught

They settled down on the sofa, cocktails in hand. Ferdie switched off the television.

"What brought you back into town today?" Fran asked, cagey about his earlier admission of going broke in the casino. "I thought we were spending the weekend out there."

"I'm temporarily embarrassed financially." He grinned expressively. "We'll go out next weekend. We won't be bored here."

"I'd better be bored," Fran said explicitly. "Unless you're embarrassed down there, too."

"You interested in proof?" He bristled with male pride.

"Later," she stipulated, feeling herself in control again. The phone jingled. "I'll get it, Lottie," she called loudly, and sauntered across the room to pick up the extension. Ferdie's eyes followed the seductive sway of her breasts as she walked to the phone. Her breasts felt full, which meant she was due in the next twenty-four hours. She was always most passionate just before. "Hello —"

"Darling, I'm flipping!" Carla's voice, pitched high with that quality that said she had a scoop. "Have you been listening to the news in the last hour?"

"No." She waited attentively.

"It looks like Jody Jones and Vic are getting married. They were caught taking out marriage licenses in the Vegas courthouse!"

"What do you know?" Fran drawled, a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Trying to emulate Frankie boy. Jody Jones isn't even twenty."

"The publicity says eighteen, but she's gotta be twenty-six," Carla reported triumphantly. "Unless she gave birth at nine. There's the nine-year-old kid she keeps hidden away in boarding school."



"Vic's trying it out for laughs," Fran said. Damn the heel! He said four times through the marriage mill was enough, but that little cunt threw herself at him, and zingo, he couldn't wait to get in. "Maybe we ought to send him a gold-plated teething ring for a wedding present."

"Why don't you run over this evening?" Carla invited. "I have some people coming over — it ought to be great for laughs with this mob." Meaning it would be some of her Strip set, or the love people. All too young to vote.

"I'm flying out to Vegas," Fran reported, deciding on impulse. "With Ferdie." Carla hadn't met Ferdie, but she'd been briefed. "Maybe I can fill the bride in on some of the bridegroom's eccentricities."

"I don't think you'll have to tell Jody Jones anything," Carla giggled. "That broad has been laid by everything except a brass monkey."

"I'll call you when we get back," Fran said briskly, anxious to be off the phone. "Probably Sunday night."

"What's this Vegas bit?" Ferdie chided, when she was off the phone.

"I'd like to fly out," Fran said softly. "This town is a dog on weekends."

"Vegas is a dog when you can't play in the casino," Ferdie pointed out. "Let's have a private weekend, right here." He reached. She avoided him.

"A private party in Vegas," she said firmly.

"I can't do it." His jaw hardened. His eyes were annoyed. "I don't dig that town when I can't go into the casinos and play."

"So you'll play," Fran said nonchalantly. Let Vic see her there with Ferdie. Let him know she didn't give a damn if he was marrying Jody Jones. "They'll cash my check at the casino, won't they?" Her eyes were bright with triumph. She'd sail into the casino, hanging on to Ferdie's arm. Sit at a ringside table tonight, with Ferdie panting at her side. "I've never had trouble so far."

"They'll probably cash it," Ferdie conceded.

"Come upstairs and help me pack," Fran ordered, moving in to him. He knew there was nothing under the jersey shift except her. Ferdie reacted like a sixteen-year-old. Hot as a pistol!

So she was loaning Ferdie money. That didn't mean she was keeping him. He'd spent plenty on her. Besides, he'd pay back whatever she loaned him. She'd make sure he did.

# Seven

---

Deedee made a right turn onto Sunset Boulevard for the three-mile run that would take her into the Strip. Traffic was routinely heavy, for this hour of the afternoon — not the bumper-to-bumper funeral pace it would assume in three or four hours. She was learning to be sharp about missing a tourist mob. Jazzy, having the car!

Maybe Jack would be in a better mood this weekend. He was in a flap when they were together Wednesday night — his folks were putting on the pressure about his going back to school on a full-time basis. Last weekend was a dog. Zoe and Rock always underfoot. Zoe always had *somebody* underfoot, usually a closet case.

Jack didn't really dig that pot party Rock dragged them to Saturday night in the canyon. God, you could hear the coyotes howl — and that wasn't the pot making you think so.

Zoe and Rock got stoned right off. But then Zoe had been having pot parties in the pad all along. No matter how you aired the place out afterwards, the smell hung around. Zoe was going the flower child route, too. Was *that* a put-on, for Jack's benefit? Jack was talking more and more like a hippie recruit.

It was kooky the way they sat around in that dive up in the canyon, smoking joints. She'd faked it, scared of getting hooked — but everybody said you can't get hooked on pot, it isn't habit-forming. Anyhow, she was glad when Jack said for them to cut out. Zoe and Rock were stoned, but that didn't mean *they* had to follow the pattern.

How was she going to get Zoe out of the pad? She had hoped, Saturday night in the canyon, that Zoe would cut out and head for the hippie scene. It bugged her the way Zoe was making a kind of pitch for Jack, right in front of her.

She just wished Jack and she could spend a weekend by themselves. She didn't dig community living. The Strip scene was fun, in easy doses — but she liked the quiet times with Jack that happened so seldom. Maybe she was a square, deep inside. Maybe she was too grown-up for this scene.

Ferdie Reagan flipped for her. Fran was all burnt up over that, wasn't she? Ferdie wasn't a kid, and he didn't think *she* was one, either. If Fran hadn't come in right then, Ferdie might have started making a pass at her. Groovy, to be able to turn on one of Fran's men!

Fran wasn't serious about Ferdie; Fran was playing a game. Ferdie was a hood. Looking at him, you could see that. Fran went for rich, important men — like Hugo. Why couldn't Fran have stayed married to Hugo? He wasn't a Hollywood character.

Hugo was terrific, when they held her that way at the police station, pending the juvenile court action. He was sensational the way he got her out of reform school way ahead of what anybody expected. Of course, the judge helped a lot, the way he lambasted Fran for being a lousy mother. He said it was a lot like the Cheryl Crane case. Too much luxury, too much glamour, and no home life.

She used to dream that Fran and Hugo would stay married, even though she knew they were washed up. She had nutty ideas about the three of them going to live somewhere in Europe, where nobody knew them. Ideas about being a family. Maybe Hugo would even adopt her legally. Wow, had she been corny in those days!

Golly, she was getting morbid, digging up all that old stuff. Jack was right — it was now, baby, now. Maybe she could get Jack away from the mob tonight; maybe the others would go crashing another hippie bash.

Traffic was becoming more congested. Deedee warned herself to concentrate on driving — she couldn't afford any traffic violations. Not with her record. That was a gas — it was Fran's record really. What the devil was the matter with the creep just ahead, in that relic from 1940? Why didn't he move? All at once, she was impatient to reach the pad. Her pad, even if Zoe was always underfoot. That was a place where she belonged.

Deedee was humming under her breath as she hurried up the stairs to the pad. It had taken longer than usual to make the trip from Holmby Hills. Jack would be showing any minute. She didn't bother

reaching for her key — a hundred to one Zoe would be lying around the place.

Deedee reached for the knob, turned it. The blaring recording of *The Doors* told her Zoe was home. She swung the door wide and stopped dead, eyes wide in shock. Zoe wasn't in sight. A man sprawled across the opened-up studio couch, wearing boxer shorts, a drooping moustache, and a sickening grin.

"Where's Zoe?" Hot color stained her cheeks. Her voice was laced with fury.

"In there," he said nonchalantly, nodding towards the bathroom. Now he was x-raying her from bustline to thigh.

"What are you doing here?" Deedee demanded, flinching before the lascivious inspection. Characters like this showed up regularly along the Strip, along with the kids. They had one thing in mind: some chick looking for a fast five or ten, and not caring how she earned.

"I'm a paying guest." He smirked knowingly. "For you I'll make it double."

"Get out!" Deedee shrieked, just as Zoe lounged into view, wearing thonged sandals and nothing else. "I'm not running a whorehouse here!"

"You put up a good show of it," he shot back nastily, but he was sauntering across the room to pick up his trousers.

"She's fifteen," Deedee said, eyes blazing. "I'm underage, too. It's rape in California, whether you pay or not!"

"So I'm going." But he looked cowed. "It wasn't worth it, anyhow. Give me an older woman any time, who knows the tricks."

"You, too, Zoe," Deedee said, her voice still high and shaky. "Put on your clothes and cut out of here!"

"I've got it all fixed up with the landlady," Zoe shot back triumphantly. "I've been giving her money all along, towards a month's rent. She's got a vacancy right here in the building. Who needs you?" Zoe picked up a ten-dollar bill from under an ashtray on the cocktail table. "This is all I need to buy my own pad."

Zoe's eyes were bold, defiant, older than the fifteen-year-old baby face. She swung the naked hips with deliberate provocativeness as she moved about the room, collecting her belongings that had seemed pathetically sparse to Deedee two weeks ago. Zoe's client wasn't above taking a final leer as he ambled out of the room into the corridor.

Deedee went on a compulsive cleaning spree when Zoe was gone, as though to wipe out all traces of the former non-paying roommate. The pot parties were bad enough, but she wasn't sharing with a prosty. Not even Jack would be that liberal-minded.

Deedee moved about the room, picking up dog-eared copies of movie magazines, old issues of the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the square hometown newspaper Zoe had brought home in a fit of nostalgia one night. Now, with discarded reading matter in tow, Deedee headed down the corridor to the area where old newspapers were stacked.

An issue of today's paper captured Deedee's attention. It was folded back to a gossip column. Vic Emerson's name stood out in bold type. The columnist hailed the imminent marriage of Jody Jones and Vic Emerson. Right below this item was a bit about Fran's coming film commitments, with a snide reminder that she wasn't as big as she was in the days when she shared box-office ratings with Ava and Rita and Lana. The item continued with Fran's preoccupation (the columnist's choice of word) with a hood recently imported from the East named Fernando Reagan. Reagan, the item went on to point out, had a way with the women — but Fran Constant was his biggest conquest to date.

"Hi." Jack's voice drifted to her from the foot of the flight of stairs just below the landing. Deedee forgot Fran and Ferdie.

"Hi." Pleasure warmed her voice. There'd be nobody to interrupt Jack and her tonight. She'd hated it, lying on the studio couch with Jack while Zoe and Rock carried on the way they did on the floor just a few feet away.

She waited for him, with a brilliant smile of welcome. She knew the kind of welcome Jack most enjoyed. Was there something the matter with her, the way she couldn't wait to hit the sack with him? She wasn't a nympho. A nympho never really enjoyed it. With Jack, she was ready to climb the walls.

"That was jazzy," she said complacently, much later, stretching like a satisfied kitten, naked against a mound of pillows on the floor. She'd told him about Zoe, and he'd been shook. There was all that business about the high increase in VD floating around, particularly in their age bracket. Jack could be serious about things like that. "I was so up-tight before —"

"Why?" he demanded.

"Who knows?" Deedee shrugged cynically. She'd never told Jack about Fran. He didn't talk about his family, except about the way they were pressuring him to go back to college for his degree, to rejoin the great middle-class parade. "Nothing seems to mean anything." Except Jack. "What is there for us, anyhow?" She was parroting Jack — but that was okay.

"What about taking in the parade on Wilshire Boulevard tomorrow?" Jack asked, squinting into space. "Maybe we could ride on a float."

"What kind of a parade?" Deedee settled her head in the curve of Jack's arm, her rump resting against him. It always switched him on, when she nuzzled back this way, pressing into him. Wow, already!

"Hippie parade. The love people." Jack reached to adjust her body between his California-tanned thighs. He was reacting to the gentle, insinuating pressure of her rump. "Maybe we'll take in the Teenage Fair tonight. I hear there's this bash, too, near Salem Street. I've had it with the Strip scene. It's noisy and nutty — and what comes of it?"

"So we'll crash the party," Deedee agreed. She had to go along with whatever Jack said. "If they don't care who crashes," she flipped.

"Baby, there's a new bag over there. A new way of looking at things." His eyes glowed with fervor. "I buy that whole bit, about 'I am a human being — do not fold, spindle, or mutilate.' I can't breathe in a computer world, Deedee!"

"I'm for anything that keeps you out of the army," Deedee said with unexpected intensity. Neither Jack nor she often talked about it — but it bugged the two of them. "Why should you get killed, for something you don't even understand?"

"Let's get some clothes on and cut out of here," Jack said briskly.

"Now?" Deedee was startled. This wasn't the message she was receiving at the base of her spine.

"In a little while," he corrected with a grin, leaning back against the floor. "Come for a ride on your little wooden horsie."

But there was nothing little, nor wooden, about this race horse.

By the time they arrived on Salem Street, the scene was in high gear. Deedee and Jack both wore tight-fitting chinos, turtle-necked jerseys. They could lose themselves in the hippie population that sat against the edge of the buildings, squatted near the curbs, filling up the sidewalk space with the density of the Strip scene.

"I hear that new group at the Cheetah is great. Shall we give it a whirl?" Jack asked.

"Not yet," Deedee said, and quickly apologized for stepping on the outstretched bare foot of a sandwich eater slumped with libertine abandon against a store front.

Despite her earlier contempt for the "freak-outs," Deedee was intrigued. Jack was right; this was a whole new bag. Through the years of living around Fran — except for the lengthy gaps at the lineup of schools — she'd acquired a talent for sopping up conversation. Not all of these who called themselves hippies were genuine. There were the characters who made the scene because it was "in," for kicks. The weekend or "after Establishment jobs" hippies.

Despite her inner reluctance to come to Salem Street, Deedee found herself enjoying the casual roaming about the street, stopping here and there to talk. Groovy, in a new way. No playacting. *Real*. That is, except for the phonies. She was proud of her ability to detect the phonies.

"What about that bash I told you about?" Jack asked. "I know some of these cats — they dropped out from the same school that I did. You'll dig them."

"Let's go," Deedee accepted promptly. Jack was taking her into part of his old life. For some reason, she found this exciting.

The pad was a dive, like the place where Jack had taken her in the canyon. Before you even walked inside, you knew there was a bash in progress. The hum of voices, the sound of music. The first room was dark, except for a splash of light in one corner. Nobody seemed to mind.

Jack dropped an arm about Deedee's waist as he prodded her over feet and bodies across the room to meet his friend. With a start, Deedee stared into the next room, less dimly lit. A couple lay across the floor. The girl wore an opened blouse, nothing else. His hands were on her teacup breasts. While Deedee watched in disbelief, he swung himself above the girl. How could they do it, right in the open that way, in front of everybody? Deedee suppressed a giggle. Was that what they meant about "doing your own thing"? Nobody else seemed even to notice them.

"I'm off drugs, like forever," an earnest blonde, sitting cross-legged on the floor, was saying. "The guru won't bother with you if you're on

drugs. Ditto if you're in analysis. He made me wait fifteen days to clear my nervous system of grass."

Part of Deedee's mind tuned in to the remarks of the tall, near-emaciated ex-college buddy of Jack's. He was bragging about his crash pad.

"How many people making the scene here?" Jack asked, his eyes spanning the room.

"Twelve in residence," his host said with pride. "But it's been as high as twenty-three. We were sleeping all over the place. We take turns going out to work to bring in bread."

Deedee tuned in to the other conversations about them.

"I'm turned on everything free — acid, STP. I don't trip more than twice a week. You do, you're in trouble —"

"Don't you buy that Lancelot bit," a girl was saying vigorously, and this time Jack tuned in, too. Their host was wandering off into the room where the couple were making it on the floor.

"What's wrong with Lancelot?" Jack challenged. "The way I hear it, anybody can get a crash pad with him." Deedee snapped to attention. Jack had been with this scene more than she realized. "And if a kid wanders in — I mean, a real kid, like fourteen — he tries to get them to go home. I hear he even works with the fuzz to promote their fare."

"That's the newspapers making big of Lancelot," the girl jeered. "He's got a great habit of sticking girls on speed, without letting them know, then balling them. Oh, he's a great guy!"

"I don't dig speed," Jack said tersely.

"Baby, it's sensational," another girl joined in. "With speed, you have this groovy feeling of power. You feel you can do anything."

"With speed you can turn paranoiac," Jack pointed out.

The pair who had been making it in the other room joined the group around Jack and the girl who was defending speed. A kind of pride enveloped Deedee at the way Jack was becoming the focal point of attention. He was against everything except grass — and he had reservations about that.

"Look, you don't find beauty and truth with drugs," Jack was insisting harshly. "That was the word in the beginning. But we don't need mind-expanding drugs. And look what's coming up on LSD."



"What?" The girl was defiant. Jack wasn't alone in tearing down speed. The others knew about "speed freaks." "What about LSD?"

"Haven't you seen the buttons going around? 'Mutate.'"

"Meaning what?" an unwashed, unbarbered hippie demanded. "Man, you've been taking too many courses."

"They've come up with proof," Jack pushed on. "LSD causes chromosome breakage — like radiation. If an acidhead has a baby, it could be like the kids after Hiroshima and Nagasaki!"

"One of our kids?" a plumpish flower girl gasped in shock, and Deedee saw her turn pale. "We're the ones who hate the bomb worse than anybody in this world!"

"I was pregnant once," a girl sprawled in a corner announced dreamily. "It happened on an LSD trip. I'll bet it would have been a beautiful baby — but this cat I was shackled up with freaked out one night. I lost the baby." She didn't appear unhappy about it. She was probably on a trip, right this minute.

Nobody noticed when the door opened — until suddenly, the room was spilling over with fuzz. Dark blue shadows wove in and out, frisking, searching, ignoring the indignant voices rising to a crescendo. Deedee clutched at Jack, recoiling from the hands, horrified, stunned into immobility for a moment. It couldn't be a raid! It was just a kooky hippie bash!

"Okay, you characters!" a voice ordered brusquely. "You're getting a free ride on the city!"

Voices rose in fury. Hands flailed against the intruders. All of it was futile.

"We aren't doing anything," the girl who'd been defending speed was shrieking. "You can't take us in!"

"It's still illegal to use drugs," a cop said dryly. "You got enough here to stock a small-time pusher for a week!"

"Why don't you butt out? Who's hurtinging anybody?" someone jeered.

"A twenty-six-year-old mother is dead, and a four-year-old kid crippled," a cop shot back. "Because one of you acidheads in this fleabag got behind a wheel while hooked on speed!" He was shoving ruthlessly now, determined to marshal them out of the apartment into the waiting wagon below. "We've got somebody downtown who

saw the whole thing — one of you creeps is going to be indicted for vehicular homicide.”

Deedee clung to Jack — trembling, thrown back three years ago, to the harrowing night Fran came into the house, hysterical, running away from an accident. A child had been killed — and everybody thought *she* was responsible. She couldn’t go down to that police station! They’d know who she was. It would all be dragged out again, into ugly headlines!

“Jack, I can’t go down there,” she whispered, shuddering, sick inside. “Jack, you don’t understand! I can’t go down to that police station!”

But the fuzz were herding them out of the apartment, down the narrow stairs towards the waiting wagon. The fuzz were grim with the memory of a twenty-six-year-old mother who was D.O.A., on a slab in the hospital morgue now — and a four-year-old child who would be forever crippled.

# Eight

---

Fran made no effort to conceal her annoyance as she stood behind Ferdie, who was deeply engrossed in the blackjack game. She wasn't playing — not when it was her bankroll at stake. Ferdie was ahead. Why didn't he quit? How long did he expect her to stand here like a tourist?

"Watching the action. Miss Constant?" Corelli, the Big Boy himself, sauntered over, brown beady eyes bright with interest, almost obsequious in his attitude.

"Such as it is." Her smile indicated amusement.

Corelli was giving her that greedy inspection that said he wouldn't mind adding her to his stable of women. Right now, Fran knew, he had four favorite beauties set up in choice suites at the Versailles — a TV personality, a Hollywood starlet coming up big, a jet setter, and a much publicized "heiress" who was really a bagman, gossip claimed, for Corelli's syndicate. A syndicate which numbered Ferdie among its employees.

"Ferdie better take care of you, or you let me know," Corelli ordered good-humoredly. He'd probably figured it out. Ferdie was young and good-looking in an off-beat fashion; and Corelli was short, fat, and aging.

"Ferdie," Fran said softly, at a break in the game, "let's cut out." She was anxious to go into the lounge, to catch Vic's spot in the show. Vic must know she'd arrived — word had a way of getting around. Was it true, about Jody Jones and him? "Ferdie —" Impatience crept into her voice at his lack of reaction. "Let's go."

"Later." Ferdie's attention was all on the action at the table.

"Ferdie, I want to leave," Fran said imperiously.

"Later, baby."

"Fuck you!" she whispered furiously, and spun away from the table.

Fran walked quickly, head high, eyes flashing dangerously, pushing her way through the Friday night mob in the casino. How dare that creep tell her, "later"! She was so involved in rage that she didn't see Vic and the tall redhead that was Jody Jones until she had practically collided with them in the lobby.

"Greetings," Vic said, his smile mocking, his eyes cautious.

"Been to any good fires lately?" Fran drawled sweetly, while her eyes venomously dissected her younger replacement.

"Not lately," he acknowledged, but, Fran was already brushing past him, headed for the elevator.

In her suite, Fran called room service and ordered a bottle. That rotten bastard! Didn't he know Jody Jones was letting him lay her for the publicity it got her? If he married her, it wouldn't last more than six months. She'd use him up by then! *Was he really going to marry Jody Jones?*

Fran walked across to the window wall and gazed out at the night view of Vegas. She'd check out, now, fly back to L.A. She'd had it with this scene. First Ferdie acting up that way, then walking into Vic with that slut — who needed this kind of a weekend?

She packed swiftly, called downstairs, made her plane reservation for the next flight, arranged for the limousine to take her to the airport. For a heated moment, she remembered the last time she'd driven to the airport — with Ferdie. If he was in the mood, he'd probably try to do it on a casino table, with everybody gaping.

The bottle arrived as she was about to leave. She signed the tab, stuffed the bottle into her valise. Maybe she'd call up Carla, to come over and yak it up tonight — after Carla finished that teenage brawl. By the time she arrived in L.A., it would be close to four.

"Your limousine's waiting. Miss Constant," the driver greeted her respectfully when she emerged from the elevator. "Mr. Corelli said to tell you he's sorry you're leaving so soon."

The invitation there was clear. Fran hesitated, briefly.

"Tell Mr. Corelli I'll be back another weekend," she said sweetly. Mr. Corelli wasn't her cup of tea. Not with that potbelly and the Hollywood gangster look.

"Carla, darling, what's doing?" Fran asked with determined conviviality. "I didn't go to Vegas, after all." Easier that way than to go into full explanation on the phone.

"Oh, I just cut out from the younger set. We were all over on the Strip. The holy temple of the gorgeously young," Carla bubbled. "I really dig them, you know."

"I gathered that," Fran laughed.

"We sat out there on the car and watched that marvelous scene! Then we went over to a strip joint — some of those topless waitresses are really cows, you know. I brought this jazzy character home with me — he's nineteen and built, with a thing like nobody you've ever known. So guess what? Tonio flew in from Rome!"

"He's back?" Fran was disappointed. She didn't want to sit alone in the house tonight.

"Conked out, fast asleep," Carla said disgustedly. "He wears himself out with the *dolce vita*, then comes home to me. Who needs him?"

"Come over and split a bottle of champagne with me," Fran coaxed. "This house gives me the creeps when I'm by myself."

"I don't know why you don't keep sleep-in help," Carla began.

"Because I like my privacy," Fran said, for the hundredth time. "I don't want to fall all over help." Where did Deedee say she was going for the weekend? She really ought to throw some kind of brawl, to meet these kids Deedee was forever running around with. They'd probably be impressed as hell with her movie-star image.

"I'll be over in twenty minutes," Carla said briskly. "You know me — I can't sleep before seven."

On her last movie — which was close to two years ago — Carla had insisted on starting work in the afternoon, working until midnight. The crew had cursed her for that, Fran recalled. Carla wasn't big enough anymore to pull on those stunts. Fran shivered — Carla and she weren't seventeen, or even twenty-seven, anymore. It was a sadistic reminder, one which came frequently now.

Off the phone, Fran prowled restlessly about the spacious white and turquoise bedroom. Maybe she'd take a soak in the tub until Carla arrived. Carla's twenty minutes was more apt to be an hour. Ferdie was a heel, behaving that way. Vic was a heel. All men were louses. But deep within her, Fran still dreamt wistfully of a knight on a white charger.

Fran pulled down a gossamer black nightie and peignoir set from her wall closet, dropped it over one arm, kicked off her shoes, and headed for the lush bathroom that had been repeatedly photographed for the fan magazines during the past six years. Now that she knew Carla was coming over, she enjoyed the solitude. How could Carla bear having domestic help underfoot all the time? But then, Carla enjoyed an audience — *any* time.

Fran leaned over to adjust the water to her satisfaction — borderline hot, to ease away some of the tension. Right now, she could use a massage. What would Phyl say if she phoned her up right now, and said, “Come over”? That bull dyke would probably hop on the back of a Honda and come careening over — just to get those massive, hungry hands on the Fran Constant body.

While the water rose in the tub — silken, scented, Fran stripped, her eyes fastened to the mirrored wall opposite. Crazy, how she could get excited staring at her body this way. There, her nipples were hardening already. When she was a kid, she used to be ashamed of those huge brown circles about her nipples. Until some casting director told her they were a sign of passionate nature.

Still staring at the reflection of herself in the mirror, Fran tested the water with one toe. Just right. She leaned over to switch off the faucets. Her breasts didn’t sag yet. Carla’s did when she was out of those expensive harnesses she wore. The way she looked right now, she could even do a nude scene in a film. *If* she were the type. She preferred keeping her nude scenes for her private life.

She lowered herself into the golden-tinted liquid, relished the way it caressed her, lapped about her breasts. Ferdie was wishing he was here with her, right this minute. Like this. Was that some sag, there at her thighs? She’d have to tell Phyl to work on that. She wore a swimsuit in one scene in the film. Of course, they’d retouch it like hell. It’d probably be the scene they’d plaster all over the billboards. Nobody would ever see that faint sag.

Why do you have to grow old? She wouldn’t be forever conscious of it this way, if it weren’t for looking at Deedee, seeing herself all those years ago. She was still gorgeous — Reigal wouldn’t be paying her that way if she wasn’t. How much longer? God, she hated the thought of her face sagging like some of those broads. Was it time

for a lift? There was that plastic surgeon in Switzerland who was supposed to be the greatest.

She relaxed in the warmth of the water, leaning back, half-drowsing, her mind a montage of sexual encounters with Vic. Vic said a woman was at her peak sexually at forty — but he was back there in Vegas, stuffing himself into that slutty Jody Jones, who was twenty-seven pretending eighteen.

Damn, it was crazy, the way she could get excited just thinking. If she were a man, she'd have an erection by now. How did it feel, being a man? Was it better for them? One shot and Vic was through for the night. Not Ferdie. You could always be sure of a retake with Ferdie.

"Fran?" Carla's voice called from somewhere downstairs. God, she hadn't taken an hour this time.

"I'm upstairs," Fran yelled back. She really should learn to lock doors. "In the tub —"

"Stay there," Carla ordered. "I'll be right up."

Carla and she had been through a lot together, Fran thought, with a blend of amusement and sentiment. They had even shared a husband. Her second had been Carla's third. That bastard comic, Jason Robbins. Between marriages to Carla and herself, he had wed a Vegas stripper. Now he was writing his memoirs, and everybody was in a dither about what he was going to tell.

"Fran —" Carla's voice came to her again, a few minutes later. What on earth was Carla doing downstairs?

"I told you, I'm in the tub. In my room, Carla."

Fran stayed there, too lazy to move, with a covert desire to show off her near perfect body to Carla. Right now, she wished Ferdie was in the tub with her. But it was Vic who had a thing about screwing in the tub. Why did she keep thinking about that? She wasn't the kind who went out and picked up cab drivers when she was horny.

"What are you posing for?" Carla demanded, pausing in the doorway to the bathroom with a dramatic flourish of champagne bottle and two glasses.

"I'm a witch," Fran giggled. "I'm willing Vic to dangle like a week-old daffodil, every time he tries to shove it in that stinking redhead."

"He can't compare to my gorgeous kids," Carla said with pride. "You get somebody like Rock, and you've taken a new lease on life."

"I could use a drink," Fran said, lifting herself from the water, standing there statue-like for a long moment, intrigued with her reflection. There was something to being nearsighted, she thought with a flash of humor — right now, she looked about twenty, with her twenty-fifty vision. "Pour," she told Carla as she reached for a thick, turquoise bath towel.

"Jason was a nut about champagne," Carla said reminiscently, pouring into the pair of glasses. "I never was sure about him, you know?" She narrowed her eyes in thought.

"Meaning what?" Fran scooped a glass from her and sipped thirstily, sitting on the bench before the dressing table. The towel slid away to the floor. She didn't bother to retrieve it "What about Jason?" Fran pursued curiously.

"I was never sure whether he was queer, bisexual, or just looking for something new. I caught him with a darling seventeen-year-old — male, that is," Carla said. "The kid was out here trying to break into pictures. He got shipped back to New York. Nobody would touch him when the word got around that Jason's studio wanted him out." Carla chuckled. "Maybe they weren't sure about Jason, either."

"There was this beach party at Malibu," Fran remembered. "Just before we split. I was smashed. Jason dragged me to one of the bedrooms, with this muscle boy he'd met at the tennis club. I was too loaded with champagne to be sure what was happening," Fran giggled. "But it was my first experience at taking on two at the same time. A kind of invasion of privacy."

"From what I hear about Tonio, there was a wild old time in Rome while they were shooting the film. So I come home tonight, with Rock — and there's Tonio, out cold in the master bedroom. When the master comes home, what do you do?" Carla shrugged. "I sent Rock home."

"What did Tonio have to say about himself?" Fran asked.

"He hasn't said yet," Carla explained dryly. "I couldn't wake him up. I tried," she said slyly. "In his favorite fashion. He was dead."

"That redheaded slut will kill Vic," Fran predicted. "He's not in his prime."

"There was a time — oh, way back," Carla conceded, "when the word was that Vic liked boys as well as girls."

"Vic?" Fran was astonished. "I don't believe it."



"I heard it right from the source," Carla said calmly. "One of his boys." Fran stared in shock. "Vic? I can't believe it!"

"What's so strange?" Carla reasoned. "You try everything one way, then you start looking for new kicks. You know how many Vegas whores are lesbians? I read a study about that once, would you believe it? It said those babes are not real lesbians, they're just looking for new kicks. What kicks do you get with another babe?"

"I don't see it," Fran said, looking at herself in the mirror again. "What can there be in it that way?" Why was Carla staring at her breasts?

"Maybe being bisexed and oversexed are close," Carla guessed. "Maybe that's the way it is with Vic." She poured a refill for Fran, then herself. "I mean, when you're getting worked up, you close your eyes, and how do you know who it is?"

"I'd know," Fran said firmly, gulping at the refill.

"It's hot in here," Carla said, an odd glint in her eyes. "Let me shuck off some clothes."

"Why not?" Fran giggled. Carla was always shucking off her clothes. Like that time in Rome, when she stripped to her panties on the dance floor.

"I'll bet I could make a pass at you, and get you hot," Carla said. "If you kept your eyes closed and didn't put up any resistance."

"Not me," Fran insisted. But her eyes were bright. God, the way Carla looked at her right now, she felt as though Carla was a man. But there was nothing masculine about the way Carla was built. Pity, the breasts were just beginning to sag. It wouldn't be long now before she really drooped.

"Come here," Carla commanded, her voice tinged with excitement.

Her head not quite clear, Fran rose to her feet, moved towards Carla. Carla was such a character. She had to try out everything, didn't she?

She closed her eyes when Carla pulled her in close. It was a shock when Carla's mouth closed in on hers and her tongue thrust its way practically down her throat. Carla's hand stroking her breast. Carla's hand between her thighs. Crazy! She was reacting!

"Relax, sweetie." Carla's voice was edged with huskiness and triumph. "Lie down, here. Shut your eyes. Sweetie, you won't know the difference!"

The thick turquoise carpeting received her body. The floor hard beneath the carpeting that had cost Hugo a fortune. Close her eyes, the way Carla said. It wasn't Carla anymore — Hugo. Hugo bought this bit. He got a greater kick out of going down than the usual way. Oh, in another minute, it'd be like it was with Hugo. Or Ferdie. Who needed creepy men? She could have an orgasm, all by herself!

"You filthy, rotten whores!" A male voice, Italian-accented, lashed out at them.

"Tonio," Carla gasped, as he wrenched her from Fran, dragged her to her feet.

"I figured you'd be over here, lushing it up with Fran," he said with contempt. "I didn't expect this!"

Fran cringed as Tonio swung at Carla. Carla's eye would be black tomorrow. But tonight — no, it was tomorrow already — Tonio and Carla would make up, in the fashion Carla most approved. Fran staggered to her feet, an outsider now. Carla and Tonio had forgot she was even here.

Tears welled in Fran's eyes. Tonio would take Carla home. He'd push her around — and then they'd make love. Carla wasn't alone. God, it was awful, being alone. If Vic wasn't such a stinking bastard, it could have been great with them. Some women belonged to be married. She was one of those women.

Who would she marry ten years from now? Who would want an aging, ex-movie star?

# Nine

---

Deedee stood in a corner of the room at the sheriff's station, clutched tightly at Jack's hand. The girl who had been defending speed was crying hysterically. A pair of long-haired boys were denouncing the Establishment in general and fuzz in particular. Outside, the rosy-gray streaks of dawn announced that this was now Saturday.

"Shut up, the lot of you!" the cop in charge yelled above the clamor. "You'll all get a chance to call home if it's local. Out-of-town calls, you make collect. Now line up and wait your turn."

"Jack, I can't call home," Deedee whispered in panic. "I can't!"

"Baby, we're clean," Jack consoled, squeezing her hand encouragingly. "They didn't find anything on us. We were just there at the party."

"I know." Deedee shuddered, remembering the humiliating physical. Those lousy matrons enjoyed it! Treating them like they were hard-core addicts, looking *everywhere* for narcotics. Her face flamed — fingers poking that way, as if she could hide a joint there. "But Jack, I can't call my mother —"

"Why not?" he probed gently, his voice low, meant only for her ears.

"My name isn't Deedee Costello," she admitted in a whisper. "It's Deidre Evans — Fran Constant is my mother." Her eyes met his, reading recognition there. He remembered the headline-splattered trial, the whole bit. "Jack, it'll be all over the papers again! Fran's starting a new movie — she'll die if they drag that out again!"

"Okay, you can't call your mother," Jack said calmly, his eyes squinting in thought. "Stick to Deedee Costello — I'll work on Dad to try to get us in the clear, together. I've got a strong angle, baby."

"You hate me," Deedee said, tears filling her eyes.

"I love you, you little kook," he reproached. "Now cool it. I'll get the word across to Dad — he can back me up."

"How do you know he will?" Deedee challenged. God, she couldn't call Fran! Even if Fran sent down that battery of lawyers instead of coming herself, the fuzz would get suspicious. Not in the newspapers again! "Jack, why should he?"

"Because I'll ask him," Jack said matter-of-factly. "Look, I'm taking this course in sociology. I'm doing a paper on hippies. We came to Salem Street on a research project. They can check with the college — and Dad'll back me up. You'll see."

"They've got that boy that drove the hit-and-run car," Deedee said shakily. "Why couldn't they leave the rest of us alone?" Jack was remembering the other hit-and-run car — the one Fran drove, though everybody except Fran and the lawyer thought she had done it. "Why did they have to start up with us?"

"All they found at the pad was grass," Jack pointed out. "And not much of that. Of course, the guy they pinned it on was on speed — still on it tonight. You know about speed. The first time is a beautiful high, then it twists your mind, turns you violent. You can kill on speed — in a minute. Put somebody on speed behind a wheel, and the world's in trouble."

"Jack, is that on the level — about the paper on hippies for your course?" Her eyes searched his.

Jack smiled faintly. "It's not a put-on. I'm doing the paper for the course. The hippie scene kind of pulls me in — I want to get down to its roots. Get to the core."

"Okay, next," the cop called out sharply. "Look lively there!"

It was past six Saturday morning when Jack, his father, and Deedee walked out of the sheriff's station. Deedee took grateful gulps of the outdoor air. Her eyes smarted from all the cigarette smoke inside, from lack of sleep. She clutched tightly at Jack's hand as they followed his father to the late-model Cadillac parked nearby.

Jack's father was nice. He looked a lot like Jack, but older, of course, and heavier. He had a way of squinting his eyes when he was thinking hard that was exactly like Jack. She was glad Jack hadn't told his father who she really was.

"We'll drive Deedee home," Mr. Rogers said, his voice a blend of annoyance and bafflement. "Jack, how can you manage to become involved in such situations?" Despite his efforts, he was losing his cool. He'd been great, inside. "Your mother's a nervous wreck over all this!"

"Dad, I told you — I was researching this paper. Who expected a raid?"

They settled themselves on the front seat, Deedee in the middle. His father was terribly upset, but he'd come down immediately, Deedee thought with respect. Mr. Rogers had thrown his weight around — and here they were, in the clear.

Mr. Rogers looked startled when Jack casually threw in that bit about their going steady, that they had to get Deedee out because he — Jack — had got her into this. Would Mr. Rogers have bothered if he knew she was Deidre Evans? A lot of people didn't think being fifteen and a movie star's daughter was an excuse for vehicular homicide.

"Where do you live, Deedee?" He sounded preoccupied now. He was figuring out how to spill it to his wife that Jack was going steady with a girl caught in the raid with him. Did Jack mean that? Deedee knew they *were* going steady — but neither of them had put it into words before.

"Near the Strip," Deedee told Mr. Rogers, feeling his distaste when she gave him the exact address.

Jack couldn't come back to the pad with her; he'd have to go on home with his father. His father probably guessed they were shackled up. He didn't know how to cope with Jack, did he? He was like all the other parents — full of self-pity because their children didn't follow the pattern *they* set for them. Jack was supposed to go through college, marry some girl they approved of, and settle down into the same rat-race of middle-class existence. *What was so great about what they had?*

Deedee and Jack sat back in silence. Mr. Rogers made no further attempt to communicate with them. Traffic was light at this hour, and they'd have her home in a matter of minutes now.

Deedee tensed as they neared her block. She wished Jack were going up to the pad with her. She wanted to lie under the sheet in his arms, not to feel alone. That was the awful part of being eighteen — you were so alone, most of the time, out there all by yourself.

"I'll pick you up about eight tonight," Jack said casually — after a quick glance at his father — when the car came to a standstill before the rundown rooming house where Deedee presumably lived full-time. Jack pushed open the door, stepped to the curb, waited for her to emerge. "Rock's got some new chick. It's her birthday — we'll celebrate at It's Boss, or maybe that new place."

"Okay." Play it cool. But suddenly her mind shot back to the night when Jack walked into the pad with that birthday cake in tow. Golly, he must have thought she was a kook, bawling that way. "Eight o'clock," she said, smiling with sweet determination for Mr. Rogers' benefit. "Thank you, Mr. Rogers — for everything."

Mr. Rogers cleared his throat self-consciously.

"We'll have Jack bring you over for dinner one night next week, Deedee. I'm sure his mother will want to meet you." That was being diplomatic, playing it Jack's way. They were scared to death of losing him. But she could see the wheels rolling in Mr. Rogers' mind — was Jack serious about this girl? What kind of girl lived on the Strip?

"Thank you, Mr. Rogers — that'll be nice." It wouldn't be nice — she'd hate it. She'd sit there at the dinner table with Jack's parents, and shiver inside.

She walked, head high, as though she didn't have a hang-up in the world, into the doorway, up the dimly lit stairs towards the pad. Rock had a new chick. Zoe was still around. She wouldn't be for long, not the way she was playing it. Zoe would be picked up on the Strip one of these nights, and the folks would come charging to Los Angeles to collect her. She'd never go Zoe's way, though. She wouldn't — would she?

Deedee lingered in bed long after she was awake. There wasn't much point in getting up. Jack was coming. For no reason at all, she called Fran. Fran sounded in a real bitchy mood. She said Len was on her back about taking off another ten pounds. Fran always used Len for her whipping post when she was sore. Weren't things going the way Fran wanted with Ferdie?

After she'd hung up, Deedee realized that this was the first time she'd used her telephone to talk to anybody except Jack. It gave her a feeling of separation from home to talk to Fran from here. Of course, Fran thought she was calling from a girlfriend's house. Thank God, Fran wasn't the kind to check up on her. There *had* been times when she wished Fran would act like a mother.

"Deedee?" Jack's voice accompanied the knock on the door.

"Use your key," she called back. Wanting him. Wanting him in bed with her, this minute. Not just because of the way it was with them, making it. That, too — but just having Jack *with* her. It was belonging somewhere.

She waited expectantly, the sheet sliding down from the high rise of her breasts, just at the nipples. Jack knew she wasn't like Zoe, this was different.

"Hi," she said, her voice faintly husky, copying Fran in one of her famous movie scenes.

"Wow, you come on strong," he said, his eyes mirroring his arousal at the sight of her provocatively slouched beneath the sheet.

"Come over here and prove it." Her mouth parted in the Fran Constant look. But the desire that fluttered low in her pelvis was Deedee Costello, nee Deidre Evans.

"No time wasted," he promised. Grinning broadly, he shucked off his clothes.

She'd heard Fran say once, to Carla, that the place to hold a guy was in the sack. She wanted to hold on to Jack, like forever. It wouldn't ever go stale for them — she wouldn't let it. Why did it scare her, because Jack's folks knew that he was seeing her? They couldn't do anything to keep Jack from seeing her!

"Hey, baby, you're a character," Jack said, beneath the sheet with her. "Playing the incognito bit."

"It turned you off," she said quickly, stiffening in his arms.

"Of course not," he objected. "Why should I care what title you operate under — as long as you operate under me?"

His mouth was warm at her ear, and his hands searching expertly. This wasn't just making it — this was making it with love. Why couldn't they get married, even if it was the square thing to do? She wanted to be with Jack all the time. They didn't have to live in the rat-race — they could be themselves, but *together*. Why couldn't it be that way?

"Oh, baby, I dig you like nobody ever," Jack was saying huskily.

And then they stopped talking.

Deedee and Jack pushed their way through the Saturday night throngs that jammed the Strip. The sounds of rock spilled out as doors opened and shut to admit or disgorge youthful customers. The familiar way-out get-ups that belonged to the young, the aging juveniles

trying to emulate the kids, the Saturday night “in” watchers leaning against cars at the curb — it was Saturday night on Sunset Strip, and Deedee loved being part of it.

They pushed their way to It’s Boss and found an inch of space on which to stand and wait for Rock and his new chick. The cars were crawling along, bumper to bumper, their occupants avidly watching the action. This seemed so much safer than the hippie scene, Deedee thought — the hippies were the freakouts from the Strip. After the nightmare last night, she wouldn’t have to worry about Jack and the hippie bit, would she? Deedee suppressed a shiver — she couldn’t forget that lousy matron with the shoving fingers. They had no *right!*

“There’s Rock,” Jack said, his arm about Deedee. “Let’s go.”

Rock’s new girl was another teeny-bopper new to the Strip. This one had an accent soft as molasses and an eagerness to see everything, taste everything.

“At first I was going to Frisco,” she said, when they were lounging at an all-night lunch counter, still uncertain about their major destination for the evening. “But I didn’t dig the Haight-Ashbury scene, so I detoured to Los Angeles. Wow, I’m glad I did!” She clung avidly to Rock, thrusting her hips against his.

“Sally’s got a job, starting next week,” Rock said, grinning broadly. “She’s going to be a topless waitress in The Joint.” He closed one hand about a thrusting breast. “She’s got the talent for it.”

They spent a typical Strip evening — noisy, crowded, not costing too much because the kids who make the Sunset Strip scene don’t have money to burn. Their big investment was a two-fifty a head admission to the teenage club they finally decided upon.

By five, Rock’s molasses-voiced chick was yawning openly. It developed that she was hoping to save room-rent for the night by going to Rock’s pad. Rock was still coasting from one pad to another. Deedee grimly kept quiet. With a low chuckle, a knowing exchange of looks with Deedee, Jack handed over three dollars that, with what Rock maintained was his bankroll, would get the other pair into a sleazy motel for the night.

“I’m selfish,” Deedee said, later, when Jack and she were back in the pad. “I don’t want to share with any more of Rock’s teeny-boppers. I’m too old for them,” she jibed.



"The fifteens and the sixteens make me feel like an old man," Jack admitted.

"Put on The Doors," Deedee commanded. Jack wasn't really all here tonight. She kept seeing that odd look in his eyes. It scared her, to be shut out like that. "One of the old ones. 'Light My Fire.'"

Deedee shut her eyes, writhed with the music. Get the music inside her head — then she wouldn't be so frightened by the look in Jack's eyes.

"I'm thinking of cutting out," Jack said abruptly, and Deedee stopped dead.

"You mean, going home tonight?" She lifted the needle from the record groove. Acid rock was replaced by ominous silence.

"I mean out of the whole scene." Jack made a point of not looking at her. "Last night bugged me. Salem Street is going stale, for me —"

"I never knew it was so big for you," she snapped back, dying a little.

"It's a good thing, baby, but it's getting shot down. It could be beautiful, if it weren't for the freakouts. I might go out to Santa Fe — I know somebody out there. They've got something of their own going out there that sounds groovy."

"Take me with you," Deedee said quickly.

"Let me see what it's like out there," Jack hedged. "It might be nothing."

"You're running out," Deedee said bluntly. "You feel the Establishment closing in. Because your old man said bring Deedee over for dinner some night. All of a sudden, you're scared!"

"Don't be a kook, Deedee!" His eyes blazed angrily. "I'm looking — for me, what I am, what I can be. You know, and I know, I don't dig what my folks have. I don't dig the middle-class nightmare. So I'm going to make it my kind of life."

"So I could just go along — no strings," Deedee tried again.

"I'd worry about you," Jack rejected somberly. "I'd start making compromises."

"I'm discovering something about me," Deedee said, fighting for calm. "I can't live for now. I have to think about tomorrow. So it's been a blast, and you're going off to Santa Fe. So what do I do now?"

"Baby, I'm not going yet," Jack said, his voice exasperated. "I said I'm thinking about it."

"You go," Deedee said heatedly. "Right now! I've got plans, too. I don't dig your hippie scene. I'm staying here on the Strip. I've got ideas for me."

"Like what?" Jack sounded nervous.

"I can't go on sitting around the pad, waiting for you to show. You'll be heading for Santa Fe or the East Village or some other spot that hits you in the eye! I'm getting myself a job! I'm moving out of the jazzy house in Holmby Hills to be a full-timer on the Strip."

"What kind of a job?" Jack demanded.

"Not like Zoe," she threw at him with contempt. "Like Alabama," she said, with a defiant glint in her eyes. If Rock's molasses-voiced chick could do it, why not she? "I'll be a topless waitress on the Strip. I've got the equipment, wouldn't you say?"

"Cut it out, Deedee!" Jack grabbed her by the shoulders. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'll be doing my thing!" she shrieked at him. "When you get bored with Santa Fe and the love people, come back to the Strip and look me up. I'll be a topless waitress at the first joint that'll hire me. And I'll be a big success — you wait and see!"

"Deedee, stop it!" he shouted.

"No! This is something I can do all by myself. I won't even have to take my allowance from Fran anymore. I'll belong to me!"

Jack was remembering about the Deidre Evans case — he was remembering that she was supposed to have killed that child, and spent those months in reform school! She'd never run away from that. Not ever. So she'd have a ball at one of the swinging joints on the Strip. And she wouldn't need anybody. Only herself!

# Ten

---

Fran pulled her mouth away from Ferdie's and lay back against the pillow with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Why'd you let me run off that way?" she chastised Ferdie. "Was the blackjack game better than this?"

"I was on a winning streak — for a while." His hand closed in at her throat, mockingly. "Why'd you run out? You cost me my luck. I went flat again."

"Is that why you're back?" she taunted, while discontent edged out some of her earlier satisfaction. "No bankroll?"

"I'll pick up a bundle by the middle of the week," he said complacently. "Meanwhile, I'm here." His hand massaged her throat.

"Don't do that," she said sharply. Why did she have this feeling that Ferdie would rough her up if she crossed him?

"Why?" He grinned. "No bruises, baby, to show on the film when they start shooting." He was proud of the fact that she was starting on a new picture, Fran guessed. "Look, why don't you get dressed and let's drive out to Vegas?"

"Now?" Her eyes widened. Who needed Vegas? Just Ferdie and her — bang, bang, bang. Ferdie was lots better than Vic ever was. Her pride was hurt with Vic — that was the big squeal there. But Ferdie shot her right up through the ceiling, it was so gorgeous with him. "What's so urgent about Vegas?" she picked up, because he was looking at her oddly.

"Why not? So I'll sit in for a few hands at the table, we'll catch the show —" Damn him, he was needling her about Vic, wasn't he? "Then we'll fall into the sack for a while, drive back." His hand was being amorous.

"You won't be welcome at the casino," she reminded, eyes bright. Being one of Corelli's hoods didn't extend credit to him, obviously. "You're flat."

"You're not," he pointed out calmly.

For an instant, their eyes clashed, with his hand continuing its amorous trek. Fran rebelled at what she saw in Ferdie's eyes. He knew too much about her, damn him — a hood like Ferdie Reagan knew what made her tick.

Fran moved away from him, ostensibly to reach for a cigarette.

"I can't go chasing around when I'm getting ready to work," she said brusquely. "It's in bed by eleven, at the latest, from now till the picture's in the can."

"Tomorrow's Saturday," he pointed out. "You can sleep all day."

"No deal," she said, in control now. She lived the austere life when she was on a picture. No boozing, no sitting around in Vegas clubs, no three-day houseparties. Ferdie was about to find out. But there'd be time for *them*, in the hay. "It's only for a few weeks," she soothed. "You'll survive."

"So one night you can cut out," he said impatiently. "I want to walk into the casino at the Versailles with my broad. I want a ringside table, to show her off." He was watching her closely. "You seeing that creepy singer on the side?" A vein welted on his forehead. "You do, I'll cut his throat!"

"Don't be a kook," Fran shot back. But the sign of jealousy pleased her. "Who needs Vic Emerson?" What was the matter with Ferdie? Couldn't he *read*? Didn't he know about Vic and Jody James?

"On second thought," Ferdie said calmly, "I'd cut yours."

"Shut up, will you?" Fran flashed out violently. What was the matter with Ferdie? But looking at him she sensed he wasn't kidding. He said it calmly, now — but triggered into rage, he'd act first, then talk about it. "Haven't you got anything better to do than yak about nutty things like that?"

"Christ, you never get enough, do you?" But there was a look of admiration in his eyes.

"What's the matter?" she jibed. "Can you only perform at the blackjack table?"

"You want a performance, you'll get it," he promised.

"I want it," she said. That was one way to get Vic and that slutty Jones bitch out of her mind. "Variations on a familiar theme." Variations was Ferdie's talent.

Fran heard the doorbell downstairs. Lottie was in the house still; she would answer. Anyhow, Fran thought humorously, she was hardly in a position to hop downstairs and answer the door. It was great the way she could get Ferdie hot as a pistol, time after time. Carla thought she was lying. Ferdie was still like a sixteen-year-old.

"Okay, okay," Ferdie grunted. "You want to kill me?"

Part of her mind was attuned to the caller downstairs. Probably Len. He was all worked up because she was seeing Ferdie. He'd never got over the big scare. Christ, what on earth brought that into her mind? Screw it, it was over.

"Miss Constant?" A light tap on the door. "Miss Constant, there's someone to see you."

Fran froze. She didn't want to see anybody. Hell, at a time like this?

"Get rid of her," Ferdie whispered, hovering over her now.

"Who is it, Lottie?"

"A young man. His name is Jack Rogers," Lottie reported, an undertone of self-consciousness in her voice. The old bag probably knew Ferdie was here. Figured Ferdie was screwing her.

"I don't know any Jack Rogers," Fran said impatiently. "Get rid of him."

"He says he's a friend of Deedee's," Lottie said virtuously. "He says it's important." Her voice said, you have to see him.

Fran sighed. "Okay, tell him to wait."

"Don't tell me to wait, you oversexed broad," Ferdie whispered. "Not when you've got me like this!"

What kind of trouble was Deedee in now, Fran asked herself, passion drained away. But she was able to simulate. Hugo said once that as a call girl she would have made a mint. Hugo had been out of his mind with her, orgasms every time he tried it — until he found out she was faking.

Why should a friend of Deedee's be coming to see her? What was Deedee up to now? Damn, this was no time for fresh trouble, when she was about to start a new picture.

"I have to go downstairs to see this creep," Fran said finally. "Have yourself a shower — then we'll go out somewhere."

"In this town?" Ferdie grumbled. "Los Angeles is for the kids."

Fran dressed quickly, in slacks and sweater, anxious to talk to Jack Rogers. A dozen possibilities filtered in and out of her mind. If it was something tough, she'd call the lawyers — no messing around.

"You're a friend of Deedee's?" she asked coolly, lounging in the doorway to the den, where Lottie had brought her visitor.

He swung around to face her. Good-looking young bastard — Carla would flip for him. Was he giving it to Deedee? Why did he look so somber? At least, he wasn't one of those lumberjacketed motorcycle hopheads.

"Yes, I am," he said stiffly. "I wouldn't have come here. Miss Constant, if I weren't —" He hesitated.

"All right, spill it," she said, annoyed at his hesitation. "What's Deedee up to that you think I ought to know about?"

"There's a lot you ought to know about," he said bluntly. "But I guess you've been too busy with the career."

"Now just a minute!" she flared. "You don't come into my house and talk to me that way!"

"Somebody has to," he said doggedly. "Did you know that Deedee has a pad of her own, over near the Strip?"

"No." Fran whitened. What the hell was Deedee doing with a pad near the Strip? God, with this gorgeous house here? *What was Deedee doing?* "Go on —"

"Deedee decided she needed a job," Jack began grimly.

"Why?" Fran interrupted. "I give her a terrific allowance! Why does she need a job?" God, don't let her be on the dope kick! Not Deedee! "Has — has Deedee got herself an expensive habit?" she probed, trying to hold on to her cool.

"Deedee's not on drugs," he said. "That's not her thing. She's working at a job on the Strip. As a waitress. A topless waitress."

"She's flipped!" Fran stared at him in shock. This was all she needed, for Deedee to land in the papers as a topless waitress. The papers would drag out the old business, all over again. Riegel would tear out what little hair he had left.

"Look," Jack said — and Fran realized the desperation in him. "Will you come down to the club with me and talk to her? Nothing I say

means anything — she's so screwed up now, maybe nobody can talk some sense to her. But you're her mother — you have to try."

"I tried to keep her in analysis," Fran said unsteadily. "She refused to go."

"Will you come to the club?" Jack repeated. "Now?"

"All right," Fran conceded reluctantly. "You'll have to wait a few minutes."

Upstairs, she told Ferdie about the topless waitress bit. It made her sick to visualize Deedee pushing her way through the ogling customers, standing there with her breasts showing like those broads in the girly magazines. Her Deedee! Tears welled into her eyes.

"Hey, that kid's got guts," Ferdie chuckled. "I'll come down there with you."

"No," she said quickly. "Wait for me here." She didn't want Ferdie seeing Deedee like that. But anybody could see her, for the price of a beer.

"Okay," Ferdie agreed. "I'll wait."

Fran collected a mini-length suede coat and hurried from the room and down the stairs. Damn, Ferdie didn't have to look like *that* when she told him about Deedee. Like he was seeing Deedee standing there before him, right then. Like he was wishing he could shove that thing of his into the baby. He wasn't going to touch Deedee — she'd see to that!

She sauntered down the stairs, aware that Jack Rogers was watching her descent. But she wasn't Fran Constant, movie star, to him. She was Deedee's mother. A rotten mother, in his estimation.

"We can go in my car," he said, looking relieved that she had actually come back downstairs.

"Okay," she accepted, playing it soft. Maybe what Deedee needed was a kid like this. Serious, with standards. He thought she was a lousy mother. What did he think about his mother?

They left the house and walked out to the car parked in the white-stoned circular driveway. Jack was polite as he helped her into the car. Not movie star polite — older woman polite, Fran told herself, with that sadistic need to hurt herself. How could Carla play around in the sack with kids the way she did?

"How long has Deedee been working there?" Fran asked finally, when they turned into the Friday night nightmare that was Sunset Boulevard.

"Since day before yesterday," Jack told her, sighing at the bumper-to-bumper procession they had joined. "I tried to talk to her — it's useless."

Fran frowned with impatience at the delay. Three lanes of traffic inched along. The passengers in the cars all seemed so young, Fran thought painfully. To them, the drive was a bash — they didn't mind the delay. It was part of the scene. They sang, swilled soda, munched on burgers brought along for the trip.

When she first made it big — with the house in Beverly Hills, just above Sunset Boulevard — this was the most glamorous street in the world to her. Sunset Strip was her beat. What happened? Television, damn it! A chill wrapped itself about her. Television took over, and the film people fled — to Europe, to way-out places, where it was cheaper to work. Hollywood became a TV town, where they shot a half-hour segment in the time the studio spent on a reel of a movie.

Len had been on her back for years to go into television. She had this mental block against it. She'd never do TV — she was a movie star. Leave TV for the Jody Jones and the bed-oriented would-be TV starlets. She belonged to another class. She'd been in the top ten, year after year.

"It's rough on weekends," Jack said apologetically. "We'll get there eventually."

"I hope so," Fran said, her voice laced with sarcasm.

How long since she'd been on Sunset Strip at night, Fran asked herself, as the car finally crossed into the three thousand yard Strip that had once been the most highly publicized street in the world. Now you went to Vegas if you wanted big-time night-club entertainment — where else did you find the names today? Not here — not anymore.

Fran stared out at the street scene. Kids everywhere. Kids in every kind of weird outfit imaginable. Music blaring out into a deafening din. Kids humped over cars parked at the curb. Lights everywhere. It was a new kind of revolt, taking over moviedom's street of dreams. She was a stranger here, Fran told herself with violent, inner distaste.

She'd heard enough about this junior revolt. How could you live in Hollywood and not know about the sound on Sunset Strip? That sound was reverberating across the country. Oh, the police put in



some kind of curfew, didn't they? You had to be at least eighteen — and able to prove it — before you were allowed on the Strip after ten o'clock. Well, that wasn't one of her personal problems, Fran conceded dryly — she was well past the curfew age.

"How old are you?" Fran asked Jack curiously.

"Old enough to pass the curfew — not old enough to vote." He grinned, looking surprisingly young. Was that a sign she was getting old, to think Jack Rogers looked so young? "Nineteen. Of course, some of the joints are off-limits to anybody under twenty-one."

"Like where Deedee works?" Fran asked tautly.

"That's right. They don't always enforce it. I got in."

"You wouldn't remember the way the Strip looked ten years ago." Fran's eyes glowed reminiscently. All right, fifteen years ago, she amended inwardly. Jack's directional signal was advertising that he wanted to cut off the Strip, find a parking spot. "The Strip wasn't all this cheap motels, teenage clubs, all-night lunch counters scene. It had a special kind of glamour all its own."

With a distaste that was turning her sick, Fran watched the spill-over from teenage club to discotheque to strip joint. Lights screeched in noisy display above, spraying color upon the milling pedestrians, the slow-moving motorists.

"Over there," Fran said, before Jack made the turn. "See that building? That used to be *Ciro's*." A tightness in her throat. Once, *Ciro's* was *the* place to be seen in, if you were anybody at all in pictures. In those days you didn't walk into the place with less than fifty dollars in your wallet.

"It's a groovy joint now. It's *Boss*," Jack said. "The kids really dig it."

Sentiment brought tears to Fran's eyes again. You could still see the "C" from the old sign. For a moment, she was visualizing the line-up of long, black limousines and sleek convertibles that drove up before *Ciro's* in those days, to spill out their *Grables* and *Turners* and *Constants*. It was the era of *Ciro's* and the *Mocambo* and the *Trocadero*, for a poignant, painful moment.

Then reality hit Fran across the head. Those days were gone. The Strip belonged to the teeny-boppers, the suffers, the *Hell's Angels* — and the menacing fringe the papers kept screeching about: runaway kids turned prostitutes, homos, drug addicts. And somewhere in this

mess of crummy strip joints and teenage clubs, Deedee worked as a topless waitress.

"This is the place," Jack said grimly, when they'd finally parked and walked back to the Strip.

Biting at her lip, Fran walked into the badly lit, over-smoked noise of the room, where Watusi dancers writhed to the electronic thunder of would-be successors to the Jefferson Airplane. She didn't see Deedee at first. The waitresses were all young and stacked. They moved with studied detachment among the paying customers in their miniskirts and fishnet hose and bared breasts.

"There's Deedee," Jack said, his voice anguished.

Fran stared, enveloped in disbelief. Deedee moved with a proud, impersonal air of detachment from the customers. There was libertine gorgeousness about her as she displayed her bare, free-standing, long-nippled breasts, at which the customers could gape with impunity. Deedee hated this, Fran realized with painful intensity — Deedee was punishing herself. For what? At this moment, more than any time in her eighteen years, Deedee was Fran's daughter. Because Fran knew that quirk of sadistic self-torture that sent Deedee about this room, to be leered at by these creeps.

"I have to talk to her," Fran said huskily.

She pushed her way towards Deedee, oblivious of the customers — they'd never recognize her here in this dimly lit room. Nobody would expect Fran Constant to be here.

"Baby," she whispered, behind the perennial subterfuge of dark glasses. "Baby, you can't do this!"

Deedee swung around, for an instant shaken by her mother's appearance. For the instant, frozen, indecisive, then angry and oddly joyous at being discovered.

"I can take care of myself," Deedee whispered tightly. "Get out of here, before somebody recognizes you."

"Not without you," Fran insisted, fighting down an impulse to pull off her coat and wrap it around that poignant nudity.

"Fran, you'll start an uproar," Deedee insisted nervously. "Get out of here! You want it all over the papers tomorrow? Now, nobody knows who I am." Her gaze moved past her mother, to Jack, hovering in the background. "He's a fink, to go running to you!"

Fran hovered futilely while Deedee — with a surface calm — moved about on the floor. Now Fran glanced about nervously, aware of being stared at. Deedee was right; she had to get out of here.

Fran walked restlessly about the white and turquoise bedroom. Ferdie was flipping mad at her because she'd sent him away. Or because she'd sent him away broke? She was in no mood to fool around with Ferdie when Deedee was down at that strip joint, parading around like that. And why should she finance Ferdie's gambling? Once was enough.

Again, she reached for the phone, to try to call Carla. Again, the phone rang monotonously, unanswered, at the other end. Even if Carla were home, what could Carla say to make her feel better? Her baby, down there, stared at by the lecherous creeps!

Where had it all gone wrong with Deedee? With the case? God, what a rotten mother she was! But she couldn't stand trial — she would have been convicted, sent up! There would have been nothing for Deedee after the lawyers were paid off, the parents paid off. They would have got more money if *she* had been convicted — the lawyers said that. But she gave the parents enough money to buy a gorgeous house — they were young enough to have more kids. Why was everything so rotten?

Why couldn't Vic have played it straight with her? She wouldn't be falling apart this way if Vic hadn't started up with that slut. What were people thinking? That she was getting too old to hold a man like Vic Emerson? Were they laughing at her?

A drink. She needed a drink! No, no drink — alcohol put on the pounds like crazy. She had to drop another eight in the next ten days. The stinking cameras picked up every ounce.

She didn't want to do the picture. Damn, she didn't want to do it! Len had talked her into it, for his stinking commission. Everybody on her back. Everybody wanting something from her — when *they* wanted it. Vic, two-timing her like that in Vegas. Ferdie, turning his back on her for a blackjack table. And the baby, parading around like that in that rotten strip joint! Deedee knew she had this picture to make — she couldn't afford to be upset this way.

She paused before the mirrored wall of the white and turquoise bedroom and stared at the lush reflection of herself in sheer black

peignoir and nightie. They all ran out on her! All of them! Except when they wanted her. She'd show them! She'd show them all!

Fran ran, half-sobbing, into the bathroom, jerked open the box that held her collection of pills. Like an array of jewels, she thought. A handful of those and she wouldn't need anybody!

Her fingers were tense as she shook the contents of a bottle onto the marble-topped dressing table. They were small — she'd have them down in no time.

One, two, three, down the hatch. Fuck the world!

# Eleven

---

"Deedee! Deedee!"

She wasn't hearing it, she told herself — Jack was talking to her in a dream. She kept her eyes shut tight, clutched at the pillow, the way she'd clung to a teddy-bear as a child. It was over with Jack. He hated her!

"Deedee, baby, wake up." Hands at her shoulders now. Urgency in the voice.

Startled, Deedee opened her eyes, swung her head around.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she began belligerently, but something in Jack's eyes stopped her.

"I wanted to get here before you heard it on the transistor. Now, take it easy, baby," he tried to be calm. "It's Fran — she's in the hospital."

"What happened!" Deedee sat up, coldness closing in about her. "Jack, what happened?"

"She took a handful of pills, baby. But the doctors think she's going to be okay. The news broke this morning — she's at some private sanitarium."

"Where?" Deedee was shaking.

"I don't know. I figured you'd be able to check it out."

"Len," Deedee said, throwing back the covers. "I'll call Len."

"Put on a robe — it's cool," Jack said, going to the closet to pull one down for her.

"Jack, why?" Deedee asked, her eyes agonized. "Because of me?" Her hand shook as she dialed Len's private number.

"It's never one reason, honey," Jack consoled her, standing beside her with the robe, draping it about her now. "The news reports say someone got there in plenty of time, though."

Why didn't Len answer? Wasn't he home? Or was he with Fran? She could call the police, if she couldn't reach Len. They'd know. She shivered. The police again.

"Hello . . ." Len's voice, groggy, sleep-coated.

"It's Deedee," she said. "I heard the news."

"Hey, I tried all night to find you," Len complained, waking up. "Nobody knew where you were."

"What about Fran?" she asked urgently. "How is she? Where is she?"

"She'll be okay. She slugged down the pills, then called me. I got there the same time as the ambulance — lucky she reached me, though. We just made it."

"Can I see her?" Deedee reached for Jack's hand.

"Sure. She's at the private sanitarium where she goes for the crash diet sessions. We tried to keep it quiet but some fink alerted the columnists. You know, they'll do anything for an easy buck."

"I won't have any trouble getting in, will I?" Deedee asked uncertainly.

"No. Oh, stop by the house and pick up some of Fran's nighties and her makeup — they'll be keeping her there three or four days, the doc said. She'll want to get fixed up before the reporters crash in."

"Okay," Deedee promised. "Len, is this going to be bad for Fran? For the picture deal, I mean?"

Len was silent for a moment.

"I don't think so," Len said briskly. "Publicity never bothered any producer in the midst of a picture. Besides, the columnists have always been good to Fran."

"Yeah," Deedee conceded. But they were making nasty cracks about Ferdie and Fran.

"What'd he say?" Jack asked, when Deedee put down the phone.

"She's going to be okay. I have to pack a valise and take it over to the sanitarium. Will you come over with me?" It was kind of wonderful, the way Jack rallied.

"Sure." He was hesitant. "Baby, I feel awful about what happened. I mean, after I took her over to see you."

"I won't go back anymore," Deedee said violently, huddling against him.

"You get dressed, I'll make coffee — and we'll go over to see your mother," Jack decreed.

"In a minute," Deedee said, her arms creeping about him, the robe cascading from her shoulders over her nude back to the floor.

Fran was going to be all right. The awful panic was ebbing away from Deedee. She wanted Jack to hold her, to sway with her in comfort. And in a few minutes, it would be more than comfort. She flattened the high, full breasts against his shirt front, burrowed her pelvis against his. Already, the flutter-flutter down there.

"Jack, I was so scared," she whispered.

"Not any more, baby," he soothed, walking her back towards the studio couch. "Everything's going to be great."

The back of the couch — that stupid clump of iron jutting out because the landlady never bothered to have it fixed — scraped at the back of her legs. The sagging mattress received her weight. Like Jack always said. Now, baby, *now*.

Deedee waited in the reception room on Fran's floor until the nurse would call her. How could Fran have taken pills? She'd never done anything like that before! Even in the rotten time. Maybe it was like Jack said, everything piling up. But she'd called Len right away. She wanted to be sure Len found her. Fran didn't want to die.

"Miss Evans —" A tall, pretty nurse beckoned to her. Curiosity was in the nurse's eyes. "You can go in now."

"Thank you." She smiled faintly and rose to follow the nurse down the corridor to the luxury hotel suite accommodations the private sanitarium provided for its well-heeled clientele.

Deedee walked through the ornately furnished, wall-to-wall carpeted living room of the suite to the large, square, wall-papered bedroom, where Fran lay back, pale and tired, against a mound of pillows in a queen-sized bed. The drapes were drawn snug against the noonday sunlight. Flowers already sat about the room.

"Baby," Fran said brokenly, holding out her arms to Deedee. Deedee dropped the valise and weekender to the floor.

"Oh, Fran, Fran —" Deedee threw herself into her mother's arms, even while part of her realized that Fran was playing the drama to the hilt. "You scared me to death!"

"I just didn't know what to do, baby," Fran said plaintively. But she'd known enough to call Len right away. A shudder brushed at Deedee — thank God, Fran had been able to call Len.

"Jack heard it before I did — he came over to tell me. Len said he hadn't been able to reach me."

"Don't ever do anything like that, baby," Fran said. "It was awful, what they did to me! Ugh —" She shivered in remembrance. "Reigal's going to be furious — I may hold up the picture."

"I doubt that," Deedee said. "You'll be coming home day after tomorrow, the doctor told me. You can start the picture right on the nose." Fran looked startled.

"Why didn't the bastard tell me that?" Fran sulked. "He let me lie here stewing over it."

"Maybe he figured you didn't want to talk about it." The initial horror was over now. She sat back at the edge of the bed, beside Fran, a little bit angry at the way Fran was enjoying the scene.

"Baby, bring me that white sheer wool pants-suit — I'll wear that home. And give me the makeup kit — I must look like a dog!" She struggled to sit up, while Deedee went to pick up the makeup box she'd put down in her rush to go to her mother. "Oh, God, I'm weak. It was that stinking stomach pump!"

"Here, I'll set up the box on the table for you," Deedee soothed. Fran was okay: she was already worried about her appearance.

"I'll have to let the reporters in later today," Fran compromised sweetly. "You know I'm always cooperative."

There was a knock at the door to the sitting room. Deedee started.

"Oh, they run this place like the jazziest hotel," Fran crooned. "Be a doll and see who it is. Even the nurses knock before they come in."

Deedee pulled the door wide and stared somberly at Sam Reigal.

"Deedee, honey, how could Fran do this to us?" he rebuked her tenderly. "You know, Fran's like a daughter to me — I almost had a cardiac when I heard."

"She's going to be all right," Deedee said with an effort at politeness. The people from the studio had always been The Enemy when she was a child. The situation had changed little with her growing up. "Come in."

"Who is it, Deedee?" Fran called out softly.

"Sam Reigal," he boomed out. "Darling, what are you trying to do to me?"



Deedee stood by, watching the elaborately dramatic greeting between producer and star. But after the initial hoopla, Fran and Reigal settled down to business: how was Fran to handle the reporters.

"Look, you know you have them on your side, Frannie," Reigal was saying expansively. "It was an attack of artistic temperament. This is your comeback picture —"

"What do you mean, comeback?" Fran demanded imperiously. "I've never stopped making pictures — I'm big enough to be selective!"

"All right, darling," Reigal soothed. "So it's your first picture after a period of rest — you were nerved up over production problems. Look, I'm not having the best relationship with the leading man — we'll ditch him, bring in somebody else. They'll figure he was giving you a rough time."

"Bring in somebody more important," Fran prodded. "There'll be a lot of publicity on the picture now."

"You made headlines in every tabloid across the country," Reigal said proudly.

"Fran," Deedee interrupted, with a sudden need for fresh air. "I'll go over to the house and get the pants-suit for you. Anything else?"

"Yes." Instantly, Fran concentrated on her wants. Reigal supplied pen and paper. Deedee conscientiously wrote down what Fran required. "That's about it, baby. And tell the nurse — absolutely no reporters until late this afternoon."

"The doctor's already done that," Reigal said. "I talked with him. The studio's arranging for a press conference tomorrow. They can take shots this afternoon, talk to you tomorrow. That way, we add another day in the headlines." Reigal grinned with relish. "The studio hair-dresser is on his way over with some wigs. Also, the makeup man."

"Sam, remember that negligee I wore in *Purple Is the Night*?" She smiled reminiscently. "Have the studio send that over, too."

"I'll be back," Deedee said stiffly, and hurried towards the door.

Nothing had changed, really. It was the same Fran Constant scene. Nothing mattered except the image. Why was Deedee always pulled in — briefly — when Fran pulled those Peyton Place clichés? Why couldn't she accept things the way they were? *They weren't going to change.*

# Twelve

---

"Frannie, remember, you're one of the big ones," Sam Reigal said fatuously, preparing to leave. "Why else am I paying you so much money? Now rest, take care of yourself — and we shoot on schedule."

"Okay, Sam." He paid a bundle — but Taylor and Andrews were drawing triple per picture. With the right vehicle, she'd be up there with them again. "And for God's sake, get a leading man who isn't a juvenile!" Reigal nodded placatingly.

"I'll send over the negligee from *Purple Is the Night*," Sam said reflectively. "I'll put the promotion boys on this — maybe they'll come up with some fresh angles. Anything else you want?"

A knock at the door intruded.

"Yes," Fran called out sweetly. Things were swinging again.

"More flowers," the nurse sang out brightly as she sauntered in with the florist box.

"How do people know where to send them?" Sam asked. "The studio hasn't given out where you're holed up. Len talking, after he told the office to be quiet about it?"

"I had Len phone Carla — you know her big mouth." Carla had sent a gardenia plant. Was she sure she could afford it?

"I'll have to dig up some more vases," the nurse said, admiring the long-stemmed yellow roses that lay in the box. "Probably lots more vases," she added flily, strolling back to the door again. A nurse with movie ambitions, Fran wondered cynically — she wasn't throwing the body around for *her* benefit. Everybody knew Sam Reigal, naturally.

"Anything you want sent over, besides what we discussed?" Sam asked, eyeing his watch.

"The newspapers. All of them. Tell the nurse at the desk to send out for them, will you, Sam?"

The yellow roses were from Vic, with an extravagant card about his concern. Sweet of Vic, to remember she flipped for yellow roses. She ostentatiously left Vic's card lying on the table before the nurse came back in with the vase. Maybe the big dramatic scene would have unplanned repercussions. Maybe Vic was coming back into the fold.

Ferdie was great in the hay, great for her morale — but Vic had class, the name quality. They'd be sensational as a team. So he couldn't get it up more than once a night — she could live with that, she thought in rising good humor. She felt comfortable with Vic.

"Is there a radio around?" Fran asked the nurse. Was she still in the newscasts? Probably.

"There's a radio-television combination in the living room," the nurse announced with pride. "But Dr. Thomas wants you to stay in bed until tomorrow. I'll have the set moved in here, if you like."

"I'd like," Fran said, switching on the Constant charm. "Oh, and Mr. Reigal asked the nurse at the desk to send out for newspapers. Will you make sure they're brought right in?"

The phone rang. The nurse frowned, grabbed for it.

"The switchboard was told to keep out all calls," the nurse said sharply. "Hello." Crisp, impersonal, on the phone.

"See who it is," Fran said quickly. "I might want to talk."

"Just a moment, please." She covered the phone. "A Mr. Reagan." The bright-eyed, bushy-tailed nurse knew all about Ferdie, Fran guessed, reaching for the receiver. Ferdie and she had been hitting the columns regularly.

"Will you hold up on calls until I can give you a list of people?" Fran said sweetly, pointedly waiting for the nurse to cut out.

"I'll tell the switchboard operator," the nurse said politely.

"Ferdie, darling," Fran drawled, remembering the yellow roses from Vic.

"Hey, baby, you scared hell out of me!" Ferdie sounded more the hood over the phone — it was the disembodied voice, Fran thought detachedly. "I went crazy, trying to find out where you were. When you coming home?"

"Day after tomorrow. How was Vegas?"

"I did great," he bragged. "But I have to stay here — a job coming up for the boss. I'll be back in L.A. in time to bring you home. You're okay?" he asked solicitously.

"I'm fine, sweetie," she purred. "You don't have to rush back from Vegas because of me." Yellow roses from Vic.

"Honey, you take good care of yourself," he ordered expansively. "Because Dr. Ferdie Reagan is coming home with the prescription to make you all well again."

"Look, I'm kind of tired, darling. Call me back later, okay? Tonight, maybe?" She wanted to get off the phone. The nurse was coming in with the papers.

"Sure, baby. I'll call you tonight," Ferdie promised, and hung up.

Fran leaned back against the pillows, alone with the pile of yesterday's late papers and today's. They'd used the grooviest shots, she thought with satisfaction. And all of them mentioned the new picture. Nobody knew why she'd taken the pills yet, though there were hints that she was overwrought about the movie coming up. How did they mean that? Did they think her face was falling apart, that she was ready for plastic? When the time came, she'd have the plastic job — and nobody would know about it.

There was another knock on the door. God, how did they expect her to get any rest around here?

"Come in," she called querulously.

It was the nurse with a pair of maintenance men to move the radio-TV into the bedroom. Even in this plush joint the maintenance men were impressed with Fran Constant, she thought with a flicker of satisfaction. She asked for a slip of paper and a pencil to list the people to whom she would talk. Why hadn't Carla phoned her? Too busy screwing with those kids that were young enough to be her sons!

"There's a remote control," the nurse said, bringing the box to the night table, at the same time dismissing the maintenance men, who seemed inclined to linger.

"Here's the list for calls," Fran said briskly, and leaned back against the pillows. God, she was bushed! A couple of times, last night — out in the room where they were working over her — she wished she were dead, the way she'd felt. "But no calls for an hour, okay? And no visitors. I want to flake out."

That was one of Deedee's expressions. Her baby was a woman, she thought with a rush of sentiment. Was Deedee serious about that Rogers kid? *He* was serious. Lord, they could make her a grandmother in nine months! She shuddered. Nothing advertised your age like that.

Fran lay back, eyes half-shut, waiting for the newscast. When it arrived, she was annoyed at the delay of international and national news. Then the local news began and she sat up expectantly. A smile hovered about her mouth as she listened to the account of the suicide attempt. She was despondent about problems on the coming production. Temperament. Good. It paid to be cooperative with the press.

"The rumors about the Vic Emerson-Jody Jones merger can be put to rest." Fran stiffened. "The pair were married in judge's chambers in Las Vegas, at ten this morning. They're honeymooning on a borrowed yacht, off the coast of Mexico —"

Fran flicked off the set, stared stonily ahead. He sent her yellow roses — but he married Jody Jones! People would start thinking she took the pills because of Vic. That she'd been thrown over for that eighteen-turning-twenty-eight slut!

Fran reached for the telephone.

"I want to call Las Vegas," she said, tears welling in her eyes, spilling over to dilute her mascara. "The Versailles Hotel, person-to-person to Mr. Fernando Reagan."

When she checked out day after tomorrow, she wanted to be sure Ferdie was hanging around her and not around a blackjack table. Let the photographers see she wasn't moping over Vic Emerson!

Fran stared about her bedroom with satisfaction. Flowers like crazy from Ferdie. He'd phoned her twice again after her call on Saturday, and twice yesterday. Now she'd be going home. Ferdie ought to be showing any minute.

Dr. Ferguson checked her out this morning. She felt fine, just sort of washed out. Ferguson said, take it easy for three or four days. There was no problem about keeping the shooting schedule. That made Sam happy. What was Sam doing about a leading man? He'd already fired that kid.

The columnists were still playing up the bit about her taking the pills because she was upset about the film, only now the pitch was that she wanted stronger support, that a Fran Constant picture had to be

top drawer all the way and Sam had been letting her down. That sounded great — it gave a kind of prestige to the picture.

Okay, get out of the negligee from *Purple Is The Night*. Into the sheer wool pants-suit. The outfit cost her a fortune, but it was worth it. Even at forty-three, she looked terrific in a pants-suit. Only these days she wore a bra and girdle underneath. Results sensational. On camera, she still looked thirty. Sam said she looked better today than ten years ago, with the flattering hairstyles these days.

Fran took a final appraisal of her appearance when she was done with the last retouching of makeup. The publicity office would be sure there was somebody at the sanitarium to cover her leave-taking. They were sharp about opportunities like this.

Deedee had offered to come to bring her home. Poor baby, she was upset — felt she was to blame for what happened. There was no need for Deedee to come tearing over here this morning, that was Ferdie's job. Besides, there was no point in throwing it in the public's face that she had a grown daughter. That didn't fit the Fran Constant image.

A heavy-handed knock shattered the comfortable silence in Fran's luxury suite. It must be Ferdie, knocking like that.

"Come in."

She walked quickly to the door, to pose there with the look of wistful expectancy that had been successful with movie audiences — and suitors — for over twenty years.

"Hey, baby!" Ferdie strode across the living room to where she stood. "Don't you ever pull a fool thing like that again! I nearly had a heart attack."

"Sweetie, you know," Fran purred. "I was so upset about Deedee, working in that awful place — and nothing was going right about the movie — and then you let me walk out of Vegas without a backward look." Play it up, make him feel *he* was to blame, too. Ferdie had that fantastic sex appeal — what a shame there was no class about him.

"It's gonna be different from now on," Ferdie promised expansively. His eyes were heated. "How're you feeling? I mean, the doctor give you restrictions about things?" A broad grin settled on his handsome face.

Fran giggled.

"Don't worry, doll. No restrictions." He couldn't wait to get her home and throw her across the bed.

How was Vic doing with his slutty wife? She was going to give him a rough time, judging from her press. Vic was going to be hanging like wet macaroni by the time Jody Jones got through with him!

"All this luggage yours?" Ferdie gazed, in mock shock, at the pile of valises waiting to be transported to Ferdie's car. "For three days in a sanitarium?"

"Wait till you see what I take for ten days in Acapulco," Fran warned. Maybe, after the picture, she'd take a run out there with Ferdie. It could be a ball.

"Let's get you home," Ferdie said, but taking time out to pull her to him tightly.

"Hold it till we get home," Fran laughed. With all the gorgeous young things running around Hollywood, Ferdie still began to bulge the minute he was nuzzling her.

In the car, Fran nestled cozily against Ferdie, a hand resting on his thigh. The studio had photographers waiting at the sanitarium entrance. There would be another newspaper splash. Sam called, just as Ferdie and she were about to leave, to tell her he was negotiating a replacement for the male lead. Of course Todd Colton was unknown to American audiences, but he was already big in England. Not too young — late or middle thirties. It wouldn't hurt her at all to star with a potential male discovery.

"Deedee'll be waiting for us at the house," Fran forewarned Ferdie. "The poor little kid feels kind of lousy about things."

"Well, get her out of the way quick," Ferdie ordered ebulliently. God, did he have to drive this fast? She didn't want to land back in the hospital before she even reached home! "We've got things to do, baby." His hand left the wheel for the moment to touch her.

If she didn't know better, she'd think Ferdie was high on drugs. He steered clear of that jazz, even though Corelli was supposed to be a big operator in the narcotics traffic. Unease filtered through her; the papers were getting nasty about Corelli and his mob. But it would blow over. It always did. Corelli had the right contacts.

Thank God, Deedee wasn't running with hopheads. That kid — Jack — was solid. A kooky intellectual, probably a college student. Maybe she ought to talk Deedee into going back to school. She hadn't tried too hard before.

"Home," Ferdie announced smugly, turning into the impressive circular driveway.

Deedee was standing at the open door, waiting for them.

"Baby," Fran crooned sentimentally, clutching at her. "I'm so glad to get home."

"I'll take this junk up to your room," Ferdie said, but he took time out to inspect the baby carefully, Fran thought with a surge of annoyance — inspect her like she was standing there *without* her Maidenform bra.

"Lottie has coffee up," Deedee said, dragging her eyes away from Ferdie's loaded look. "Would you like some now?"

"Darling, I'd love some coffee." Fran dropped an arm about Deedee's waist, walked with her into the house, across the foyer, towards the den. "Where *is* Lottie?" Lottie enjoyed being Fran Constant's housekeeper. She had nearly flipped when that fan magazine writer included her in an article.

"She went shopping at the market. She's fixing a welcome-home dinner for you tonight." Deedee hesitated, her eyes going opaque. "Will Ferdie be staying for dinner?"

"I imagine so, darling." Didn't Deedee like Ferdie? Or did she like him too much? Fran's mind dwelt on the heated looks that had passed between Ferdie and Deedee from time to time. Deedee was just impressed with Ferdie's contacts with the Corelli mob — it was like watching a Class A gangster film. "Unless Ferdie has to fly back to Vegas." She'd have to figure out something to get Deedee out of the house. All of a sudden she was getting squeamish. She didn't feel like sliding beneath the sheets with Ferdie, with Deedee floating around in the house.

Deedee went out to the kitchen for coffee. Ferdie came down from stowing away her luggage. For a moment, he thought they were alone.

"Hold it, honey," Fran said sweetly. "Deedee just went out to the kitchen for coffee."

"Hey, baby, I have to fly back to Vegas," he complained.

"When?"

"Oh, not till late," he admitted, grinning. "I've got a date with a blackjack table."

Deedee returned with the coffee tray and set it down on the table before the fireplace. Again, Fran intercepted a look between Ferdie



and Deedee. What the hell was the matter with Ferdie? He looked ready to knock Deedee on her back and jump right in. Deedee didn't dig this character — she was way out of her depth. *Jack* was her speed. The trouble was, a kid Deedee's age got her head turned when somebody like Jack got all turned on over her.

"No cream, no sugar for me," Fran said, her voice laced with irritation.

"I know," Deedee said, self-consciously, too aware of the way Ferdie was stripping her to her skin in a heated corner of his mind.

The phone rang. Fran rose to take it.

"Hello." The sweet-sexy Fran Constant voice, because you never knew who was going to be on the other end.

"Fran, darling, it's Carol Connelly," the columnist identified herself. "I just thought I ought to cheek personally with you before we ran the story."

"What story?" Everybody had the bit about the pills.

"Ferdie and you, sweetie." Carol's voice dropped to a quiet, serious undertone. "He called about an hour ago to say that you two were getting married as soon as you're fully recovered —"

"Not true," Fran interrupted, her eyes blazing. That cheap, rotten hood! How dare he make statements for her. "Not one word of it's true, Carol. Thanks for checking with me!"

"You'd better check around, Fran," Carol cautioned. "I imagine I'm not the only one he gave the story to."

"Thanks, Carol — you're really a friend," Fran made an effort to show her gratitude, though fury surged through her. "You know you'd be the first to know if there were anything to it." She was trembling when she turned away from the phone.

"You shouldn't be getting so upset, Fran," Deedee said nervously. Her eyes swung questioningly to Ferdie, as though suspecting he might be involved.

"How can I not be upset?" Fran's voice rose-perilously. "What do you mean, Ferdie? Telling the newspapers we're getting married!"

Ferdie lounged nonchalantly before the fireplace, a smug look across his crudely handsome face.

"A welcome-home surprise for you, baby." He was trying not to lose his cool. "I mean, after that big spread about Emerson and Jody Jones, I figured we ought to start some excitement of our own."

"I'm not marrying you, Ferdie," Fran said violently. This hood? It had been fun, for a while. For laughs. All right, so he was a sensational stud. She didn't have to marry him for that! "Whatever gave you the idea I'd marry you?"

"Okay, so it's a big joke." His face darkened dangerously. "Who needs you? Personally, I don't mind turning in the old model for the new." With a nasty smile, Ferdie reached out to Deedee, fastened a hand at her breast.

"Don't you touch Deedee!" Fran screamed. "Take your filthy hands off the baby!"

"Don't you think I can turn her on, too?" Ferdie taunted, moving in on Deedee, while Deedee froze in shock. For an instant.

"Fran, no! No!" Deedee's voice rose to an hysterical screech as she watched the andiron in Fran's hand rise above Ferdie's skull, take aim at the back of his head. "Oh, Fran, no, no, no!"

# Thirteen

---

Deedee stared, sickened, shaken, at the ugly scalp wound, the blood oozing from Ferdie's head onto the pale beige of the exquisite carpeting.

"I didn't mean it," Fran gasped, eyes dilated. "I didn't mean it!"

For a terrible instant, Deedee's eyes met her mother's. It was three years ago. Suddenly, it was three years ago.

"I'll call Len," Fran began turning her face away from the sprawled, unconscious body on the floor.

"On the other phone," Deedee shot back. "I'm calling for an ambulance on this one."

"Deedee —" Fran's eyes were dark with panic.

"Call Len," Deedee said impatiently, already dialing the operator. "He'll know what to do."

Deedee called for the ambulance while Fran ran out to the den to call Len, who'd take care of the battery of lawyers and whatever else was necessary. It was going to be awful. The same mess all over again! What was Fran going to tell them? That *she* hit Ferdie over the head with the andiron?

Her heart racing, Deedee moved over to where Ferdie lay, colorless, still. He wasn't dead, was he? Was he going to die? Please, don't let him die! Let the ambulance come quickly. Don't let it take forever, the way you read about in the papers sometimes.

Jack wouldn't want to see her again. She was trouble. His parents were going to flip when they found out who she really was. She was supposed to go over there for dinner Wednesday night! Jack had looked awfully self-conscious when he asked — but he *had* asked. It had been sort of like giving official status to their going together.

The police would pour in, and the photographers. She shut her eyes in anguish. Her picture splashed all over the papers again, bringing back the other mess, too. She was that wild Deidre Evans. Jack's folks wouldn't want him near her. She was supposed to meet Jack at the pad later. He said he was going right over from his class, to do some work on that paper. Her eyes moved compulsively to the phone.

She hesitated. Should she call Jack? She wanted him with her. But how would he feel? How did she know what Fran was going to tell the police? Because whatever Fran said to them, she knew she would have to go along with it.

From the corridor came the sound of hysterical crying. Fran. She must have got through to Len. A car drove up, circled to the back of the house. Not the ambulance. Lottie, coming home with the supplies for tonight's welcome-home dinner.

Deedee hurried out to the kitchen. Lottie was coming in, swearing at the awkwardness of the bundles in her arms.

"Lottie, there's been an accident," she said, trying not to fall apart. "You'd better see if you can do something with my mother."

Deedee fled, from the kitchen, down the corridor, skirting the living room to stand in the foyer, to wait for the ambulance. Should she have tried to do something about that wound? But you weren't supposed to touch an accident victim. Deedee hesitated, listening to Lottie's voice above Fran's sobs. Jack. Try the pad. Oh, Jack, come!

Her finger shook as she dialed the number. Nobody in this world was real but Jack. She needed him, now.

"Hello —" A lilt in his voice because he had suspected it was she.

"Oh Jack —" Her voice broke, "Come over to the house. Something awful's happened!"

Lottie phoned the doctor to come over to give Fran a sedative. He arrived at the same time as the ambulance. Before the ambulance attendants had Ferdie on the stretcher, Len arrived with a pair of lawyers.

"Deedee, where is she?" Len demanded solicitously. He looked upset. Fran wouldn't have lied to Len.

"In the den. The doctor's giving her something," Deedee stammered. "Len, what's going to happen?"

"I don't know, baby," he said heavily. "Let's hope that creep pulls through."

A police car came screeching up the long, circular driveway and crunched to a stop. Len exchanged a long look with the attorneys.

"Take her inside with Fran," one of the expensively tailored attorneys ordered crisply. He was one of the ones from the earlier trial, wasn't he, Deedee realized suddenly. "We'll talk to them."

"Come along, Deedee," Len urged nervously.

And then everybody stopped still, because Fran Constant, in the dramatically smart pants-suit that had been her homecoming outfit, stood proudly in the doorway.

"There's nothing secret about what happened here," Fran announced, pale but composed now. The detectives were watching her intently. "Mr. Reagan had given out a story to the columnists that we were going to be married. It wasn't true. I told him we were finished. And then he said something about — about turning me in for a younger model —" Her voice wavered. Deedee watched, transfixed. Almost word for word, it was the script from a movie Fran had done four years ago. "He touched Deedee. I told him to keep his hands off her —" Fran's voice broke. "I warned him not to touch the baby, but he grabbed her! I hit him over the head with the andiron!"

It was as good a performance as Fran had ever given before the cameras.

Deedee sat huddled in a corner of the sofa, while Jack held firmly to one hand.

"They've been gone so long," Deedee said plaintively. "Jack, what's happening?"

"It's the routine bit," he soothed. "They have to book your mother, then arrange for the bail."

"Jack, suppose he dies?"

"Don't think about that." Jack looked grim for an instant.

"Your parents will flip," Deedee warned. "They'll try to make you stop seeing me."

"No, they won't. I've got a deal for them. I'll go back to school, make the whole college scene — if they let us get married and go on to school together."

"Jack!" Deedee sat upright in astonishment. Her eyes searched his face. "Jack, don't put me on —"

"I've had my rebellion," he said matter-of-factly. "Oh, I'm not settling for *their* bag, baby — but I'm smartening up. I'll get nowhere

without at least one degree. And I'll never get that degree if I'm always worrying about you. They'll go along with it, Deedee. In fact," he shot her a sardonic grin, "they might get a charge out of having Fran Constant in the family."

"Fran came through," Deedee said softly. "You know how tough it must have been for her. But she told them, this time, exactly how it was." Deedee stopped dead before the look in Jack's eyes. Comprehension glowed there. He knew she'd covered for Fran, that other time. Why did she feel as though she'd been lifted to the top of Olympus, because Jack knew? She didn't care about the rest of the world; but it had hurt, for Jack to think she'd been responsible for that little girl's death. "Jack, I didn't mean that —" Color flooded her face.

"Ssh," he ordered gently. "From now on, everything's going to be groovy. You'll see."

It would be groovy, if Ferdie recovered — if Fran got off clear. The lawyers were optimistic.

"Could we call the hospital?" Deedee asked anxiously. "It's been hours since they took him there."

"I don't think it's a good idea," Jack began doubtfully. Then they both snapped to attention.

"Who's that?" Deedee leaped from the sofa and crossed to the window. Len's car was crunching to a stop. "It's Fran!"

Fran walked wanly up to the door, with Len hovering solicitously about her. She looked white, Deedee thought nervously — but she was smiling.

Deedee pulled the door wide to admit them.

"What happened?" Deedee searched her mother's face for an answer.

"It's going to be all right, baby," Fran soothed.

"I think Fran ought to be put to bed," Len was insisting. "She's fresh out of the hospital, remember."

"I'm all right," Fran insisted.

"We were so worried," Deedee acknowledged. It felt good, having Fran walk into the house this way. She'd been afraid they'd hold Fran — the way they'd held her, that time.

"Darling, go tell Lottie to make us champagne cocktails. We can all use them." Then Fran spotted Jack. Her smile took on warmth. "Jack," she purred, "how sweet of you to rally around the baby."

"Fran, what happened?" Deedee repeated impatiently.

"I was booked and released on bail. It was all a matter of form, really. The attorneys insist I'll be cleared," Fran reassured her. "I mean, what woman is going to stand by and let a hood like Ferdie Reagan molest her own daughter, right in her presence?"

"What about Reagan?" Jack asked quietly, addressing the question to Len.

"Reagan'll recover," Len said cynically. "He'll have to stay in the hospital a few days, but he'll be okay. Hard skull."

"Deedee, darling, tell Lottie — champagne cocktails," Fran ordered again. "Jack, would you like some sandwiches?"

"I'll go along and raid the refrigerator," Jack said, sliding an arm about Deedee's waist.

"Did you know, Len," Deedee heard Fran say indignantly, "that bastard told me he was forty. At the station, they said he's thirty-one!"

"Honey, I didn't get a chance to tell you," Len intervened smoothly. "Reigal's arranging to sign Todd Colton — the English actor — for the picture. Mature, rugged, great actor — he'll be hailed as the next Richard Burton once the picture's released. And Fran, he can't wait to meet you."

It would go on and on, Deedee thought — Fran searching for the knight on the white charger — but it didn't have to be a life-and-death matter to *her* anymore. She had a whole new bag, with Jack.

# Biography

---

Alison Lord

Born in Columbus, Georgia, Julie Ellis moved to New York at the age of sixteen, where she worked as a successful actress, playwright, and producer off-Broadway. Her first novel was published in 1960, and between then and 1974 she wrote 143 contemporary, gothic, and romantic suspense novels. She now writes one to four new books every year and is published in thirteen countries. A single mother since 1972, Julie Ellis considers her daughter Susan and son Richard her major productions. She is a passionate environmentalist and divides her time between her Manhattan apartment and beach house in Montauk.