



"MEN—THEY'RE ALL PIGS!"

SOMEONE IS BLEEDING

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RICHARD
MATHESON



Someone Is Bleeding

by

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Chapter One

It was a pretty brisk day, as I recall. Sky a little overhung, the Palisades greyish behind the mist. I suppose that's why the beach wasn't too crowded. Then again, it was a weekday and school hadn't let out yet. June. Put them together and what have you got?

A long stretch of beach with just her and me.

I'd been reading. But it got tiresome so I put the book down and sat there, arms around my knees, looking around.

She had on a one-piece bathing suit. Her figure was slight but well-placed. I guessed she was about five-five. She was gazing intently at the waves. Her short-chopped blonde hair was stirring slightly in the breeze.

"Pardon me but could . . ." I said.

She wasn't turning. She kept looking at the shifting blue ocean. I looked over her figure again. Very well-placed. A model's figure. The kind you see in *Mademoiselle*.

"Have you the time?" I asked.

She turned then.

Eyes. That was my first impression. The biggest and the brownest eyes I'd ever seen, great big eyes seeming to search for something. A frank look, a bold one, meaning a bold curiosity. But no smile. Deadpan. Did you ever have a child watch you from the seat in front of you in a bus or a trolley car?

That's what it was like.

Then she lifted her arm and looked at her watch. "One-thirty," she said. "Thank you," I answered.

She turned away. Her eyes moved to the sea again. I felt the uneasiness of the unconsolidated beachhead.

I rested on my elbows and looked at her profile. Delicately upturned nose. Lovely mouth. And those eyes.

After watching a while to catch her eyes again, I gave up. I was no professional at pickups. I got up slowly and walked down to the water. I felt her eyes following me.

I didn't leap in like athletes do. I stalled, I edged, I shivered. I evolved quick arguments for forgetting the whole thing. Then I slid forward with a shudder and swam out a little way. Body heat took up the chills, my blood started moving.

On my back, looking up at the sky I wondered if I should speak to her. Whether it was worth it.

Then, when I came dripping back, she asked me if the water were cold.

I jumped at the opening.

"Pretty cold," I said. "I'll give you ten dollars if you go in." She shook her head with a smile. "Not me," she said. I dried myself.

"Does the weather get cold out here?" I asked her. Weather talk, I thought. Always an ample wedge. "It gets cold at night," she said.

The eyes intent on me again. I almost felt restive. They *were* searching. But for what? I edged a little closer to her blanket.

"Well, I've just come from New York," I said, "and I came to get warm."

"Oh," she said, "is it cold there?"

Weather talk. Enough to start on. We eased into other things. California. New York. People. Cars. Dogs. Children.

"Do you like good music?" she asked me.

"What's good music?" I asked.

"Classical music."

"Sure," I said, "I love it."

The eyes looking harder. Was that the basis of the search? "Gee," she said.

She sat hugging her knees. The filtering sunlight touched her white shoulders. She couldn't have been more than seventeen, I thought.

I was smiling. "Why gee?" I asked her.

"Because men never like good music," she said. "My . . ."

She stopped. Her eyes lowered.

"What's the Hollywood Bowl like?" I asked her, not wanting to let conversation run down.

She was looking again, shaking her head.

"I don't know," she said, "I sure wish I could go, though."

Too easy, I thought. Where is the hedging, the sly evasions, the mental sparring of a he and she? The moxie? No moxie in Peggy. That was her name.

"What's yours?" she asked.

"David," I said, "David Newton."

And so we talked. I'm trying to remember the significant things she said. They came out once in a while in between straight data about her mother, dead, her father, a retired navy man, her profession, none, and her spirit, obviously stepped on somewhere.

She saw my book and asked what it was. I told her, and we got started on the subject of historical novels.

"They're dirt," she said, "nothing but sex."

Something in her eyes. A hardness. I said why read them if they offend her.

"I'm looking for a decent one," she said.

"I'll write one," I said.

Obvious move. Impress the little girl. I am a writer, what do you think about that, young lady? She didn't catch it.

We kept skating around with words. Talking about home and background, school and other things. I told her I'd graduated from the University of Missouri Journalism School three years before. She told me about traveling around with her mother, father and brother until her mother died, then she and Phillip, her brother, not being able to follow the old man from one base to another anymore. So they stayed in San Francisco with a friend of her mother's.

"She was a swell woman," Peggy Lister said. "But her husband . . ."

"What about him?"

"He was a pig," she said.

A significant remark. Not to me at the time. But later I understood.

Now, though, I just listened halfway, devoting the other half of my attention to looking at her almost childlike face. At the way her hair was parted on the right, the boyish wave of blonde hair over the left part of her forehead. The full lips, delicately red. And those eyes.

How could a face like that give you premonitions? It just didn't. And that was too bad. We were in the middle of a discussion on jazz when she stood up.

"I have to go," she said.

I felt myself start. I'd almost forgotten we'd just met.

She began to put on her jeans and blouse.

"Well, I have to get back to my novel too," I said standing up. Trying again.

"Oh, that," she said, frowning.

"No, one I'm writing, not reading," I said, giving up subtleties.

We scuffled across the warm sands.

"Gee," she said, "you like good music and you write." She shook her head. I got the impression she was confused. "Is it so strange?" I asked.

"Men aren't sensitive enough to do things like that."

We reached a corner on Arizona and she started to turn off. I fiddled around, asking for her phone number and she fiddled back, finally giving it to me with a brooding reluctance. I memorized the number.

We said good-bye and I watched her walking down toward Santa Monica Boulevard. She moved with a relaxed, effortless grace.

I turned away. I went home and worked on the book with a renewed vigor.

That afternoon I sent a card to a friend in New York. *Met me a cute gal*, it read. *Glad you aren't here.*

That evening I remembered something. I remembered that I'd forgotten to write down her telephone number and now it was gone from my mind.

I went to the beach every day for a week but I saw no Peggy Ann.

I gave up three days and wrote heavily. Then, on the fourth day, I got up late, couldn't get up the fortitude to sit in front of my typewriter, ended up by putting on my bathing suit and leaving for the beach.

And, down there, happened to glance up while I was walking across the sands and saw her. My heart beat harder. I realized I'd been looking for her. Again.

She didn't see me. She was sitting on her blanket rubbing cocoa butter over her legs when I came up with my blanket and clothes.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, Davie," she said.

It made me feel strange. No one since my mother had called me that, Davie. There was something about it.

"I was going to call you," I said, "but I forgot your number and your name wasn't in the directory."

"Oh," she said. "No, I live with another couple and the phone is under their name."

She seemed a little evasive that day. She avoided my eyes, kept looking down at the sand. Then, when she tried, without success, to put the cocoa butter on her back, I offered my services.

She sat stiffly as I rubbed my hand over her sun-warmed back. I noticed how she kept biting her lower lip. Worriedly.

"I . . ." she started to say once and then stopped. She sat quietly. Finally she drew in a deep breath.

"I have something to tell you," she said.

I felt myself tremble slightly. She sounded so serious.

"Go ahead," I told her.

"I'm divorced," she said.

I waited.

"Yes?" I said.

Her throat moved. "That's all," she said, "I . . . I just thought you might not want to go out with me when you knew . . . I . . ."

"Why not?"

She started to say something, then shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

"I don't know," she said, "I just thought."

She looked so young, so timorous.

"Don't be silly, Peggy," I said, quietly.

She turned in surprise.

"What did you call me?" she asked.

"Peggy," I said. "That's your name isn't it?"

"Yes, but . . ." She smiled at me. "I didn't think you'd remember."

She shook her head in wonder. "I'm so surprised," she said.

It was one of those things about Peggy. The littlest thing could delight her. Like when I brought her an ice cream cone later that morning.

It might have been a diamond ring.

* * *

Peggy lived on Twenty-sixth Street off Wilshire.

It was Sunday night and I was walking up the quiet tree-lined block looking for her house. It was to be our first date.

I was thinking that it was amazing how quiet it got right off Wilshire. Like a country street. That's what a lot of Los Angeles and suburbs are, I'd decided. A hick town with feathers. Gaudy but rustic.

There were two things in front of the house. An old Dodge. A man watering the lawn. The car was a 1936 model. The man about a 1910 model, pudgy and pasty-faced, wearing most unfetching shorts.

"Peggy Lister live here?" I asked him.

He looked at me with watery blue eyes. His expression was dead. He held the hose loosely in his hands. His head jerked a little. "She lives here," he said.

I felt his eyes on me as I stood on the porch. Then Peggy opened the door.

With heels on she was tall, about five ten, I guess. She wore a sweater and skirt, a brown sport jacket. Her shoes were brown and white, carefully polished. Her hair had been set and combed out painstakingly. She looked wonderful.

"Hello, Davie," she said. "Won't you come in?"

I came in. Those big brown eyes surveyed me.

"You look nice, Davie," she said.

"You look terrific."

Again. Surprise. A half-quizzical smile which seemed to say—oh, you're just fooling me.

Just then an older woman came out of an adjoining room.

"Mrs. Grady, this is David Newton," Peggy said.

I smiled politely, said hello.

"Going out?" asked Mrs. Grady.

"We're going to get acquainted," Peggy said.

Mrs. Grady gave us a nod. Then she leaned over and called out the window.

"Supper's on, Albert."

We went to the front door and passed Albert. He gave me a sullen look. And her a look. A look that made me start. Because there was almost a possessiveness in it. It gave me an odd feeling.

"Who is that guy anyway?" I asked as we started down the street.

"Mr. Grady," she said.

"That look he gave you," I said.

"I know."

That expression was on her face again. Not quite identifiable. Mostly disgust. But there was something else in it, too. I wasn't sure but it might have been fear, I thought. The fear of a child who has come upon something it does not quite understand yet instinctively shrinks from.

I decided to change the subject.

"Where would you like to go?" I asked.

"I don't care," she said, brightening. "Where would you?"

"A movie?" I suggested, without really thinking.

"Well . . ." she said.

"What am I talking about?" I said. "I don't want to go to a movie. I want to talk to you." She smiled at me. "I'd like to talk, Davie," she said.

We went down to Wilshire to the Red Coach Inn for a few drinks. It's a cute little place, intimate, booths, a man playing casual organ music.

She ordered a Vodka Collins and I ordered a Tom. Then she turned to me and, casually, said.

"I think I should tell you I'm madly in love with you."

I took it for a gag, of course.

"Splendid," I said. "That's grand."

But her face wasn't smiling. It made me feel a little restless. Sometimes you couldn't tell what Peggy meant. We drank a little. It was quiet.

"Would you like to come to a party with me?" she said. On the spur of the moment it seemed.

"Why . . . sure," I said.

"Good," she said.

"Where is it?"

"At my lawyer's house," she said.

"You have a lawyer?"

"He handled my divorce," she said.

I nodded. I asked her where the house was. She said Malibu.

"Oh," I said, "how will we get there? I plan to get a car but I haven't yet."

"We can get a ride," she said confidently.

Then the confidence seemed to slip. She fingered her glass nervously,

"Davie," she said.

"What?"

"Will you . . . will you promise me something?"

I hesitated. Then I asked what.

"Well, I . . ."

She looked irritated at her own fluster. "These parties are so . . ."

Again she halted.

"You're a gentleman," she said.

I waited. "I am?" I said.

"I mean," she went on, "you know how these parties are. Actors and actresses and . . . well, usually they get all drunk and the men start to . . ."

"You want me to promise not to touch you."

"Yes."

I didn't like to say it. She looked delicious then, in that soft light. But I nodded.

"All right," I said.

She smiled gratefully.

After a few drinks we started down Wilshire again, headed for the ocean.

"I wish I did have a car," I said.

"It's all right," Peggy said.

We walked and talked. Peggy told me about her mother. Her mother had died when Peggy was twelve.

"Tell me about your marriage," I asked once.

"There's nothing to tell," she said and that was all I could get out of her.

When we walked past my room I asked her if she'd like to come in and read some of my published stories. Strange it didn't seem wrong with Peggy. With any other girl I would have felt obvious, but with Peggy I couldn't even conceive of anything under the table. She had too much . . . what's the word? Class, I guess you'd have to call it.

Peggy sat on my bed and looked at my stories. I sat across the room by my typing table. I watched her draw up her shapely legs and rest one of them under her, then drawing the slip and skirt down. Watched her as she took off her jacket, as she leaned against the wall reading, watched her large brown eyes reading my words. Living in them. She was right there.

She looked up after reading the first one.

"My goodness," she said, awed. "I had no idea."

"Of what?" I asked.

"Of how . . . deep you are."

I chuckled self-consciously.

"I've done better," I said.

She shook her head wonderingly. "You're so sensitive," she said. "Men aren't sensitive, but you are."

"Some men are, Peggy," I said.

"No," she said.

And she really believed it.

"They're pigs. They don't care anything about beauty."

Was that her marriage talking? I wondered. What had it really been like to put that look of bitter conviction on that sweet face?

All I could do was shrug. Feeling a little helpless before her complete and dismaying assurance.

"I don't know, Peggy." I shouldn't have said it.

"I do," she answered.

And there was hurt there too. She couldn't hide it. I didn't want to spoil the evening. I tried to let it go. But Peggy wasn't finished.

"I've seen it time and again," she said. "My uncle left my aunt with three children to support. The husband of the woman my brother and I stayed with was a drunkard. Phillip and I used to lie in bed on Saturday and Sunday nights and listen to the man beat his wife with his fists."

"Peggy, those are only two examples. In my own family I can give you four examples of happy marriages."

She shook her head. She read some more. And her jaws were held tightly. I sat there looking at her sadly. Wondering if there were anything I could do to ease that terrible tension in her.

The night seemed to disappear, Houdini-like. The first thing I knew we were walking back on the block off Wilshire. It was a nice, starry night. The street was dark and quiet. Peggy took my arm as we walked.

"I *do* like you," she said. "You talk my language."

We talked of different things. Nothing important.

"I should work," she said, a little ashamed. "It's not very honorable to live on . . . my alimony. But . . ." She looked at me as if almost pleading, "I don't know how to do anything, and I dread the idea of working in a ten cent store or something. I did that when I was married. It's . . . awful."

I patted her hand.

A little later. "Where does your ex-husband live, Peggy?"

"Do we . . . have to talk about it, Davie? Please."

"I'm sorry," I said.

It was when we were walking past the little park between 24th and 25th Streets.

"Would you like to sit in the park a while?" she asked me.

"Sure," I answered.

So we sat on the grass looking over the mirror-like pond. Watching the moon saucer that floated on the water surface. Listening to a basso frog giving out a roundelay for his lady love.

We didn't talk. I listened to her breathing. I glanced at her and saw her looking intently at the pond. Felt her hand on the ground and covered it with mine. And, naturally, without forcing it, found my head resting against hers. Her cheek was firm, soft. The cologne she wore was a delicious, delicate fragrance.

And, then, in a moment, casually, I drew back her hair and kissed the back of her neck. Long.

She didn't move. She shivered. Didn't struggle. But her hands tightened on the grass and pulled some out. I wondered what her lowered face was like.

I took off my lips. Her breath stopped, then caught again. In time with mine? I wondered.

Her throat moved. "Wow," she said.

I guess I laughed aloud. Of all the words in the world, it was the last I expected.

Peggy looked hurt, then offended. I quickly apologized.

"The word seemed so odd right then," I explained.

"Oh," She smiled, a little awkwardly. "No one ever kissed me like that," she said.

I looked at her in amazement. "What? *No* one?"

She shook her head.

"But . . . your husband?"

Her lips tightened.

"*No*," she said. She shuddered and her hands tightened into hard fists. "*No*," she said again.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She shook her head. "It's not your fault," she said. "You just don't . . . realize. What it was like."

I put my arm around her.

"Peggy," I said, softly.

When we reached the front of her house I took her in my arms and kissed her. Her warm lips responded to me.

I left her three times. Then, each time, turned to look back. And saw her standing by the picket fence that glowed whitely in the moonlight. And she was looking after me. The way a frightened and lonely child looks after its departing parent.

I kept going back. Holding her. Feeling her press her face against my shoulder. Whisper. "Davie. Davie."

And trying to understand that childlike look, that hungry, wistful look in her eyes.

It was while I was walking away the third time that the big car passed me, I didn't notice it. At least not any more than I'd notice any car that passed me on a dark street in the early morning. We'd sat talking till way after midnight.

But at Wilshire I stopped to go back again.

And found the car parked in front of her house. Right behind Albert's old Dodge. I saw a man at the wheel wearing a chauffeur's cap. He was slumped down, staring at the windshield.

Another man was at the door. He had on a top coat, a homburg.

At first I thought, Oh my God, it's her husband and he's a millionaire. I felt like creeping away.

Then I saw her framed in the doorway and I suddenly knew I couldn't leave and I had to know who this man was. I walked past the Cadillac, a sleek, black job. I glanced at her room which faced the street. But the shades were drawn. I turned into the alley and walked up to the side window of her room. I stood there in the darkness, holding my breath. The window was open. I could hear her voice.

"You shouldn't come here like this," she was saying, "at this time of night. What will the landlady say?"

"Never mind that," said the man. "I was talking about something else."

"I said no and I mean it."

Silence a moment. The man's voice again.

"And who's the new one?"

She didn't answer. I felt my brow knitting. Because the man's voice was familiar.

"Some poor fool who . . ." he started.

"Oh leave me alone, will you?" she burst out.

"Peggy."

The voice was low and it warned. "Don't keep trying my patience. Even I have a limit. Even I, Peggy."

I heard her skirt rustle, then a long silence. I tried to hear. I tried to look under the shade. Nothing to see or hear. I imagined. I'm good at that.

"Jim," she said, "Jim . . . no."

Another connection. Not quite secure. The voice. The name.

Then I heard the back screen door shutting and I walked down the alley. As I turned onto the sidewalk I saw a dark figure coming up the alley. Albert. I recognized the form. I didn't know whether he was just out for the air or whether he was going to listen at the window too.

It didn't matter to me.

I'd had enough. I stalked past the black Cadillac and walked quickly toward Wilshire. In my mind I kept seeing her in the man's arms, being kissed, minutes after I had kissed her. Kissing him the way she kissed me. Peggy, the new, the bright, Peggy, the deceiving one.

I think I felt sick. I just wanted to get far away. When it comes down to it, I'm not very confident about my overweening charms. Right then the only thing I wanted was escape.

Good-bye Peggy Ann.

* * *

There was someone scratching on my screen.

I raised up on one elbow and looked at the window. She was looking in. She knocked at the door then. I hesitated. Then I relaxed.

"Come in," I said.

She was carrying her bathing suit and a towel in one hand. A grease-spotted paper bag in the other.

I looked at her clinically.

"I brought doughnuts for breakfast," she said.

Still no answer from me. She caught the look. Peggy was always quick at that. She knew the moment your feelings toward her chilled. Her face fell.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

I didn't answer. Her face was disconcerted. The face I was beginning to love. I tried to fight that but it was just about impossible. She turned away sadly. "I'll go," she said.

I didn't feel anything until her hand touched the doorknob. Then it seemed as if someone were wrenching at my insides.

"Peggy."

She turned to look at me. Her face blank. I patted the bed. "Come here," I said.

She stood there, looking hurt. She tried to flint her features, failed, tried again. I patted the bed a second time.

"Sit down, Peggy," I said.

She sat down gingerly.

"I haven't done anything," she said.

"I came back last night," I said.

At first she didn't understand. Then her face tightened. "You saw Jim," she said.

"Is he your husband?"

"He's my lawyer," she said.

Last connection. The voice, the name, the profession.

"What's his last name?" I asked.

"Vaughan," she said.

"My God."

She looked at me in surprise. "What is it?"

"I know him," I said.

"You do?"

"We went to college together."

"Oh." Her voice was faint.

I shook my head. "My God," I repeated.

"Jim Vaughan. Of all the crazy coincidences."

I turned to her.

"Is Jim in love with you?" I asked.

"I . . ." She looked helpless.

"Is he?"

"I don't know."

"Isn't he married anymore?" I asked.

"They're going to be divorced," she said.

Audrey divorced. I saw her face at college, in my mind. Adoring Jim Vaughan. Divorced.

"Is Jim's brother here too?" I asked.

"Yes."

"My God, it's so fantastic." I saw that look again and let it go for the moment though there were still many questions I wanted to ask. Jim and I had known each other very well at the University of Missouri. "It's his party we're . . . supposed to go to?" I asked.

She looked at the floor. "I suppose you're not going now," she said.

"I don't know," I said. "I'd like to see him again. But if he's in love with you it would be a . . . little strained."

"If you don't want to," she said.

"Don't you think he'd mind?"

She didn't answer.

"Peggy, come on."

"I had no idea you knew him. But . . . what difference does it make? I asked you to go with me."

I remembered something.

"Poor little fool," I said. "Why that snotty son of a bitch. He's as smug as ever. Sure, I'll go. I just want to see his face when he sees me walk in with you."

* * *

I was putting the polishing touches to my bowtie when the car horn honked outside.

I found the black Cadillac waiting.

Peggy was inside, the door open.

"Hi," she said. "Come on in."

I got in. The door shut and the car pulled away from the curb. Good God, I was thinking, this ices the cake. Peggy smiled at me.

"What's the scoop?" I asked, quietly so the driver couldn't hear.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't say we were going in Jim's own car."

"What's the difference?"

I started to answer. Then I chuckled. "Jim will do nip-ups."

"Why?"

She actually didn't know. Not my Peggy Ann Lister, divorced and very wonderful. I patted her hand.

"Here is the picture, my dear," I said. "You taking Jim's rival to Jim's party in Jim's car. You get it?"

She looked blank. "You're no rival," she said.

It was my turn to look blank. Maybe she was naive, I thought.

I took a closer look at the driver. Affluence, I was thinking. Jim has done well for himself. A Caddy, a chauffeur, a house at Malibu.

But the chauffeur didn't fit. Not quite. Rich men's chauffeurs have non-committal features. They match the upholstery.

Not Walter Steig. That was his name. Steig stood out like a keg of beer among wine glasses. Big and stolid. His face and neck were reddish. He looked like a left-over from the Third Reich. Big and brutish with closely cropped hair of grayish-steel color. Rimless glasses and a stiff, unrevealing expression.

The first time I saw Steig I don't think I believed him. He was a living cliché.

He turned the car onto Pacific Coast Highway and speeded up the ocean. Malibu, I thought, Jim *has* done well. A beach house probably. Fireplaces and French windows and opulence. Jim Vaughan.

I looked at Peggy.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that I can't help being surprised that you know Jim. That he's so well off. When I knew him he was . . . as poor as I am now."

That was poor.

She smiled back. My love was wearing a dark blue dress that clung fittingly to her boyish figure. Her blonde hair was brushed out again, haloing her head with light curls. Her skin was flawless. No makeup other than lipstick.

Everything seemed fine.

Why, then, did I start to feel premonitions? No, it wasn't her face, that was silly. I guess it was the memory of the look Jim had given me that last time I saw him. On graduation day. It was a look that killed and Jim was one of those people who try never to let such looks be seen on their faces.

And that chauffeur. Again the disparity hit me. That burly German just didn't go with Jim's overt refinement, with his cultivated taste for the inoffensive, the best in company.

I wondered why.

I tried to let it go. Talk to Peggy and not jump the gun. And I pretty well succeeded except for a stray conjecture here and there.

The Malibu house was a lush two-story affair that rambled all over a hillside and ended up like a luxurious animal crouched on a cliff, peering down at the pounding surf way down below across the highway. I imagined that the living-room windows were tightly fastened because the back porch was air.

I felt nervous as we stood on the front porch waiting for the door to open. Years had passed. And now I was entering Jim's life again, with the only tongue that could ever scathe him. And, more important, with another of his women on my arm. Stab in the back number two, I was thinking. A maid opened the door and we entered the high-ceilinged hallway.

It was quite a place. Thick broadloom, everything smart and rich. Jim's taste, all right, I could see that.

"Well . . ."

And heard him. I turned and saw him standing, one foot below the other on the step that led to the raised living-room. Staring at me.

Prophetic, I thought, that the last time I had seen him and this first time again, the expression I saw was devoid of all concealment. With not enough time to combat shock. It was Jim Vaughan in the raw looking at me. The look had surprise in it. Surprise, and, no hiding it, although he did his best thereafter, distinct and obvious displeasure.

"David!"

The pose was back. His hand holding mine was firm. The smile, the look was one of pleasure.

"If this isn't a coincidence," he was saying. "How are you, Jim?" I said.

No need to ask. He was in fine shape. From his well trimmed head of red hair, down through his well-shaven, well-fed face, through his maroon dinner jacket, and down to his shiny, dark maroon shoes. Jim was all right. I almost felt like a tramp in my old jacket, one he'd seen at college no less. And that feeling was a new one for me. When I was with Jim especially.

I'd always felt at least equal, if not superior.

"What are you doing out here?" he was asking me.

His arm around Peggy's waist. Obviously. She looked a little pained but she didn't move away. The move made me feel strange. As if with one calm, assured gesture, Jim was removing her from my sphere.

"Writing," I said.

"Oh yes, of course," he said, as if he didn't know it. "You wrote."

His tendency towards smugness that I'd taken delight in puncturing at school had now blossomed into a full-fledged snobbishness. This, I suspected, was progress to Jim.

Then came a move which sort of put down the groundwork for the coming months

"Peggy, I've got someone you must meet," Jim said.

That was the opener. There were other words, quickly spotted. But the kicker was me standing alone in the hallway. A few seconds after I'd met a guy who'd been a good friend years before, I'd been dismissed that easily. Jim Vaughan discarding the past like a scab. He'd said, "We'll have to have a long talk," but I knew it was only words.

I saw him wedge Peggy into a mass of people standing up near a large fireplace which was crackling with orange flames. Peggy looked toward me once, apologetically. But it didn't much ease my irritation.

I went up the small staircase and into the huge living-room. Just as expected. Lush. High-beamed ceiling, thick, wall-to-wall carpeting, huge, solid color furniture, copper lamps. Jim had it.

I looked around. At first I thought there would surely be someone I had known from college. He couldn't have discarded them all, he knew so many. If nothing else, there would be Audrey. She and I had been minor buddies at college. She wasn't too pretty a girl. She made up for it though. So well you hardly ever knew she wasn't particularly attractive. Something inside. Not many people have it.

No Audrey. I kept walking around adding unto myself a drink and a plate of well-catered canapes, a high-class antipasto. I stood, back to a wall-high picture window and surveyed the room full of affluent strangers. I got philosophical, I always do when I'm around people who all have more money than I do.

It was about that time that I saw Dennis.

He was sitting on a couch with a pretty young thing. He was glowering alternately into his drink and at the mass of people wherein stood Jim and Peggy.

I went over, sat down. I hadn't known Dennis at college except by sight. Flitting about the campus like a scholastic phantom, carrying books and a woman. Always a woman.

"Hi," I said.

The young thing showed teeth. Dennis looked at me with his dark eyes. Stuck in a lean face that seemed more than anything else to reflect one big, endless resentment. Of anything. Of everything. He didn't answer. Once a spider looked at me like he did.

"You don't remember me," I said.

"No, I don't," he agreed.

"I'm Dave Newton," I said. "I was a friend of Jim's at Missouri." Recognition. But no pleasure.

"Oh, yeah," he said.

I can't get on very well with people who won't talk.

"You've got quite a home here," I said.

"*Jim* has quite a home."

There it was. Plain as the nose on his sullen face, The resentment. I'd heard Dennis talk once at college. That was one day when I'd come up to him and Jim on the campus. Dennis had walked away saying, "Sure, have it your way. You always do anyway."

And Jim had said to me, faintly amused, “*That* is brother Dennis. The brat of the family.”

Now, in the present, I saw that Dennis was still the brat of the family.

“Yeah,” I said, for want of anything better.

Young thing coughed. Dennis didn’t stir.

“I’m Jean Smith,” came a gushing introduction. “Dennis is just *awful* about introductions.”

I smiled and nodded. I forgot about her.

“Where’s Audrey?” I asked Dennis.

He looked at me coldly a moment. I guess he didn’t see what he was looking for. He turned away.

“She’s sick,” he said.

“That’s too bad.”

“Yeah, isn’t it?” he said and was up and moving for the bar.

“Are you in pictures?”

That was the young one. The busty one, revealing her deepest interest, her religion. To gain stardom at all costs, chastity to soul.

“Sure,” I said disgustedly. “I work at Metro.”

“Oh, *really*.”

Big eyes popping. Brassiere straining.

I was looking at Peggy. She was smiling at some big man who was holding her hand and obviously shooting her a line.

“You’re an actor, I bet,” the young thing simpered.

I paid little attention. “Producer,” I said.

“Oh?”

The poor girl was losing breath. She was dying to do something impressive. Chant Ophelia’s song going downstream, or peel clothes or do something noble.

“What have you produced?” she asked.

I took out a cigarette after she took one. I lit it and blew out a cloud. David Newton, producer and liar,

“I just did a remake of *Lassie Come Home* with Gene Kelly,”

“Oh?”

“Musical. Technicolor,” I said. I watched Peggy look around cautiously, looking for me. Around her waist still, Jim’s arm.

"Technicolor," said the young thing.

"Couple of million," I said. "Prestige picture."

"Yes, I see."

I looked at Miss Nothing. I sighed.

"My greatest picture though . . ." I stopped, overcome.

"What? What?"

"*Vanilla Vomit*," I said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"That was the title."

"Vanilla . . . ?"

"Vomit."

"I don't believe I . . ."

She was still looking very blank as I moved for the big group. I was getting tired of this. It was obvious that Jim had no intention of sharing Peggy. She was private property.

"It was superb." Jim was doing some soaping up. Lamar Brandeis, real producer. Influential man. I stood behind Peggy Lister.

"Peggy, let's dance," I said.

Jim's smile was antiseptic. Toothpaste ad smile.

"Not right now, Dave," he said. "We're rather busy." Then I was left to stand there, unintroduced, the ghost of Hamlet's father at Malibu. I felt a heat churning up in my stomach. I've got a temper. I'll be the last to deny that.

Peggy kept looking at me when she could, trying to smile. But Jim kept closing up the group so that his back was to me. I looked at the back of his neck. Jim Vaughan, I thought, my old buddy. You dirty, smug, son of a bitch.

Why didn't she come to me, excuse herself? I figured that she was afraid to. She was a timid girl really. She could be taken advantage of.

I listened to the talk awhile. Then when my arm muscles felt like rigid glass I just moved around and grabbed Peggy's hand.

"Come here. Peggy," I said aloud. "There's someone you must meet."

"I could feel their stares on me as I pulled her away

"That wasn't very polite," she said.

I took her over to the small open portion of the floor where a few couples were dancing to record music.

It wasn't polite to bring me here and ditch me, either," I said.

"I didn't do anything," she said. "He took me over."

"No, you never do anything," I said. "Peggy Lister, victim of fate "

She tried to draw away. I tightened my hold. "You're going to dance with me," I said.

She was quiet then. Her mouth was a resigned line, parenthesized. She held herself stiffly.

"My old friend Jim Vaughan," I said.

No answer.

"Peggy."

"What?"

"Do you want to meet the person I was going to introduce you to?"

No answer.

"Do you?"

"Who *is* it?" she asked, with false patience.

"Me," I said. "I'm all alone."

Her eyes on me. And softness coming back. I felt her hand on my shoulder tighten. "Davie," she said softly.

"How do you do," I answered.

Later. About. Jim taking her. Then me dancing with her. And both of us standing by, around eleven, while Dennis danced with her. Both of us trying to put on an air of Auld Lang Syne.

"I suppose Peggy has told you about our marriage plans," Jim said. Casually. Jim loved to flick off bombshells.

"No," I said, keeping it casual even though it killed me. "She didn't say anything."

"Well, it's understood," he said. The dampener. And was that a little threatening in his voice?

"Does Audrey understand?" I asked.

The twitching that presages a well-reserved smile.

"She understands," said Jim Vaughan.

"The way Linda understood." I said.

Another twitch, without a smile this time. I knew he remembered as I did the time at college when I'd started to date Linda. Linda, who everybody but myself considered Jim's un-ringed fiancée. And Jim had taken me into the Black and Gold Inn one afternoon and given me the low-down. Told me, just as casually, that he and Linda were going to be married. Although Linda didn't know it. Although Linda later on left him cold.

"That was a childish thing," Jim was saying now. "I'm past childish things"

I nodded. "I see," I said. Then I said, "I hate to say it Jim but I'm in love with Peggy."

No sign. No hint. He gazed at me like an exterminator, sighting on his prey.

I smiled thinly. "I know it isn't very guest-like for me to tell you," I said, "Especially after what happened with Linda but . . . well, there it is."

He looked at me as if making some sort of decision. His grayish-blue eyes examined me carefully through the lenses of his glasses. His thickish lips pursed slightly as he deliberated.

He decided.

"Come in here, David," he said. Father about to tell his son that the birds do more than fly and the bees buzz.

He led the way to the library. He ushered me in. The door closed off the sound of the party. He locked the door. We stood together in the quietude, surrounded by the literature of the ages, all dusty.

"Sit down, David," he said.

I sat. I didn't know what to say. I decided to let him play the scene his own way.

"What has Peggy told you about herself?" he asked.

I sat quietly a moment, trying to figure out what his angle was. Jim was always trying for an angle. It might be hidden at first but it was always there. I knew that from school. He'd lead up, lead up, then sock you over the head with his coup de grace.

"Her family," I said. "Her life." I paused for effect. "Her divorce," I said, as casually as possible, figuring that it was the angle he was working on.

James Vaughan, late of Missouri farm town, now of California society, raised his eyebrows. Most effectively. All right, let's have it, Jim, I wanted to say, you can spare the histrionics. I know you.

"That's what she told you," he said. "That she was divorced?"

"That's right."

A sinking sensation in my stomach. What in hell was he driving at?

He looked at me, still deliberately. Until the thoughts of what he might be hiding started to make my skin crawl.

"What is it, for Christ's sake?" I asked.

He put one hand into his coat pocket.

"I don't know whether you'll believe what I tell you," he said.

"What?"

"Peggy isn't divorced," he said.

"She's still married?"

"No," he said, "not now."

"What about her husband?" I asked, perfect straight man for horror.

He hesitated. Then he said, "Murdered."

I felt the cold sickness explode in me because I knew his coup de grace before he said it.

"Peggy murdered him."

Chapter Two

I sat there and I felt as if the walls were tottering, ready to fall in on me. Everything out of proportion and coldness in me and him looking down.

"You're lying," I said, weakly, very weakly.

"Am I?"

And I couldn't convince myself that he was.

"All the facts can be found in newspaper files," he said, "if you don't believe me. I have some of the clippings here if you'd like to see them."

I thought, I'll throw him, I'll ask to see the clippings. Then I was afraid to try. The thought of holding them in my hands, reading them, sickened me. I kept seeing that angelic smile in my mind. That smile. Those eyes, those lustrous, frank eyes. The way she stroked my hair. Her soft lips on mine. The long, happy days together.

Murder?

"Don't you think it would be better if you left?" I heard him saying.

I want to see Peggy, I thought. I visualized it though. A writer's curse. I heard myself asking, inanely it seemed, "Peggy, did you murder your husband?"

"I'll have Steig take you home," he said.

I looked up at him. His face was without expression. Certainly there was no sympathy there.

"I should see her," I said.

But without conviction. I didn't want to see her. I was afraid to see her. Afraid of seeing her lower her eyes and refuse to answer me. And all I could think of was Peggy lying to me.

I couldn't face it. I'm a coward, I guess, in lots of ways.

"I think it would be foolish to see her," Jim said.

I found myself standing. For moments at a time I forgot where I was, even who I was. Just pain standing there, overwhelmed with misery.

"Listen," I heard him say, "I know Peggy. For years I thought what you think of her now. That she was simple, uncomplicated." He shook his head. "She's not." he said, walking me to the door.

I wanted to get away. I was sick.

"She's hopelessly erratic," he said. "If you spoke to her now about it, she might cry. She also might explode in your face and tell you it wasn't murder, really, and besides, it isn't any of your business. Her mind shifts from one emotion to another. You must have seen that yourself, David."

I don't know whether I did or not. But the words were in my brain, and, in the state of shock I was in, I took them straight.

"Peggy is a dangerous girl," he said.

David Newton, sheep. Led from the house. Luckily or unluckily, depending how you look at it, I didn't see Peggy. I think she was in the big room again, dancing with Dennis. Or looking for me. A me that was being led, dazed and shocked, to the big black Cadillac. Slumping back on the cold seat. Vaughan leaning in.

"If you don't believe what I've told you," he said crushing some more, "I want you to check. Don't take my word for it."

Then the door slammed and Steig pulled the black car around the pear-shaped drive and onto the road that led precipitously down to the highway.

I sat in the car staring at the floor. And listening to the wind whistle by the car as it roared along the ocean at eighty miles an hour. Under a cold moon.

* * *

I wrote sporadically. I went to the beach, way up the beach, far from the spot where we'd met. I went to the movies. I read. And, from all activities, absorbed nothing. I was still half anesthetized. I hadn't known her long, a few weeks. But she'd gotten to me.

I thought about her after the first few days of deliberately avoiding any thoughts at all about her.

I remembered taking her to the little bar downstairs in one of the hotels along Ocean Drive. I forget the name of it. I remember the soft lighting, the heavy wood paneling, circling the dance floor with Peggy in my arms, listening to the music of the three-piece combination. Sitting at the tables and having a couple of drinks together, Her eyes over the glass, looking at me. A soft look. Adoring and unquestioning.

I remembered the first time I'd told her how I felt about her. I remembered other things. It had been such a short time really Yet so long, it seemed. Years of walking through the silent streets of Santa Monica looking at the pretty houses, making unspoken plans. Walking together through Will Rogers State Park in the Santa Monica Hills. Finding fresh mountain lion tracks and running back to the parking place, breathlessly excited and laughing. And walking all the way back to Santa Monica. Walking everywhere, hand in hand, never needing to speak. Murder?

I went to the library and looked through old papers. I didn't find anything. And when I thought some more, I remembered Linda and that look Jim had given me on graduation day.

I went back to my love. Days after. In sorrow and repentance. And found her on the back lawn, trying to read. But just staring at the same page.

And she was cold at first because she'd been hurt. I didn't let it stop me. I was apologetic. I smiled at her and said again and again and again:

"I'm sorry, Peggy. I'm sorry."

* * *

"Murdered!" she said to me. "Is that what he told you?" I nodded, grimly.

She shook her head. "How could he?" she said. And I felt some slight relish in seeing indications of the chinks in Jim Vaughan's self-forged armor.

"Why, though?" she said. "I didn't murder him."

"Where is your husband?" I asked.

"He's dead," she told me. "He died in San Francisco. A year ago."

We sat in the back yard, talking. And she kept shaking her head and saying she couldn't understand how Jim could say such a thing about her.

"It is strange," I said. "I never saw Jim involve himself in such an obvious lie before."

"I don't know," she said.

She looked away. "I didn't murder him," she said, softly.

"I know," I said.

"You didn't know it before," she said. "You believed what he said."

"It came as such a shock," I said. "Think of how you'd feel if, out or a clear blue sky, someone told you I'd murdered my mother or my wife."

"I'd check before I believed."

"What would you think if I told you I was divorced, made you think my wife was still alive?"

She didn't answer.

"Let's forget about it," I said, leaning over to kiss her cheek. "I have missed you," I said.

"But you stayed away."

I couldn't answer. I just felt rage. At Jim for lying so blatantly to me. At myself for believing him. Mostly the latter. For a guy who considers himself superior, I thought, I'd been awfully easy to delude.

It was around that time that I noticed Albert.

He was looking out of his window at Peggy. I forgot to mention it, but Peggy only had on shorts and a tight halter.

I called it to Peggy's attention. Her mouth grew hard again.

"Oh." She bit her lip. "I have to get out of here," she said. "Do you think I could find an apartment . . . or something?"

"Has he . . . tried anything?"

"No. Not with his wife around. But I'm afraid."

"We'd better get you out of here."

"And he pretends to be so pious," she said angrily, "just like all men. Pretending to be moral when all the time they're just pigs."

I didn't want to get started on that again. Besides, I thought, she was probably right in Albert's case.

Albert turned away from the window when I made it obvious from my look that I felt a severe desire to plant my foot in his pudgy face. His white, sickly face. Mushroom shade.

"You sure he hasn't tried anything?" I said.

"No," she answered, "but I know he'd . . . like to. The other day Mrs. Grady called me to the phone. I had on my shortie nightgown. I was too sleepy to think about putting on my robe. And Albert came out in the hall and saw me."

She shuddered.

"The way he looked at me made me sick," she said. "Like a . . . like an *animal*."

"I'd like to break his neck," I heard myself saying. Manly pose. I really couldn't break anybody's neck, I was sure. I get melancholy just dressing a chicken for Sunday dinner.

"I don't want any more trouble," Peggy said. "I'll just leave."

"Trouble?" I asked. And, sometimes, wished I'd cultivated a deceiving voice like Jim's. Too often, practically always, my voice is a mirror of my feelings.

She looked at me dispassionately.

"You're still thinking about it, aren't you?" she said.

"About what?" I pretended.

"You're thinking about what Jim told you."

I must have looked flustered.

"I'll tell you what I mean," she said. "Maybe you'll be sorry I told you."

Her sensitive face was cold, hurt.

"When I was eight years old," she told me, "I was attacked by a boy. He was seventeen. He dragged me in a closet and tore all my clothes off."

She swallowed and avoided my eyes.

"When my father found out," she said, "he tried to kill the boy."

I reached for her hand instinctively but she drew back.

"Was it . . . ?" I started. "How far did . . . he go?"

Her voice was like an axe blow.

"All the way," she said. "I was unconscious."

Peggy, Peggy.

"I can't help the way I feel," she said, "about men. It's in my flesh. If you weren't . . . if you hadn't been so different, I'd have run from you too."

"And Jim . . . ?"

"Jim took care of me," she said. "He was always good to me. And he never asked anything in return."

We sat there in silence awhile. Finally our eyes met. We looked at each other. I smiled. She tried to smile but it didn't work.

"Be nice to me, Davie," she said. "Don't be suspicious."

"I won't," I promised. "Peggy, I won't."

Then I said, as cheerfully as possible, "Come on, let's find you an apartment."

I found a car that same day at a used-car lot, and afterwards we found a place for Peggy.

It was a small place. Two rooms, bath and kitchenette for \$55 a month.

It wasn't going to be empty for about two days so we went back to her old place. I invited her out to dinner. Then to a show or maybe down to the amusement pier at Venice. She accepted happily.

"Let's start all over," she said impulsively during the afternoon. "Let's forget the past. It doesn't matter now, does it?"

I hugged her. "No, baby," I said, "of course it doesn't."

When we went in the house Albert and his wife were sitting there in the front room. That they'd been arguing was obvious from the forced way they broke off conversation. There were splashes of red up Albert's white cheeks.

They looked up at us. The old, sullen resentment in Albert's expression. The prissy, forced amiability in Mrs. Grady's face.

"Mrs. Grady," Peggy said, "I expect to be moving out in two days."

"Oh?" said Mrs. Grady. With that tone that can only be attained by landladies about to lose a tenant.

Albert looked at her. He looked down at her bust. I felt myself tighten in anger. The look on his face made me want to drive my fist against it.

"Is there something wrong here?" Mrs. Grady asked, a trifle peevishly. "Perhaps . . ."

"No, no," Peggy said, "it's fine. I just want an apartment, that's all."

"Well," said Mrs. Grady. "Well."

"I just happened to stumble across it today," Peggy said, "or else I would have given you more notice."

"I'm sure," Albert said, his fat lips pursed irritably.

More tightening in me.

Peggy moved for her room. "Excuse me," she said.

I followed without thinking.

"Gratitude," Albert said. And when I was going into her room he said something else. Something about little trash.

I felt myself lurching to a halt. I threw a glance over my shoulder. Then I felt Peggy's restraining hand on my arm.

In her room she looked at me.

"I guess you should have waited outside," she said.

"What's the difference?" I said, loud for all to hear. "Change your clothes and let's get out of here."

She put up a screen and went behind it. I saw her halter and shorts flutter over the top and I tried to avoid thinking of Peggy standing there tanned and nude. I tried to concentrate on my rage at Albert. But your mind is hardly your own when it's distracted by such merciless visions.

She came out in a little while. During which time I sat listening to the angry voices of Mr. and Mrs. Grady, lovable duo. And I heard the word "trash" used again. Albert wasn't hiding it.

"We'd better go," I said, "or I swear I'm liable to punch that slob in the nose."

Silence outside. I hoped they heard.

"I wish you could leave tonight," I said.

"I . . . so do I," she said. And in her voice I heard the mixture of revulsion and contempt and, yes, fear.

They were talking when we went out into the front room again. But they shut up. They looked up at Peggy, who wore a light blue cotton dress and had a blue ribbon in her hair.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to refund your money," said Mrs. Grady, revealing the depth of her soul.

"I . . ." Peggy started.

"She's got no claim to it, mother," Albert snapped bitterly, "no claim 'soever."

"I don't expect it back," Peggy said. "I'm *sure* you don't." That was Albert.

"Shut your mouth, Albert," I said. Surprised at myself how easily it came.

"Uh!"

In unison. Mr. and Mrs. Grady were both outraged at my impertinence.

"Come on," I said and Peggy and I left.

Hearing a muffled, "She'll be sorry for this," from Albert as we closed the front door behind us.

"You shouldn't have said that," Peggy said as we got into the car. Then she laughed and it was nice to hear her laugh again.

"Did you see the look on his face," she said. "It was priceless."

We laughed for three blocks.

* * *

I parked the car on one of the streets that lead down to the Venice pier. And we walked down together, hand in hand. Unaware that we were being followed.

We tried to hit a swinging gong at a shooting gallery. We nibbled on buttered popcorn and threw baseballs at stacked wooden bottles. We went down in the diving bell and watched tiger sharks circle the shell holding us, watched manta rays and heard the man say over and over, "They fly, ladies and gentlemen—they fly!" We rode the little scooter cars and bumped each other and Peggy laughed and her cheeks were bright with color.

I don't remember everything. I just remember the walking, hand in hand, the warm happiness of knowing she was with me. Remember her screams of mock fear as the roller coaster plummeted us down through the night and then up again, straight at the stars.

I remember *Funland*.

It's a strange concession. One of those things. Nothing really but a big black maze. You wander through it, down inclines, turning corners, searching for an exit—all in a blackness that's complete and abysmal. This sounds pointless, I guess. Until you take a girl. A lot of loafers hang around there. They wait for unescorted girls to go in.

I don't know what it was that made me nervous from the start. Maybe it was Peggy. She seemed to be driving herself, daring herself not to be afraid. Her laughter was forced and her hand in mine shook and was wet with perspiration. She kept tugging.

"Come on, Davie, let's find our way out."

"What did we come in for?"

"To find our way out."

"Progress," I said.

The place was like a coal mine. I couldn't see a thing. It had a dank, rotting odor too. that place. The smell of uncleaned spaces and water-logged wood and the vague, left-over smell of thousands of phantom bodies who had come in to get out.

And there were sounds. Giggles. Little shrieks of deliberate fright. Or were they deliberate? Peggy's breath was fast, erratic. Her laughter was too breathless.

"Babe, what did we come in here for?" I said.

"Come on, it's fun, it's fun."

"Some fun."

She kept pulling me, and I held on tight, moving through the blackness that was filled with clumping and shuffling of feet. And more shrieks and giggles. And the sound of our breathing. Unnaturally loud.

"This is scary," Peggy said, "isn't it?"

We touched walls, bumped down inclines, pressed together in the dark.

"Excuse me," I said. It sounded inane.

"All right," came the Phantom reply In a voice that had more fright than elation in it now.

"How do you get out of here?" I said, trying to get rid of the rising uneasiness in me.

"You just wander and finally you come out," she said.

Silence. Except for feet shuffling and her breathing and my breathing. Shuffling along in the dark. With the rising sense that we weren't alone. I don't mean the other people in the black maze. I mean somebody *with* us.

The next thing I remember, the last thing for a while, was a sudden blinding beam of light behind us. A rushing sound behind me. And me whirling around into the eye-closing light. Then feeling two big hands grab my throat, strong arms spinning me, now in blackness again. A heavy knee driving into my back, and something hard crashing down on my skull.

And though it was dark, for me it got darker. I felt myself hit the floor and start falling into night.

But not before, on my knees and almost gone, I heard Peggy scream out in mortal terror.

* * *

Somebody was slapping my face.

I twisted my head away and groaned. Sounds trickled back into my brain. I opened my eyes.

I was still on the pier, half-stretched out on the walk, propped up against a wooden fence. A crowd was watching me with that alien and heartless curiosity that crowds have for stretched-out victims of any kind. I heard a voice saying, "It's nothing folks, he just fainted. Don't congregate, please. Don't get the police on me, thank you kindly, I appreciate it. Nothing at all folks, just fainted that's all, he just fainted."

"Peggy!"

I struggled up, suddenly remembering her. The pain in my skull almost put me out again. I fell back on one elbow.

"Take it easy, boy," said the man with the cigar in his mouth, the loud sport shirt, "Just fainted, folks. Don't congregate, please don't congregate."

He looked at me. "How's the head?" he asked.

"Where *is* she?" I asked. I grabbed his arm, fighting off the dizziness. "She's not still in there, is she?"

"Now, now," he said, "take it easy."

"Is she!"

"No, no, no, no, nobody's in there now. It's cleared out. Stop yelling please. You want the police to come down?"

"Did you see her leave?" I asked.

"I didn't," said the man, still looking around. "Somebody said they did."

"Alone, was she alone?" I slumped against the fence, dizzily.

"I don't know, I'm not sure. *Please*, folks, don't congregate like this. Be a good egg, folks. Give me a break and don't congregate like this."

I pushed up then and started through the crowd, holding myself tight to keep the pain from knocking me on my face again.

I kept seeing her in there. In pitch blackness. With her fear of men. And someone attacking her in blackness. It would drive her out of her mind.

Then another thought.

Jim.

Steig trailing us. Jumping me. Taking Peggy away. It seemed terribly logical to me then,

I started running up the pier for the car and planning to drive to Jim's place to find her. Strange there seemed no doubt in me that she actually was there. Only in a white rage could I be so certain.

I rushed past endless gaudy concessions, the barker voices shrouding me with blatancy, calling me to break balloons, and throw pennies and pitch hoops around knife handles and telling me what they were going to do if only I'd stop. I got a stitch in my side but kept running, gasping for breath.

Then, suddenly, I thought, I'll phone him. He would more than likely deny it but then again he might not. He might flaunt it. It was worth the try.

In the airless booth my head started throbbing. I gritted my teeth, panting. I looked up Jim's number, sweat rolling down my face. I called the operator and had the call put through.

His voice, assured, dripping with aplomb.

"This is David," I said. "Is . . ."

"David who?"

"Newton!" I said angrily. "Is Peggy there?"

"Peggy? Why do you ask?"

"Is she there?"

"You sound hysterical," he said.

"Did you have me attacked tonight?" I asked furiously, not thinking at all.

"Did you have Steig take Peggy?"

"What are you talking about?"

I suddenly felt my insides falling. If it weren't Steig, then who was it?

"Speak up, David. What are you talking about? What's happened to Peggy?"

I hung up. I pushed out of the booth. I walked a few feet. Then I broke into a weaving run again. I felt a wild fear in me. What had happened to her? Where was she? Oh good God, where was she?

I moved off the pier and wove up the dark street past bars with tinkling pianos and a mission with a tinkling piano and tone deaf converts singing for their supper.

"Peggy," I gasped.

And found her in my car.

She was sitting slumped over on the right hand side. The first impression I got was one of stark shock. She was shaking violently and continuously. Just staring blankly at the windshield and shaking. She had her right arm pressed over her breasts. The fingers of her left hand in her lap were bent and rigid.

"Peggy!"

I slid in beside her and she snapped her head over. Her stare at me was wild with fear. I put my arm around her shaking shoulders. "What happened, Peggy?"

No answer. She shook. She looked at me, then at the windshield again. Her pupils were black planets swimming in a milky universe. I'd never seen eyes so big. Or so terror-stricken.

"Baby, it's me. Davie."

She started to bite her lower lip. I could almost feel the rising emotion in her. She literally shook it out of herself.

It suddenly tore from her lips. She threw her hands over her face. Then she drew them away just as suddenly and held them before her eyes in tight claws of blood-drained flesh. She clicked her teeth, clenched them together and tried to hold back the moaning.

But her breath caught. And a body-wracking sob burst from her throat. She dragged her hands across her breasts. And I saw that the front of her dress had been ripped open and one of her brassiere straps had been snapped.

"I'm dirty," she said, "dirty!"

I had to grab her hands to keep her from ripping open her own flesh. I was amazed at the strength in her arms and wrists. Impelled by savage shock, she was almost as strong as a man, it seemed.

"Stop it! Peggy, stop it!"

Sitting there in Venice, California, in a black Ford coupe trying to calm the hysterics of a young woman afraid of sex who had been attacked.

Some people stopped and watched with callous curiosity while Peggy shook and groaned and gnashed her teeth and tried to claw away the flesh that had been touched by some vicious attacker.

"Peggy, please, please . . ."

I wanted to start the car and get away from those staring people. But I couldn't let her tear at her own flesh.

A long shuddering breath filled her. And she started to cry. Heartbroken crying, without strength or hope. I held her against me and stroked her hair.

"All right, baby," I said, "cry, cry."

"Dirty," she moaned, "I'm dirty."

"No," I said. "No, you're not."

"I'm dirty," she said, "dirty."

As soon as I could, I started the car and drove away from the curious people. I drove along the ocean for a while and then stopped at a drive-in. By that time she'd stopped crying and

was sitting quietly, way on the other end of the seat, staring at her hands.

I put my jacket over her to cover the torn dress and slip. I ordered coffee and made her drink it. She coughed on it but she drank it.

It seemed to calm her a little. I stayed away from her. She wanted it that way, I knew. She almost pushed against the other door, crouching as if prepared to leap out should I make the remotest suggestion of an advance.

"Tell me what happened. Peggy?"

She shook her head.

"It'll help you if you can tell me."

Finally she did. And the visualization of what she said made me shiver.

"Someone grabbed me," she said. "I screamed for you but . . . but you didn't answer."

"I was unconscious, Peggy."

For the first time she looked at me with something besides fear.

"You were hit?" she asked.

I bent over and told her to touch the dried blood on my head.

"Oh," she said in momentary concern, "Davie . . ."

Then she drew back.

"Go on," I said.

"Some . . . some *man* put his hands on me. He clawed at me. He tore at my dress. I scratched him. I think I must have scratched his eyes out. Oh, God I hope I did. I hope he's *blind*."

"Peggy, stop."

I saw the look of revulsion on her face. Because she had suddenly picked up her hands to look at them.

She made a gagging sound. Then she started rubbing her fingers over her skirt. I saw what it was.

Skin under her nails. The skin of the man who had tried to rape her.

I got a pen knife from the glove compartment and cleaned her nails while she kept her head turned away, her eyes tightly shut. Her hands trembled in mine.

"I think I'm . . . going to be sick," she said.

I felt sick myself, flicking those particles of someone's skin on the floor. Someone who had terrorized the girl I loved. It was almost as if he were present with us. I thought vaguely of taking those particles to the police but then I just let them fall. I couldn't stand putting them in an envelope.

"Peggy." I said, "do you think it was Steig?"

She couldn't speak for a moment. Then she said she didn't know. "If I'd had a gun," she said, "a knife, a razor, *anything*. Oh God I'd have . . ."

I felt the muscles of my stomach tighten. Until I told myself that she'd been driven half-mad with fear. And I pushed away the thought I was trying so hard to avoid. And came up with another one that had preyed on me since I was conscious again.

"Peggy."

"What?"

"Did he . . . ?"

She closed her eyes.

"If he had." she said, "you wouldn't have found me here. I'd be in the ocean."

My stomach kept throbbing as I drove up Wilshire. The thought of her being alone after this experience distressed me terribly. Worse than alone, alone with Albert. What if he made an advance this night?

And then I thought, what if it were Albert who had attacked her in the first place?

I didn't know how to put the thought to her. I didn't want to alarm her needlessly. She seemed set on going back to her room. If I made the idea horrible, and she went anyway . . .

Thoughts. No end to them. And no resolution.

As I turned up 26th I saw Albert's Dodge in front of the house. And another car too. Jim's Cadillac.

I pulled up to the curb. Jim got out of his car and came quickly over to mine. He opened the door on Peggy's side.

"What is it, Peggy?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Come here," he said.

By the time I got out of the car, he'd led her to his Cadillac and tried to make her get in it.

"I don't want to go!" I heard her say, her voice edging on hysteria again.

"Stop it, Peggy," Jim said. "I just want to talk to you."

Then she was in. And I came up to the car. I looked in and saw their dark forms. I heard Jim's muffled voice.

Steig got out of the car and walked around to where I stood.

"This is private," he said. Guttural. Thick German accent.

"Miss Lister is . . ." I started to say and found that one of his beefy hands had clamped on my arm. The strength of his grip pressed pain into the flesh.

"Let go of me," I said, gasping.

"You go," he said.

He started to lead me to my car. I couldn't do a thing. He was too big, too strong.

"God damn you!" I said, suddenly raging. "Get your fat hand off me!"

I wanted to call for Peggy but I didn't. She was in no state to come to my aid. Besides, I felt like a fool being led around like a baby this way. Struggling with teeth-gritting frustration. I was shoved against my car.

Steig stood by the door he had just slammed shut.

"You get out of here," he said.

"Listen, you ignorant Kraut." I said, more angry than sensible.

His face hardened, the pig eyes blazed at me. "You get out of here before I break your little neck with my hands."

He glanced at the Cadillac. Then, under his breath, he said something that covered my flesh with ice water. "If you did not know Mr. Vaughan," he said, "you would be *dead*. For snooping."

I gaped at him, my hands shaking. I saw his brute white face in the light of a street lamp. And I was afraid. No one had ever threatened my life personally. And it comes as a shock to a man to suddenly learn that another individual wants to kill him.

"*Get out*," Steig said.

My fingers shook as I slid the ignition key in. They shook on the gear shift. My legs trembled on the clutch and the

accelerator. My heart pounded violently as I pulled up the street, afraid to look back.

I got out.

* * *

I jolted up on the bed with a gasp.

There was a dark figure standing over the bed.

My heart lurched. “*No!*,” I gasped, throwing one arm up toward off the expected blow.

“Davie, what is it?”

I fell back on the pillow, panting. My throat clicked. I lay there heaving with breaths.

“Davie?”

“You s-scared me,” I said. “I’m . . . I was dreaming.”

“Oh. I’m . . . sorry. It’s Albert,” she said quietly.

“What . . . ?”

Then the light was on. She was over at the sink, back. She pressed a wet cloth on my skull. To my surprise I saw her wearing a different outfit. She had a dark pair of slacks on and a tight black turtleneck sweater. She’d taken a shower too. I could tell from the fresh smell of her, from the dampness on the lower part of her hair where it had come out of the shower cap. Her only makeup was a little lipstick.

She looked very calm.

“What *about* him?” I said.

“When I went in the house tonight,” she said.

“Yes?”

“I . . . I went to brush my teeth and I met Albert in the hall.” she paused.

“Well . . . !” I asked.

“*His face was all scraped off,*” she said.

“Albert,” I said.

She turned the cloth over with her gentle, unshaking fingers.

“What did you do?” I asked. I wanted to tell her what Steig had said to me but I couldn’t, get to it. Things were happening that fast.

She stroked my hair gently. “I left,” she said.

"You took a shower first?"

"No," she said, "I took that before. It was after the shower that I met Albert in the hall."

"You came right here?"

"I stopped to call Jim."

"He didn't stay with you?" I asked, inanely.

She looked slightly surprised. "Of course he didn't," she said, "he just wanted to find out what had happened tonight. He said you called him."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I thought maybe you were at his house. I thought maybe it was Steig who had . . ."

* * *

We drove back to her place in the morning.

"Well, I'll just *tell* Jim," she was saying. "He'll get rid of Steig if I tell him."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, Davie," she said, "you're his friend, aren't you?"

"I doubt it."

"Davie."

Then I said, "I still think you should move out today. Stay with me one more night. But, my God, don't spend another night there with Albert."

"I won't," she said.

She shook her head then. And her throat moved nervously. "We'll just pick up your things," I said, "You don't even have to go in the house."

As we drove up to the house and I parked behind the Dodge, Peggy's face got suddenly pale.

"Baby, it's all right," I said.

I got out. She got out too.

"Baby, stay here," I said. "You don't have to go in."

"No," she said, "I'll come in."

"Well . . . all right."

We went up the walk together. I felt in myself that if Albert were there and he said a word to me, I'd knock him down and step on his face. The victimizing by Steig the night before had given me a tight, vicious temper.

The front door was open. We went into the living room.

"Is Mrs. Grady home?" I whispered.

"I guess so," she said.

We went into the hall. She went into her room and I followed. Then as she turned to close the door I heard her voice sink to a whisper.

"Davie . . ."

I looked in the direction she was looking. Down at where Albert's room was. My heart jumped. There was a body sprawled on the floor.

I broke into a run and pushed open the half-open door. I heard Peggy behind me.

Mrs. Grady was crumpled on the floor. Her white face was pointed at the ceiling. In her right hand she clutched something. I couldn't see what it was but the tip was red . . .

Then my eyes moved suddenly to the bed.

Albert was there. He was staring at us, his eyes were wide open.

Albert was no more. And that was when I recognized the instrument in Mrs. Grady's hand.

An icepick.

It had been driven into Albert's brain.

Chapter Three

Lieutenant Jones, Homicide, was a broad man with horn-rimmed glasses. His mood was surly.

Mrs. Grady was giving her version of what had happened. "I went in to call him for breakfast," she said. "I found him in there with that—that *thing* in his . . ."

"Why did you take it out?"

She shook her head. Then suddenly she twisted her head and pointed a shaky finger at Peggy.

"*She* did it!" she said wildly. "I know it, I *know* she did it!"

I sat beside Peggy on the big flowered couch, afraid to look at her.

"That will do," Jones said.

"*Do!* My husband is dead. He's killed! Do you understand that? Are you going to let her get away with it?"

"I know he was killed, Mrs. Grady," Jones said. "We're trying to find out who did it as soon as possible. If you'll just help us and not throw around accusations."

I sat there numbly staring at him. Listening to the murmur of voices in Albert's room, the muffled pop of flash bulbs, the shuffling of feet.

I kept visualizing Albert lying in there, the icepick hole in his head—and the other. It was almost unbearable to think about the other. Whoever had driven the icepick into Albert's brain

had also taken Albert's straight razor and made an enormous bloody slit around Albert's neck. It was long, nearly the whole circumference of the neck. And it was deep. It was almost as if .

..

As if . . . and I wanted to be sick.

"Miss Lister?" Jones said.

"Y-yes?"

"You were out last night?"

"Yes."

"What's that you said about having trouble with him?"

The way he spoke made me start. As if he were trying to rip away all incidentals and get to the core of everything.

"He was . . ." Peggy started. She lowered her eyes. "He . . ."

"Albert tried to rape her last night," I said.

"Lies, lies!" cried Mrs. Grady. "He was a dear, clean man, a dear clean man."

"You'll have to stop this," Jones said to her, "or I'll have to ask you to leave this room."

She slumped back in silence again, blubbing helplessly, her toothpick shoulders twitching with violent sobs.

I was sitting there, suddenly wishing I'd kept my mouth shut. Because all I could think was that I'd given Peggy a perfect motive. Like a fool I'd practically accused her.

Jones looked at Peggy.

"Is this true?" he said.

She tried to answer but couldn't. She nodded her head once, jerkily.

Jones looked back at me. "Well," he said, "what about it?"

I told him about the scrapes on Albert's face. I told him about *Funland* and the attack on me and Peggy. My words were punctuated by moans and muffled denials from Mrs. Grady. I didn't know whether she really doubted me or not. After all, I kept thinking, the icepick had been in her hand. And she certainly had a motive.

"Did you see him?" Jones asked.

"You mean last night?"

"I mean last night."

"No, I . . ."

"Why not?"

"It was pitch black."

"I see," Jones said. But he really said, in effect, thirty days, next case. It occurred to me that he might even think I did it. The jealous lover. I lowered my eyes.

Jones worked on Peggy again. "You two were together then?" he said.

She swallowed. "Yes."

"And you went to . . ." Jones consulted the pad in his hand, "to Newton's apartment later."

Peggy looked flustered. "I . . ."

"What time did you go there?"

"She came to my room about . . ." I started.

"Will you kindly let Miss . . ." He consulted the pad again. "Miss Lister answer her own questions?"

"About two," Peggy said.

"Why did you go there?" Jones asked.

"Because I saw the scrapes on Albert's face. I didn't want to . . ."

"Lies..lies!" Mrs. Grady again. "*Murderess!*"

Her voice broke off with a choking gasp as two men carried a stretcher into the room, a blanketed body on it.

"Couldn't you go the back way?" Jones asked sharply.

"Alley's too narrow," said a bored cop.

Mrs. Grady was up. Her face was strained and wild.

"I'm going with him," she said, "I'm going with my darling."

"That won't do any good," Jones said quietly.

"I'm *going*, I tell you." Her voice was cracked, her eyes almost glittered.

Jones let her go. He said a few words to one of the cops. While he was talking, I turned to Peggy. "Don't tell him how you feel about men," I whispered.

"What?"

I glanced at Jones. "I *said*," I whispered out of the side of my mouth, "don't tell this man how you feel about men. It would only . . ."

She was looking at me curiously.

"What were you saying to her?" Jones asked me.

"Nothing," I said instinctively.

Jones looked at me coldly. "No talking," he said. Then he sat down as the door shut behind Mrs. Grady and her dead husband.

"How sure are you that the dead man is the one who tried to rape you?" Jones asked Peggy.

"I know how I scratched the face of the man who . . . And Albert had scratches all over his face too. You saw him . . ."

"I know." Jones said, "did you see anyone else last night?"

"My . . . lawyer," Peggy said.

"When?"

"When . . . when we came home from Venice."

"You told him about the attack?"

"Yes."

"Did you suspect the dead man of being the one who had attacked you at the time you were speaking to your lawyer?"

Not then. I told him later that it was Mr. Grady who had done it."

"You saw him later?"

I called him before I went to . . . to Mr. Newton's room." Her eyes were lowered in embarrassment.

Mr. Newton, I thought. Murder, the strange impersonalizer.

Then the doorbell rang. Jones got up and opened it.

Jim. He came in and talked to Jones for a few minutes, and then Peggy went to the station with Jones and Jim. I wasn't invited. As they got into the police car, Jim told Steig to follow them. I felt a tremor in my stomach as the big German eyed me before getting in the Cadillac. I tried to imagine him with an icpick in one hand and a razor in the other.

It was easy.

I tried to catch Peggy's eye as the police car moved away from the curb. But she avoided my look. I guessed because I'd as much as told her I suspected her.

I watched the two cars go down the street. And I felt sick and empty.

* * *

That afternoon, back at my room, I was trying to nap when I heard footsteps on the porch and, looking out the window, saw that it was Jim.

"Come in," I said when he knocked. He came in and the first thing I asked him was how Peggy was.

"As well as can be expected," he said, always cryptic.

"What the hell does that mean?"

He took his hat off and looked at me dispassionately.

"If you're going to tell me that Peggy killed Albert, save your breath. I know she didn't," I said.

"And how do you know?"

"I . . . I know."

"Hardly a legal defense David," he said. "You always did talk before thinking."

"And you," I said, "always did destroy what stood in your way."

A flicker. Gone then. He sighed.

"What's the use?" he said. He reached into his inside jacket pocket and drew out a rich leather billfold. He was holding something out to me.

"Well, take it," he said. He paused for effect. "Are you afraid?"

I reached out a visibly shaking hand and took it. Thinking, imagining . . . refusing to accept.

"No." I muttered.

"Read it."

The clipping was five years old. San Francisco dateline. Picture of a man I'd never seen. And next to him a picture of Peggy.

The headline:

G.I. Student Stabbed
Pregnant Wife Confesses

I sat slumped on the bed staring at the floor. The clipping still hung from my nerveless fingers. Jim still sat in the chair

looking at me. His expression was vaguely sympathetic now. He'd made his point. He didn't have to belabor any more.

"I met Peggy's father when I was in the Navy during the war," Jim said. "I was his aide for about a year while he served on the court martial board.

"When the war was over he invited me to his home several times for dinner. That was before I went home to Missouri. I stayed on the coast about three months after I was discharged.

"Lister wasn't trying to be social. He was trying to make me join the regular Navy, it turned out. It was at the captain's house that I first met Peggy."

He paused and I heard him clear his throat in the silence of the room. I lay there, still apathetic.

"There was no particular attraction," Jim said, "and when I went back to Missouri, I forgot about her and her about me. She married George."

Was that bitterness in his voice? I couldn't be certain. I didn't explore.

"It was what you might call a shotgun wedding," Jim said, and that *was* bitterness in his voice. "Peggy was forced into it by her father. She'd stayed out late one night and Captain Lister accused her of being intimate with George. He said his name was in disgrace. And poor Peggy, too naive to know any better, too shy to argue, married George."

He smiled without pleasure. I guess he was showing me a little more of his feelings because he figured that his battle had been won.

"George didn't mind," he said. "It was all right with him. And maybe Peggy didn't mind at first either. She hated her father. She still does. I don't even know all the reasons. They stretch back through the years. At any rate all she thought of at first was leaving her home and how glad she was to do it. Leave the tyranny of her father's control. If he was anything at home like the unfeeling flint he was on the court martial board, Peggy's life with him must have been intolerable. Then I saw her one day years later. I'd set up an office in San Francisco. And one day Peggy came in."

He drew a deep breath.

"I didn't recognize her, David," he said. "She was almost . . . gaunt, Her face was lined. There were dark hollows around her eyes, she looked as though she'd been violently ill for years."

He paused.

'She *had* been," he said. "She'd been married to George."

I turned my head on the pillow and looked at him, He was looking at the wall, hands still clasped in his lap.

"I won't go into details," he said. "Her problems were partly sexual, of course."

His voice became contemptuous.

"Her husband was completely indifferent to Peggy's timorousness, her hypersensitive system. And it was killing her. In addition to the fact that her husband was going to college on the G.I. Bill and they were just about living on that income alone. It was actually poverty. And to a girl like Peggy, who'd had every material advantage anyway, this was an even greater torture."

He shifted on the chair.

"She said she wanted a divorce," he said. "She said some doctor had told her that divorce was essential if she wanted to remain sane. The poor physical relationship, the extreme poverty was destroying not only her health but her mind. She was pregnant, too. We never got her the divorce," he said. "I started to get the papers together, but it was too late."

He stared at his hands.

"A few days later Peggy went out of her mind and stabbed her husband to death in their one-room apartment. It was a measure of her torture. Because she's a very gentle girl, as you know."

I knew.

"She came to me then," Jim said. "I took her to the police. I put up her bail, I defended her. I got her acquitted on a temporary insanity plea, and during this time she miscarried. I tried to help her forget. I gave her money to live on because she didn't have any profession and I didn't want her to work in dime stores as she had during her marriage."

"She told me . . . alimony." I heard myself saying, not to him. The thought just had sound that's all.

He shook his head.

"And you doubted what I told you," he said. "You surely see now what I meant. The lie about her husband's death, the failure to tell you about her pregnancy. The lie about her income. *Peggy*."

* * *

I don't know what time it was. Because I was back in the past. Shadows of years flickered across my mind.

Jim, me, sitting in his office at college. He used to be assistant to the head of the Law School.

Jim talking "I don't think you really know about Linda," he said, his face very serious.

"What about her?" I said.

"She's been sleeping with me for a year now."

The crusher. My first blind-eyed attraction for Linda's sharp intelligence, her long red hair, her svelte form—shattered.

Later on, of course, I found out it was a complete lie. Jim hadn't even kissed her.

And that brought me back. But not completely. I'd seen that clipping. She'd killed her husband. But the rest? I wasn't sure.

So, Jim or no Jim, facts or no facts, I was back in the car. Driving at near violation speed up Wilshire. And going in the front door without knocking. Pretending to ignore the shudder I got going back into that house. She was packing, her face very sad.

"Peggy"

I stood in the doorway. Knowing that if everything Jim said was true, our love had to end. Because it would have been founded on lies And the only thing that could console me was that Jim never did say once that Peggy had killed Albert.

She kept packing after she looked at me. She moved around the room, her motions crisp and tight. I watched her for a moment. And I just couldn't, for the life of me, visualize murder in those hands. I went in and sat on the bed by the suitcase.

"Peggy"

No answer.

I want to tell you why I didn't come back this afternoon."

"It doesn't matter"

"Doesn't it?"

"No."

"I saw Jim this afternoon."

"I see."

Coldly. As if she were a woman who didn't care for anything in the world. Instead of a shy, timorous girl afraid of the world and its multiple terrors.

I reached out and grabbed her wrist. She didn't honor me with a struggle. She just stared straight ahead.

"He showed me a newspaper clipping, Peggy," I told her. Her eyes moved down at me.

"It was the story of how you killed your husband," I said. She shuddered and her wrist went limp.

"Jim also told me you were living on his money, not on alimony." I said.

I wanted desperately for her to snap out angry words at me and make me know they were all lies. But she couldn't. She didn't speak. Then she said, softly:

"Let me go."

"When you tell me why you lied to me. About so many things."

"I didn't want to tell you," she said.

"Why?"

She bit her lower lip and kept her face averted.

"Peggy, I want some truth! Do you hear me?"

She cut off a sob.

"What sort of a girl are you," I said, "who can speak of love and yet lie incessantly to the person you say you love? What kind of selfish girl are . . ."

"Selfish!"

She jerked away her hand violently.

"Selfish!" she said, "yes, I'm selfish! Very selfish! I was brought up by a father who hated me. Who did everything he could to make my life miserable. I was shuttled around from city to city, never having a home. Only hotels and motels and dingy little apartment houses near naval bases. I had boys try to rape me. I had older men try to proposition me. And to top it all off, I married an animal who dragged me through poverty

and gave me nothing but filth in return. Filth, do you hear! A man who made me pregnant, then tried to force me to get an abortion! A man who had no regard for me. I was a piece of flesh to him. And I killed him and I'd kill him again for the things he did to me! And now . . . when I find something good for the first time . . . when I try to hold on to the only beautiful thing I ever had in my whole life . . . you call me *selfish*! Yes I'm s-s-selfish."

Her back was turned from me. She shook violently, crying and trying not to cry. But unable to keep all the pent up misery of years from flooding out.

I got up quietly. I stood behind her. I put my hands up to hold her shoulders. Then I drew them back. I didn't know. I felt terribly contrite. Everything seemed to fall into a pattern. Jim had colored an already ugly picture with even uglier hues. For his own purpose.

She cried for a long time. We sat on the bed and I kept drying her eyes with my handkerchief. Later I asked her about her marriage. She told me substantially what Jim had said.

"And the money?" I said.

"Money?"

"Jim's."

She looked at me unhappily. "Why . . . what's wrong with that? If he wants to give it to me?"

"Baby, you're being kept!"

"He never *touched* me, Davie."

"It's the idea, Peggy."

She looked at me, a little frightened.

"Peg?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Did you . . . ?"

"What?"

I didn't speak. Finally I said, "If you did it, Peg, I'll understand, and I'll stick by you. I'll—"

"Love my memory?" she said.

"No, I—"

"I didn't kill Albert," she said.

I grabbed at it. I clung to it and it was like a tonic, the first moment of limp ease after a raging fever has abated.

"I believe you," I said.

* * *

We moved her into the new place that afternoon, and I tried to get her to tell the police about Jim. But she refused with her little girl logic. Then I suggested that at least we ought to confront Jim himself with his lies, and she refused to do that, too. It wasn't loyal, she said.

So I went alone to see Jim. I didn't find him, but I did find somebody else.

Audrey. Audrey flung her arms around my neck. She had a silk pair of lounging pajamas on. Black and sheer and nothing else. I could feel the uncupped softness of her breasts mold against me.

"Give us a kiss, Dave."

The thin face, that sweet smile. Her soft lips pressed against mine. And I got a sense of tension in her. The way she clung to me. It wasn't right.

Suspicion vindicated by the distinct odor of whiskey on her breath.

That was a shock. Audrey had never drunk at college. She'd just follow Jim around, a disciple to his calloused presence. Treasuring the few scraps of affection he gave her.

"Gee, Dave, it's good to see you," she said.

"It's good to see you too, Audrey."

She drew back, her small hands still gripping my shoulders. "Let me see," she said. "Oh, yes. You're heavier. Affluence? Or beer?"

I chuckled and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

"Audrey, Audrey," I said, "what transmutation is this? I remember saddle shoes and bright-eyed naivete. Now I find a new hairdo, sexy pajamas and . . . well . . ."

"And liquor?" she said.

I tried to slough it off.

"Come on in," she said, "come on in and talk to me. I'm lonely."

"Is Jim home?" I asked as she led me into the living room, big and empty now.

"He's on business," she said.

I got that too. Too chipper, too much a toss-off. She had found the phrase too easy. And from it I knew there'd been a lot of nights when Audrey had stayed home while Jim went out on "business." The old American synonym for cheating. Yes, it all added up. College had been the preamble.

I sat down and Audrey got a couple of drinks, Big ones, and straight. She drained hers swiftly and filled her glass again.

We talked for a long while. It wasn't too pleasant.

"Sometimes I could scream," she said later on.

I thought of Peggy. "Sometimes I could, too," I said.

Then I stood up. "I'd better go," I said. Before I forget myself, I didn't add. I went over to her.

"Good-bye, Aud . . ."

I slopped when she looked me in the eye. Her breath was tortured. It shook her body. Something seemed to be bubbling up in her.

"I could scream," she said.

"Scream," I said.

Suddenly she grabbed my arms and pressed her open mouth against my chest. I heard the muffled sound of her screaming at the top of her lungs into my flesh. It lasted until her breath went. Then she raised her darkly flushed face and looked at me, gasping.

"There," she said, hardly able to speak. "Mostly it's a pillow. Thanks for the nice cushion."

She turned away. I followed her from the room. We stood together by the front door.

"Will you give me a good-bye kiss?" she asked.

She raised on her toes and slid her arms around my neck. She brushed her warm lips over mine. Then she smiled and stroked my cheek.

"You're sweet," she said. "I wish . . ." She shrugged. "Oh, what's the difference, anyway?"

"Good-bye, Audrey."

"Good-bye, dear."

I went out the door and down to my car. I got in and sat there a long time staring at the windshield, wishing I'd stayed with Peggy.

Then, as I stepped on the starter, light streamed across the porch and leaped on the car.

"Dave!"

I looked over and saw Audrey come running across the porch and down the steps. She had on a long black raincoat with a hood over her head. I saw a maid at the door watching her go. Then the maid shrugged and shut the door.

Audrey ran around the car, opened the door and slid in.

"How about giving a gal a ride into town?"

"All right," I said, caught off guard.

Back on Pacific Coast Highway, I asked her where she was going. "Santa Monica," she said.

You're not quite dressed for evening activity," I said.

"Nobody will notice," she said, "where I'm going."

"Where's that?"

Just drop me off downtown," she parried. "I'm not going any place in particular. I'll probably go to a movie."

"Oh."

I drove in silence a while. Audrey sat staring out at the ribbon of road unraveling under my headlights. Her face was expressionless

"You can let me off here," Audrey said at Wilshire and 3rd.

"I'll take you downtown," I said.

"You don't have to."

I slowed down at Santa Monica Boulevard and 3rd.

"This is fine," Audrey said.

I kept moving. Down to Broadway. I stopped the car and she turned to look at me.

"I'm not clever, am I?" she said. Broadway is where all the bars are.

"Come with me," I said. "Meet my girl."

"Oh, you have a girl."

"Come on. Shut the door."

"No."

"You'll like Peggy," I said.

And from the look on her face I suddenly realized that it was Audrey's husband who wanted to marry Peggy. And I knew that, contrary to Jim, Audrey didn't "understand" it.

Audrey shuddered and pushed out of the car.

"Bye," she said hurriedly and slammed the door.

She was already turning the corner. I started the car and pulled around. I saw her going into The Bamboo Grill.

I drove to Peggy's and found the note on the door.

Davie: Jim came. He said we had to discuss my legal case. I told him I was waiting for you but he said it's very important. After all Davie, I have to have a lawyer and I don't know anyone else and he doesn't charge me. I'm sorry but I think I should go. Please call me in the morning. Peg.

Legal case. Fat chance that's what they were discussing. He was pouring more lies into her. I was burned up. I'd told her I was coming right back. She might have waited. After all the tension we'd had between each other—this.

I stood beside my car, glowering, wanting to hit back. I was sick of it all. I wanted to write a note telling her it was all over. Something that would hurt. But I knew I had no right to do that.

I didn't want to go home, though.

Audrey. Downtown, alone, my old pal Audrey.

I got into my car and drove back to The Bamboo Grill. She wasn't there and she wasn't in the next four bars I tried, either. But I had a drink in each of them.

In the fifth bar, I decided to hell with it. I grabbed a booth and ordered another bourbon and water. I drank half of it. And then she appeared. From the cosmos. From the universe. From the ladies' room.

And, even slightly potted and disarrayed, Audrey was out of place there.

She almost passed my table.

"Buy you a drink, girlie?" I said.

She turned to cut me off, then smiled as she saw me.

"Davie!"

She slid in across from me. She still had on the rain coat. "Where did you come from?" she asked.

"From the cosmos, from the universe," I said.

"I came from the John."

"Won't you allow me to purchase you a magnum of chantilly?"

"That's lace, isn't it?"

"Who knows? If it's lace, we'll drink it anyway."

We drank a lot. The time seemed to pass. And I found myself sitting beside her instead of across from her. The strong sensation of drunkenness on me. The loss of balance. The sense that you're hyper-brilliant, that your brain, though cased in numbing wool, is glittering like a jewel.

And around midnight, I remember putting my mouth on hers. And feeling all the animal heat in me dredging up. And not caring. She made no attempt to stop my hands from touching her. Her body was warm and soft and willing.

I don't know what time it was. But somehow we were in the car driving up Broadway. Then over to Wilshire on Lincoln. I remember that. We parked. We were out of the car and into my room. In the darkness, weaving as in a dream. I took off her raincoat, letting all the things I believe in be washed away by the tides of coarse desire flooding through me.

It was dark. She was naked in the cool darkness, waiting for me.

And then a car came past the house in the alley, slowly moving out. And the light played on Audrey's face. She was lying down on the bed and I had my knee on the mattress beside her.

In the light I saw her face. It was blank. That headlight was like a spotlight of revelation on those expressionless features.

Her cheeks were shimmering with tears.

"Audrey."

My voice was broken. Something cold billowed up in my body freezing everything as violently as it had come. I got off the bed and stumbled to my closet. I stood there, trembling, putting on my robe. I stayed there a long time, fumbling with the sash.

Then I went over to the bed. I reached down and pulled the blankets over her nude body. Without a word I bent over and kissed her forehead.

I was afraid to say anything. I was about to straighten up when she put her arms around my neck.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "I tried to believe it was right. But . . ."

* * *

I almost fell out of the chair in shock when the knocking came on the door. A loud knocking, hard.

I leaped up, wincing at the stiffness in my back and neck. My heart was pounding. My head ached a little.

Suddenly I remembered Audrey with a gasp. My eyes ran over to the dark outline of her body in my bed. Lying there naked, asleep.

I didn't know what to do. I just stood there shivering, staring stupidly at the bed, then at the door. I felt myself jump as Audrey stirred restlessly. She moaned a little and turned on her side. I think I was paralyzed. All I could do was visualize Peggy standing out there. My claims of innocence would mean nothing to her.

I started for the door.

"What is it?" Audrey asked in sleepy fright. She was propped up on one elbow.

"Shhh!" I said anxiously.

Then I leaped back as the door was shoved open violently and I saw a figure in the doorway, lit by the hall light. A tall figure, square, powerful.

Steig.

He came in and flicked on the light switch.

I don't know what I felt in those first moments. Shame, fear, anger. But I exploded in his face.

"Get out of here!" I almost yelled. Wondering suddenly if other tenants in the house were awake by now.

My words were hacked off as Steig drove a violent right into my stomach which doubled me over.

All the night seemed to flood in on me. I was bent over, gasping for air. The floor ran like water to my eyes.

Another blow on the side of my head. Like a cast iron mallet it felt. It drove me into the table and sent me and the whole business crashing over onto the floor.

I was helpless. I've read of men who fight back after being struck like that. But how can you fight back when you can't breathe or see?

I felt one of his beefy hands grab my upper right arm.

"Stop it!" Audrey screamed, "Stop it, Steig!"

I was dragged up. Then a rock exploded in my face and I felt hot blood spurting out of my nose and sharp pain in my head.

"You stay off!" Steig snarled. "*Stay off!*"

I think he might have beaten me to death if Audrey hadn't jumped up and grabbed his arm. She was Vaughan's wife, Mr. Vaughan's wife. He couldn't afford to harm her.

He had to let me go. His way of letting go was shoving me across the room. I crashed into the partition that separated the room from the kitchenette. Then I slid down and crumpled into a heap on the rug

"Let me go!" I heard Audrey screaming.

I couldn't help. I was gone. Falling through a black pit that hurt. And hurt. And hurt.

Chapter Four

I felt lousy for a couple of days after that. Nothing seemed right.

Jones stopped around to tell me it was dangerous business getting mixed up with Jim's crowd. He was a little late with that information, and I just grunted.

I told him I wanted to prefer charges against Steig but he said that was just a lot of trouble for nothing.

Nothing?

Yes, he said. How could I prove anything?

I pointed out that Audrey had been a witness, and Jones pointed out, not very gently, that Audrey herself was always being hauled in on drunk charges and that her testimony wasn't worth anything. He also told me that Steig was bad business, as if I didn't already know, and that he used to be a professional killer back in Chicago in the days before Jim got hold of him.

After Jones left, I drove to Peggy's and found Jones just coming out of her apartment house. He grinned smugly at me.

Peggy was inside. So was Dennis, And another miserable afternoon began. Dennis was in a nasty mood and he made it plain that he was after Peggy and that he didn't want me seeing her any more. That led to one thing and another and, finally, a brawl. I took out on Dennis all the anger Steig had built up

inside me, and when the fight was over, Dennis was battered and bloody.

While he was picking himself up off the floor, Peggy announced that she thought it would be “nice” if I drove Dennis home.

Very nice.

I drove Dennis home. He didn’t open his mouth once during the drive, but as soon as he got inside the house at Malibu he began squabbling with Jim. Jim sent him upstairs and invited me into his den for another father-to-son chat.

I sat there stupidly while he told me that Peggy was his. Only his. was to lay off from now on. and if I didn’t, well . . .

“I’m going to have Peggy,” he said. “I’m going to take her away from your dull influence. And if I have to lie to do it, I’ll lie, justifying the means by the end. You can rectify one lie. I’ll tell another. You can keep refuting one lie after the other but my words will go on and gradually they’ll forge ahead of you. I’ll build such a structure of lies around you that Peggy won’t know what to believe. I’ve done it and done it quite successfully with other men who were foolish enough to think they’d win Peggy. I have more strength than you. And more will. And I’ll beat you. There’s no step I won’t take.”

“Even unto murder,” I said.

And watched his face.

No tremor, no twitch. The man *was* a master at deception. He smiled casually.

“That’s for you to prove, isn’t it?” he said.

He smiled and I had to face it. It was the cold, unyielding smile of the professional killer.

“I’ll get Audrey to tell me all about your . . .” I started.

At last. A rise.

“You’ll leave Audrey out of this,” he said tensely.

“I’ll leave nothing out of this,” I said as slowly and as hostilely as I could, “because you’ll leave nothing out; you just said so. Because your war is no gentleman’s war.”

“You’ll leave Audrey out of this.”

More strenuously spoken. The composure was going slightly. And it gave me a distinct pleasure to see it peeling away.

"Someone is bleeding," I said.

I drove home slowly. I thought all the way of the look of white, shaking rage I'd finally managed to wreak out of Jim. Of his threats which he obviously had the means to carry out. Of my poor, ineffectual rebuttals. Of whether I could do anything I'd threatened.

There was one thing necessary, I realized.

Pinning the murder on him. The rest didn't matter anyway. Why hurt Audrey? Why hurt Dennis? They weren't responsible for anything. No, a murder indictment against Jim and Steig. Two birds with one subpoena.

And I thought of what I'd said to him.

Someone is bleeding, I'd said.

Sure. Someone is always bleeding. Bleeding over politics. Bleeding over religion. Over where the next meal is coming from. Lots of things.

And over women? Good God. Hemophilia. And the next day, Peggy came and told me that Jim wanted to take us to dinner and to a concert at the Bowl. Us? Sure, she said. Us. Peggy and me.

"Why this change in Jim?"

"I told him I didn't intend to stop seeing you."

"Is that what he wanted?"

"Yes."

He was working on her already. Already? He'd probably been working on her since she'd come in that time to tell him she wanted a divorce. It wasn't hard to desire Peggy. And for a man like Jim who took what he wanted . . . I wondered how many men he had frightened away from her.

"I told him I had no intention of not seeing you," she repeated. "I said if he wanted it, I'd find another lawyer."

I imagined Jim's reaction to that.

"Is that all?" I said.

"So he said all right, to see you if I wanted."

"That was sweet of him," I said.

"Yes," she said, "he told me . . ."

"What?"

She seemed flustered. "It's not important."

"Tell me."

"No, Davie, it isn't . . ."

"*Tell* me."

Well." She looked upset. "He said . . . you . . . he said he'd show you up. It's silly."

"Silly."

I put on my jacket.

"He'd show you I wasn't worth anything," I said.

"Let's not talk about it," she said. "Let's talk about something else. You know what they're playing tonight? Sibelius' Second Symphony. Isn't that wonderful?"

I took her arm with a heavy, dejected breath.

"I'm sure the three of us will love it," I said.

* * *

One of the first things Jim said at dinner was, "David, I want to apologize quite sincerely for the terrible mistake Steig made the other night. I guess he jumped to conclusions that were unwarranted:

He shrugged like the genial apologist he wasn't.

"Steig has been disciplined," Jim said like a stern schoolmaster.

"What did you do," I asked, "take away his pet spiders?"

He smiled. Perfect combination smile. Clever admixture of amusement and aloofness. A look that said to Peggy—there, you see, my dear, I told you that this lout was beyond all appeal to decent behavior.

I drank heavily at dinner. I don't know what was the matter with me. I guess I'm spoiled. I just wouldn't take that evening straight. I couldn't beat Jim in his own territory at a game he made the rules for. I felt clamped and a hapless jerk from the start.

As a result I just drank and sniped like a kid all night.

Jim's tactics weren't too obscure for me to guess, however, drunk as I was. A simple maneuver. An overweening niceness toward me, a mannerly well-behaved attitude toward Peggy. And, behind all this, a machete mind hacking away at Peggy's opinion of me. How?

By showing off.

Simple. Little boys do it. They stand on their heads and get red-faced and impress little pig-tailed inquisitors. And as they grow older they keep it up. But more subtly. No more standing on heads. There are other ways.

He took us to Ciro's for dinner. He ordered for the three of us like a father. I started to argue but he made me feel like a clod for doing it. He said he knew what they did best there. I didn't want to make a scene yet and I let him have his continuously jovial and throat-cutting way.

He was charming the pants off us. Off Peggy, anyway. With his knowledge of wines and exotic dishes. And, naturally, with his ordering of the most expensive dishes on the menu—and that's expensive.

And all the while treating me like a misbehaving little son who he'd been compelled to drag along because no one would baby-sit with the little bastard.

Giving out with little cleverly coated stabs.

Like. "You look very nice tonight, David. I always did like that suit at college."

Or, "Have you been here many times, David?"

Or . . . why go on. Only one thing to say. Peggy was impressed by all of it. Impressed despite her so-called love for me. In spite of the fact that she saw how Jim was trying to relegate me.

While I drank. I kept thinking of Audrey, driven to the same expedient but, now, permanently. I saw her in her room pining for this big hulk of egotism or driving into town looking for bars wherein to find amber solace. Her body twisting itself into knot over a man who didn't care if she was alive or dead.

And Dennis with his temper and his nervous stomach living from tantrum to tantrum, wanting Peggy for no other reason than his brother also wanted her. All these human beings in search of something.

At the Bowl, it turned out that Jim had bought the most expensive seats. Right in front of the stage We'd be able to smell what Mitropoulos had for supper. The best seats. Jim thought so, anyway.

But when we sat down, Peggy looked around restlessly. She looked at the people around us. She stared up at the hill, the banks of seats climbing.

She turned around and tried to pretend she was satisfied where we were. But then some loudmouths sat behind us and started giggling and blathering about the show they'd seen that afternoon. Jim gave them a Vaughan look but for some appalling reason it didn't seem to impress them.

A man started blowing cigar smoke around. Peggy coughed. She looked unhappy. She kept turning around and looking up the hill at the sky.

"What is it?" Jim asked her.

"I . . . I feel so cramped down here. Could we . . . Jim, could we go up there?"

"What, in the 65 cent .seats?"

"We stand aghast," I said.

They paid no attention to me. She asked again. Jim couldn't see any way out of it. Pampering her was his choicest weapon. So he shrugged and picked up his coat, looking like a martyr going up in flames.

We climbed up the hill. Peggy first, me next. Jim behind us like a tired old man following his nutty children.

Oh *this* is the place," Peggy said when we sat down half-way to the moon.

And, of course, she was right. Down there it was absurd, like sitting in a hole in the ground. Paying more to jam yourselves down with a thousand others when the sky and the night were calling,.

Afterwards we went to the Mocambo. All I remember is people laughing and cigarette smoke and dancing once with Peggy and her not looking me in the eye.

I drank. The room spun around me. I didn't taste the drinks any more. They were just containers of liquid. And Peggy drank some and so did Jim.

Then we were up again. Large denomination bills fluttering out of Jim's wallet like flocks from a sanctuary. And me, God help me, staggering, almost falling. Jim's hand at my elbow, guiding.

"Let go!" Me, rambunctious. The tough guy. Sing me an old refrain. "*Oh what an ass was Davie!*"

Out in the street. The reaction at last. Sudden quietude in me. A desire to be rid of everyone and everything for good.

"Good night," I said, casually and walked away from them as Jim was helping her into the car.

"Davie."

Her voice was more irritated than concerned. I paid no attention. I walked quickly up Sunset. The wrong way, I later discovered.

They didn't follow. I suppose Jim talked her out of it. She was just angry enough to let him.

I was peeved at that. I had sort of envisioned a car cruising alongside of me with Jim and Peggy sticking their heads out of the window entreating—Davie, come back, oh *do* come back.

Me just sneering, the gallant one, despised of all.

No such luck. They let me walk. Oh, I'm sure Peggy worried but, by the time she started, I guess I was gone. She must have worried how I was to get home. Jim must have been delighted. It must have warmed the chilly crypt of his heart, I kept thinking.

I don't know how long I wandered. The night went on and on and so did I. Everything whirled around, it was just dumb luck I wasn't flattened by a car. I bumped into a couple of people who looked mildly revolted. I tried to get into somebody else's 1940 Ford which I thought was mine.

I don't remember everything. But I remember sitting in a diner and drinking coffee and discussing religion with the cook. I remember sitting on a curb and petting a very patient collie dog who must have been repelled by my breath and my soporific mumbling. I remember standing in front of a ten-cent store and staring at hairpins. I remember lying on my back on somebody's lawn and looking up at the stars and singing a soft version of *Nagasaki* to myself with lyric variations pertaining to the atom bomb.

Then, finally, in some erratic fashion I found my way down to Wilshire Boulevard and got myself on a red bus. I rode down to Western and picked up my car where I'd left it. I drove back to the room.

Key in door lock. Opening of door. Drunken weaving to lamp,
turning on of lamp.

Breath sucked out. An icy hand crushing my heart.

On my bed, Dennis.

In his brain, an icepick.

Chapter Five

I don't know how long I stood there looking at him.

I kept shivering. I kept waiting for my stomach to throw up its contents. Which it soon did. I bent over the sink and heard myself muttering, "No, no, no, no, no, no, no . . ."

Then I sat at the table in the tiny kitchenette and stared at my hands, Afraid to turn around, afraid his open eyes were looking at me. I could feel them. I stared at my shaking hands and I was as sober as a judge.

Dennis dead.

Who? The thought finally managed to emanate after the initial shock had faded a little. Who had done this? Another icepick.

It had to be Steig. Peggy was out with Jim. But Steig had been driving us around. I didn't get it.

But how long had Peggy been home? I jumped up and ran out of the room. I got into my car and started the motor. Then I stopped it and ran back in again. I tried not to look at those glassy, staring eyes and that great patch of blood on my pillow. I drew the light blue bedspread over his body, his face. Then I turned out the light and went into the hall and back to my car.

A mistake. But who ever makes the right move when he's all twisted inside? Who ever makes a right move when his nerves are frayed? I drove up Wilshire fast after a U turn. And halfway to 15th Street I heard a voice on a loudspeaker.

"Black Ford, pull over to curb."

I didn't know what it was at first. Then a red light flashed on and a car pulled alongside.

"Pull over," ordered the voice.

My heart jolted and I went numb. I drew over to the curb and stopped the motor, trying to keep my hands from shaking.

The cop came over to my car. Another one went around to the other side and opened up the door.

"Why were your lights off?" the cop on my side spoke.

For a moment I was almost relieved. I had some crazy idea that Jim had told the police. I was certain he was behind the killing. Dennis was expendable.

"What?" I said, hearing the cop speak.

"I said your license." the cop said irritably.

"Oh. I'm sorry."

I handed him the wallet. He told me to take the license out. I did. He pulled it away from me. The other cop finished looking into my glove compartment.

"No gun," he said.

"Gun?" I said.

They didn't talk to me. The first cop looked over my license. He looked in at my registration card wrapped around the steering column.

"Why didn't you have your lights on?" said the cop. A little more restrained now.

"I've . . . I've just had an argument with my girl," I said. "I was upset. I'm sorry."

I thought of the dead man in my room. I thought of how that policeman would be very interested to know I had a dead man in my room, A murdered man.

"Your license is okay," he said. He still seemed to be deliberating. And I was thinking that if he gave me a ticket I'd have the incident recorded. Recorded that one David Newton was found speeding away from a murdered man in his room. The thought made my insides turn over.

"I'll just give you a warning this time," the cop said.

I swallowed. "Thank you," I said.

When they were back in their car, I started the motor. I almost drove off again without turning on my lights. Then, pulling away from the curb I suddenly remembered and almost lunged for the knob. My heads beamed out onto Wilshire.

I turned off at 15th and drove down to Peggy's. I saw a light in her living room as I ran across the lawn.

She was alone, sitting in her bathrobe reading a book. I forgot about the night that had gone before. All I could think of was Dennis.

I knocked.

"Baby, how long have you been here?" I asked hurriedly as she opened the door.

"What do you . . . ?"

"Peggy, how long?" I asked, grabbing her shoulders.

She jerked back and her right hand slapped against my cheek.

"Get your hands off me!" she said angrily.

She stood there trembling, her chest rising and falling with sharp breaths.

"Dennis is in my room, I said.

"What has that got to do with . . ."

"He's dead," I said.

She stared at me.

"What?"

"He has an icepick in his head," I said slowly and watched the look come over her face. A lost look. Her mouth fell open. She stepped back and bumped against the couch. She sank down on it and looked at the far wall.

"He's . . . ?"

I didn't say anything.

"Dennis?"

"Yes, Dennis," I said, "how long have you been home?"

"I . . . I don't know. A few hours, I guess."

"Think!"

"It was . . . I remember looking at my watch. We were . . . just turning the corner at Wilshire, I think. Yes, we . . ."

"What time?"

"12:30. No, 12:45."

I looked at my watch. It was past four.

"Did Jim stay here?" I asked.

"For a while," she said.

"How long?"

"Oh . . . twenty minutes."

Then she was in my arms, crying. Her fingers held tightly to me.

"Davie, Davie, what's the matter with everything?"

"All right," I said, "I know you didn't do it."

She drew back as if she'd been struck.

"Me!" she said. "You thought I'd killed him!"

She pulled away from me.

"Get out of here," she said. "Oh, get out of here!"

"Peggy, listen to me."

"No, I won't listen to you," she said. "I've had enough of you. All you've done is act suspicious and hateful!"

She looked at me angrily, hands clenched.

"Listen, Peggy," I said, "your pride is rather unimportant now. In the past week, two men have been murdered. That's a little more important than vanity, isn't it?"

She turned away. "I don't know," she said. "I know I'm tired of everything. I'm tired of it. I'll never find any happiness."

"I'll leave you alone then," I said. "You can go to sleep. But I advise you to call Jim. You'd better find out if he's arranged an alibi for you."

She looked at me but I left. I got in my car and drove back to the room. I was going to walk up to the gas station and call Jones.

I didn't notice the big car as I parked and got out. I didn't notice anything, I was so upset.

But there were two plainclothesmen waiting. And Jones said, "I'm glad you had the sense to come back."

* * *

The body was gone. Jones and I were sitting in the room. "And that's your story," he said.

"Easily checked," I said. "Ask Peggy Lister. Ask Jim Vaughan. I was with them."

"There's a long time you weren't with them."

"I saw other people then."

"We'll find out about Vaughan first," he said.

"Do you really think I'm lying?"

He shrugged. "The pick is from your drawer," he said.

"Are you . . . do you actually think I did it?"

He shrugged again. "You'll do for now," he said.

"Are you serious?" I said.

"For God's sake, why should I come back here if I did it!"
"Come on."

"I told you I was going to call you!"

"Are you coming?"

"Listen . . ."

"Let it go, boy," he said. "Get some toilet articles and let's get out of here."

That's how I spent my first night in jail. Lying on a cot in a cell. Staring at the walls. Listening to a drunk singing college songs.

In the morning I was taken to Jones' office.

He sat there working on some papers while I waited nervously. I watched his lean, blue-veined hands shuffling through papers. I looked at his thin face, the dark eyes.

Finally the eyes were on me.

"So you were with Vaughan," he said.

"That's what I said. Have you spoken to him?"

"Yes," he said, "we have."

"Well . . . ?"

He kept looking at me and not answering and all of a sudden the bottom started dropping out.

"Oh, *no!*" I said.

He looked at me without speaking. He nodded. "This is crazy!" I said. "You mean that he actually said he wasn't with me last night?"

"He actually said that."

"Well, he's lying! Damn it! Isn't that obvious?"

He shook his head.

My hands started to shake. "Have you asked Peggy?" I said.

"Yes."

It hit me right in the stomach. I felt as if I were going out of my mind.

"Let me get this," I said. "Peggy said I wasn't with them last night?"

"How long are you going to insist on that?" Jones asked.

"Have you heard of people lying?"

"Yes, I've heard of it," he said, looking at me.

"Peggy," I said, "*Peggy*. To lie about me. I just don't get it. I just . . . don't."

"Tell me what happened last night," he said.

"I told you." "Tell me again."

I told him. When I finished, he looked at me studiously.

"That's it, huh?"

"Yes, that's it. I have no reason to lie."

"Except to save your life," he said.

"Listen, Jones," I said, "You're falling right in with that redheaded bastard who's trying to shove me around the way he's been shoving people around all his life."

He looked at me a long time until it made me nervous.

"I don't know," he finally said, "whether you're telling the truth or not. I'm inclined to believe you. I don't think you could make up as many verifiable lies on the spur of the moment and then duplicate yourself. But—unless either one of those two will change their story, there's not much I can do. Your story *could* be a lie."

"The concert program." I said.

"In the paper," he said, "a telephone call to the Bowl."

"What about the waiters at *Ciro's*? At the *Mocambo*? What about that cook in the diner?"

"What about the collie dog?" he said. "You have as much chance of him identifying you as anyone else."

"Let me go." I said, "I'll kick it out of them."

"Sure," he said. "That's a swell idea."

I was taken back to my cell.

I spent the morning reading the paper. The story was on the front page, There was no picture of me, just one of the house, a front view. I knew the landlady wouldn't exactly love me after this. Her house would have a reputation now.

I tried to go over the whole thing in my mind but it didn't add up to a thing. I couldn't understand Peggy lying about me. What was she? How could she do that? And I tried to avoid the idea that kept growing bigger and bigger. Dennis was dead, so he wasn't the killer. Mrs. Grady was obviously out of the picture because she had no place in Dennis's life. That left Audrey or Jim or Steig or . . .

About noon, a cop opened my cell door and gestured with his head.

"Get your stuff," he said.

I found Steig out in front. I was going to get irate first and refuse the bail. I decided otherwise.

As we started down the steps, Steig said. "Mr. Vaughan wants to see you."

"I don't want to see him," I said.

"You go with me," he said, assured.

I felt that rising heat again. You can just hold temper in so long.

"Listen, tough man," I said, too burned up to be afraid, "I'm not going with you. If you want to try and make me. go ahead. I'd just as soon kick your groin in as look at you."

"I have a gun in my pocket," he said.

I looked down, saw the snub end of the barrel pointed at me.

Where I got the guts to do what I did, I don't know. Maybe there's a streak of insanity in the family.

"Then shoot me in the back," I said, "right here in front of the police station. I'd like to see you get away with it."

Then I turned on my heel and started away. Luckily, Steig couldn't imagine shooting me in front of the police station either.

I walked all the way to Wilshire with him trailing me in the car. But I stayed in crowded sections and he didn't try to get me. Maybe he was a little off balance, too. I don't suppose he'd been treated like that for some time. I found Peggy in her living

room. I went in without knocking. She jumped a little as I entered.

"All right," I said, "let's have it."

She stood up and I grabbed her wrist.

"Well?"

"You're hurting me!"

"You're hurting me, too!" I snapped back. "Does it mean anything to you that I might be executed for murder?"

I've seen confused faces in my time. But the look on Peggy's face had them all beaten.

"Who told you? Vaughan? Told you what? That they couldn't pin anything on me?"

"Well, I'm the only suspect," I said. "Who the hell do you think they're going to suspect—Dracula?"

"I don't understand, Davie . . ."

"Obviously." I said. "Listen, Peggy, maybe you don't realize what's been going on. There have been two murders, two of them!"

"But you didn't . . ."

"I know it and you know and Jim knows. But if neither of you tells the truth about it, who's going to take my word?"

"I . . ." She ran a hand over her cheek.

"What did he tell you?" I asked. "Come on, let's have it. Did he actually tell you I wouldn't be involved?"

"Yes. He told me they . . . couldn't prove a thing against you. So he said we shouldn't get involved. I mean, I shouldn't get involved."

"A dead man in my room with an icepick from my kitchen drawer," I said, "and I wouldn't be suspected? Come on Peggy, what's the matter with you? You're so naive, it's near criminal."

"I know. But he . . ." She shook her head. "He said we shouldn't!"

"And you just . . . *took* his word."

"Well . . ."

"Peggy, when are you going to start using your head?"

She looked up defiantly a moment. Then her shoulders slumped. She lowered her eyes.

"What did he really tell you?" I asked. Her voice was defeated.

"He said he'd re-open my old case. He said I'd be executed for it."

"You can't be tried twice for the same crime!"

"He said . . ."

"He said, he said! What is he—a Svengali? Haven't you got a brain in your head?"

"He has my life in his hands," she said.

The thought was sickening.

"He has *not*," I said. "He has no control over you. Are you going to set his welfare above mine?"

"Davie . . ."

"What kind of love do you have for me anyway? Fair weather love? The kind that . . ."

"Please, Davie."

"Listen," I said incredulously, "this is serious business."

"I was *afraid* . . ."

"Afraid," I said. "I'm afraid too, Peggy. Jim said he'd get me one way or the other. Steig said he'd kill me. What am I supposed to do because of that—crawl into a hole and die?"

"Steig said that?" Something new to worry about.

"Yes. Yes, Peggy Ann. And I say that Steig killed Dennis on Jim's orders."

"But . . . they were with us last night."

"We met him at Western," I said. "It took us almost an hour to drive there. Then we had to drive all the way back to Hollywood. Was there any real sense in that?"

"He had a case over there and . . ."

I didn't say anything. I looked at her somberly.

"He wouldn't kill his own *brother*."

"Jim would kill his own *mother* if it served his purpose."

"No."

"It serves his purpose to get me out of the way. And he'll do it too, if you keep lying about me."

She looked at me blankly, then nodded once.

"All right," she said quietly. "This afternoon I'll go to Lieutenant Jones and tell him you were with us."

"I took an easy breath. They were short and far between those days. I knew I should start worrying about what Jones would do when she changed her story in midstream. A girl who was proven to have murdered once and suspected of having done it again.

But sometimes I'm selfish, too. Or thoughtless.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll go now."

I was beginning to sense the end of our relationship. I couldn't see how it could last through all this. Even if I loved her. Let's face it. It *isn't* enough when everything else is lacking. I turned at the door.

"Don't forget to tell Jones that it was Jim's suggestion for you to say I wasn't with you. Put the onus where it belongs."

"I'll . . . do what I can."

I left. I told her I'd come back soon. And, in my mind I knew that I loved her but I didn't understand her. If only there was a way to find out what she'd gone through, what had been her life before I came. If there were someone who she had known before. Maybe her father or her brother. If I could talk to them.

A thought. Why couldn't I?

I was thinking about that when I found Steig waiting for me again.

"This time, you try to get away and I'll break your neck," he said viciously.

I tampered with the immediate instinct to take a flying kick at his groin before he could make a move. I decided against it. I wanted to see Jim anyway. At least that's what I told myself to avoid a battle which I would, rather obviously, come out second best in. In this case that might be dead, too. Yeah, I wanted to see Jim.

This didn't take long. He was sitting in the back seat of the car. He nodded once as I sat down beside him. He was dressed immaculately as usual. Grey, subdued sharkskin, homburg just right, tie just right. A man to excite admiration and respect. Until the shell was pierced anyway.

"So I wasn't with you last night," I said before he could talk. "I dreamed it all."

"Don't be a fool," he said. "You must realize why I lied about it."

"I'm not a fool," I said. "You did it to incriminate me. When did Steig kill Dennis? Before you met us or after I left you?"

You *are* a fool," he said, "if you can't see that I did the only thing possible."

I was going to let him know that Peggy planned to spike his lie but I changed my mind. I didn't want to have him trying to stop her before she had a chance to do it.

Instead I said, "Your brother must have meant a lot to you."

He surveyed me icily.

"You really think I had my brother murdered, don't you?" he said

"I know it," I said. "Real life murder isn't as complex as one in a two-and-a-half dollar mystery. There aren't so many suspects in this case that I have to read two hundred pages to know who killed Dennis."

I knew that Steig was listening. I saw those big shoulders hunch back, then forward. As if he were flexing, readying himself. It made me a little nervous.

"You're a blind idiot," Jim said. "I'll tell you why I lied about you. Because I knew there wouldn't be any evidence against you that meant a thing."

"Just a corpse in my room with my icepick in his head."

"Do you think you'd be out on bail if Jones really suspected you?"

I didn't know.

"I knew you'd be free," he said. "But the real murderer wouldn't be."

"You," I said, "Steig."

"Peggy," he said.

That skin crawling again. I'd tell myself, he's lying, he's lying, he's lying. Three times, because once wasn't enough. But every time I did, he said something more and I got sicker and weaker in conviction. He seemed so sure and I am chronically incapable of believing that intelligent people can keep lying, even if they threaten to. And Peggy had stabbed her husband to death. That was authenticated.

"You're lying." I said, but only to talk.

"You know I'm not," he said. "You know that there's every possibility in the world that Peggy went to your room last night and killed Dennis."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I . . . I know Peggy."

"You don't know Peggy."

"She didn't do it."

"She killed Dennis."

"Can you prove that?" I said.

"Prove it?" he said. "I'm trying to make it impossible to prove. I don't want anyone to have a chance to prove it."

I must have looked blank.

"I'm telling you," he said, "Peggy killed my brother. And I'm trying to save her."

"Why did she kill him in my room?" I asked, suspiciously, but weakening.

"He told her to come there. He threatened her."

"With what?"

"With exposing her as Grady's murderer."

"Oh, you're crazy," I said.

He paid no attention. He seemed to sense me weakening. He went on.

"She's insane," he said. "You may not choose to believe that, but it doesn't alter the fact. She's killed *three* men now. God knows why."

"But you still want her," I said, searching vainly for confidence in Peggy.

"I guess you wouldn't understand that," he said. "You who live by the morals of a petty world."

We sat in silence a moment.

"All right," I said, looking for a peg to hang my mind on. "Where does that leave us?"

I couldn't go on. I couldn't concentrate. I was sick thinking that maybe everything Jim had ever told me was the truth. How long can blind love sustain you when someone keeps hacking

away at it with a very tangible axe? And the thought that my relationship with Peggy had been an endless fabrication of lies made me ill.

"I've told you," he said, "they can't do anything about it. And as long as you don't try to involve her, I'll leave you alone."

"I still don't believe you," I said. "I saw the shock on her face when . . ."

"One night Peggy and Dennis went out together," he said. "At three o'clock in the morning, Dennis came in the house with his arm streaming blood. He had to have five stitches."

"It's . . ."

And the next day Peggy came to see him and she cried and said she didn't mean it."

"It's your story," I said.

"It's the facts," he said. "Use your head. David. When are you going to stop plunging into things you can't cope with?"

"Look . . ." I said.

"*You* look," he said. "Open your eyes. You're not up to this."

That's what Audrey had said too. Maybe they were right. Maybe I wasn't up to it. I knew it would be a relief to get away from it all.

"Peggy is . . ." Jim started, "I don't know what word will express it Deranged, perhaps. I know it's not a nice word but I have to use it. There's a Hyde beneath her I don't know what brings it out, but it's there. Love won't help her. Psychiatry may. I don't know. But she's dangerous, very dangerous."

"Why do you love her, then?" I asked.

"I happen to love Peggy," he said, "with a love I don't think your type of narrow-minded idealist understands. Because it's a love that asks nothing."

"Maybe it asks nothing," I said, "because it gets nothing."

"Now we're being petty," he said.

He said it with the old familiar expression of intellectual scorn on his full face. And it was a shock to realize for a second that this man and I had gone to college together and called each other friends.

I got out of the car and looked at him. He made no effort to detain me and waved Steig back into the car.

"There's only one thing to say." I said. "Your entire story is a lie from beginning to end."

But as I walked back to my room, I knew I'd been reaching. Peggy *had* murdered once. These clippings were genuine. Even Jones had told me that.

Which helped not at all. Because there came visions to my mind. Of Peggy holding an icepick, a razor. Standing over Albert, standing over Dennis. Plunge of the arm, sound of steel point driving into flesh and tissue. A look on Peggy's face. One I'd seen that night on the pier when she'd been attacked. A shocked and wild look.

A look not human.

* * *

Funerals are not nice.

They are creations of society which are intended to provide people with a last chance to show respects but which turn instead into miniature Grand Guignols. For my money, they're morbid and tasteless. You just can't effect anything tasty with a corpse. They're too dead.

Dennis's funeral was no exception. I don't know what brought me to it. Peggy told me about it. She wasn't going with Jim so I took her.

And I did feel sort of sorry for Dennis. A little ashamed, too, at having suspected him of murder. He'd just been an ill-fated kid with no chance at all. Victimized all of his short life by brother James.

A few relatives were there. Not many. Most of them, I suspected, were in Missouri. Even the ones that came looked like country cousins. Their clothes weren't on a par with Jim and Audrey's. Yes, Jim had his wife with him. It was his concession to appearance. After all, this was in the paper and no breath of scandal must besmirch the moment.

Some people there I didn't understand. They were men mostly. And there was something about them. Something faintly tawdry in spite of the clothes they wore. An aura of inherent cheapness and vulgarity.

They didn't look too sad either. One of them even snickered during the service. Jim didn't hear it. But Steig did and I saw

him put his big hand on the man's shoulder and the man went white.

The relatives played their expected role. They looked sad. They clucked pityingly. They commented. Once I thought it was a joke, that line about how "natural" the corpse looks. Well, it's not a joke. I heard it about five times that afternoon.

And there was poor Dennis, unable to complain, lying up there in front and taking it straight. That ugly little hole in his temple all covered up and prettied. Dennis finally at peace. The hard way.

Peggy didn't speak to me much. She kept her head lowered during much of the service. I don't think she looked at Dennis once. Her dark gloved hands were clasped tight in her lap. The thought in my mind that she might have caused all this was enough to make my hands tremble spasmodically all afternoon.

I watched Audrey in the front row. I'd been surprised to see her at first. I didn't think Jim would want her there. Maybe he didn't.

Maybe she went in spite of his wishes. But there she was at his side, thinner-looking than ever in her black dress, looking at Dennis fixedly.

When the dismal charade was over and we had all guessed that Dennis was dead, we filed out in the sunlight and found Wilshire boulevard much the same and all the people thereon alive and moving.

The assemblage milled respectably in front of the parlor. They made gentle, strained smiles and spoke in muted, strained tones.

"Horrible thing, James, horrible."

Jim nodding gravely, lips pressed together. To keep back a smile? I didn't know.

"The dear boy looked so natural."

Chicken claw hands plucking at pearls. A relative ghoul passing comment on the dead.

I didn't concentrate on staying by Peggy and somehow, Jim managed to get her beside him. So I moved over to where Audrey stood with an aunt.

As I approached, the woman said a few extra words of vain condolence and then passed into the void.

Audrey looked at me, dry-eyed and dead sober, it appeared. There was a certain classic loveliness about her. Dressed in black, her dark hair pulled back tight, her eyes as funereal as her outfit, her skin pale and clear.

She tried to smile at me but couldn't, it was nice of you to come," she said.

I took her hand and squeezed it.

"I'm sorry for him," I said. "That's why I came."

As I stood close to her now. I noticed her breath. She wasn't sober. Sorrow had just given her the capacity to hold it in. She was as taut as a drum. I got the impression that it wouldn't take much to unhinge her.

"I'll be going." I said.

She held onto my hand

"Don't leave me," she whispered. "Don't leave me with these, jackals. Relatives waiting for scraps. And those . . . those tramps."

I didn't know what she meant. But I stayed as her fingers dug pleadingly into my arm.

"Have you your car?" she asked. "Yes, but . . ."

"Take me somewhere," she begged, "anywhere, David. I've got to have a drink or I'll go out of my mind."

"But I'm with Peggy."

"Does she look as if she'll have to walk home?" she asked bitterly.

"Well," I said, "I should . . ."

* * *

The bar was cool, dark and empty. We sat in a back booth. Outside July shimmered hot fingers over the streets.

Audrey had a long one, a stiff one. I watched her throat move convulsively as she poured it down. When she'd finished it off, she put down the glass and leaned back against the booth. The tenseness gave a little at the edges. Alcoholic relaxation eased her nerves temporarily. And two big tears forced themselves from under her closed lids and ran down across her white cheeks.

"Poor baby." she said, "poor helpless baby."

Audrey needed someone to talk to. I listened.

"He never had a chance," she said. "Money, sure he had money. Is that what they call a chance nowadays?"

She looked at me and the anger slipped from her thin features. She started working on her second drink. She put the glass down and pressed her right hand to her breasts as if she wanted to rub the liquored heat into her flesh. She reached up and dragged off the black veiled hat with a sob.

"I *hate* funerals," she said miserably. "They stink. You hear me! They stink."

"I hear you."

She leaned her head onto her right palm and then ran shaking fingers through her hair. "Poor baby," she said.

She lost breath for a moment as a sob clutched her throat. Then she drank some more. Her eyes on me. Red. Lost eyes. "You know what he said to me a few nights ago?"

"Jim?" I asked.

Dennis. Jim never talks to me." Another sob. "Dennis said—you're my family, Aud. The only family I have."

"Yeah," I said quietly

Imagine it," she said. "Just his sister by marriage, but to him, I was his family. And he kissed me on the cheek. And he hugged me."

Her teeth clamped together. Her lips pressed tightly, drained white under the lipstick.

"If I find out who did it," she said, "if I find out for sure that she did this I'll . . ."

"What?" I said.

Her eyes dropped. She shook her head and picked up her glass

"You'll do what?"

"Nothing," she said.

"I'll tell you who killed Dennis. Steig killed him."

She shook her head. "I don't know."

"You don't want to know," I said. "You'd rather believe it was Peggy."

"Buy me another drink?"

"No, I won't buy you another drink. I'm taking you home. I'm never buying you another drink again. Drink yourself to death on your own money. I've lost sympathy."

She didn't say a word all the way to Malibu. She got out of the car and I drove away. I imagine that she went to her room and locked herself in. There, she probably took off all her clothes and went to bed with a bottle of whiskey and drank it until she was senseless Happy college days gone. Betty Coed in a drunken stupor.

Later that afternoon I stopped by Peggy's apartment. Apparently Jim had to entertain a few visiting firemen he happened to be related to. And, naturally, since Audrey wasn't around he'd have enough trouble explaining that without having Peggy around to arouse comment too. As a matter of fact I found out later that Jim was burned up because I'd taken Audrey away. Lord know why. She certainly was in no shape to play hostess to ferret-eyed relatives.

Peggy was sitting in the living room listening to the radio. I recognized the introduction the orchestra was playing. In a moment Lanza would start heaving his lungs out and using up his incredible gift a little more.

The door was open to let the breeze in so I went in and sat beside her. She smiled a little and patted my hand as I sat down.

"How long have you been here?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said. "I haven't been keeping track. Where were you?"

"I took Audrey home," I said.

"Oh. Jim took me home. That is, he had Steig take me home."

"I imagined he would."

Casual conversation with *Che gelida manina* in the background. And my mind tearing at me to ask her once and for all if . . .

But how can you ask a girl you love to tell you—yes or no—whether she's murdered?

"I'm sorry you went," I said, unable to ask.

"Went?"

"To the funeral. They're depressing. And you have enough troubles."

She smiled mirthlessly.

"I'm used to funerals," she said. "My mother. An uncle. An aunt. A cousin. Dennis." She shrugged. "Everybody dies," she said.

I looked at her closely. At her finely etched profile, the light from the dying sun on her cheeks.

Then she started to talk. More to herself than to me, I think. Just her thoughts spoken aloud.

"He looked nice lying there," she said. "He wasn't a . . . a man anymore. I mean there was nothing ugly about him."

Was that a smile? It was gone too quickly for me to be sure.

"You know what he looked like?" she asked.

She began to examine her white hands. "He looked like a gentleman," she said.

Chapter Six

It took about an hour to drive to Pasadena. I followed winding Sunset all the way to its end, then turned off into the speedway that led to Pasadena. The car worked fine. I hit eighty once. A good thing the car was in working shape. I was in no mood for more troubles. I had enough.

Driving gave me time to think.

About my novel, which was getting nowhere at an exceedingly rapid clip. About my life, which was getting more and more complex and unenjoyable. About Peggy, who seemed more an enigma by the day.

That's why I was going to Pasadena to see her father.

I wanted to meet him, talk to him. There had to be some beginning to all this. Some cause for all this unbalanced effect.

The house was a small bungalow near the California Institute of Technology.

The place was fastidiously kept. I don't know whether the captain or his son or hired help did it. It was probably hired help. Whatever the case, the lawn was cropped close, the house was neatly painted and everything was square and neat and clean. You could almost guess that a very appearance-conscious man lived there. A man to whom exterior presentation was half the essence of personality, if not a good deal more than half.

I stood on the porch waiting for someone to answer the bell, looking at the porch railing scrubbed clean recently, the smell

of soap and lye still in the air. The welcome mat was dusted and swept but no more welcoming for that.

It was a young man in his teens who answered the door. He was pale, he wore glasses. I knew him, though. It was Peggy's face. I noticed the black coat sweater over his white shirt, the small, tight knot on the tie.

"Yes?" he said.

Myopia. A lot worse than mine. Braces on his teeth. Nothing to glean a Mr. America vote.

"Are you Philip Lister?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "that's, right."

"I'm a friend of Peggy's," I said. "I don't know whether she's mentioned me."

He looked confused. "No . . . she didn't."

I extended my hand, feeling awkward, feeling a slight sense of anger with Peggy. Was she ashamed of me? The inevitable question popped into my overly male brain.

"I'm David Newton."

"How do you do?" His handshake was weak. "Won't you . . . come in?"

The same hesitating way of speaking as Peggy. As if he weren't sure that what he was about to say was the right thing.

I was in the hallway. It was as fastidious as the outside. Scrupulously arranged. It was more like the waiting room of a doctor than a home. Lister probably ran his house like they said he ran his ship before the war. With a tyrannical insistence on the immaculate.

"Won't you sit down?" Phillip asked me. He was a little taller than Peggy, about five ten I guessed. He was quite lean. And overstudied, it was obvious. I could just picture him in the early morning hours poring over complex engineering volumes.

I sat on the couch. He sat on the edge of a chair. Like a timid man in a furniture store, afraid to damage anything because it isn't his property.

I noticed the room, too. Everything in its place. A sterile cleanliness. The fireplace obviously unused and swept clean, the andirons polished to a bright luster, the unneeded screen dusted and standing in precisely the right spot. On top of the fireplace, polished candlesticks, empty. Over them, pictures, all

hanging at the right angle. Pictures of Navy men and ships; Captain Lister's only concession to nostalgia, I imagined. A discharge prominently displayed. Or did an officer get retirement papers? I didn't know. Maybe it was a citation.

Phillip was clearing his throat.

"How is Peggy?" he asked.

"Fine." I said.

"She . . . she was here about a week or so ago."

"So she said," I said, nodding.

"Mmm-hmmm," he said, nodding too. He swallowed. "What is she doing now? Has she found a job yet?"

"Uh . . . no, no, not yet. Still in the process, I guess."

He smiled. It faded.

Have you known Peggy long?" he asked.

"About a month," I said.

He looked surprised. Then he hid it. "Oh?" he said. "Are you from California?"

I got the impression that he'd spend the whole day chatting about nothing before he'd ask me what I'd come for.

"I'm from New York," I said. "Say, is . . ."

"I was going there once," he said.

"Oh, I . . ."

"But Father . . ." He paused, smiling falsely. "I changed my mind."

"Is your father home?" I asked.

He looked at me blankly.

"Uh, he's . . . he's upstairs. He's taking his nap."

"I see."

"Did you want to see him?"

"Yes."

He stirred restlessly. "Oh," he said, "I . . . can I help you in any way?"

I hesitated. Then I said, "Maybe you can. I want to find out about Peggy."

"Oh."

The glasses, the coat sweater, the lean, bowed form. Student. Driven son. I threw off the thoughts about him.

"Can you tell me about Peggy's marriage?" I asked.

"Her marriage?" He looked at me carefully, "Tell me," he said, "is Peggy really involved in all these . . . these terrible . . . things?"

He finished weakly as if the word "murder" were more than he could speak.

"I'm afraid she is," I said.

"Oh. Poor Peggy." He bit his lip. "She must be terribly upset. She wouldn't tell us much when she was here. And Father . . ." He broke off, ill at ease.

"Did Peggy kill her husband?" I asked abruptly.

He flinched. As if someone had cracked a whip over his head. He looked over into the hall. I got the idea he was looking to see if his father were around. "She. . ."

"Did she?"

He nodded jerkily.

I closed my eyes for a moment. It was true. I couldn't even take the pleasure of doubting it vaguely any more. "Do you know why?" I asked.

I shouldn't have asked. I should have realized how it would hurt him. But curiosity was conquering any sense of consideration I had.

"Well," he said. "I really don't . . ."

"I'm not just prying for its own sake," I said. "Peggy is suspected of these other two murders and . . ."

Silence from both of us. It clung to us. He was shocked, looking at me with disbelieving eyes. And I was shocked too by my own words.

Peggy is suspected.

I knew then, finally, objectively, that she could have committed either crime. And the knowledge was like a wedge between us. And more knowledge would be like hammer blows on the wedge, hurting us, separating us. I was almost afraid to learn anymore, to admit anymore to myself,

"Peggy?" Phillip said. "Peggy is suspected?"

"Yes. You see she . . ."

"Who rang, Phillip?"

Stentorian voice. Our eyes shifted quickly to the hall. There in the doorway, straight and bleak Aaron Lister.

He was tall. There was some resemblance to Peggy. In the frame. In the touch of masculine strength in Peggy's face. That strength that hinted of flint-like resolution. He was her father, all right.

His eyes were on me as he spoke to Phillip.

"Father, this is . . ." Phillip looked at me for help.

"David Newton," I said.

I was standing up as he came walking in. Captain Bligh on the main-deck, I thought. Ready to squelch mutiny or flog a dead man. His face was unmoving and rock like, like one of those faces carved out of that mountain out west.

"Newton," he said. He seemed to taste the word to see if it were poisonous.

Then his eyes moved over me in examination. I might have been before his court martial board, a twenty year A.W.O.L.

"Mr. Newton is a friend of Peggy's," Phillip said nervously.

Lister didn't speak. He walked over to the fireplace and turned. Still not a flicker on his face. This guy even makes Vaughan look transparent, I thought. World, oh world, full of people afraid to show themselves as they are.

"You wished to see me?" he said and it wasn't a question. It apparently never occurred to him that anyone might come there to see Phillip.

"Yes," I said, "I did."

"May I ask why?"

Phrased politely. But behind it, the unspoken words—Speak, man, or I'll have you thrown to the dogs.

I looked at him, wondered why I always felt that momentary sense of uneasy timorousness when I came across these people were bent on dominating all relationships. Was it because I wasn't ever pushing hard? Because I just took life easy and was thrown off stride by these intent ones? These people to whom life is a challenge and a never-flagging combat. I don't know. But I felt a little nervous at first. Until I realized, as I ultimately did in all such cases, that they were born the same way as I was and were no better. No Olympian horn had sounded the

nascence of Aaron Lister. Just a squawling like mine. Ten fingers, ten toes, et cetera. I looked at bleak Captain Lister without a qualm then. The regal manner was just show to me.

"I'm interested in your daughter," I said.

"Are you?" Amusement? Contempt?

"I plan to marry her," I said. I felt a slight twinge in the knowledge that I wasn't sure whether I said it because I meant it or because I wanted to get a rise out of the captain.

His cheeks seemed to twitch. His whole body seemed to be galvanized, then stiffened as if his spine had transformed itself into a long iron rod. His poker face changed an iota.

"I believe my daughter is expecting to marry another gentleman," he said. Final words, the clap of doom.

"I don't think so," I said.

There went my plan. He wouldn't talk to me now. Why did I always bristle before smug minds?

"Your opinion is immaterial to me," said Captain Lister.

That was that, it appeared. Thirty days, next case.

Dead silence. Lister apparently expected me to retire, bowing.

Phillip cleared his throat. "Mr. Lister," I said.

"Captain Lister," he corrected.

I licked my lips.

"Captain Lister," I said

"I have nothing to say," he said.

"Captain Lister, I want to know about your daughter. This is very important. She's involved in murder and . . ."

"I have no interest in it," he said, deceptively mild. "I do not care what my daughter is implicated in."

"Well, for God's sake, can't you . . . !"

I stopped. I could see I wasn't going to get anything out of him. I might as well try to melt an iceberg with a match.

"That's all, I believe," Aaron Lister said. Still on the board. He'd die on that court martial board. I could see him instructing his pallbearers.

"Captain Lister," I said, "you have no idea what a shock it is to see a father who doesn't give a damn about his own child."

He closed his eyes.

"Lister!"

"Mr. Newton!" he exploded. "My daughter is no longer a part of my family!"

I looked at him. I shook my head. Then I turned on my heel. "Good day," I said.

"Good day," he answered,

I slammed the door in a fury and started down the walk. So That was her father. A starchy, heartless ramrod. I could just visualize Peggy's bringing-up by him. The unbending discipline, the harsh cowing of her young personality. Like taking a bird and holding its wings so that all it could do was flutter in mute impotence.

Then I heard the door open. I turned.

"Mr. Newt . . ."

"Phillip!"

The voice rang out inside. Phillip looked at me. Then he tried to smile but it didn't come off. He shut the door quietly and I stood there looking at the white door, the polished brass knocker, the entrance to emptiness.

I couldn't concentrate as I drove back. I was too distracted. Peggy had been brought up by *that*. Her impressionable brain assailed with hardness and cruelties. Her entire youth sterile of love after her mother's death. No wonder she was hungry for it. She'd been starving for it all her unhappy life.

I wanted to run to her, to make it up. I drove to her apartment when I got to Santa Monica. She wasn't there.

I waited a while but she didn't come back. I tried to think she wasn't with Jim. She couldn't be. Not now, after what she'd told me. Could she trust him after he threatened her? If she could . . . I tried to think it out as I drove to Malibu to see if Jim were out. Yes, it made sense. I finally decided that. She'd never had anyone she could really count on. Jim had been the rock she needed. She had never known real love. Was it surprising then that she misinterpreted and decided that Jim loved her the way she needed? How could she really know that being given things and having favors done for her wasn't being loved? No one had ever taught her differently.

A maid opened the door at Malibu.

"Mr. Vaughan in?" I asked her.

"No, he isn't," she said.

"Oh." I stood there looking at her.

"Who is it, Jane?" I heard a voice calling from the head of the stairs. Audrey I leaned in and looked up.

"Hi!" she said, smiling. "Come on in. All right, Jane."

The maid nodded, closed the door and disappeared down the hallway.

"Come on in the living room," Audrey said, coming up to me. "I'll make you a drink."

"Where's Jim?"

"He's down at the police station."

"Oh."

We went up the stairs and into the high-ceilinged living room. I remembered the first night I'd gone there, met Jim again for the first time since graduation. Since then—murder, murder and here I was again.

"What'd you want to see Jim about?" she asked, pouring drinks. I shook my head.

"That's right," Audrey said, "we went through that routine once, didn't we? Well skip it this time. Soda?"

"A little."

"None for me. thank you," Audrey piped to herself. "I like to drink it straight if you don't mind I don't mind at all well that's nice you thank you you're welcome."

She was drunk again. Good and . . .

I went over to the big picture window and looked out. Way down below, across the highway, I could see rocks and blue-green ocean dashing out its white brains on them. Foam flashed and drops sparkled in the crystalline air. The breeze coming through the windows was crisp and tangy with the smell of the sea. To live in a house like this, the thought came. It had everything.

Except happiness.

"Quite a view," I said.

"Quite a jump," she said.

"Planning on it?" I said.

She pursed her lips.

"Who knows?" she said, sinking down on the couch. She patted the cushion beside her.

"Sit here," she said. "Tell mama all about everything."

I sat down.

She grinned at me.

"You're feeling pretty chipper today, aren't you?" I said.

"No," she said blithely, "just pretending."

"Okay," I said, "I'll pretend too. Is it easy?"

"It is if your brain falls out," she said.

"Uh-huh. Oh . . . I . . . guess I should apologize for the nasty way I spoke to you last time I saw you."

"When was that?"

"The day . . . I took you home "

"Oh." She shrugged. "Anything you said, I'm sure I deserved."

I smiled at her. I took a sip of my drink.

"The police station, you said? What's going on?"

"Questions and answers, I suppose," she said. "Jones probably has the culprit."

"If he has," I said, "you have no husband."

She looked at me without anger. "I haven't got one anyway," she said.

"When are you going to leave him, Audrey?"

"When are you going to leave that girl?"

"I'm not."

She shrugged. "That's my answer," she said. She held up the glass and looked at the liquor. She shook her head.

"It looks so innocent," she said. "Just some colored water. But what it does. Lawsy."

I didn't say anything. We had nothing to discuss really, but I didn't want to leave. I was tired of driving, tired of looking for answers. I wanted to relax. You can't pile-drive twenty-four hours a day.

"You look pretty," I said.

She smiled.

"Sweater girl," I said.

"That's me."

"You have a nice figure, Audrey."

"Merci." She drank. She licked her lower lip. "Well here we are, Davie boy."

"Here we are," I said.

"You in love with a murderess, me in love with . . ."

"Cut it out."

"Sorry."

"Audrey."

"Wha?"

"Did Dennis . . . have his arm cut open by Peggy?"

She looked at me. "Yes," she said. "He had to have stitches taken, it was so bad."

"What did he do?"

"You mean to deserve a cutting-up?" she said. "He probably looked cross-eyed at her."

"Oh, stop it. You know he must have done something serious. He probably made a pass at her."

"Is that bad? A man should make a pass at me. I wouldn't cut his arm open."

"*She* would. You don't know what she's been through."

"I don't care, Davie. I don't care."

"All right. Forget it."

"Audrey," I said then, trying to get somewhere in all this crazy tangle, "who were those men at the funeral? The ones you called tramps?"

She looked at me over her glass.

"I don't know whether I should tell you," she said.

"Listen," I said, "I know about Jim. I know he didn't win his money at a raffle."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Law is profitable," she said.

"Come on, Audrey. You know what I mean."

"You won't . . ."

"Repeat it? I won't use it against him. I wouldn't hurt you even if you are in love with the wrong guy."

"Who's the right guy?"

"I don't know."

"Kiss me, Dave?"

I leaned over and her warm mouth opened a little under mine. I could taste her breath. She sighed as I straightened up.

"Gee, it's nice to be kissed," she said. "It's been so long. You kiss nice, Dave."

"Tell me about Jim, Audrey."

She looked away from me. Then she settled herself in the couch. She poured a little from the bottle into her drink. She smiled. Then it went. She couldn't relate it in a joking way. That was clear.

"It's not too complicated," she said. "Jim has dozens of ties with the crime syndicate out here on the coast. He started out as just a lawyer. But he found out soon enough that a beginner couldn't make out in law. At least he couldn't make out the way Jim wanted to make out. So he took on a couple of shady characters as clients. He defended them. He saved one from the gas chamber and got the other one acquitted. He got money for that. And a rep, too. They started coming to him. One thing led to another."

"Did you know about it?" I said.

"Not at first," she said, "but he couldn't keep it a secret. Those men kept coming to the house. You can't keep them away. When I found out, I almost left him. But I can't, you know that. I tried to talk him out of doing it. You can imagine what good it did."

"Did Dennis ever threaten to expose him?"

She didn't answer.

"Audrey, did he?"

"Well . . ."

"He did, didn't he?"

"He . . . Dennis was always a hothead. He'd threatened lots of things."

"And you wonder why Jim had him killed," I said.

"David, I don't want you to say it anymore."

"Listen," I said, "do you know what Steig is?"

No answer.

"Audrey, he used to be a Chicago gunman. A paid killer!"

I thought she'd gone into a coma the way she stared at me.

"Jones told me that," I said. "He showed me the card on Steig, no He's suspected of murdering about a *dozen* men. That's your husband's chauffeur, Audrey."

"Is that true, Dave? You're not lying?"

"I swear to God it's the truth, Audrey."

Her head slumped forward and her eyes closed. "God help him," she whispered. "God help my poor Jim."

I stared at her. At a woman who could love him still.

"Audrey, how can you . . ."

"Don't. Don't, Dave. I love him. That's it. I don't question your love even if I question the girl you love."

"I'm not sure I love her," I said.

She looked at me bleakly.

"I hope you don't," she said, "I hope at least somebody gets out of this in one piece."

I put my arm around her but she didn't respond in any way. She stared at her lap. She put the drink on the table.

"I guess you'd better go," she said.

I took my arm back and looked at her. Poor Audrey. Not a sodden alcoholic. A girl, confused and betrayed in her love. Lost in a morass of frustrations and unanswered yearnings. One thing I know and will always know. When love starts turning itself in, the results are horrible to see.

"I wish there was something for you to hold on to," I said. "I wish I could be that something."

She smiled momentarily and patted my hand. Then she got up.

"Thanks," she said.

I followed her across the thick rug, feeling a dragging sense of inevitability in me. That Audrey would live and die here in this house. In her terrible despair as long as Jim lived. And if he died, maybe even then.

Someone was bleeding.

* * *

Later I went home and sat around my room. I tried to work on the novel but it was impossible. I kept writing the same sentence over and over again. I read the paper and saw that nothing had developed on the case. Nothing that the papers had anyway. No fingerprints on the second icepick either.

Finally I threw down the paper and went to call up Peggy. I didn't get an answer. I drove over to her place. She wasn't home. I got I disgusted and went out to have supper. I ate at the Broken Drum, a little place on Wilshire whose motto is—You Can't Beat It. The pun was bad but the food is good.

I went back to my room and tried to write. I couldn't. I kept thinking about Peggy being with Jim. It disgusted me. Yet I think I almost felt glad. It gave me an excuse for being disgusted with her In spite of everything I felt. I had a desire to get away. I was on a fence and it seemed as if Peggy was pushing me over the other way.

I tried to read. I couldn't do that either. I listened to the radio That wasn't any good either, so I turned it off and went to the movies.

* * *

"Hi!" she said brightly, standing by the screen window. I jumped up and unlocked the door. She came in and we embraced. I'm like Audrey, I thought. I can talk too, but when it comes down to it, I can't do anything but love her when she's near.

"Did I wake you up, Davie?"

"Nope."

"What are you going to do?"

I was going to tell her that I *had* to work on my book. But I knew if I did she'd go away and I didn't want her to go away. She looked so fresh and clean. Come to think of it, the only time I could deliberate about leaving her was when we were apart. When she was close to me, I didn't have a chance.

"Nothing in particular," I said.

"Wanna take a hike?" she said.

"I . . . guess so."

Her face fell.

"Wouldn't you?" she said.

"Sure, babe."

"If you don't want to, tell me, Davie."

"Baby, I'm a little sleepy, that's all. Go make us some breakfast while I take a shower."

She smiled and rubbed her warm cheek against mine

"Davie," she whispered happily. And even though the words in my mind were *Here we go again*, I didn't care.

"Shall we go to Griffith Park?" I said, dressing after my shower.

"Ooh, yes!"

I smiled to myself. Just a big kid, really. Give her the love she needed and the world was her oyster.

"Shall I make sandwiches?" she asked.

"Sure. I'll go get the stuff."

"Okay. After you eat. Breakfast is almost ready."

While we ate she looked up.

"Jim says I might not even have to go through a trial," she said excitedly. "Isn't that wonderful?"

I smiled and patted her hand. "That is," I said. "I'm glad, Peggy."

"I'm so happy," she said. "I've dreaded it. I couldn't sleep at night thinking about it."

I nodded. "That's wonderful, Peggy," I said.

It was a beautiful day as the car buzzed along Sunset. A day to make a guy forget there is violence in the world. To make a guy forget that double murder had been a part of his life. To make him forget everything except that he was going on a picnic with his girl. It's amazing how little can change a fellow's attitude. Sun in the sky, a car driving along at a fast clip, breeze on you, the car radio playing *Der Rosenkavalier Waltzes* and her hand holding my arm.

I glanced over at her. She had a bright red ribbon in her hair, a tight red sweater, a pair of jeans, loafers. I noticed she kept pulling the sweater as loose as she could but it insisted on clinging to her curves.

"You look good enough to eat," I said.

She leaned over and pressed her forehead against my arm. She sighed happily. "I'm so lucky," she said.

I kissed her hair. And felt the first sense of peace in weeks. It was almost as if we were escaping. To a sunlit day, away from every dismaying thing.

"It's been a long time," she said and her hands tightened on my arm.

We drove about fifty minutes to reach the park. We talked about inconsequential subjects mostly. I didn't tell her I'd been to see her father. I wasn't sure how she'd take it and I didn't want to spoil anything.

The park was as Peggy said, just like going out into the hills. Wild overgrown hills, not at all like the Prospect Park in my home town, Brooklyn.

Griffith Park was a park. In size alone it made Prospect Park look like a corner lot. And for sheer beauty and clean wilderness it far surpassed the Brooklyn spot. Deer run loose in Griffith Park. Only teen-age gangs run loose in Prospect.

When we got out of the car and locked it up and got the two brown paper bags with our lunch, I looked around. Far up a winding path, on the crest of a hill stood a white-domed building, it looked like a fortress. The country around it looked like Scottish wilds. It was fascinating.

We left the path after a little while and plunged into the thick brush. Overhead the sun grew very hot. The blunt waves of heat seemed to cling to the ground as we climbed. Peggy pulled up the sleeves of her sweater and kept plucking at the wool to loosen it from her flesh. The sun on my head didn't help toward cool detachment. Great drops of sweat rolled over my temples and cheeks. I watched her ahead of me as she climbed. If I could touch her, I thought.

And thought something else.

Was it possible that, unconsciously, Peggy dressed and behaved in a manner calculated to draw desire out of the men she was with? Ostensibly she feared men and their aggression. Why, then, did the very thing she claimed to fear always happen to her? That boy, her husband, Albert, and all the men she had driven half-mad with desire for her. Include me. What was it about her? Was that shy withdrawal part of her calculation? Was it all intended to gather to herself what she claimed to fear but actually desired intensely? They talk about accident-prone men. Well maybe there are rape-prone women, too.

I shook my head under the hot sun and felt dizzy. Partly with heat. Mostly with the confusion that a human mind can evoke when it begins to exist on different levels.

She stopped and sat down in the shade of a tree. I plopped down beside her.

"Phew, it's hot," she said.

"Am I out of shape," I said.

"We both are," she answered.

"Typing doesn't give me much muscle," I said.

"Neither does loafing."

"Your brother said you were getting a job. Are you?"

"My brother?"

Give me a scissors and I'll snip off my tongue.

She was looking at me intently.

"When did you see my brother?" she asked.

At first I hesitated. Then I told her. Her face hovered undecided between acceptance and anger.

"Why did you have to go *there*?" she asked.

"I wanted to meet your father," I told her. "I wanted to find out what sort of man had raised you."

She looked at me a little sullenly. I noticed the halo of sunshine around her golden hair, the way the breeze flicked the delicate hairs against her forehead.

"Well, did you find out?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You couldn't have asked me to take you, could you?"

"When did you ever offer to? I've asked you four or five times if I could go with you."

"I don't like to be investigated, Davie."

"I wasn't investigating."

"What do you call it?"

"Listen, Peggy, isn't it . . ."

"Oh, don't start," she said. "I've had enough lectures this week."

She leaned back against the gnarled tree trunk with a sigh. She stared at her lap, then closed her eyes as if to shut me out.

"Everybody wants to investigate me," she said.

I reached out and took her hand but she drew it back.

"Peggy, I'm sorry if I . . . offended you. But I think I have a little right to know something about you. Apparently you don't care to tell me anything about yourself. I have to find out some way."

"You don't believe what I've told you, do you?"

"You've told me practically nothing."

"Maybe I thought it was better."

"Maybe I didn't," I said.

She opened her eyes.

"What would you like to know?" she asked, bitterly, "how I killed Albert? How I took an icepick and . . ."

"That's enough, Peggy."

"Let me tell you all about it," she said.

"You *did* kill your husband, Peggy."

"Yes, and I'd kill him again! You hear that, I'd kill him again. He was a pig, an *animal*!"

"And would you go through everything else again. The trial, the accusations, Jim?"

"Why do you always keep harping on Jim? He's always been good to me."

"Good! He threatens to have you executed for a crime you've already been acquitted on! Is that what you call being good to you?"

"Maybe he's . . ."

"What?"

"I don't know."

"I guess not. Well, Jim hasn't been exactly good to me."

"He's your friend."

"Does a friend have you beaten senseless?"

"That was a mistake and you know it," she said. "He thought you were with his wife."

"He doesn't give a damn about his wife!"

"She's an alcoholic and a nymphomaniac, why should he?"

"What? Is that what the son of a bitch told you? God damn it, Peggy. when the hell are you going to get some sense in your

head? Oh, stop looking so goddamn petulant! That man has been shooting lies into you until you're poisoned! He's the one who *made* Audrey into an alcoholic. And you're as much of a nymphomaniac as she is! She's so faithful to him, it's pathetic."

"Jim told me . . ."

I slammed a palm against my forehead.

"*Jesus!* Jim told you, Jim told you! Horse manure! Let me tell you what he told me. He said he'd do anything to win you. He said he'd lie and cheat and connive and consider it all justified if he won your affections. He said he'd lie about me. He said I could keep refuting his lies but he'd keep lying until you didn't know whether you were coming or going. He said you killed three men! He said you were deranged! Is that the man you want to marry?"

Her face was pale as she looked at me. She shuddered with caught breaths. And I kept thinking of how many troubles would be avoided if people would only tell each other the truth.

"Is all this true?" she said, her voice shaking.

"Uh!"

I lurched to my feet and started sliding, stumbling down the hill in a blind rage.

"Davie!"

I stopped but didn't turn. I heard her shoes on the hill. Then she came heavily against me and moved around to face me.

"Don't leave me!" she said. Almost angrily, as if I were betraying her.

I held her in my arms without spirit.

"Why can't we get away from all this?" she said unhappily. "Why does it follow us wherever we go?"

"Murder has a way of following people."

We stood there a few silent moments, then went back to the tree and sat down on its roots. I took two apples out of one of the bags and we ate without speaking.

"I can't believe it," she said after a while.

I looked at her sharply.

"Davie, I don't . . . mean I don't believe you. I mean that it's so incredible to me. Why hasn't he ever told me about his wife, told me the truth?"

"Because he only tells lies or that segment of the truth which serves his advantage. Like the way he told me how you cut open Dennis's arm but neglected to tell me also that Dennis threatened to expose his crooked practice to the police."

"He told you . . ."

"Peggy, don't deny this. It's been verified."

"I . . . I cut him. He tried to . . . to make love to me."

"Why should that frighten you so?"

"Davie, if you went through what I did, you couldn't stand having anyone's hands on your body. Can't you *see* that?"

"I . . . suppose."

"He . . . touched me. He tried to make me take my blouse off. I . . ." She shuddered. "I don't know what happens when . . . men try that. It just makes me . . ." She couldn't find the words but could only express it by the clenched fist she held shakingly before her.

"All right, Peggy," I said, "I've understood that a long time. You've never seen me try it, although God knows I've wanted to."

She looked at me sadly.

"Oh Davie," she said, "I'm sorry. I don't mean to tease you. You know I don't. It's Just that . . ."

"All right."

"What did you say about Jim's practice?"

"You mean you don't know that either?" I said wearily.

"No, I . . ."

"He's connected with the crime syndicate here, Peggy. He's criminal."

"Oh, *no* . . ."

"Is there anything else you need?" I asked. "He's lied to you, he's cheated you, he's threatened you. He's a criminal, he's had two men killed, he's turned his own wife into a drunk. Is there anything else you need?"

She glanced at me, then back. She sat there silently, looking at the ground. "I'm so . . . confused," she said.

"It's been his most effective weapon against you," I said. "Confusion."

"It's so hard to believe. All at once."

"Take your time," I said. "He'll be the same for years to come."

"Jim," she said, shaking her head.

After a while, we got up and climbed the rest of the way. At the peak of the hill we stood panting and looking down at Los Angeles, which was spread like a carpet at our feet. The climb had been exhausting. At least it had worn away our tempers.

"You should see it at night from here," Peggy said.

"I bet. it's nice."

"It is."

She turned to me. She looked into my eyes, then lowered them. She looked up again, and her hand stole into mine.

"Davie."

"Yes."

"I'm . . . sorry. I mean. I'm sorry. That I keep . . . fighting the only thing that ever meant anything to me."

She looked up and smiled.

And I don't know what happened. Words came over me suddenly. I don't know from where. But suddenly they were in my mouth and I was speaking them.

"Peggy, marry me."

She looked startled.

"*Marry?*" she said.

"Why not? Don't you love me?"

"Davie. *Davie*, you know I do." Her eyes on mine, the way they were that first night. "Oh, Davie."

"Will you?"

"You want to marry me?"

"Yes, Peggy"

"You love me enough to marry me after all this?"

"Peggy!"

The moment seemed huge. Maybe it was the moment that overwhelmed me more than a love for Peggy. High on a hill as if we stood above the world. The hot sun on our heads, the wind on us, the white-domed castle waiting for its prince and princess.

"I love you enough for that," I said.

"I want to tell you," she said, "I want you to know."

I felt myself shiver.

"Know what?"

"I'm going to tell you . . . about myself. Then when . . . when it's over you can decide. If you want me or not. If you even want to see me again after today."

"Peggy, stop . . ."

"Don't say anything," she said. "Listen."

"I killed my husband," she said. "You already know that. But you don't know why. Not really," she said, as I was about to speak. "You can't know how it was."

She clasped her hands in front of her. She didn't look at me. She looked out at the darkening hills

"My mother was dead a long time," she said. "And the woman I stayed with when my father was away had too many troubles to spend any time with me. No one ever told me about . . . *men*. I didn't know *anything*. Oh God, I was so ignorant. Once I . . . once I thought you could have a baby if a man kissed you. I was afraid to let any boy kiss me. Once a boy kissed me at a party in grade school. I was *paralyzed*. I was so afraid. I thought they all hated me and were making me have a baby. I was in torture for *three* months, Davie. Until a girl I knew found out and told me the facts."

I heard her throat move and I knew how much it must have embarrassed and hurt her to tell me these things. I could feel it. I was probably the only one she'd ever told in her whole life.

"I was forced to get married," she went on. "You know about that. I was barely seventeen but I got married. Graduated from high school one day and the next day I got married. Because my father accused me of . . ."

"I know," I said.

Married without knowing the slightest thing about sex," she said, "My wedding night was a nightmare. You can't know how hideous it was. He was like an animal. I know you don't like me to use the word but it's the only one that describes him. He chased me around the hotel room. Maybe that sounds funny but . . ." Her voice broke "It wasn't funny, I was so afraid I couldn't even think. All I could do was run and the more I ran and the more I cried, the more excited he got. He trapped me in a corner and he . . . *ripped* my nightgown off my body. Into

shreds! I hit him, I scratched him, but it didn't do any good. It just excited him.

"I was raped by my own husband."

She sat there in silence, a shiver wracking her frame. Breath quivered in her throat.

"It was like that all the time," she continued, "all through my married life. Me with no knowledge of anything, just fright. And him . . . *brutalizing* me. Night after night until I thought I'd go out of my mind and commit suicide. You don't know what it's like to lie awake at night and plan on committing suicide. I kept trying to make myself do it. But I didn't have the courage. So instead I just went deeper and deeper until I . . . I lost my head."

She drew in a quick breath and bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling.

"I was pregnant," she said. "I was sick. I couldn't hold down any food. Nights I used to just stay in the bathroom on my knees on the cold tile floor . . . just *waiting* to throw up.

"But that didn't matter to him. No, he wanted his flesh, his . . . his toy! I killed him and I swear I'd do it again, *I would, I would!*"

"I understand," I said. But did I?

"No," she said, "I haven't told you yet."

She hesitated a moment. Then she said, "Once I went to a movie and . . . and *the person* I was with put his arm around me and tried to put his hand inside my blouse."

"Peggy."

"No, you have to know sooner or later, Davie. This isn't just another story I'm telling you.

"That same person . . . attacked me later in the car."

"Peggy, don't. Stop torturing yourself."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Peggy"

"Do you?"

Her hands were shaking uncontrollably in her lap.

"Peggy, *please*."

"It was him!" she said, her voice shaking with the memory.

"Him! *My own father!*"

Chapter Seven

As we entered he looked up from the couch. He was dressed informally in a brown suede jacket with a lightly patterned sport shirt under it.

"I've been looking for you all day, Peg," he said firmly. He didn't even glance me.

"Jim," I said.

"Will you get dressed as quickly as possible," he said to Peggy. "We're to go to a barbecue at Lamar Brandeis' beach house. We're late already."

I held my temper. The axe would fall on him soon enough. I glanced at Peggy.

"Jim, I . . ." she started.

"Peggy, I wish you'd hurry."

She took a deep breath. "I can't, Jim," she said.

His eyebrows drew together and I felt inclined to utter a mocking "Bravo" at this splendid bit of facial business. But facetiousness didn't have much of a hold on me. I was thinking of what he might do to me or have done to me when he found out. More particularly of what he might order Steig to do.

Jim was looking at her gravely.

"And why, may I ask?" he said, still ignoring me.

She couldn't finish. She seemed halted by those eyes. Those grey-blue eyes on her, probing, demanding, almost hypnotizing.

"Peggy is staying here," I said.

"No one is speaking to you!"

Anger at last! And anger in Peggy's sight. I almost reveled at it. Something ugly that had been veiled too long from her eyes. Now at last, revealing itself.

"Listen, you pompous ass," I started.

Davie," she pleaded. I stopped and her eyes moved over to Jim. Her throat moved. She bit her lip. "Jim . . ."

"Well, *what* is it, Peggy?"

"Jim, Davie and I are going to be married." She spoke quietly; half in defiance, half with the still remaining timidity.

Jim Vaughan's body twitched. Something almost gave. Like a great wall about to topple. He stared at her, speechless for the first time I could remember since I'd met him, so many years ago. Someone had finally hit Jim Vaughan where it hurt.

And, suddenly, it came to me that Jim was in the same boat as Peggy and Audrey. And all of us to some degree. He was starving for real love and he'd never received it. And now it was tearing him apart at last because the shell he'd made to hide himself was cracking.

"It's not true," he said.

She nodded once. "Yes. It is."

Something seemed to drain from his body. He pumped it back with will power. He managed a thin smile.

"Oh?" he said. "And have you told him how you murdered Albert? Is he willing to . . ."

"Your lies won't work anymore." I told him.

"Lies?" he said.

"I know who murdered Albert. And Dennis. I know about your argument with Dennis. I know that he threatened to expose your . . . your *practice*. And I know about that call Peggy made to you the night that Albert was killed."

I didn't know the last thing but I suspected its truth.

"I know a lot of things Jim," I finished, "a lot of them."

He turned and walked to the door. There he turned again. He looked at us, his face a stone mask. His eyes settled on me like the benediction of a cobra.

"Then maybe you also know," he said, "how you'll live long enough to marry Peggy."

Peggy gasped.

"*Jim!* You wouldn't . . ."

For a moment, Jim's face was stripped of everything. The animal, the hating, frustrated animal showed for that moment. And it was ugly.

"I'll do anything for you," he said. "I've lied, I've cheated for you. Yes, I've *murdered* for you! And now . . ."

His words went on. But they were lost in the sudden explosion of joy in me. He had confessed! Peggy was free. Sick in mind and afraid—but free. And it seemed as if breath began for the first time since I'd been struck on the head that night that seemed so long ago. That had been about two weeks before.

I put my arm around Peggy. "Don't argue with him," I said. "I don't argue with him," I said. "You don't have to argue. Look at him, Peggy. He's beaten."

Those were my words but my stomach was throbbing because I knew that from that moment on, my life was in danger. All possible friendship between us was kicked away for good. His face was cold and murderous.

"I've despised you for a long time," he said, "And now, by God, I'll see to it you bother me no longer."

I tensed myself instinctively, almost expecting him to reach into his pocket and take out a gun. Or an icepick, my imagination said.

I should have known better. That was not his way. Once I'd seen Jim refuse to sweep a floor in his fraternity house room. And he would always have someone else do his dirty work. And murder was dirty work.

He just opened the door.

"Good night," he said as casually as his shaken system would allow.

Then he closed the door quietly and we heard him walking down the path, unhurried, carrying through to the last his pretense that the illusion of his casualness might even deceive himself. We stood there motionless and silent until the sound of

his footsteps had disappeared. Then we heard a car door slam and the big Cadillac drew Jim Vaughan away into the night.

Her hands were shaking.

"I never knew he was like that," she said, frightened. "I never even suspected he was like that."

"I know you didn't, Peggy."

"What are we going to do?"

In answer, I went to the phone and dialed.

"Lieutenant Jones," I said when they answered.

I felt her hand grow limp in mine.

"Yes?"

It was Jones. I told him what Jim had said.

"I'll have him picked up," Jones said, "and you'd better come by the morning. With Miss Lister."

"I will," I said.

"All right. You say he just left 15th Street?"

"Yes."

"All right. Good-bye."

I hung up and looked at Peggy.

"All over, baby." I said.

How wrong can a guy get?

* * *

I left about ten. First I stood at the door and looked through the small peephole. Then I opened it and looked up and down the path to see if there was anyone around. There wasn't. I turned and kissed her.

"Good night, baby," I said.

"Good night, Davie," she said. "Please be careful."

"Don't worry." I told her. "he's probably been picked up already."

She looked worried still.

"Do you really think so?" she asked.

I nodded. I hoped so, anyway. I hated to think of him and Steig running loose. I also didn't care for the idea of Audrey alone, her life ended. But I didn't let myself think about that.

"Maybe you should go down to the station and see." Peggy said

"That's a good idea. Very good."

"Be careful, Davie. If I lost you . . ."

"Shhh. No more now. Smile."

She smiled.

"You *will* be careful," she said

"Honey," I said, "I *like* living You'll find that out when we're married."

That angelic smile.

"Married." she said, almost sighing the word, "to a man I can trust. Oh, I'm so . . . you have no idea how relieved I feel. I can forget everything that ever happened."

I kissed her cheek.

"Breakfast at nine," I said. "Bacon and eggs."

"I'll have it ready," she said cheerfully.

I approached the car cautiously. All sorts of ideas filled my head. Steig was behind a bush or a tree with a rifle, a pistol, an axe, an . . . I wouldn't let myself think the word. Or Steig was in his car waiting to run me down, to drive me to the curb, fire a gun into my brain . . .

I moved along the house, my heart pounding violently. I thought of going back to the house but I felt too ashamed. I'd just said good-bye I knew she'd welcome me back. I could sleep on the couch. But I'd feel silly. And there was nothing definite to be afraid of, anyway. Just imaginations. And I was curious to know whether the police had picked up Jim and Steig. If they hadn't, my imaginations would come to life.

No black Cadillac in sight. Only my little black Ford. I ran to it and jumped in fast after cursing at my shaking fingers that wouldn't let me find the lock with the key.

I slid in and pulled the door shut and locked it. I looked around anxiously as I searched for the ignition with my key. No black figures dashing at the car. I would have been helpless if there had been. I swallowed and slid in the key.

Another fear. Bomb in the motor. I knew it was far-fetched but my mind would not discount it. I looked up and down the street, feeling the tug of rising fear in me. I got out and pulled up the hood, threw the flashlight beam around it. No infernal

machine. I felt like an ass Then I jumped around nervously and looked back up the street. I got back in the car.

I started the motor. Illegal U-turn before I thought. I could have gone over to Santa Monica Boulevard. I turned left at Wilshire and headed toward the ocean. At Lincoln I made another left turn and started for the police station.

I don't know when I first became conscious of the car following me.

But when nervousness kept me looking into the rear view mirror, I saw it.

Big and black and Steig at the wheel.

My hands clamped spasmodically on the wheel and my legs shook. There wasn't much doubt now what he was after. He kept pulling closer, closer, gunning that big motor.

I stepped on the accelerator harder. In my mind I saw visions of him pulling alongside, a gun in his hand. My foot pushed down harder still and my small Ford sputtered ahead. I forged away a little distance. Steig put on the gas and moved up on me.

I pushed harder, hit fifty, then sixty. Still he gained. I felt sweat breaking out on me. I roared past a red light, another. I kept hoping a policeman would pick me up. There weren't any, though. I passed a car, saw Steig pass it too, the big car sweeping out into the opposite lane and then back. He moved up on me.

Suddenly I pushed down hard on the horn, hoping that the noise would attract a police car. The shrill blasts filled the early morning stillness. Still no police. Still the Cadillac moving closer as we both sped toward Venice.

At Olympic he was almost on top of me. My heart was tearing at my chest like a crazy prisoner in his cell. The old Chicago way. Pull alongside, empty gun into driver's head. The rub-out.

Steig moved the Cadillac around me. He was almost beside me. I glanced over my shoulder and saw his face, white as tallow. My hand slipped off the horn. I saw his right arm raised. He was pointing something at me . . .

I jammed on the brakes and almost flew through the windshield as my tires shrieked in friction on the pavement and the car skidded to a dead halt. Steig went speeding past and across the intersection. I dragged the Ford around, almost

panic stricken and started down Olympic for the ocean. I didn't know what to do. I knew the police station was down this way but I didn't know how I was going to get to it. All I could think of was I had to get away from Steig because he wanted to kill me.

I was half-way down the block when the black car came around the corner and started after me. I was suddenly very grateful that my car had been owned by a hot-rodder. The way it sprang forward at my touch, the speed it was giving me was the only thing I had then between life and a bullet in my head.

Then I cried out loud in horror as I roared past the Fourth Street intersection without thinking. There was no way to get to the police station now. I was headed for the coast highway! And on a straightaway I could never outdistance the Cadillac.

Then, as I started down, I saw the light behind me change and saw that Steig had to stop violently as a big trailer truck started across the intersection. It gained me another half block. Then the view behind disappeared and I fled into the dark tunnel under Second Street.

I turned the dark curve and was on the Pacific Coast Highway. I shoved the accelerator all the way to the floor and the Ford almost leaped ahead. The pistons pounded crazily under the hood, it felt as if the car was going to take off. The roar of the motor was tremendous coming out of the double exhaust pipes. The black ocean flew by, the high bluffs of Santa Monica above me. I raced along at ninety and way behind I saw glaring heads as the big Cadillac pulled out of the tunnel.

As I roared past the light on the hill that led to the Santa Monica business district I saw that Steig was gaining on me. No Ford could outdistance that car. souped up or not. At least not a Ford more than a decade old. Sweat ran down over my eyebrows, along my temples. The thing seemed insane but here it *was*. I came to California for the weather, the phrase occurred inanely. I came for the weather and about two months later a man was chasing me in a car because he wanted to shoot me.

I couldn't keep going on the highway. He'd catch up to me too easily. My only chance was eluding him somehow.

At Channel Road. I wheeled around the corner and bulleted up the canyon, past the Golden Bull, alongside of the flash flood channel. I'd passed the first intersection when Steig turned too.

I moved up to the second intersection and made a sharp left turn.

There were two streets branching off. Without thinking I steered my speeding car into the right one, too afraid even to think that it might not be a through street. My Ford powered up a gradual hill and spurted down the grade on the other side. The bright heads of the Cadillac swung around and were boring on me.

My hands were slick on the wheel now. I had to keep taking off one at a time to rub them, almost frenziedly, on my trouser leg. I had no idea where I was going. Finding a policeman was hopelessly out of the question now.

The only thing that could possibly save me now was Henry Ford's 1940 model. I was almost praying that it held together. If anything went now, I was dead.

My eyes were straining to see if there was anything ahead. I was too upset to think of getting my glasses from the glove compartment.

I almost turned left, then saw at the last possible second a sign reading—*This Is Not a Through Street*. I jerked the car around, jumped over a curb and back into the street, gasping for breath. I roared up a hill, past the silent Country Club, past the tennis court that stood empty and white in the moonlight. The headlights behind me, the throaty growl of the Cadillac's motor. Steig with a gun.

Down a hill. Two intersections. I chose the right by dumb luck. I myself speeding around a twisting road, over a wooden bridge and through a woods so deep it reminded me of the Hurtgen Forest, another place where I'd faced death. But then I was on foot fighting war. Now I was in a car and a civilian and at war with no one. But a man was following me and he was going to kill me if he could because he'd been ordered to kill me and there are men who will kill on order. And the man who had ordered him had been my friend once.

A sign. *Sunset Boulevard*. And an arrow pointing. I jerked the wheel around and fired up the hill to Sunset. Now Steig was very close. He knew how to handle that car of his.

There was a hill on the right side I saw as I sped up Sunset toward the Pacific Palisades. I don't know why I turned onto it. One of those snap decisions made more by reflex than by mind. I just wheeled around and went roaring up the steep incline,

watching those heads behind me whip around in the dark and start after me again like blinding monster eyes.

Now I was headed into the hills. I hadn't a chance in the world of finding anyone to help me. It would be deserted up here, probably not a house for miles.

And, for the first time since I'd started being chased, I began to realize how afraid I was. So afraid my body was starting to go numb. A person goes through life and never sees violence except in a war. But this was personal violence. I couldn't understand it and it frightened me. Steig didn't even know me but he hated me. And because another man had told him to kill me, he was going at it as if his life depended on it.

A winding road, up and up. I kept the car in second and the pedal on the floor. The phrase occurred to me out of nowhere. I hoped that man had been telling the truth. The creeping indicator indicated that he might have. The motor roared under the dark sky as it kept pulling me up the hill rapidly and I kept spinning the wheel wildly to keep on the road.

A gate across the road!

I jerked the wheel instinctively and the Ford climbed up a small embankment beside the gate. The wheels ground through soft earth and came down again on the other side of the gate, back on the road. I threw the car into second again and picked up speed; then into high. It was a lucky break. Steig couldn't get the heavier Cadillac through the soft ground easily. I saw his lights spin around behind me as the car skidded, dug into earth.

I moved on through an open gateway into a wide concrete stretch. There was a dark house looming out of the ground on my left. And, suddenly, I realized that I was back in Will Rogers State park where Peggy and I had hiked that time. The house was that of the late humorist. The park was closed, there wouldn't be a soul anywhere close by. My heart jolted as Steig came powering through the gateway after having regained the road.

There were two ways to go. I remembered that the one ahead led to the park entrance. I had come in by the road that is used for the exit. If I went straight ahead, I'd go down that road and come to a closed gate. But there was no way around *that* one.

All in the space of seconds I knew that and I spun the Ford left and headed for a narrow bridge that led to the other road.

My fender raked across the wooden railing as I crossed the bridge. I jammed my accelerator to the floor as I gunned up the tree-lined road. That led to . . . I didn't know.

Stables. Bleak and dark and deathly still under the moonlight. I sped up the road passing training yards, dark buildings. I kept going, praying that there was an exit, my eyes straining ahead to see if there was an exit. There wasn't. I left the paving and the car plowed over the grass through low bushes, around a flimsy fence. My speed kept going down as the soft earth impeded the wheels.

And, finally, the wheels dug in too far and the whole car spun around crazily, almost tipping over. The wheels started grinding away at the earth.

Without a thought or a plan, I flung open the door and plunged out into the night and started racing across the ground, headed for the thickly overgrown hill on my left.

I jumped out of the Cadillac's bright head beams. I ran and heard the big car stop and grind itself into the earth. I heard a door slam and other feet running. I reached the foot of the hill and started up.

Steig moved fast for a big man. He was close behind and there was no way I could be quiet. I made a loud noise as I thrashed through bushes and tore through thick undergrowth, slashing my skin, ripping my trousers and shirt sleeves on the brittle twigs.

Not a sound from Steig. He might have been a brainless robot built for only one purpose. He came running up after me, his big feet thudding on the ground, his big body plowing through all the shrubbery that blocked his way.

Something scurried away under my feet and I leapt to the side running. My heart jolted harder still as I remembered the mountain lion tracks Peggy and I had seen that day.

Now my breath was going. A stitch started knifing my side. My face and body ran with sweat. But I couldn't stop. I thought of falling to the dark ground and hugging it, hoping that Steig would bypass me. But it was too much of a chance. He'd hear the sound of my running stop. And he might even stumble right over me. He wasn't fooling. He'd just fill my body with bullets.

I kept going. But the going was tough. And getting tougher. The shrubbery was getting so thick I kept banging into

branches and being knocked aside. It's a wonder I didn't put out my eyes on the sharp sabers of branches. One needle-pointed twig raked across my forehead as I plunged on and the laceration drove lances of pain into my head.

I reached the top of the hill. For a moment I must have been outlined against the sky. Because, suddenly, the night was torn by a loud explosion that echoed. And I heard something whistle by me.

I drove myself over the peak and found a hard, flat path. I started racing down it like a fool, clearly visible. In the bright moonlight. I don't know what I had in mind. Maybe getting distance between Steig and me. My legs trembled as I ran, they felt as if they were ready to collapse.

Another shot. It kicked up dirt by me and sent me plunging to the right. I couldn't see where.

My footing was gone. I found myself sliding and clawing down a steep embankment covered with shrubbery. My hands tried to find something to stop my rapid and helpless descent but I got only friction burns. My body kept rubbing and banging against earth and rocks and bushes.

At the bottom of the drop. I turned a complete somersault and landed on my side with a violent impact.

Only fear got me up. My breath was gone. It felt as if it had been ripped from my lungs. My side ached sharply. Every limb ached. Only a force of survival could have kept me moving. I started across the ground, in a hollow so deep that a hill kept most of it in dark shadow.

I heard something overhead and I stopped dead. I thought that if I were silent he might think the fall had killed me.

I looked up and, on the crest of the embankment, saw his big outlined. He was looking down. I held my breath.

He stooped down for support and started climbing down.

I turned and ran. Shrubby whipped past me, clawing at me like maniacal arms. Branches flailed at my face and body. My chest ached. I breathed through a wide open mouth.

Then Steig lost his grip. I stopped and whirled. I couldn't see but I heard him clawing his way down the embankment and landing heavily. Silence. I waited. Was it possible he'd been knocked out? I waited, trying to hear something beside my own breathless, whistling gasps.

He was moving again.

I turned with a whimper and started running again. He was still coming. Slower but still coming. He must have been deranged. It was all I could think of. No man could be so intent on killing and be in his right mind. His thick, Teutonic brain was devoid of everything but murderous hate.

I ran into the embankment. And, gasping, looked up to see that I was trapped, blocked by an almost perpendicular wall of earth and bush. No way out but back or sideways. I had no idea how small the hollow was. And if I ran sideways I'd be running out into the spotlight of the moon. I felt a panic-stricken cry tear at my throat. *Help!* I wanted to scream it. But who was there to hear? At least I didn't lose my mind that badly.

I heard Steig stumbling through the brush. It was like one of those crazy dreams where no matter how ingenuously you hide yourself, your pursuer finds you without any trouble. As if he knew where you were at every moment. That's what I felt about Steig.

In a brainless fright, I spun around and started to pull myself up the sheer incline. Some of the bushes I held on to slipped out and I grabbed out for more. I half-climbed, half-pulled myself up by my aching arms. I was closer now. I dug my feet into the earth and lurched up the embankment for a way.

I stopped dead and hung there against the earth trying to be absolutely quiet as Steig came bursting through the shrubbery and stood at the bottom of the rise.

I clenched my teeth. The breaths caught and almost choked me. My heart was hammering violently. Was it possible he didn't see me? I didn't know then that he'd lost his glasses in his fall and couldn't see much of anything.

Then dirt trickled down from under my feet and it silted through the air, down on Steig. I twisted my neck to look down. I could see the dark, shapeless hulk of him down there. He was looking up I was sure. It was an insane picture. A half sightless killer ready to fire bullets into my body and me clinging to the side of a hill no more than twenty-five feet above him. Wondering if he could see me. Thinking, momentarily, that Jim had won his victory.

Steig started to climb up.

It was no use going on, I knew that. The hill got steeper and steeper as it went up until it was vertical with the trees and bushes growing out sideways. I couldn't take it. I was too exhausted, I'd slip and fall. He'd be able to see me.

My mind felt all jumbled and thick as I tried to think of some way to defend myself. I had to have a weapon. A stick, a rock, anything. My eyes fled around, squinting.

I saw one. A big rock. It was perched precariously to my right. My hand touched it, then I had to pull it back quickly to get support.

I reached for the rock again. I lost balance and had to throw myself against the dirt, slapping for support. The dislodged dirt slid down on Steig. He didn't say anything but kept climbing methodically. I could hear his breathing now, thick, whistling breaths. He was an animal with a quest. Insensitive and mute, he climbed up to kill me. Crawling fear covered my flesh.

I edged over quickly and my fingers touched the cool stone surface. I almost jarred it loose. My heart leaped at the sensation of complete terror in me. I felt as if my hands would freeze, my whole body be struck with paralysis and I would just be stricken there until he came up to me, put the barrel of the gun against my body and pulled the trigger.

The breathing. Closer. Coming up at me. My lips drew back in an uncontrolled gasp of horror. There was no time. *No time!* My mind howled the words. He had heard me, I knew he'd heard me. In a matter of seconds he would be able to see me despite shadow, despite impaired sight. He was almost to the point where his hands touched my feet.

I lurched over, slipped and caught onto a heavy root with one hand, to the rock with the other. I pressed my body against the rock and looked down. My feet slipped and I hung down loosely a moment before I found a foot support. I tested the support with frantic haste. I had to have both hands free.

I froze rigid. Steig was just below me. He'd stopped climbing. He was reaching into his pocket as he squinted up. It was so still I could hear his fumbling hands on his trouser leg.

I grabbed onto the rock and tried to turn. The scuttling sound made him throw up his arm. An explosion surrounded me and I felt hot flame gouge through the flesh on my right shoulder. It must have been the pain that did it. Because I suddenly forgot

about balance. I just grabbed onto the rock and started falling down toward Steig.

He threw up his gun again with a guttural cry as my dark body came heaving down on him.

He had no chance to fire. I held the rock before me and drove it violently into his face and we both went flopping down the hill like broken dolls. I grabbed out for support as we fell and managed to grab onto a bush and cling there as his body went all the way down and landed with a single hollow thud.

Silence.

I hung on a long time, my chest shuddering as I breathed. Then, finally, when I'd stopped the terrible shaking a little, I eased myself down the hill to where he was.

I stood over the body.

His face was in moonlight which made it even whiter. It was crushed in.

The sight of it made me gag and turn away. I stood with my back to him, shuddering uncontrollably. Steig's left arm was twisted out of shape too. He'd been climbing that hill after me with a broken arm.

* * *

I don't know how I found my way back to the car. I was sick and I was exhausted. My legs trembled under me. I shivered from the cold wind. I kept wiping the sweat off my face and neck as I stumbled through the wilderness.

I got lost for a while but finally I spotted the headlights still shining and heard the rumbling of the Cadillac's motor. Mine had stalled.

I climbed into the Ford and slumped down on the seat. I pulled the door shut and turned out the light and turned off the ignition switch. Then I lay down on the cool seat cover, pressing my cheek against it, gasping for breath. I turned on my back with my legs bent up.

I must have fallen asleep or into an exhausted coma for more than an hour. I jerked up quickly, eyes staring around me and I didn't remember what had happened for a good minute. Then I straightened up with a groan. My body was sore and aching. Every bone felt bruised, every inch of skin either torn or scratched.

It took a while to back out of the soft earth. I went backwards around the fence, into the stable area again. I left the Cadillac still running, its lights on. I swung my car around and headed back for town.

I went up Sunset and then down Chataqua to the coast highway. I slopped at a bar and called Jones and told him about Steig and told him I was going back to my room. He asked me to come in but I hung up. I was too tired. I went back to the car. I just wanted to go to bed and forget everything.

I drove slowly up the canyon and down Seventh Street. I turned left at Wilshire and parked across the street from my room, I unlocked the door and stumbled across the room in darkness.

In the light of the bulb I saw my face in the medicine cabinet mirror. It was puffy and scratched. I gritted my teeth in pain. I drew open my torn shirt and looked at the thin line of blood-caked flesh where the bullet had gouged. I drew in a pained breath. Then I stared at the mirror and felt a burst of insane rage in me. I felt rage at Steig and wanted to kill him again. I wished I had Jim alone too. The same rock in my hand.

"Son of a bitch!" I snarled at the mirror, at the world. "Dirty, lousy son of a bitch!"

"So he failed." said Jim Vaughan.

Chapter Eight

I whirled and stared at my bed.

He was sitting there in the shadows, hat and top coat on.

"Where is he?" he asked.

I started for him, then stopped as he leveled the gun at me.

"Don't come any closer, David," he said, "or I'll take the pleasure of putting a slug in your belly."

I gaped at him. Sickness hit me again. I'd just escaped from death, was I to be asked to face it again? I don't know whether I was afraid or outraged at the turn of events. I think it was more outrage. Fear had been so much in me that there wasn't any left. I had to concentrate to realize that I might die now too.

"Well?" he asked.

"He's dead," I said. "I killed him."

Surprise on his face a moment. The slightest of consternation. Then a flicker of amusement. Even now Jim could force upon himself the pose of detached bystander.

"Dead," he said. "So, at long last, you are also guilty of murder."

"Murder," I said. "You speak of murder."

"Indeed," he said, smiling deceptively, "I'm quite versed on the subject."

He was drunk. I hadn't realized it at first. That smile, the slightly, almost imperceptibly disheveled appearance. The tie knot slightly off center, the hair slightly uncombed, the hat at the minutest wrong angle. All added up. I remembered how Jim had been at college the few times he'd been drunk. He'd been quite unpredictable. And this time he had a gun in his hand. And hate for me.

And I remembered something else, too. Me refusing to go down to the station to see Jones. He must have known that Jim would be after me. Now it was too late.

I know you're versed on the subject," I said, my mind tripping over itself in the attempt to find an escape, "well versed."

He gave me a look of dispassionate criticism.

"So the poor, bungling kraut finally found his peace," he said, "And to think it was at *your* hands. The hands of a dull, indefinite pacifist. The young American idealist, the writer of novels, the seeker of truths . . ."

He kept rattling on. There was a reddish tint in his cheeks. And a light in his eyes that wasn't there normally. I let him rattle. I hoped he'd rattle himself to sleep.

I moved for my chair.

"Careful, careful," he warned, breaking off his bantering continuity.

"I'm not trying anything," I said, disgustedly. "Do I look like I'm in any condition to try anything?"

"You look like something three cats dragged in," he said. He lowered the gun.

I wondered what he was planning. He might have been confused, it was just possible. I don't think he knew what to do. He wanted me dead but the idea of personally committing murder had never occurred to him, I'm sure. That fell in the province of menial labor. But he might change his mind.

Except for one thing. My mind seized on it. Steig had done those killings. I was sure of that. And now Steig was dead. And there was no one who could prove Jim was involved. He was clear. I think even he realized that.

"So poor, benighted Steig, Kaiser Wilhelm's beloved warrior, Chicago's beloved killer and navigator of getaway cars, is dead. We bow our heads for Walter Steig, victim of society's perverseness."

His face grew cold, the humor drained from him in an instant.
"I never trusted the fool. He was a lunk-head."

Amusement back.

"It must have been the climate that got him," he said.

He stopped talking and looked at me. He raised the gun.

"I should shoot you," he said, "now, while the opportunity is here."

A car motor. Headlights coming to the curb. I saw them out of the corner of my eye. My heart thudding. Was it Jones? And, if it was, would he come thudding up or the porch?

It was fortunate that Jim was drunk. Otherwise he surely would have heard the car door slamming, the footsteps on the porch, the shadowy figure that stopped outside of the screen window.

"Now that you're going to kill me," I said, "you can tell me about your murdering of Albert and Dennis."

He looked at me with that thin, supercilious smile on his lips. The light reflected off his polished, rimless glasses.

"You had them killed, didn't you?" I said, hoping that there was no sign of eagerness in my voice.

His face sobered.

"Of course I did," he said. "They both stood in my way."

"Albert?" I said.

"He attacked her," he said.

"And Dennis?"

It seemed too good to be true. A confession in the hearing of a police lieutenant. "Why go on?" he said. He raised his gun and pointed it at me. "And now a third victim?" I said.

Jim didn't point the gun at me. He just let it hang loosely in his hand.

"Who knows?" he said.

"You can put down that gun now," Jones said from the window.

Vaughan twitched a little. But he didn't turn. He seemed to listen a moment as if waiting for Jones to say something else. Then that smile came to his lips again.

He seemed too drunk, too emotionally exhausted to feel fright.

"Trapped," he said.

Then Jones took Jim Vaughan away.

I rushed over to Peggy and told her and we decided to drive down to Tijuana the next day. When she saw my bruised, swollen face and the torn gully in the flesh of my shoulder she cried terribly and couldn't help me bandage it.

We packed her clothes and then I went back to my room and packed some things for myself. My shoulder throbbed and I felt exhausted but I was at peace.

I slept that night. I turned out the light without dread. The end of it. I figured, closing my eyes.

No.

* * *

Because the next day after I'd gone to a doctor, after I'd picked up a wedding ring, after I'd bought a bottle of champagne to open at night, I found a note slipped under my door.

I opened it.

At first I couldn't believe it. It seemed too cruel a joke.

The letterhead was *Santa Monica Police* and the message said that . . .

I drove as fast as I could up Wilshire. I wheeled around the corner of 15th and jerked to a stop in front of Peggy's house. I ran in the open door.

She whirled in fright as I entered. Her fingers clenched on the dress she was holding.

"Davie! What is it?"

"Are you finished packing?" I asked quickly. "We have to get out of here right away."

"Why?"

I handed her the note. She looked at it. Then looked up at me her eyes frightened.

"Jim?" she said.

The note said that Jones hadn't shown up yet.

My car raced down Lincoln. Every time I hit a red light I thought it was a plot. My eyes stayed fastened to the road ahead. I wasn't going to the police. I didn't want to stay in town. I wanted to get out fast.

I remember looking out the rear view mirror. But I didn't notice anything. Because, without thinking, I was only looking for a black Cadillac.

* * *

Tijuana. A five hour drive. Dirty and almost wordless, with me looking at the rear view mirror. With Peggy sitting close by me and glancing at me in fear every once in a while.

We stood side by side in the little place and I slipped the ring on Peggy's finger. It felt wrong though. As if I were being forced into it. As if we really weren't sure but had to go through with it. Inevitable. There was nothing casual, nothing leisurely or pleasant. The nerve-wracking aspect of a man following to kill me. And if I felt uneasiness at the haste of the wedding, Peggy felt it twice as much.

"What is it?" I asked.

For the last ten miles she'd been staring ahead glumly at the highway. She shook her head.

"What is it?" I asked again.

She tried to smile and press my hand reassuringly.

"Nothing," she said.

"Tell me."

She shrugged.

"I guess I know," I said. "The wedding. The way we're rushing. It isn't what we'd hoped for. It doesn't seem like a wedding at all."

"I . . . I" she started. "I guess it's because it reminds me of my first wedding. The same rushing and . . . I was even more scared then."

"Scared?"

"Of him. Of . . . my . . . of George."

"What are you afraid of now?"

"Not of you," she said, but it didn't sound convincing. "Jim, I guess."

That didn't sound convincing either. I tried to get her mind on something else. I thought I knew what she was afraid of.

"As soon as we hear one way or the other about Jim," I said, "we'll have a real church wedding. We'll go back to New York and have all my family at it."

She turned, a smile flickering on her tired face. We'd been driving all morning and afternoon.

"Honest?" she said.

"Honest."

She leaned against me wearily and was at peace for a moment. She held my arm.

Then a horn honked behind us and she sat up with a gasp and looked back. The car passed us and disappeared up the dusty highway. Peggy drew in a heavy breath.

"We'll be out of it soon," I said.

But I was beginning to get the feeling that neither of us would ever get out of it. It seemed to be going on endlessly. Months of it. Would it go on for years?

Night was falling over the highway and I was sleepy and tired. And starving, too. We hadn't eaten much all day and my stomach was about empty.

I signed the motel registry with as pleasant a smile at Peggy as I could manage.

Mr. and Mrs. David Newton, Los Angeles.

For a moment I had the crazy notion that the man was going to ask us for identification because we looked so young. But the man didn't. He looked bored and slid us the keys. To Cabin K.

We walked along the gravel path under the sky that was hidden by dust clouds. And we tried to pretend we were happy.

But every sound made us start nervously and I was almost getting angry at Peggy, with a whole society for getting me into this. There were no thoughts of wedding night pleasures. I felt grimy and disgusted with life. It took a strong effort to be pleasant for her sake

Cabin K. All wrong. A slanty little structure, painted green and white and the paint was probably an inch thick. The shutters hung lopsided and the window curtains looked as if they hadn't been laundered since V-J day. And then with lye.

I stood before the door and looked at her. She shook her head once and I didn't go near her. It would have been a tragic

mockery to carry her over that dismal threshold. I just opened the door and stepped aside.

She looked inside. Something held her back. She shuddered once.

"Davie."

"Don't be afraid," I said. "Have I ever harmed you?"

The pleasantness slipped as she still hesitated.

"Come *on*, Peggy," I said. "I'm too tired to make a pass at anyone."

She stood inside looking around the room as I put the bags on the bed. The room was terrible. For anybody. Especially for us. We were newlyweds and the room was dingy and uninviting. No touch of sweet romance. No windows with boughs stirring outside. A dusty floor, a touch of stale whiskey in the air.

I looked at her. And the expression on her face made me forget my own irritation and worries. I took her hand.

"Peg," I said, "I'm sorry. I wish it was a castle. But it's all we can get now. We *have* to sleep."

"I know," she said. Without enthusiasm.

While she was in the bathroom I went down to the manager's office.

"Hey, can I get some food?" I asked.

"Afraid not," he said. "All I got's candy. And that popcorn machine over there."

"How about some ice?"

"Only got a little, mister," he said. "Ice's hard to get around here."

"Look," I said, "we've just been married. And I have a bottle of champagne in my bag. Can't you let us have a little ice? Maybe a pailful or something?"

He looked at me studiedly. Then he got compassion. He got a pail and put a chunk of ice in it.

"Fifty cents," he said.

I paid him and held back the temper.

"What about glasses?" I said irritably.

"Glasses in the cabin."

"I can't get this chunk of ice in the glasses," I said. He reached under the counter . . .

"Voila!" I cried to her as she came out of the bathroom. I'd chopped up the ice into small pieces and decided to chill the bottle instead of putting the ice chips in the glasses. I'd stuck the bottle into the pail. But the ice only covered about two inches on the bottom of the pail. The champagne would never chill.

"Oh!" Peggy said. "Champagne!"

She tried to smile and keep smiling. But even Peggy with her imagination couldn't overcome all this dinginess. Couldn't picture us as being anywhere but where we were—a dreary cabin K on the highway.

She sat on the bed as I opened the bottle. I noticed her glance at the pail, at the object beside it. Then she turned her eyes away and smiled at me again.

She was wearing a long dressing robe over her body. She sat on the bed and watched me. But she wasn't relaxed. Her poise was strained, her lips forced into a smile.

I put down the unopened bottle and sat beside her and put my arms around her.

"Honey, be happy," I said. "It's not paradise, I know. But we're away at last. And we're free of the past."

Her arms clung to me.

"Oh, Davie," she said, "don't let anything happen to me. Don't let anything spoil it."

"I won't," I said, cheerfully. Then I stood up and opened the bottle.

"Ooops!"

The white foaming champagne spurted out of the bottle mouth and ran onto the floor. I leveled the bottle quickly and poured it into the glasses. Then I put down the bottle on the bedside table next to the pail. I put some pieces of ice into the glasses.

"I shouldn't dilute it," I said, "but if I don't, the champagne will be too warm."

"It's all right," she said.

I handed her a glass. I held my own out to her.

"My love," I toasted.

She smiled. We sat side by side and drank. I was thirsty. The cool tingling of the champagne tasted good. I polished off the glass in two swallows.

"Popcorn, m'lady?" I asked.

She took a few pieces. I tried some. It was stale.

"I wish we could get a steak dinner," I said, "but there's nothing around here. I promise as soon as we get back to Santa Monica or . . . wherever we're going," I added as her face grew concerned. "I'll buy you a nice, juicy sirloin."

"You'll make my mouth water," she said.

I felt a little lightheaded. I blinked at her and grinned.

"Mrs. Newton," I said.

She smiled dutifully and I poured two more glasses. One and a half really. Peggy had only drunk about half a glass.

I felt the warmth coursing my body and I had a little more pop corn. It made me thirsty. I put the bag aside because it spoiled the taste of the champagne.

The stuff worked fast. I felt as if I were floating. I put my head down on her lap and felt the bed rolling gently under me. I reached out casually and stroked her soft, swelling breast.

She tried to smile but she couldn't.

"Baby," I said.

I raised up and kissed her on the mouth. I felt something rising in me. A familiar sensation. Everything had been building it up through the months. And now hunger and lightheadedness were added to it. A cabin isolated. And my brain saying speciously—she's your wife now, you can do anything to her you want. The immediate philosophy of the deluded male.

I squirmed on the bed and poured some more to drink.

"Peggy?"

"No thanks," she said. "Maybe we should . . . find someplace to eat."

"There isn't any place around here," I said.

"Maybe up the road."

"Honey, not now. I'm tired. I don't want to drive again."

"But . . ."

Her chest rose and fell with a shudder. She swallowed. But not champagne.

"Do you think Jim is . . . ?

I had my mouth over her to stop her talking about it.

"Now, never mind him," I said. "This is our wedding night."

"Davie."

Her fingers in my hair were shaking.

I ran a hand over her leg.

"Davie," she said. I started to unbutton her robe.

"Why are you doing that?" she asked, like a timorous little girl.

"Because . . ."

Her hands held mine.

"No, Davie." Gently pleading.

"Peggy, stop it," I said. "What are you afraid of? Have I ever hurt you?"

"No, but . . ."

"Well, stop it, then."

"I'm sorry. I just . . ."

I opened another button. She was staring at me, her face white and tense. She looked like some maiden about to be sacrificed to a horrible god.

"Peggy!" I said angrily.

She had her dress on under the robe.

"Davie, please don't be angry. Don't you see I'm . . ."

* * *

"See! See *what?*"

"Davie . . ."

"What do you think marriage is, a business relationship?" I snapped pettishly. "Oh . . . for God's sake . . ."

"Davie."

I didn't look at her. I had another drink. She drank another glass. We sat there in silence and we both drank. She seemed to be trying to get drunk. Relentlessly trying to lose herself so she could please me. But it seemed she couldn't do it, as if this fear in her were embedded in her very flesh.

I don't remember every moment. But I do remember that she took off her robe after I acted sullen. She took her dress off and

lay beside me in her slip. Her motions were nervous and shaky. She kept drinking. Her lips shook. She tried to smile.

"You won't . . . do . . . anything, will you?" she asked, quietly.

I didn't answer. My breath was heavier. I could see the lines of her body through the silk now. A beautiful body. My lips pressed against the warm flesh of her shoulder. I remembered that night we'd gone to Ciro's and Peggy had worn the low dress. I thought of all the times I'd wanted her. I thought of Audrey screaming into my chest. I wanted to scream too. Hunger seemed to have been converted into an ugly drive in me. I couldn't keep my hands off her. My mind kept trying to stop me but I kept kicking it aside.

I caressed her. She shuddered.

"Davie." A frightened little voice.

"Stop that," I said.

I heard her throat move. I kissed her throat. She drew away. I pulled her close in what I thought was a gentle way. She drew away again and stood up.

"I think I'll take a bath," she said.

It sounded so obvious to me. It irritated me. I stood up quickly and stood before her. I slid my hands around her.

"No," I said.

"I'm . . . Davie, can't you . . ."

Her eyes like a frightened bird's. Trapped, helpless.

"Peggy, I'm your husband." Thick voice, uncomprehending voice.

"I know, I know but . . . you said you'd . . ."

"I just want to touch you."

"Davie, please."

"I just want to *touch* you."

"*Davie*."

"All I want to do is . . . touch you."

I was lost in a fog. I kept running my hands over her. She kept backing away. I followed. I was out of my mind. I grabbed her. She squirmed out of my embrace.

"No," she said. More firmly now. A little fire in her eyes.

I grabbed her.

"I told you to stop it!" I said angrily and the unspent fury of the last months surged up into my voice. She tore away from me.

"You're not going to touch me!"

"No?"

I moved toward her and she backed away. I thought about her husband. I threw the thought aside. Almost, her fright drove me on harder. I could almost understand a man wanting to take Peggy by force. She seemed the sort of woman.

She backed into the bedside table.

"Davie . . . no!"

I clutched her shoulders.

Suddenly her eyes expanded, her lips drew back as she sucked in a terrified breath. I could almost hear the scream tearing up through her throat.

That was when something managed to lance its way through the thick coating of mindless desire in me. I saw myself. I saw her. And I was doing to her what they'd all done. I was no better than any of them. And the shame of it made me turn away with tears in my eyes and a shaking hand over my eyes.

"I'm . . . I'm . . . I'm . . . sorry," I muttered brokenly.

A sudden rushing sound. A biting pain in my right shoulder right below where the bandage ended. I jumped around with a gasp.

She was holding the icepick in her hand and staring at me, her eyes like white dotted marbles in her head, her lips pressed together into a hideous white gash.

My mouth fell open. I stared at her dumbly.

I don't know how long we stood there without a sound. She was like a tensed animal, the icepick raised in her hand, her dark pupils boring into me.

I moved back a step then. The words seemed to come from my mouth by themselves.

"You're *crazy*," I said.

She still looked at me, something tight holding her together.

Then she noticed the big drops of blood running over my hand and dripping on the floor. She leaned forward a little, the

berserk look fading from her face. The features relaxed. Her arm dropped.

"Davie?" she said.

"Get away from me."

"Davie."

"You *heard* me."

"Davie, I didn't stab you."

I backed away some more.

Davie, it wasn't you."

'Get away."

I didn't stab at you. Davie, not at you!"

I said get away!"

I backed off in horror. And then the idea came and the breath was sucked out of me.

"You killed Albert, didn't you?" I said.

She stopped. She looked at me blankly.

"You *killed* him, didn't you?" I said hoarsely.

"Davie. I . . ."

"Didn't you?"

"Davie . . ."

"You did, didn't you!"

"What difference does it make?"

"Oh my God!" I cried. "You kill a man and you ask what difference it makes!"

"You said you could forget everything," she said.

"Forget that you murdered a man!"

"He wasn't a man, he was an animal!"

"He was a *man*, a man! And you killed him!"

Her throat moved. She started to tremble. She raised her hand. She saw the icepick and then threw it away with revulsion and it rolled over the floor.

"I didn't," she said weakly.

"You did!"

"Yes, I . . . I killed . . . h-h-him. But . . ."

I felt myself drained in an instant. As if by some invisible vampire of the strength. I staggered back, hardly feeling the pain in my shoulder at all.

"You lied to me," I said dizzily. "All this time you lied to me."

"No, Davie, no," she said miserably.

She was trying to wipe away the past. It was what she always meant. That we should forget everything, even that she had killed.

"You said what happened before didn't matter. You said it didn't," she said.

"What are you?" I said. "An animal yourself? You kill a man and then you say forget it."

"I was out of my mind. I couldn't help it. I . . . didn't mean to."

"Why did you lie? Why did you lie to me?"

"Davie, don't." Tears were flooding down her cheeks. "I was upset. I couldn't lose you. You're all I have now. Don't desert me. I need you. I *need* you."

"And you let me think that Jim killed them," I said.

"He had Dennis killed," she said, "I didn't do that. What's the difference if he dies for one crime or two. Didn't he *say* he killed Albert?"

He'd lied for her. I knew it suddenly. I hadn't gotten any confession from him. He'd heard Jones out there and he'd lied once more to save Peggy.

I couldn't get it. I just couldn't understand it. All I could think was one thing.

"And we're married," I said. "We're *married*."

Something hard gripped her features.

"Oh, that's awful, isn't it?" she said, her voice breaking. "That's just horrible, isn't it?"

"I don't think you feel guilty at all," I said, "I think you feel *justified* for everything you did. You think you had a *right* to kill Albert, don't you?"

"I *did* have a right! He was a pig! He tore at my clothes and he tried to make me filthy with his own dirt! I *had* to kill him! I had to, can't you see that!"

"No, I can't! I can't see it!"

Something seemed to start in her. Way down. Like a flood of hot lava surging up to the mouth of a volcano. It shook her body as it came up. It made her arms tremble at her sides, made the fingers clamp into boney fists.

It exploded in my face.

"You're like all of them!" she yelled. "Like every damn one of them! *Defending* each other! *Plotting* with each other against us! Driving us into a pit! A *pit*! *Hurting* us, *brutalizing* us, *destroying* us, making us into tools for your filthy hands! Twisting our hopes into knots! And tearing our hearts out! You don't care, oh, you don't care! You're all the same, *all* of you! You don't care about us! You don't care if we have minds, you don't care if we're sensitive, you don't care if we're afraid, you just *take* us! You just rip the beauty out of our lives and give us ugliness instead! And then you tell everybody what wonderful men you are, how *happy* you've made us! All of you—*pigs*! Get away from me you pig, you pig, *YOU PIG!*"

Her blood-drained fists were crushed against her white cheeks and saliva ran from her twitching mouth. I stood there, paralyzed, looking in blank horror at a girl I'd never seen.

I didn't even hear the door open. The first thing I knew was Peggy turning. And then I looked.

Jim.

* * *

He came across the room quickly. I couldn't move. I watched him take off his top coat and put it over her shoulders. She tried to throw it off but, without a moment's hesitation, he slapped her across the face. Hard. The red flared up on her cheek and she gasped and backed away.

"You're coming with me," he said. "Don't argue with me. You'd better if you don't want to be turned in. You don't want to be executed for murder, do you?"

Her eyes on him were wide and staring. Eyes like an insane cat.

"I'm all you have now," he said. "Your dear *David* wouldn't lift a finger to save you now!"

His words seemed to whip her into submission. The wildness was gone. The deepest Peggy came into control. The weak Peggy, the Peggy who always needed guidance and discipline.

Who could never think for herself. She looked at him like a frightened child at its parent.

"Jim, you . . ." she started, "you won't . . . let them do . . ."

"Come on, Peggy," he said. "How long do you think I can protect you from the world?"

She didn't answer. She just stood by him and let him lead her to the door. I stood there bleeding and not feeling it. Staring after them helplessly. Detached from reality.

"You won't let them, will you Jim"? she begged.

He looked at her pathetic face. He heard the lost fright in her voice. And, for the first time in his life, he showed in my sight that there was more than machinery in him.

He drew her against him and pressed his lips to her hair.

"Peggy," he said, "oh, *Peggy*."

Only an instant. Then he raised his head and his face was hard.

"They won't get you," he said. "Not while I live."

I might have been invisible standing there. The blood dripping from my finger tips onto the floor. Me watching a world slip away from me. A rootless, detached feeling. As if something I'd called my heart had been torn away leaving me hollow, a shell.

I noticed that there was somebody outside the door.

"Is there anything wrong in here?" the voice asked. "I heard shouting."

Jim Vaughan spoke calmly, distinctly.

"-This is my wife," he said. "I'm taking her away from that man in there."

Muttering. "I knew it, I *knew* it."

Then, at the door, Jim turned. He had his arm protectingly around Peggy's shoulders. And for some reason, all the smugness and the meanness and the cynical detachment seemed to have gone from him.

He looked at me. And it seemed as if he felt as helpless as I did. He had tried to save her again and again. Doing everything he could, even confessing for her crime. Now, if they were fugitives, it would be Jim they sought for murder.

And, despite all that, she had not changed.

And I knew later—not then because I could do nothing but stand there mutely—that Jim loved her. In a way that I and my sort of person cannot understand, much less appreciate. In the old way. The unquestioning way. Defying the traditions of society rather than losing it. Loving in a way that even allowed a man to kill for his love. Right out of the middle ages. Yet, something strangely and perversely noble there.

At least there seemed a sort of quiet unassuming nobility to Jim as he stood there by the silent Peggy. The frightened and weak Peggy who would never in her life be able to face the world without help even if she feared that help above all else.

“Just for the record,” Jim said to me, “I had both Albert and Dennis killed. *Both*. Do you hear me?”

I knew he hadn’t. He’d had Dennis killed. But Albert had died at another’s hands. The hands of a girl I had loved and who, even now, was my wife. But I was too dazed to think of that.

Jim turned to her then. His eyes were on her only and his mind and heart held her alone.

“Come away, my dear,” he said.

And led her out of my life forever.

* * *

The police came soon. I hadn’t left. They picked me up on a morals charge. Later they called Santa Monica and fortunately Jones was still alive. He gave them the facts and they released me and started after Peggy and Jim. But they didn’t catch them.

And one day I saw Jones and he told me they’d caught the man who’d attacked Peggy at *Funland*.

“I don’t understand,” I said, “Albert . . .”

“Grady didn’t do it,” Jones said.

“But . . . the scratches,” I said, in a last confusion about my Peggy Ann, “She said she’d scratched the man who’d tried to rape her. And Albert’s face was covered with scratches.”

“That’s right,” he said, “they both were scratched.”

I looked at him a moment and then I lowered my head. And I whispered, “God help her.”

That’s about all. I finished my novel and sold it and made \$1700 on it. I talked Audrey into going back to her family in

Pennsylvania. I met some people and laughed again and pretended that everything was status quo again.

I read the papers.

Maybe you read the story, too. It was about a month ago. When they found Jim and Peggy in a Kansas City hotel room. And when they took away the thing that Peggy was fondling in her lap she said they mustn't.

She said they had to let her keep his head because she loved the man.

THE END