

Ménage à Trois
by F. Paul Wilson

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Burke noticed how Grimes, the youngest patrolman there, was turning a sickly shade of yellow-green. He motioned him closer. "You all right?"

Grimes nodded. "Sure. Fine." His pit-iful attempt at a smile was hardly re-assuring. "Awful hot in here, but I'm fine."

Burke could see that he was anything but. The kid's lips were as pale as the rest of his face and he was dripping with sweat. He was either going to puke or pass out or both in the next two minutes.

"Yeah. Hot," Burke said. It was no more than seventy in the hospital room. "Get some fresh air put in the hall."

"Okay. Sure." Now the smile was real — and grateful. Grimes gestured toward the three sheet-covered bodies. "I just never seen anything like this before, y'know?"

Burke nodded. He knew. This was a nasty one. Real nasty. He swallowed the sour-milk taste that puckered his cheeks. In his twenty-three years with homicide he had seen his share of crime scenes like this, but he never got used to them. The splattered blood and flesh, the smell from the ruptured intestines, the glazed eyes in the slack-jawed faces — who could get used to that? And three lives, over and gone for good.

"Look," he told Grimes, "why don't you check at the nurses' desk and find out where they lived. Get over there and dig up some background."

Grimes nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, sir."

Burke turned back to the room. Three lives had ended in there this morning. He was going to have to find out what those lives had been until now if he was ever going to understand this horror. And when he did get all the facts, could he ever really understand? Did he really want to?

Hot, sweaty, and gritty, Jerry Prit-chard hauled himself up the cellar stairs and into the kitchen. Grabbing a beer from the fridge, he popped the top and drained half the can in one long, gullet-cooling swallow. Lord, that was *good!* He stepped over to the back door and pressed his face against the screen in search of a vagrant puff of air, any-thing to cool him off.

"Spring cleaning," he muttered, look-ing out at the greening rear acreage.

“Right.” It felt like August. Who ever heard of eighty degrees in April?

He could almost see the grass grow-ing. The weeds, too. That meant he’d probably be out riding the mower around next week. Old Lady Gati had kept him busy all fall getting the grounds per-fectly manicured; the winter had been spent painting and patching the first and second floors; April had been des-ignated basement clean-up time, and now the grounds needed to be whipped into shape again.

An endless cycle. Jerry smiled. But that cycle meant job security. And job security meant he could work and eat here during the day and sleep in the gatehouse at night, and never go home again.

He drained the can and gave it a be-hind-the-back flip into the brown paper bag sitting in the corner by the fridge.

Home . . . the thought pursued him. There had been times when he thought he’d never get out. Twenty-two years in that little house, the last six of them pure hell after Dad got killed in the cave-in of No. 8 mine. Mom went off the deep end then. She had always been super religious, herding everyone along to fire-and-brimstone Sunday prayer meetings and making them listen to Bible readings every night. Dad had kept her in check somewhat, but once he was gone, all the stops were out. She began hounding him about how her only son should join the ministry and spread the Word of God. She submerged him in a Bible-besotted life for those years, and he’d almost bought the pack-age. She had him consulting the Book upon awakening, upon retiring, before eating, before going off to school, before buying a pair of socks, before taking a leak, until common sense got a hold of him and he realized he was going slowly mad. But he couldn’t leave be-cause he was the man of the house and there was his younger sister to think of.

But Suzie, bless her, ran off last sum-mer at sixteen and got married. Jerry walked out a week later. Mom had the house, Dad’s pension, her Bible, and an endless round of prayer meetings. Jerry stopped by once in a while and sent her a little money when he could. She seemed to be content.

Whatever makes you happy, he thought. He had taken his own personal Bible with him when he left. It was still in his suitcase in the gatehouse. Some things you just didn’t throw away, even if you stopped using them.

The latest in a string of live-in maids swung through the kitchen door with old lady Gati’s lunch dishes on a tray. None of the others had been bad look-ing, but this girl was a knockout. “Hey, Steph,” he said, deciding to put off his return to the cellar just a little bit longer. “How’s the Dragon Lady treat-ing you?”

She flashed him a bright smile. “I don’t know why you call her that, Jerry. She’s really very sweet.”

That's what they all say, he thought, and then *wham!* they're out. Stephanie Watson had been here almost six weeks — a record in Jerry's experience. Old lady Gati went through maids like someone with hayfever went through Kleenex. Maybe Steph had whatever it was old lady Gati was looking for.

Jerry hoped so. He liked her. Liked her a *lot*. Liked her short tawny hair and the slightly crooked teeth that made her easy smile seem so genuine, liked her long legs and the way she moved through this big old house with such natural grace, like she belonged here. He especially liked the way her blue flowered print shift clung to her breasts and stretched across her but-tocks as she loaded the dishes into the dishwasher. She excited him, no doubt about that.

"You know," she said, turning toward him and leaning back against the kitchen counter, "I still can't get over the size of this place. Seems every other day I find a new room."

Jerry nodded, remembering his first few weeks here last September. The sheer height of this old three-storey gothic mansion had awed him as he had come through the gate to apply for the caretaker job. He had known it was big — everybody in the valley grew up within sight of the old Gati House on the hill — but had never been close enough to appreciate *how* big. The house didn't really fit with the rest of the valley. It wasn't all that difficult to imagine that a giant hand had plucked it from a far-away, more populated place and dropped it here by mistake. But the older folks in town still talked about all the trouble and expense mine-owner Karl Gati went through to have it built.

"Yeah," he said, looking at his cal-loused hands. "It's big all right."

He watched her for a moment as she turned and rinsed out the sink, watched the way her blond hair moved back and forth across the nape of her neck. He fought the urge to slip his arms around her and kiss that neck. That might be a mistake. They had been dating since she arrived here — just movies and something to eat afterwards — and she had been successful so far in holding him off. Not that that was so hard to do. Growing up under Mom's watchful Pentacostal eye had prevented him from developing a smooth approach to the opposite sex. So far, his limited rep-ertoire of moves hadn't been successful with Steph.

He was sure she wasn't a dumb in-nocent — she was a farm girl and certainly knew what went where and why. No, he sensed that she was as attracted to him as he to her but didn't want to be a pushover. Well, okay. Jerry wasn't sure why that didn't bother him too much. Maybe it was because there was something open and vulnerable about Steph that appealed to a protective in-stinct in him. He'd give her time. Plenty of it. Something inside him told him she was worth the wait. And something else told him that she was weakening, that maybe it wouldn't be too long

now be-fore . . .

“Well, it’s Friday,” he said, moving closer. “Want to go down to town to-night and see what’s playing at the Strand?” He hated to sound like a broken record — movie-movie-movie — but what else was there to do in this county on weekends if you didn’t get drunk, play pool, race cars, or watch tv?

Her face brightened with another smile. “Love it!”

Now why, he asked himself, should a little smile and a simple *yes* make me feel so damn good?

No doubt about it. She did something to him.

“Great! I’ll —”

A deep, guttural woman’s voice interrupted him. “Young Pritchard! I wish to see you a moment!”

Jerry shuddered. He hated what her accent did to the r’s in his name. Setting his teeth, he followed the sound of her voice through the ornate, cluttered dining room with its huge needlepoint carpet and bronze chandeliers and heavy furniture. Whoever had decorated this house must have been awfully depressed. Everything was dark and gloomy. All the furniture and decorations seemed to end in points.

He came to the semi-circular solarium where she awaited him. Her wheelchair was in its usual position by the big bay windows where she could look out on the rolling expanse of the south lawn.

“Ah, there you are, young Pritchard,” she said, looking up and smiling coyly. She closed the book in her hands and laid it on the blanket that covered what might have passed for legs in a night-mare. The blanket had slipped once and he had seen what was under there. He didn’t want another look. Ever. He remembered what his mother had always said about deformed people: That they were marked by God and should be avoided.

Old lady Gati was in her mid-sixties maybe, flabby without being fat, with pinched features and graying hair stretched back into a severe little bun at the back of her head. Her eyes were a watery blue as she looked at him over the tops of her reading glasses.

Jerry halted about a dozen feet away but she motioned him closer. He pretended not to notice. She was going to want to touch him again. God, he couldn’t stand this!

“You called, ma’am?”

“Don’t stand so far away, young Pritchard.” He advanced two steps in her direction and stopped again. “Closer,” she said. “You don’t expect me to shout, do you?”

She didn’t let up until he was stand-ing right next to her. Except for these daily chats with Miss Gati, Jerry loved his job.

“There,” she said. “That’s better. Now we can talk more easily.”

She placed a gnarled, wrinkled hand on his arm and Jerry’s flesh began to crawl. Why did she always have to touch him?

“The basement — it is coming along well?”

“Fine,” he said, looking at the floor, out the window, anywhere but at her hungry, smiling face. “Just fine.”

“Good.” She began stroking his arm, gently, possessively. “I hope this heat wave isn’t too much for you.” As she spoke she used her free hand to adjust the blanket over what there was of her lower body. “I really should have Stephanie get me a lighter blanket.”

Jerry fought the urge to jump away from her. He had become adept at masking the revulsion that rippled through his body everytime she touched him. And it seemed she *had* to touch him whenever he was in reach. When he first got the caretaker job, he took a lot of ribbing from the guys in town down at the Dewkum Inn. (Lord, what Mom would say if she ever saw him standing at a bar!) Everybody knew that a lot of older, more experienced men had been passed over for him. His buddies had said that the old lady really wanted him for stud service. The thought nauseated him. Who knew if she even had —

No, that would never happen. He needed this job, but there was nothing he needed *that* badly. And so far, all she had ever done was stroke his arm when she spoke to him. Even that was hard to take.

As casually as he could, he moved out of reach and gazed out the window as if something on the lawn had attracted his attention. “What did you want me to—”

Stephanie walked into the room and interrupted him.

“Yes, Miss Gati?”

“Get me a summer blanket, will you, dear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” She flashed a little smile at Jerry as she turned, and he watched

her until she was out of sight. Now if only it were Steph who couldn't keep her hands off him, he wouldn't--

"She appeals to you, young Pritchard?" Miss Gati said, her eyes danc-ing.

He didn't like her tone, so he kept his neutral. "She's a good kid."

"But does she *appeal* to you?"

He felt his anger rising, felt like tell-ing her it was none of her damn busi-ness, but he hauled it back and said, "Why is that so important to you?"

"Now, now, young Pritchard, I'm only concerned that the two of you get along well. But not *too* well. I don't want you taking little Stephie away from me. I have special needs, and as you know, it took me a long time to find a live-in maid with Stephie's special qualities."

Jerry couldn't quite buy that expla-nation. There had been something in her eyes when she spoke of Steph "ap-pealing" to him, a hint that her interest went beyond mere household harmony.

"But the reason I called you here," she said, shifting the subject, "is to tell you that I want you to tend to the roof in the next few days."

"The new shingles came in?"

"Yes. Delivered this morning while you were in the basement. I want you to replace the worn ones over my room tomorrow. I fear this heat wave might bring us a storm out of season. I don't want my good furniture ruined by leaking water."

He guessed he could handle that. "Okay. I'll finish up today and be up on the roof tomorrow. How's that?"

She wheeled over and cut him off as he tried to make his getaway. "What-ever you think best, young Pritchard."

Jerry pulled free and hurried off, shuddering.

Marta Gati watched young Prit-chard's swift exit.

I repulse him.

There was no sorrow, no self-pity at-tached to the thought. When you were born with twig-like vestigial appen-dages for legs and only half a pelvis, you quickly became used to rejection — you learned to read it in the posture, to sense it behind the eyes. Your feel-ings soon became as callused as a miner's hands.

He's sensitive about my little Ste-phia, she thought. Almost protective. He likes her. He's attracted to her. *Very* attracted.

That was good. She wanted young Pritchard to have genuine feelings for Stephie. That would make it so much better.

Yes, her little household was just the way she wanted it now. It had taken her almost a year to set it up this way. Month after month of trial and error until she found the right combination. And now she had it.

Such an arrangement would have been impossible while Karl was alive. Her brother would never have hired someone with as little experience as young Pritchard as caretaker, and he would have thought Stephie too young and too frail to be a good live-in maid. But Karl was dead now. The heart at-tack had taken him quickly and with-out warning last June. He had gone to bed early one night complaining of what he thought was indigestion, and never awoke. Marta Gati missed her brother and mourned his loss, yet she was revelling in the freedom his pass-ing had left her.

Karl had been a good brother. Ty-rannically good. He had looked after her as a devoted husband would an ail-ing wife. He had never married, for he knew that congenital defects ran high in their family. Out of their parents' four children, two — Marta and Gabor — had been horribly deformed. When they had come to America from Hun-gary, Karl invested the smuggled fam-ily fortune in the mines here and, against all odds, had done well. He saw to it that Lazlo, the younger brother, received the finest education. Lazlo now lived in New York where he tended to Gabor.

And Marta? Marta he had kept hid-den away in this remote mansion in rural West Virginia where she had often thought she would go insane with boredom. At least he had been able to persuade him to decorate the place. If she had to stay here, she had a right to be caged in surroundings to her taste. And her taste was Gothic Revival.

Marta loved this house, loved the heavy wood of the tables, the carved deer legs of the chairs, the elaborate finials atop the cabinets, the ornate val-ances and radiator covers, the trefoil arches on her canopy bed.

But the decor could only carry one so far. And there were only so many books one could read, television shows and rented movies one could watch. Karl's conversational capacity had been lim-ited in the extreme, and when he had spoken, it was on business and finance and little else. Marta had wanted to be out in the world, but Karl said the world would turn away from her, so he'd kept her here to protect her from hurt.

But Marta had found a way to sneak out from under his overprotective thumb.

And now with Karl gone, she no longer had to sneak out to the world. She could bring some of the world into the house. Yes, it was going to be so nice here.

“Tell me something,” Steph said as she rested her head on Jerry’s shoulder. She was warm against him in the front seat of his old Fairlane 500 convertible and his desire for her was a throbbing ache. After the movie — a Burt-Reynolds-type car-chase flick, but without Burt Reynolds — he had driven them back here and parked outside the gate-house. The top was down and they were snuggled together in the front seat watching the little stars that city people never see, even on the clearest of nights.

“Anything,” he whispered into her hair.

“How did Miss Gati get along here before she had me?”

“A lady from town used to come in to clean and cook, but she never stayed over. You’re the first live-in who’s lasted more than a week since I’ve been working here. The old lady’s been real choosy about finding someone after the last live-in . . . left.”

Jerry decided that now was not the time to bring up the last maid’s suicide. Steph was from the farmlands on the other side of the ridge and wouldn’t know about her. Constance Granger had been her name, a quiet girl who went crazy wild. She had come from a decent, church-going family, but all of a sudden she became a regular at the roadside taverns, taking up with a different man every night. Then one night she became hysterical in a motel room — with two men, if the whispers could be believed — and began screaming at the top of her lungs. She ran out of the room jaybird naked and got hit by a truck.

Jerry didn’t want to frighten Steph with that kind of story, not now while they were snug and close like this. He steered the talk elsewhere.

“Now you tell me something. What do you think of working for old lady Gati?”

“She’s sweet. She’s not a slave driver and the pay is good. This is my first job since leaving home and I guess I’m kinda lucky it’s working out so well.”

“You miss home?”

He felt her tense beside him. She never talked about her home. “No. I . . . didn’t get along with my father. But I get along just fine with Miss Gati. The only bad thing about the job is the house. It gives me the creeps. I get night-mares every night.”

“What about?”

She snuggled closer, as if chilled despite the warmth of the night. “I don’t remember much by morning, all I know is that they’re no fun. I don’t know how Miss Gati lived here alone after the last maid left. Especially without any legs. I’d be frightened to death!”

“She’s not. She tried out girl after girl. No one satisfied her till you came along. She’s a tough one.”

“But she’s not. She’s nice. A real lady. You know, I make her hot chocolate every night and she insists I sit down and have a cup with her while she tells me about her family and how they lived in ‘the Old Country.’ Isn’t that nice?”

“Just super,” Jerry said.

He lifted her chin and kissed her. He felt her respond, felt her catch some of the fervor running through him like fire. He let his hand slip off her shoulder and come to rest over her right breast. She made no move to push him away as his fingers began caressing her.

“Want to come inside?” he said, glancing toward the door at the gate-house.

Steph sighed. “Yes.” She kissed him again, then pulled away. “But no. I don’t think that would be such a good idea, Jerry. Not just yet. I mean, I just met you six weeks ago.”

“You know all there is to know. I’m not hiding anything. Come on.”

“I want to . . . you know I do, but not tonight. It’s time for Miss Gati’s hot chocolate. And if I want to keep this job, I’d better get up to the house and fix it for her.” Her eyes searched his face in the light of the rising moon. “You’re not mad at me, are you?”

“Nah!” he said with what he hoped was a reassuring grin. How could he look into those eyes and be mad? But he sure as Hell *ached*. “Crushed and heartbroken, maybe. But not mad.”

She laughed. “Good!”

There’s plenty of time, he told the ache deep down inside. And we’ll be seeing each a lot of other.

“C’mon. I’ll walk you up to the house.”

On the front porch, he kissed her again and didn’t want to let go. Finally, she pushed him away, gently. “She’s calling me. Gotta go. See you tomorrow.”

Reluctantly, Jerry released her. He hadn't heard anything but knew she had to go. He wondered if her insides were as churned up as his own.

"Hurry and drink your chocolate before it gets cold," Marta Gati said as Stephie returned from down the hall.

Stephie smiled and picked up her cup from the bedside table. *A lovely child*, Marta thought. *Simply lovely*. Her own cup was cradled in her hands. It was a little too sweet for her taste, but she made no comment. She was propped up on her bed pillows. Stephie sat in a chair pulled up to the side of the bed.

"And what did you and young Pritchard do tonight?" Marta said. "Any-thing special?" She watched Stephie blush as she sipped her chocolate.

Marta took a sip of her own to hide the excitement that swept through her. *They're in love!* This was perfect. "How was the movie?" she managed to say in a calm voice.

Stephie shrugged. "It was okay, I guess. Jerry likes all those cars racing around and crashing."

"Don't you?"

She shrugged. "Not really."

"But you go because young Pritchard likes them. And you like him, don't you?"

She shrugged shyly. "Yes."

"Of course you do. And he likes you. I can tell. I just hope he hasn't taken any liberties with you."

Stephie's color deepened. Marta guessed she wanted to tell her it was none of her damn business but didn't have the nerve. "No," Stephie said. "No liberties."

"Good!" Marta said. "I don't want you two running off and getting married. I need the both of you here. Now, finish your chocolate and get yourself to bed. Never let it be said I kept you up too late."

Stephie smiled and drained her cup.

Yes, Marta thought. *A lovely girl*.

The gatehouse was one room and a bathroom, furnished with a small desk, a

chair, a bureau, and a hide-a-bed that folded up into a couch during the day. A sort of unattached motel room. But since he took his meals up at the house, it was all that Jerry needed.

The lights had been off for nearly an hour but he was still awake, rerunning his favorite fantasy, starring the voracious Steph and the inexhaustible Jerry. Then the door opened without warning and Steph stood there with the moonlight faintly outlining her body through the light cotton nightgown she wore. She said nothing as she came forward and crawled under the single sheet that covered him.

After that, no words were necessary.

Dawnlight sneaking through the spaces between the Venetian blinds on the gatehouse window woke Jerry. He was alone. After she had worn him out, Steph had left him. He sat on the edge of the hide-a-bed and cradled his head in his hands. In the thousand times he had mentally bedded Steph since her arrival, he had always been the initiator, the aggressor. Last night had been nothing at all like the fantasies. Steph had been in complete control — demanding, voracious, insatiable, a wild woman who had left him drained and exhausted. And hardly a word had passed between them. Throughout their lovemaking she had cooed, she had whimpered, she had moaned, but she had barely spoken to him. It left him feeling sort of . . . used.

Still trying to figure out this new, unexpected side to Steph, he walked up to the house for breakfast. The sun was barely up and already the air was starting to cook. It was going to be another hot one.

He saw Steph heading out of the kitchen toward the dining room with old lady Gati's tray as he came in the back door.

"Be with you in a minute," she called over her shoulder.

He waited by the swinging door and caught her as she came through. He slipped his arms around her waist and kissed her.

"Jerry, no!" she snapped. "Not here — not while I'm working!"

He released her. "Not your cheerful old self this morning, are you?"

"Just tired, I guess." She turned toward the stove.

"I guess you should be."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you had an unusually active night. At least I hope it was unusual."

Steph had been about to crack an egg on the edge of the frying pan. She stopped in mid motion and turned to face him.

“Jerry . . . what on earth are you talking about?”

She looked genuinely puzzled, and that threw him. “Last night... at the gatehouse ... it was after three when you left.”

Her cranky scowl dissolved into an easy smile. “You must really be in a bad way!” She laughed. “Now you’re believing your own dreams!”

Jerry was struck by the clear inno-cence of her laughter. For a moment, he actually doubted his memory — but only for a moment. Last night had been real. Hadn’t it?

“Steph ...” he began, but dropped it. What could he say to those guileless blue eyes? She was either playing some sort of game, and playing it very well, or she really didn’t remember. Or it really never happened. None of those choices was the least bit reassuring.

He wolfed his food as Steph moved in and out of the kitchen, attending to old lady Gati’s breakfast wants. She kept glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, as if checking up on him. Was this a game? Or had he really dreamed it all last night?

Jerry skipped his usual second cup of coffee and was almost relieved to find himself back in the confines of the cel-lar. He threw himself into the job, partly because he wanted to finish it, and partly because he didn’t want too much time to think about last night. By lunchtime he was sweeping up the last of the debris when he heard the sound.

It came from above. The floorboards were squeaking. And something else as well — the light sound of feet moving back and forth, rhythmically. It contin-ued as he filled a carboard box with the last of the dirt, dust, and scraps of rot-ten wood from the cellar. He decided to walk around the south side of the house on his way to the trash bins. The sound seemed to be coming from there.

As he passed the solarium, he glanced in and almost dropped the box. Steph was waltzing around the room with an invisible partner in her arms. Swirling and dipping and curtsyng, she was not the most graceful dancer he had ever seen, but the look of pure joy on her face made up for whatever she lacked in skill.

Her expression changed abruptly to a mixture of surprise and something like anger when she caught sight of him gaping through the window. She ran toward the stairs, leaving Miss Gati alone. The old lady neither turned to watch her go, nor looked out the win-dow to see what had spooked her. She just sat slumped in her wheelchair, her head hanging forward. For a second, Jerry was jolted by the sight:

She looked dead! He pressed his face against the solarium glass for a closer look, and was relieved to see the gentle rise and fall of her chest. Only asleep. But what had Steph been doing waltzing around like that while the old lady napped?

Shaking his head at the weirdness of it all, he dumped the box in the trash area and returned to the house through the back door. The kitchen was empty, so he made his way as quietly as possible to the solarium to see if Steph had returned. He found all quiet — the music off and old lady Gati bright and alert, reading a book. He immediately turned back toward the kitchen, hoping she wouldn't spot him. But it was too late.

“Yes, young Pritchard?” she said, rolling that “r” and looking up from her book. “You are looking for something?”

Jerry fumbled for words. “I was looking for Steph to see if she could fix me a sandwich. Thought I saw her in here when I passed by before.”

“No, dear boy,” she said with a smile. “I sent her up to her room for a nap almost an hour ago. Seems you tired her out last night.”

“Last night?” He tensed. What did she know about last night?

Her smile broadened. “Come now! You two didn't think you could fool me, did you? I know she sneaked out to see you.” Something about the way she looked at him sent a sick chill through Jerry. “Surely you can fix something yourself and let the poor girl rest.”

Then it hadn't been a dream! But then why had Steph pretended —?

He couldn't figure it. “Yeah. Sure,” he said dully, his thoughts jumbled. “I can make a sandwich.” He turned to go.

“You should be about through with the basement by now,” she said. “But even if you're not, get up to the roof this afternoon. The weatherman says there's a sixty percent chance of a thunder-storm tonight.”

“Basement's done. Roof is next.”

“Excellent! But don't work *too* hard, young Pritchard. Save something for Stephanie.”

She returned to her book.

Jerry felt numb as he walked back to the kitchen. The old lady hadn't touched him once! She seemed more relaxed and at ease with herself than he could ever remember — a-cat-that-had-swallowed-the-canary sort of self-satisfaction. And she

hadn't tried to lay a single finger on him!

The day was getting weirder and weirder.

Replacing the shingles on the sloping dormer surface outside old lady Gati's bedroom had looked like an easy job from the ground. But the shingles were odd, scalloped affairs that she had ordered special from San Francisco to match the originals on the house, and Jerry had trouble keeping them aligned on the curved surface. He could have used a third hand, too. What would have been an hour's work for two men had already taken Jerry three in the broiling sun, and he wasn't quite finished yet.

While he was working, he noted that the wood trim on the upper levels was going to need painting soon. That was going to be a hellish job, what with the oculus windows, the ornate friezes, cornices, brackets, and keystones. Some crazed woodcarver had had a field day with this stuff — probably thought it was “art.” But Jerry was going to be the one to paint it. He'd put that off as long as he could, and definitely wouldn't do it in summer.

He pulled an insulated wire free of the outside wall to fit in the final shingles by the old lady's window. It ran from somewhere on the roof down to the ground — directly *into* the ground. Jerry pulled himself up onto the para-pet above the dormer to see where the wire originated. He followed it up until it linked into the lightning rod on the peak of the attic garret. *Everything* connected with this house was ornate — even the lightning rods had designs on them!

He climbed back down, pulled the ground wire free of the dormer, and tacked the final shingles into place. When he reached the ground, he slumped on the bottom rung of the ladder and rested a moment. The heat from the roof was getting to him. His tee-shirt was drenched with perspiration and he was reeling with fatigue.

Enough for today. He'd done the bulk of the work. A hurricane could hit the area and that dormer would not leak. He could put the finishing touches on tomorrow. He lowered the ladder to the ground, then checked the kitchen for Steph. She wasn't there. Just as well. He didn't have the energy to pry an explanation out of her. Something was cooking in the oven, but he was too bushed to eat. He grabbed half a six pack of beer from the fridge and stumbled down to the gatehouse. Hell with dinner. A shower, a few beers, a good night's sleep, and he'd be just fine in the morning.

It was a long ways into dark, but Jerry was still awake. Tired as he was, he couldn't get to sleep. As thunder rumbled in the distance, charging in from the west, and slivers of ever-brightening light flashed between the blinds, thoughts of last night tumbled through his mind, arousing him anew. Something strange going on up at that house. Old lady Gati was acting weird, and so was Steph.

Steph ... he couldn't stop thinking about her. He didn't care what kind of game she was playing, she still meant something to him. He'd never felt this way before. He —

There was a noise at the door. It opened and Steph stepped inside. She said nothing as she came forward, but in the glow of the lightning flashes from outside, Jerry could see her removing her nightgown as she crossed the room. He saw it flutter to the floor and then she was beside him, bringing the dreamlike memories of last night into the sharp focus of the real and now. He tried to talk to her but she would only answer in a soft, breathless “uh-huh” or “uh-uh” and then her wandering lips and tongue wiped all questions from his mind.

When it was finally over and the two of them lay in a gasping tangle of limbs and sheets, Jerry decided that now was the time to find out what was going on between her and old lady Gati, and what kind of game she was playing with him. He would ask her in a few seconds ... or maybe in a minute ... soon ... thunder was louder than ever outside but that wasn't going to bother him ... all he wanted to do right now was close his eyes and enjoy the delicious exhaustion of this after-glow a little longer . . . only a little ... just close his eyes for a few seconds ... no more . . .

“Sleep well, my love.”

Jerry forced his eyes open. Steph's face hovered over him in the flashing dimness as he teetered on the brink of unconsciousness. She kissed him lightly on the forehead and whispered, “Good-night, young Pritchard. And thank you.”

It was as if someone had tossed a bucket of icy water on him. Suddenly Jerry was wide awake. *Young Prit-chard?* Why had she said that? Why had she imitated old lady Gati's voice that way? The accent, with its roll of the “r,” had been chillingly perfect.

Steph had slipped her nightgown over her head and was on her way out. Jerry jumped out of bed and caught her at the door.

“I don't think that was funny, Steph!” She ignored him and pushed the screen door open. He grabbed her arm. “Hey, look! What kind of game are you play-ing? What's it gonna be tomorrow morning? Same as today? Pretend that nothing happened tonight?” she tried to pull away but he held on. “Talk to me Steph! What's going on?”

A picture suddenly formed in his mind of Steph going back to the house and having hot chocolate with old lady Gati and telling her every intimate de-tail of their lovemaking, and the old lady getting excited, *feeding* off it.

“What's going *on!*” Involuntarily, his grip tightened on her arm.

“You’re hurting me!” The words cut like an icy knife. The voice was Steph’s, but the tone, the accent, the roll of the “r”s, the inflection — all were perfect mimicry of old lady Gati, down to the last nuance. But she had been in pain. It couldn’t have been rehearsed!

Jerry flipped the light switch and spun her around. It was Steph, all right, as achingly beautiful as ever, but some-thing was wrong. The Steph he knew should have been frightened. The Steph before him was changed. She held her-self differently. Her stance was haughty, almost imperious. And there was some-thing in her eyes — a strange light.

“Oh, sweet Jesus! What’s happened to you?”

He could see indecision flickering through her eyes as she regarded him with a level stare. Outside, it began to rain. A few scattered forerunner drops escalated to a full-scale torrent in a matter of seconds as their eyes re-mained locked, their bodies frozen amid day-bright flashes of lightning and the roar of thunder and wind-driven rain. Then she smiled. It was like Steph’s smile, but it wasn’t.

“Nothing,” she said in that crazy mixed voice.

And then he thought he knew. For a blazing instant, it was clear to him: “You’re not Steph!” In the very instant he said it he disbelieved it, but then her smile broadened and her words turned his blood to ice:

“Yes, I am ... for the moment.” The voice was thick with old lady Gati’s ac-cent, and it carried a triumphant note. “What Stephie sees, I see! What Stephie feels, I feel!” She lifted the hem of her nightgown. “Look at my legs! Beauti-ful, aren’t they?”

Jerry released her arm as if he had been burned. She moved closer but Jerry found himself backing away. Steph was crazy! Her mind had snapped. She thought she was old lady Gati! He had never been faced with such blatant madness before, and it terrified him. He felt exposed, vulnerable before it. With a trembling hand, he grabbed his jeans from the back of the chair.

Marta Gati looked out of Stephie’s eyes at young Pritchard as he struggled into his trousers, and she wondered what to do next. She had thought him asleep when she had kissed him good night and made the slip of calling him “Young Pritchard.” She had known she couldn’t keep her nightly possession of Stephie from him for too long, but she had not been prepared for a confron-tation tonight. She would try for sym-pathly first.

“Do you have any idea, young Prit-chard,” she said, trying to make Stephie’s voice sound as American as she could, “what it is like to be trapped all your life in a body as deformed as mine? To be repulsive to other children as a child, to grow up

watching other girls find young men and go dancing and get married and know that at night they are holding their man in their arms and feeling all the things a woman should feel? You have no idea what my life has been like, young Pritchard. But through the years I found a way to remedy the situation. Tonight I am a complete woman — *your* woman!

“Stephanie!” young Pritchard shouted, fear and disbelief mingling in the strained pallor of his face. “Listen to yourself! You sound crazy! What you’re saying is impossible!”

“No! Not impossible!” she said, although she could understand his reaction. A few years ago, she too would have called it impossible. Her brother Karl had devoted himself to her and his business. He never married, but he would bring women back to the house now and then when he thought she was asleep. It would have been wonderful if he could have brought a man home for her, but that was impossible. Yet it hadn’t stopped her yearnings. And it was on those nights when he and a woman were in the next bedroom that Marta realized that she could sense things in Karl’s women. At first she thought it was imagination, but this was more than mere fantasy. She could feel their passion, feel their skin tin-*gling*, feel them exploding within. And one night, after they both had spent themselves and fallen asleep, she found herself in the other woman’s body — actually lying in Karl’s bed and seeing the room through her eyes!

As time went on, she found she could enter their bodies while they slept and actually take them over. She could get up and walk! A sob built in her throat at the memory. To *walk!* That had been joy enough at first. Then she would dance by herself. She had wanted so much all her life to dance, to waltz, and now she could! She never dared more than that until Karl died and left her free. She had perfected her ability since then.

“It will be a good life for you, young Pritchard,” she said. “You won’t even have to work. Stephie will be my maid and housekeeper during the day and your lover at night.” He shook his head, as if to stop her, but she pressed on. And when you get tired of Stephie, I’ll bring in another. And another. You’ll have an endless stream of young, will-ing bodies in your bed. You’ll have such a *good* life, young Pritchard!”

A new look was growing in his eyes: belief.

“It’s really you!” he said in a hoarse whisper. “Oh, my dear sweet Lord, it’s really you in Steph’s body! I . . . I’m getting out of here!”

She moved to block his way and he stayed back. He could have easily over-powered her, but he seemed afraid to let her get too near. She couldn’t let him go, not after all her work to set up a perfect household.

“No! You mustn’t do that! You must stay here!”

“This is sick!” he cried, his voice rising in pitch as a wild light sprang into his eyes. “This is the Devil’s work!”

“No-no,” she said, soothingly. “Not the Devil. Just me. Just something—”

“Get away from me!” he said, backing toward his dresser. He spun and pulled open the top drawer, rummaged through it and came up with a thick book with a cross on its cover. “Get away, Satan!” he cried, thrusting the book toward her face.

Marta almost laughed. “Don’t be silly, young Pritchard! I’m not evil! I’m just doing what I have to do. I’m not hurting Stephie. I’m just borrowing her body for a while!”

“Out, demon!” He said, shoving the Bible almost into her face. “*Out!*”

This was getting annoying now. She snatched the book from his grasp and hurled it across the room. “Stop acting like a fool!”

He looked from her to the book and back to her with an awed expression. At that moment there was a particularly loud crash of thunder and the lights went out. Young Pritchard cried out in horror and brushed past her. He slammed out the door and ran into the storm.

Marta ran as far as the doorway and stopped. She peered through the deluge. Even with the rapid succession of lightning strokes and sheets, she could see barely a dozen feet. He was nowhere in sight. She could see no use in running out into the storm and following him. She glanced at his keys on the bureau and smiled. How far could a half-naked man go in a storm like this?

Marta crossed the room and sat on the bed. She ran her hand over the rumbled sheets where less than half an hour ago the two of them had been locked in passion. Warmth rose within her. *So good*. So good to have a man’s arms around you, wanting you, needing you, *demanding* you. She couldn’t give this up. Not now, not when it was finally at her disposal after all these years.

But young Pritchard wasn’t working out. She had thought any virile young man would leap at what she offered, but apparently she had misjudged him. Or was a stable relationship within her household just a fool’s dream? She had so much to learn about the outside world. Karl had kept her so sheltered from it.

Perhaps her best course was the one she had taken with the last house-keeper. Take over her body when she was asleep and drive to the bars and roadhouses outside of town. Find a man two men, if she were in the mood and spend most of the night in a motel room. Then come back to the house, clean her up, and leave her

asleep in her bed. It was anonymous, it was exciting, but it was somehow . . . empty.

She would be more careful with Ste-phie than with the last housekeeper. Marta had been ill one night but had moved into the other body anyway. She had lost control when a stomach spasm had gripped her own body. The pain had drawn her back to the house, leaving the woman to awaken between two strangers. She had panicked and run out into the road.

Yes, she had to be very careful with this one. Stephe was so sensitive to her power, whatever it was. She only had to become drowsy and Marta could slip in and take complete control, keeping Stephe's mind unconscious while she controlled her body. A few milligrams of a sedative in her cocoa before bed-time and Stephe's body was Marta's for the night.

But young Pritchard wasn't working out. At least not so far. There was per-haps a slim chance she could reason with him when he came back. She had to try. She found him terribly attrac-tive. But where could he be?

Sparks of alarm flashed through her as she realized that her own body was upstairs in the house, lying in bed, helpless, defenseless. What if that crazy boy — ?

Quickly, she slid onto the bed and closed her eyes. She shut out her senses one by one, blocking off the sound of the rain and thunder, the taste of the saliva in her mouth, the feel of the beclothes against her back . . .

. . . and opened her eyes in her own bedroom in the house. She looked around, alert for any sign that her room had been entered. Her bedroom door was still closed, and there was no mois-ture anywhere on the floor.

Good! He hasn't been in here!

Marta pushed herself up in bed and transferred to the wheelchair. She wheeled herself out to the hall and down to the elevator, cursing its slow descent as it took her to the first floor. When it finally stopped, she propelled herself at top speed to the foyer where she immediately turned the dead bolt on the front door. She noted with sat-isfaction that the slate floor under her chair was as dry as when she had walked out earlier as Stephe. She was satisfied that she was alone in the house.

Safe!

She rolled herself into the solarium at a more leisurely pace. She knew the rest of the doors and windows were se-cure — Stephe always locked up before she made the bedtime chocolate. She stopped before the big bay windows and watched the storm for a minute. It was a fierce one. She gazed out at the blue-white, water-blurred lightning flashes and wondered what she was going to do about young Pritchard. If she couldn't convince him to stay, then surely he would be in town

tomorrow, telling a wild tale. No one would believe him, of course, but it would start talk, fuel rumors, and that would make it almost impossible to get help in the future. It might even make Stephie quit, and Marta didn't know how far her power could reach. She'd be left totally alone out here.

Her fingers tightened on the arm rests of her wheelchair. She couldn't let that happen.

She closed her eyes and blocked out the storm, blocked out her senses . . .

. . . and awoke in Stephie's body again.

She leapt to the kitchenette and pulled out the drawers until she found the one she wanted. It held three forks, a couple of spoons, a spatula, and a knife — a six-inch carving knife.

It would have to do.

She hurried out into the rain and up the hill toward the house.

Jerry rammed his shoulder against the big oak front door again but only added *to bruises* the *door had already* put there. He screamed at it.

“In God's name — open!”

The door ignored him. What was he going to do? He had to get inside! Had to get to that old lady! Had to wring the Devil out of her! Had to find a way in! Make her give Steph back!

His mother had warned him about this sort of thing. He could almost hear her voice between the claps of thunder: *Satan walks the earth, Jerome, search-ing for those who forsake the Word. Be-ware — he's waiting for you!*

Jerry knew the Devil had found him — in the guise of old lady Gati! What was happening to Steph was all his fault!

He ran back into the downpour and headed around toward the rear. Maybe the kitchen door was unlocked. He glanced through the solarium windows as he passed. His bare feet slid to a halt on the wet grass as he stopped and took a better look.

There she was: old lady Gati, the Devil herself, zonked out in her wheel-chair.

The sight of her sitting there as if asleep while her spirit was down the hill controlling Steph's body was more than Jerry could stand. He looked around for something to hurl through the window, and in the next lightning flash he spotted the

ladder next to the house on the lawn. He picked it up and charged the solarium like a jousting knight. Putting all his weight behind the ladder, he rammed it through the center bay window. The sound of shattering glass broke the last vestige of Jerry's control. Howling like a mad-man, he drove the ladder against the window glass again and again until every pane and every muntin was smashed and battered out of the way.

Then he climbed in.

The shards of glass cut his bare hands and feet but Jerry barely noticed. His eyes were on old lady Gati. Throughout all the racket, she hadn't budged.

Merciful Lord, it's true! Her spirit's left her body!

He stumbled over to her inert form and stood behind her, hesitating. He didn't want to touch her — his skin crawled at the thought — but he had to put an end to this. Now. Swallowing the bile that sloshed up from his stomach, Jerry wrapped his fingers around old lady Gati's throat. He flinched at the feel of her wrinkles against his palms, but he clenched his teeth and began to squeeze. He put all his strength into it —

— and then let go.

He couldn't do it.

"God, give me strength!" he cried, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Not while she was like this. It was like strangling a corpse! She was barely breathing as it was!

Something tapped against the intact bay window to the right. Jerry spun to look — a flash from outside outlined the grounding wire from the lightning rods as it swayed in the wind and slapped against the window. It reminded him of a snake —

A snake! And suddenly he knew: It's a sign! A sign from God!

He ran to the window and threw it open. He reached out, wrapped the wire around his hands, and pulled. It wouldn't budge from the ground. He braced a foot against the window sill, putting his back and all his weight into the effort. Suddenly the metal grounding stake pulled free and he staggered back, the insulated wire thrashing about in his hands . . . just like a snake.

He remembered that snake handlers' church back in the hills his mother had dragged him to one Sunday a few years ago. He had watched in awe as the men and women would grab water moccasins and cotton-mouths and hold them up, trusting in the Lord to protect them. Some were bitten, some were not. Ma had told him it was all God's will.

God's will!

He pulled the old lady's wheelchair closer to the window and wrapped the wire tightly around her, tying it snugly behind the backrest of the chair, and jamming the grounding post into the metal spokes of one of the wheels.

"This is your snake, Miss Gati," he told her unconscious form. "It's God's will if it bites you!"

He backed away from her until he was at the entrance to the solarium. Lightning flashed as violently as ever, but none came down the wire. He couldn't wait any longer. He had to find Steph. As he turned to head for the front door, he saw someone standing on the south lawn, staring into the solar-ium. It was Old Lady Gati, wearing Steph's body. When she looked through the broken bay window and saw him there, she screamed and slumped to the ground.

"Steph!" What was happening to her?

Jerry sprinted across the room and dove through the shattered window onto the south lawn.

Marta awoke in her own body, pan-icked. *What has he done to me?* She felt all right. There was no pain, no —

My arms! Her hands were free but she couldn't move her upper arms! She looked down and saw the black insulated wire coiled tightly around her upper body, binding her to the chair. She tried to twist, to slide down on the chair and slip free, but the wire wouldn't give an inch. She tried to see where it was tied. If she could get her hands on the knot. . .

She saw the wire trailing away from her chair, across the floor and out the window and up into the darkness.

Up! To the roof! The lightning rods!

She screamed, *"Noooooo!"*

Jerry cradled Steph's head in his arm and slapped her wet face as hard as he dared. He'd hoped the cold pounding rain and the noise of the storm would have brought her around, but she was still out. He didn't want to hurt her, but she had to wake up.

"Steph! C'mon, Steph! You've got to wake up! Got to fight her!"

As she stirred, he heard old lady Gati howl from the solarium. Steph's eyes

fluttered, then closed again. He shook her. “Steph! Please!”

She opened her eyes and stared at him. His spirits leaped.

“That’s it, Steph! Wake up! It’s me — Jerry! You’ve got to stay awake!”

She moaned and closed her eyes, so he shook her again.

“Steph! Don’t let her take you over again!”

As she opened her eyes again, Jerry dragged her to her feet.

“Come on! Walk it off! Let’s go! You’ve *got* to stay awake!”

Suddenly her face contorted and she swung on him. Something gleamed in her right hand as she plunged it toward his throat. Jerry got his forearm up just in time to block it. Pain seared through his arm and he cried out.

“Oh, God! It’s you!”

“*Yes!*” She slashed at him again and he backpedaled to avoid the knife. His bare feet slipped on the grass and he went down on his back. He rolled frantically, fearing she would be upon him, but when he looked up, she was running toward the house, toward the smashed bay window.

“No!”

He couldn’t let her get inside and untie the old lady’s body. Steph’s only hope was a lightning strike.

Please, God, he prayed. Now! Let it be now!

But though bolts crackled through the sky almost continuously, none of them hit the house. Groaning with fear and frustration, Jerry scrambled to his feet and sprinted after her. He had to stop her!

He caught her from behind and brought her down about two dozen feet from the house. She screamed and thrashed like an enraged animal, twisting and slashing at him again and again with the knife. She cut him along the ribs as he tried to pin her arms and was rearing back for a better angle on his chest when the night turned blue white. He saw the rage on Steph’s face turn to wide-eyed horror. Her body arched convulsively as she opened her mouth and let out a high-pitched shriek of agony that rose and cut off like a circuit being broken —

— only to be taken up by another voice from within the solarium. Jerry glanced up and saw old lady Gati’s body juttering in her chair like a hooked fish

while blue fire played all about her. Her hoarse cry was swallowed and drowned as her body exploded in a roiling ball of flame. Fire was everywhere in the solarium. The very air seemed to burn.

He removed the knife from Steph's now limp hand and dragged her to a safer distance from the house. He shook her. "Steph?"

He could see her eyes rolling back and forth under the lids. Finally they opened and stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Jerry?" She bolted up to a sitting position. "Jerry! What's going on?"

His grip on the knife tightened as he listened to her voice, searching carefully for the slightest hint of an accent, the slightest roll of an "r." There wasn't any he could detect, but there was only one test that could completely convince him.

"My name," he said. "What's my last name, Steph?"

"It's Pritchard, of course. But —" She must have seen the flames flickering in his eyes because she twisted around and cried out. "The house! It's on fire! Miss Gati —!"

She had said it perfectly! The real Steph was back! Jerry threw away the knife and lifted her to her feet. "She's gone," he told her. "Burnt up. I saw her."

"But how?"

He had to think fast — couldn't tell her the truth. Not yet. "Lightning. It's my fault. I must have messed up the rods when I was up on the roof today!"

"Oh, God, Jerry!" She clung to him and suddenly the storm seemed far away. "What'll we do?"

Over her shoulder, he watched the flames spreading throughout the first floor and lapping up at the second through the broken bay window. "Got to get out of here, Steph. They're gonna blame me for it, and God knows what'll happen."

"It was an accident! They can't blame you for that!"

"Oh, yes they will!" Jerry was think-ing about the ground wire wrapped around the old lady's corpse. No way anyone would think that was an acci-dent. "I hear she's got family in New York. They'll see me hang if they can, I just know it! I've got to get out of here." He pushed her to arm's length and stared at her. "Come with me?"

She shook her head. "I can't! How?"

“We’ll make a new life far from here. We’ll head west and won’t stop till we reach the ocean.” He could see her wav-ering. “Please, Steph! I don’t think I can make it without you!”

Finally, she nodded.

He took her hand and pulled her along behind him as he raced down the slope for the gate house. He glanced back at the old house and saw flames dancing in the second floor windows. Somebody down in town would see the light from the fire soon and then half the town would be up here to either fight it or watch it being fought. They had to be out of here before that.

It’s gonna be okay, he told himself. They’d start a new life out in California. And someday, when he had the nerve and he thought she was ready for it, he’d tell her the truth. But for now, as long as Steph was at his side, he could handle anything. Everything was going to be all right.

Patrolman Grimes looked better now. He was back from the couple’s apartment and stood in the hospital corridor with an open notebook, ready to recite.

All right,” Burke said. “What’ve we got?”

“We’ve got a twenty-three year old named Jerome Pritchard. Came out here from West Virginia nine months ago.”

“I mean drugs — crack, Angel Dust, needles, fixings.”

“No, sir. The apartment was clean. The neighbors are in absolute shock. Everybody loved the Pritchards and they all seem to think he was a pretty straight guy. A real churchgoer — carried his own Bible and never missed a Sunday, they said. Had an assembly line job and talked about starting night courses at UCLA as soon as he made the residency requirement. He and his wife appeared to be real excited about the baby, going to Lamaze classes and all that sort of stuff.”

“Crack, I tell you!” Burke said. “Got to be!”

“As far as we can trace his move-ments, sir, it seems that after the baby was delivered at 10:06 this morning, he ran out of here like a bat out of hell, came back about an hour later carrying his Bible and a big oblong package, waited until the baby was brought to the mother for feeding, then . . . well, you know.”

“Yeah. I know.” The new father had pulled a 10 gauge shotgun from that package and blown the mother and kid away, then put the barrel against his own throat and completed the job. “But why, dammit!”

“Well. . . the baby did have a birth defect.”

“I know. I saw. But there are a helluva lot of birth defects a damn sight worse. Hell, I mean, her legs were only with-ered a little!”