

In Oxrun Station, the wind carries dark musics, and dark magics ... to call this wind is to sum-mon damnation!

"Horror and reality intertwine until the reader cannot tell where one begins and the other ends."

-Fantasy Review, on The Orchard

"Grant is one of the authors who have given us a new golden age of horror fiction."

-Publishers Weekly

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The Orchard

Dialing the Wind

The Chronicles of Greystone Bay (editor)

Greystone Bay Doom City

Prologue

Sometimes it's best to leave memories alone. They've already been set in amber, slightly blurred, slightly tinted; they've already been through a dozen revisions, each more gentle unless the mood has been bitter, each more kind to the actual fact until the fact itself becomes personal legend—a nugget of truth embellished by the telling, the remembering, the lying in bed and wondering what had happened, what went wrong, what went right.

Photographs are the same.

Take an old one, somewhat crinkled, maybe faded, maybe touched with aging brown, and there's a scene there (in amber) despite the truth the camera saw. The odd dress, the puzzling expression, the ought-to-be-familiar background that nudges but never quite comes home. Turning it does no good. Holding it up to the light only makes you squint. Looking on the back doesn't prove a thing. It raises at the end more questions than it ever can answer, and so is put away, or thrown away, or simply forgotten.

Callum Davidson thinks I'm crazy. He's told me that a hundred times over the past seven days; every chance he gets, in fact, including calling me every night.

I haven't minded; I've only laughed.

"So what did you find out?" he asked tonight. He hadn't called this time; he didn't have to. As soon as the theater had closed, receipts taken care of and staff sent home, he had come over, wondering why I hadn't shown up for the late show. The film was an old one, god-awful by repute and experience, and one of my personal, all-time favorites. There had been, he told me as he settled on the porch, glass in hand, whiskey in glass, exactly fifteen people in the audience, and none of them had the appreciation of the purely bad that we did.

"Not a single genuine laugh," he complained, looking out at the front yard, cocking his head when something muttered in the tree that made a hazard of the end of the drive, and which I've refused to trim or cut down for that very reason. "I shudder to think that they took the thing seriously."

"No sense of the fine," I said from the other chair, feet up on the railing.

"Damn right."

An automobile braked harshly in the middle of the street, sat for several seconds, and drifted off, almost silent.

"An admirer?" he suggested, pointing his glass toward the car, eyebrow up in the tone of his voice.

"If it was, you scared her off."

I didn't look, but I know he mock-glared. He's a large man, Callum is, in height as well as heft, a tumble of dark brown hair only making him seem taller. He owns the Regency Theater on Chancellor Avenue, and as such is sole proprietor of a great many of the village's fantasies. He takes his job seriously, which was why he was here—to find out why I hadn't been around, as I usually am when the work doesn't go well and I need something to distract me.

He sipped his drink.

I reached down beside my chair and picked up a photograph album, placed it on my lap, touched its stained, red-leather cover with one finger, and drew away.

Callum saw it. Sighed softly. Sipped again, and shifted.

Another automobile ghosted past, one headlamp extinguished, music from its radio hanging in its wake.

, "He was a good man, Abe was," Callum said at last, nodding toward the album. "A bit of a crank some-times, but what the hell, right? A man his age, he had a right to be whatever he wanted."

A nightbird called out of the dark.

A leaf floated from above the porch, was caught in the light that spilled from the living-room window like fog. I watched it waver, rock, vanish below the railing.

In a tumbler on the other side of my chair, ice melted, clinked together, settled, and the glass sounded then as if it were cracking in half, slowly. I almost reached to take it up, changed my mind, and wondered how many others in the Station, remember-ing Abe Stockton, thought him a crank, or a fool, or someone who had just outlived his time. He was . . . had been . . . chief of police, just one in a long line of Stocktons who had made the Station their home, their family, the object and target of their protection. No one ever complained. It was, here in Oxrun, the natural order of things.

But he was gone now. And the task of cleaning out his small house had fallen to me, probably because I'm the one who most listened to his stories, his gripes, put up with him and put his words down and let them be judged. In the process, which was taking forever because work, and reluctance, didn't give me the time, I had uncovered several cartons of memora-bilia tucked away in the attic. They're now in my cellar, where Callum had discovered them last week.

And in the discovery, found the album.

It was an ordinary thing, like mothers and grand-mothers keep in their desk drawers and closet shelves for dragging out at reunions, at exactly the time when no one wanted to be reminded how cute they looked in diapers and short pants, frilly dresses and pigtails. The cover was smooth and uncracked, with no letter-ing on either front, back, or spine. There weren't many pages, and the photographs taped and cornered on them weren't spectacular, just there. We spent a long time trying to figure out who was who, since neither Abe nor anyone else had bothered to scribble any information on them.

"If you looked like that," Callum had said, pointing to something that might have been a woman in a dress that reached in folds to the ground, "would you want the world to know you ever existed?"

"Unkind," I said.

"Crap," he answered.

Then he noticed that the back cover was slightly fatter than the front. He probed a bit. He held it up to the light, shook it, rubbed it, and sliced open his thumb discovering a flap whose partially loose end was even with the inner spine.

It took both of us ten minutes to stop the blood's flow, another ten minutes to stop laughing at our helplessness.

Inside the pocket the flap had concealed were photographs, and thin pages of thin writing done in ink that seemed impossibly fresh.

Callum, holding up his damaged and ludicrously bandaged thumb, had announced that he had done the first bit; it was my turn now to do the second.

"Thanks," I'd muttered.

"It behooves you," he'd declared.

"Screw off."

He'd laughed.

And every night without fail, just before and after each show, and after closing time, he called to find out what, if anything, I'd learned.

Tonight I had called him. He sniffed, sneezed, blew his nose, sneezed again. "I hate pollen," he said, waving his glass at the air. "I hate air-conditioning. I hate sitting here with you when I know my one true love is out there somewhere, waiting for me to bash down her door, sweep her off the couch, and bear her wondrous lithe body up to heaven, in my arms." He glowered at the night. "So. As long as I'm sacrificing all for you, you might as well let me know what the problem is."

I blinked. "I just asked you to come over. How did you know there's a problem?"

He gave me a look that told me to grow up. "If there wasn't a problem, you jackass, you would've come to the theater and sat through that atrocious film with me. *You* called *me*, remember? You never call. Ergo, there's a problem."

It would have been easy then to laugh, to pass with a smart remark, tell a joke, demand to know what his one true love would say when she saw him naked; it would have been easier still to close the album and put it down, pick up the tumbler and drain it while I watched the dark street and listened to the dark-ened village and waited for the night to bring me a moon.

A siren on the block behind us.

Down the center of the street a small dog trotting, head bobbing happily as it checked the houses on either side.

A long time ago, far longer than I care to remember these days, a dear friend now, a new friend then, had shown me around the Station once I'd settled in the house and made myself known, enthusiastically filling me in on needed gossip, pointing out the shops to patronize or avoid, cannily introducing me to those she knew wouldn't condescend when they learned of my profession, or back me into party corners to tell me their dreams.

She also introduced me to Abe Stockton.

And the two of them together gave me my education, my courses on what is possible, what is not, and what lay in shadows between.

I opened the album and picked up the four photographs Callum had discovered in the pocket.

He put down his whiskey.

Then I handed him the sheets of paper, the writing so fine it couldn't be seen in the dark, and waited while he held them up to his eyes, squinting, refusing to dig into his pocket for his glasses. He grunted. He sneezed and blew his nose. He turned the pages front to back and shook them in his hand. When he was done proving he'd examined them, he placed them carefully on the floor between us.

"Okay," he said.

"Abe liked music, you know," I said quietly.

Callum snorted. "Right." He retrieved his glass. "Chamber orchestras and opera, I'll bet. He probably sang arias in the shower."

"Country."

He gaped, then laughed. "Country? As in 'You left me, darlin', for another man, and now I'm drinking as hard as I can'? That country?" He laughed again and slapped his thigh. "Jesus. I mean . . . holy Jesus, you gotta be kidding. God, he was old, but he wasn't senile, you know."

I shifted the photographs from one hand to the other. Back and forth. Staring at the dark. "It's not as bad as all that, you know."

"Oh, sure. Cowpokes and cowgirls sitting around the old campfire, crying their eyes out at the top of their nasal voices." He crossed his legs. "Country." He snarled at his glass. "Honest to god, I never in my life would've thought Abe was struck with that stuff."

I couldn't help a quick smile. "You ever listen to it?"

He looked at me to be sure I was joking. Then he saw I wasn't, and he shook his head slowly.

"All right, then," I said.

He waited.

"Look," I told him, "he told me once he could understand that kind of music better than most of the others. The words, I mean. He said the songs told stories he could get through without having to blast out his eardrums. Heavy metal, he said, was iron, not singing."

Callum looked at me again, one eye nearly closed. "I'll be damned. You like that crap, too." He grinned. "Son of a bitch, don't you learn something every day."

I shrugged. What the hell.

Then he leaned forward, glass held in both hands between his knees. "Okay. So Abe like twangy noise. What does that -"

"Rimer Nabb," I said, holding up the pictures.

He sat back again, heavily. "You're shitting me." Then he leaned forward a second time, toward me. "But they can't be. Look at them. They can't be, they're too old."

I shuffled them as if they were cards, dealt them onto my lap as if they were Tarot. "This one is Rimer," I told him, beginning with the one on the far left and making my way down the row, "and here's Tallman Evers, Willy Peace, Frieda Harks." I stared at each one, not quite believing it myself. It had taken me all day to decide I was right. "I thought I recognized Frieda, all that hair and that smile, and as soon as I did, the others just kind of naturally fell into place."

"Well, you're wrong," Callum said quickly, reaching out to take them up, and pulling back to grasp his drink again and glance *out at the yard*. "You're wrong. Relatives, probably."

"Yeah," I said doubtfully.

"Jesus," he whispered.

It would have been easy just to shrug, but I didn't. Instead, I held them up one by one for him to see.

Musicians and memories and music trapped in photo-graphic amber.

"Read," I told him, nodding to the papers he'd put on the floor.

He shook his head, saw my face, sighed his best martyr's sigh, and shoved his chair back until he was against the wall and the living-room light drifting over his shoulder. "If I go blind, I'll sue."

I didn't say a word.

I just showed him the pictures.

Part I Dialing The Wind

The porch, unpainted and darkly stained by the weather, was as long as its small house, the narrow yard that it faced deep and overgrown and ending in a steep slope walled with trees too close together for moonlight to touch the ground. There were a few flowers, mostly dying, and some grass, mostly brown, and a low picket fence against which a woman leaned, unseen, hoping the four would play once more before she made her way to bed.

She was tall, long legs in jeans, long torso in a plaid shirt whose sleeves were rolled clumsily to her elbows. Her hair was dark blonde cut close and brushed back, and she touched at it with her fingertips, drew her hand across one cheek and settled it at the flat of her chest. Waiting. Listening. Glancing up at the stars, and over to the woods a solid black now the music was ended.

There was no sense looking at the porch.

The musicians were invisible without a light from the house, and the glow from the moon barely reached the roof. She had tried several times to see who it was over there, man or men, woman or women, but she was sure that one of them was Rimer Nabb. The others could have been ghosts for all she knew.

She yawned then and nearly laughed aloud because bored was definitely not the way she felt tonight.

Behind her, a hissing sprinkler cast a mist over a lawn newly reseeded and struggling to survive; to her left, on Thorn Road, an automobile sputtered and clunked to a halt at the curb and backfired twice before its headlamps snapped out. She couldn't see it for the high hedge that marked her neighbor's front yard and curled around it to join the fence, but she supposed it was Bruce Kanfield, home late from the office, or one of his daughters, home late from a date.

Date, she thought; let's play Remember When.

Then the music lured her gaze back to the house, and she couldn't help wondering, again, what Nabb had done to his place that made it seem as if it had been here for centuries.

As far as she could tell, from observation and some willing gossip from the neighbors, the dark green Cape Cod had been built old, as if it had been here first and the rest of the world dropped in around it.

She yawned again without covering her mouth and turned slowly away when it was clear the playing was over.

Tomorrow, she vowed, as she'd vowed almost every day since mid-June, tomorrow I'll bring him some fresh bread or something and tell him how much I like it. Maybe he'll ask me over so I don't have to sneak around just to listen.

An insect brushed her ear.

Something stirred in the woods.

She had heard the music for the first time several weeks ago and had thought she'd left the radio on in the kitchen. Once there, however, she'd discovered she was wrong and decided it must be someone else's down the street, uncaringly loud. But when the tune stopped abruptly and began again from the beginning, she'd realized the music was live, and she had sworn softly to herself as she'd stalked to the back door. Angered, because she hadn't come all the way to Connecticut, half her life behind her in sealed cartons and dust, a sealed coffin and a grave, just to have to listen to some half-brained idiots practicing goddamn hillbilly songs, for god's sake, that played even by the best of them grated her nerves to a raw temper.

It made her feel as if she was no longer in control.

And it was control she needed. Now, more than ever.

Out the door then, and onto the narrow redwood stoop that would, in time, become a porch of her own. Hands firmly on her hips, mouth tight, eyes narrowed, head turning in jerks like a nervous bird until she realized it was coming from the house to her left

Wonderful. Just what she needed-some stupid amateur band to murder her sleep.

After a few seconds' hesitation, she'd stomped across the freshly seeded yard with every intention of raising a fuss. She didn't care about being neighborly. Summer nights were private, and she didn't appreciate violations.

But once she'd reached the fence, the music changed, and she had swallowed her planned out-burst, cocked her head, and had listened, breath shallow, eyes sometimes burning, wondering how the mandolin knew how lonely she was.

Every third night.

Alone in her yard.

Ending as it did tonight, in silence, without applause.

A last glance to the next yard then, *damn how did it know*, and she pushed inside. The small kitchen was dark, but she didn't turn on the light. Instead she headed straight down the short hall into the foyer with its brass umbrella stand and the new grandmother clock that refused to keep the right time. The door was locked, and stayed locked when she checked it a second, a third time.

Then she swerved into the living room and hesitated, unsure why she'd bothered to come. Out of preference there wasn't much furniture-a large couch, two armchairs, an end table, an oak sideboard; milk-glass vases with dried flowers for permanent color against the white walls, the draperies for the bay window a dark floral print. A marble-top coffee table with an unused marble ashtray.

It suited her. It was comfortable. And tonight, for some reason, it was unimaginably large.

She stood for a moment at the window, watching the empty street, the upstairs lights in the Tudor across the way, arms folded across her stomach, head tilted to one side as if she were listening to someone whispering in her ear. Then she sniffed, scratched her head, and finally decided it was too late to do anything but sleep.

And sleep, when it came, was filled with sighing music that reminded her of what she was.

And eventually, the figure of a man who walked down a tree-guarded country road, head tilted solemnly as if listening to a companion much shorter than he, hands gesturing lazy punctuation to his conversation until he reached the top of a grassy knoll, where he turned to face her, features in soft shadow in the shadow of an old tree, unmistakably smiling though she couldn't see his lips, while a flock of large dark birds wheeled silently overhead, darker against the blue sky, darker suddenly against the night sky, tearing out the stars, turning the moon to silver rags that drifted down over the head of the man still smiling, his arms outstretched to embrace her as she ran toward him, suddenly slowly because the road had turned into a bog, slowly because the bog had turned to quicksand, slowly because the quicksand had become the sea at high tide that closed over her, tumbled her, left her on a rocky beach over which a flock of dark birds wheeled under a placid blue sky.

She stared at them until they froze, baking silhouettes against the sun.

She blinked at them until they shrank, became narrow, became distant, became cracks in a newly plastered ceiling the contractor claimed was only settling, not to worry.

Cracks that blurred until she wiped the tears away with the backs of her hands.

The king-size bed was damp, sheets clammy, two lace-edged pillows bunched near the footboard. But she didn't move to get up. Her legs ached, her stomach was hollow. Twitch one finger, and she knew she'd fall apart.

She knew she had had the dream; she remembered nothing but a vague notion there was dying to be done.

The tears were supposed to have stopped months ago. Years. Control she should have had, and couldn't find, and it was wrong.

"Jackass," she muttered crossly, and sat up with a groan, hitching herself back until her spine rested against the carved headboard and she was able to stare across the mattress to the vanity's gold-framed oval mirror. "Oh god." Against all nature's laws her reflection looked a lot worse than she felt—hair atangle and matted wetly to her brow and ears, vague shadows beneath her puffy eyes, the skin from her breasts to the folds of her waist pale as paste. "Oh . . . god."

She squinted at the clock radio on the nightstand to her left, rolled her eyes at the hour, and shifted her feet to the cool bare floor. Wriggled her toes. Stretched and heard sockets pop, scrubbed her scalp vigorously, and pushed herself standing while she scratched at her thighs.

"Exercise," she commanded as she parted the curtains to look out at the backyard. The sky was low with an even grey overcast, the trees faintly blurred, as if hiding behind fog. The sill was damp and sticky. Beads of dew were caught in the screen. The smell of rain. And a quiet that in sunlight would have been serene.

Without the sun, it was just quiet.

Get going, she ordered.

"Screw you," she answered. "It's Saturday. I'll live."

She turned on the radio, scowled at the static, glaring while she chased green digital numbers up and down their range until she found a station that worked—the tail end of the news, and a commercial, and the first notes of a hymn.

"Oh, great," she said, the right side of her face pulling back in a mirthless smile. "Swell. I'm about to be saved."

And beside the radio, a white telephone rang.

"Caroline! Thank heavens, you're still home." A breathy voice, hoarse without being unpleasant. "I was afraid you'd be away for the weekend."

Caroline groaned without making a sound and slumped back onto the bed, bare feet crossed at the ankles. "Good morning, Adelle." Flat. A perfunctory greeting intended to produce, among other things, guilt.

"My dear, you sound funny. Partying to all hours again?"

"I don't party, Adelle. You know that."

She didn't dare. She might-

"More's the pity. Then you'd have an excuse." The laugh was oddly high. "But to the point."

"No."

"What?"

"No, Adelle. I am not coming in today. I am not coming in tomorrow. I am tired. It is my day off. I have not, in case you don't remember, had a full day off since god knows when. June, I think. Maybe even last year."

"But Caroline, I don't-"

"I'm on strike."

"Caroline, please."

Beyond her window, beyond the backyard, the slope rose sharply. More evergreen than oak, spotted with an occasional cage of white birch and pocked with large and small boulders jutting out of the hillside where the underbrush didn't grow. She watched a blue jay glide out of the woods and settle on the ground to eye the new grass as if it were a judge in a lawn contest.

The radio hymn ended, and a voice that startled her by its hoarseness began a gentle preaching. She stared at the station numbers for a moment, trying to recall if she'd ever heard the man before.

"Caroline, are you listening? Are you there?"

She turned down the volume, looked back to the window. "Honest to god, Adelle, what's the matter with Marion or Stacey? Why the hell are you always picking on me?"

The ensuing pause was deliberate, and she ignored it as she had ignored all the others she had suffered since the job had begun. Adelle Vanders was no doubt fluffing and puffing herself; she could see it clearly- lifting that matron's white-smocked substantial bos-om, one hand patting that matron's substantial bulge at the stomach, one foot stuffed into a supposedly stylish shoe tapping the floor impatiently while she lit her ninety-second cigarette of the day and blew the smoke at her knees.

The jay hopped closer to the house.

"... healing power," the preacher said quietly.

"Marion," the woman said stiffly, "is visiting her mother in Hartford. A very sick mother, I might add. And Stacey, as you know full well, is on vacation."

"And I am on my day off. Good-bye, Adelle."

"Caroline!"

She looked down at her right hand and saw the telephone cord twisted cruelly around her fingers. The knuckles were fading to white. A dark vein rose at her wrist. She wondered what would happen if she stuck a pin in it-would the blood seep out in bubbles, flow out, gush out? Would she die, or just make a mess in the bedroom no one would clean up but her?

"Last week," she said, "Marion was in Boston, visiting her very sick aunt. The week before that she was in Stamford, visiting her very sick brother. The week before that was probably Christmas and she was up at the North Pole, visiting Mrs. Claus!"

The cord tightened.

The jay jabbed at something she couldn't see.

"Caroline-"

"And Stacey, by Christ, hasn't been on vacation the whole year, you know; just since last week. Knowing her, she probably hasn't even left town because she doesn't want to leave her precious boyfriend. Probably fighting again. I think she must like it."

Suddenly the jay shrieked and flew off, and she frowned, wondering if one of the neighborhood cats had come prowling, come hunting.

". . . *laying on of hands*," the preacher said; "*just lay...*"

"I think," she continued when Adelle didn't answer, "that Stacey caught it-the fighting disease, I mean-from that dingbat friend of hers. What's her name-Jilly? God knows, they cry enough in the shop to keep the whole stock alive for a century."

She waited.

Adelle said nothing.

"For god's sake, Adelle, I'm only kidding, okay?"

Adelle's voice changed then-softened, almost whining. "Caroline. Darling. You know I hate to ask these things of you, but I just can't do it all myself. I need you. Please? Just for the afternoon? A few arrangements, that's all. Heaven knows you're the only one who knows how to do them so they don't look like plastic."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," she grumbled as she rose, shaking the cord free and moving closer to the window.

"A few hours, that's all I ask. Darling, I'm begging. I'm on my knees in the middle of four dozen white goddamn carnations, and I'm goddamned begging, all right?"

She smiled. Four dozen carnations of any color wouldn't begin to reach to Adelle's wrinkled knees.

"And I swear on Corbin's grave that I'll never ask you to do this again."

"Your husband isn't dead."

"You're being obstinate."

She leaned to her right and squinted through the screen. A spear of sudden sunlight blinded her, and vanished, and just as suddenly the radio hissed loudly and died, the preacher gone, the room oddly empty.

"Shit!" she muttered, breathless from surprise, fall-ing back against the wall, one startled hand flung up against her naked chest. There was no smoke from either the clock radio or the plug, but she thought she smelled something burning.

"Caroline?"

"Okay, okay," she said, sidling to the table. Eyeing the radio warily, she reached around the table and held her breath as she yanked the cord from its socket. When nothing happened, she closed her eyes briefly and nodded. "Of course," she said.

Of course. Why should she be able to do what she wanted? It was only her first full day off in three weeks. Nothing special about that, right? What the hell. Call Caroline, she's a sweet kid, she'll help out, no prob-lem. Aren't widows always glad for something to do?

A wet breeze swept through the woods and died on the lawn. A handful of tiny brown leaves fluttered over the fence and settled on the ground. A small flock of sparrows began foraging in the grass, fussing loudly among themselves, taking swift flight and returning, completely ignoring a lone crow who decided to forage with them.

"Then you'll be here?" Adelle asked hopefully,

Caroline started; she'd forgotten she still had the receiver in her hand. "Yes, already. Just give me time to dress and eat, all right?"

"You're a doll."

"Double time."

A pause. "That's-"

"Blackmail," she said. "Right."

"Okay." Adelle's turn to try to induce guilt.

It didn't work. Caroline laughed, winked at the birds in the yard, and rang off. What the hell, she thought; she wasn't doing anything today anyway. She might as well make a few extra dollars to pad the bank account. Or get herself a new radio, or find someone who knew how to fix it.

She snapped the plastic casing with her fingers. "Heal yourself, preach," she said with a giggle, and dressed hurriedly in a dark skirt and white blouse, chose not to wear jewelry, grabbed flats from her closet and hopped into them as she made her way along the hall to the staircase. Though she grumbled, and cursed when she barked her shin against the top post, it wasn't all that bad, getting out into the village on a Saturday afternoon. Not all that bad at all.

After all, this wasn't the city. This was Oxrun Station, the country, just like in the movies. People asked

her name when they came into the shop; people greeted her with smiles; people didn't look at her as she passed and whispered behind hands that hid disdainful lips.

People didn't ask her about the people in her dreams.

People didn't ask her why she chose to live alone.

After turning on her other clock radio, sitting within reach on the counter beside the refrigerator, Caroline made herself toast and coffee and dropped into a tubular chair at the small round table, her back to the hallway, her legs stretched out and crossed. She looked through the screen door at the yard, pleased that the timer on the sprinkler had worked for a change and the lawn wasn't flooded. The sparrows were still there, but the intruding crow had left.

A chuckle when one of the birds tripped over himself; smiling to herself as she sipped a cup of coffee, nibbled a piece of dry toast, listened to a weatherman make a liar of his script. She stuck her tongue out at his voice when he explained about the sun glowing warmly in Harley; she told him to get stuffed when he suggested a picnic or a drive.

"C'mon, play the damned music," she said without feeling. And glanced to her left, toward Nabb's house. If she could find music like that to listen to every day, she'd have a radio-no, two radios in every room of the house.

One finger lifted.

Correction: *her* house.

She grinned, amazed as she was nearly every morn-ing that this house, that yard, that pitiful excuse for green grass, was actually hers. Not a large place by any means, though it could easily suit a few more, but spacious enough to let her roam when the mood took her, each room as bright as she could make it, the only dark the wood trim, and the wainscoting in the hall and foyer.

It was supposed to be cheerful. That was the idea. And the idea behind leaving home after Harry had died. That house had become a mausoleum before she'd known it had happened; that life had become a monument to her dead instead of a getting-on.

A tightness in her chest she cleared by clearing her throat.

It'll pass, she was told; it'll never stop hurting, but it will pass, that's what they tell me.

Right, she thought, and wished to hell she could believe it.

A phone-in show began, people griping about state politics, the Red Sox, New Yorkers. She leaned over and changed the station, found nothing, and tapped a foot impatiently as she slid along through the band until she reached a place where there was no sound at all but a faint windlike humming.

She smiled.

"Still have the touch," she told herself, and took her hand away.

The only human being I know, Harry had said once, *who can look for a rock station and get the wind instead.*

Oh Christ, Harry, she thought, remembering. Oh Christ.

A bite of toast; the coffee was too hot.

Then the wind faded, and the preacher was there. ". . . put your hands on," he said, voice still hoarse, still gentle. "The saving power of. . ."

She groaned loudly and shook her head in disgust, leaned over and turned the volume down. Grotesque, but at least he wasn't one of those empty-hearted reporters who shoved microphones into people's faces five minutes past a tragedy. Like the guy who'd relentlessly interviewed the grieving family of a girl found dead in her bedroom over in Harley two weeks ago. The reporter had made her so furious, she'd almost driven right over there, to shove that mike where his brains were hiding.

"Let yourself *feel*" the preacher whispered. "Let the *power* make you-"

"Give up," she said absently, and glanced around the room, still reasonably bright in spite of the greylight.

The kitchen was what she called housewife tacky- the counters and sink were brilliantly white, the appliances copper, the cabinets yellow. It was god-awful, and she loved it, and it never failed to make her grin before she left to go to work.

The radio sputtered as the preacher whispered, "Lay on," again, and was gone to silence.

"Damnit, if you die on me, too," she threatened.

Static.

She glared at the counter where it sat.

A squirrel with tail raised sat among the sparrows.

The static cleared, replaced by a soft humming.

"Oh ... hell," she grumbled, shoved herself to her feet and grabbed her car keys from the top of the refrigerator. Then she reached for the top of the small radio, and yelped when a spark snapped into her palm.

"Jesus!" she said, blowing on her hand. It tingled. She shook it, puzzled because there was no pain at all; in fact, the tingling was almost pleasant. Veins on the back of her wrist bulged until she massaged them. Then she turned her hand over, expecting to see some sort of burn, some discoloration. There was nothing, and as she rubbed a thumb into her palm the wind sound returned.

Faintly.

And she listened for a moment when she thought she heard Harry.

Someone called her name as she locked the front door, and when she turned, she saw Bruce Kanfield waving to her from across the street. He was stripped to the waist, raking the lawn, and she grinned as she waved back and started for her car, parked at the curb. He was a pleasant, unthreatening neighbor, involved in something like investments or banking, forever bragging about his children, seldom mentioning his wife. Several times in the past six months he'd helped her around the house with wiring and a bit of carpenter-work, ridiculously simple things that simply eluded her.

He hadn't patronized; he just showed her and assumed she'd not need him again.

"Hey," he said, leaning on the rake, "you going to work?"

"Yep."

"You driving?"

She stared pointedly at the car. "No, ski."

"Oh. Well, don't forget all that construction. You'll end up parking back here again."

Her hand stopped shy of slipping the key into the lock when she realized he was right. She might as well walk; it wouldn't take any longer.

"Hey, do me a favor?" he called as she started up the street.

She nodded as she turned, walking backward, smiling.

"Fix me up something for Cora? A bouquet? I'll pick it up later, or send one of the kids around."

She grinned a yes and faced front, and nearly stumbled when she spun around again, thinking Bruce had changed, that he'd grown taller, huskier, more like . . .

Jesus, she thought; Jesus, what's with you? She almost ran to Centre Street. But she refused to think of Harry.

The Florist was a narrow recessed shop jammed between Anderson Footwear on the right, and Pickett's, a men's clothing store that sold only tailored English suits and handmade shirts. Caroline had been in each of them only once, to satisfy her curiosity that Oxrun was, indeed, a village of means. Were she a man, on her salary, she didn't think she'd even be able to afford Anderson's laces.

On the other hand, the Centre Street range of shops was such that she seldom had to leave town and drive east to Harley, the nearest community to the Station. And the people she met more than made up for the occasional feeling that she was out of her depth here.

When she arrived, grumbling to herself about all the construction on the street—a major renovation to replace the tarmac with brick and create a pedestrian mall—Adelle was in the back room, fussing helplessly over carnations, roses, a few giant yellow mums, and sprays of baby's breath that kept poking her in the eye.

"I am helpless!" the stout, white-haired woman declared when Caroline strode in, knocking aside the strings of wooden beads that served as a curtain for the doorway. "I am absolutely helpless!" The woman pointed a pudgy finger at a pile of green paper. "How the hell do you get the damned things to lie down on that?"

Caroline shrugged. "I don't know. Ask them nicely?"

Adelle frowned, her rouged cheeks sucking in, puffing out. "That isn't funny, Miss Edlin."

"It's your shop, Mrs. Vanders."

"Only because my husband thinks I need something to do." She lit a filterless cigarette and gladly gave way when Caroline dropped her purse on a cluttered desk and moved to the worktable. "The only thing I need to do is go home and get drunk." Then she dropped into a wooden chair that squealed when she pushed her and it against the wall with her feet. "My darling, I am exhausted."

"From what?" Caroline asked, hands already floating over the flowers, already blending colors and scents from chaos. "It looks like you left it all for me."

It wasn't said angrily, nor even sarcastically. Now that she was here, she didn't mind it at all. The flowers,

like the music, took her mind and gave it shape, gave her daydreams something to do while the hours marked their way to dark, and sleep.

From the street they heard the sharp fist of a jackhammer, both looking at the same time.

"You know," Adelle said, "I'm sorry they ever started that now. Who wants to go shopping with all that dust flying in the air? We're going to lose millions, mark my words."

The floor trembled as a pair of grimy dump trucks lumbered past, loaded with blocks and slabs of what remained of Centre Street's old surface; the flowers quivered on the table. And Caroline was grateful that she'd been able to find the house on Thorn Road. It was the southernmost street in the village, all the houses and trees between acting, thus far, as a perfect sponge for the noise.

"They found another one."

She paused in reaching for a length of wire to bind some stems. "Huh?"

Adelle blew smoke at the floor. "Over on Devon. A little girl was discovered yesterday morning in her bedroom. Not a child, you understand. I think she was twenty. God, you can't hear anything else on the street. It's so morbid. I hate listening to that sort of thing. It's ghastly."

A sliver of stiff leaf lodged under her thumbnail, and Caroline hissed as she worked it out gently. "Maniac, right?" A drop of blood glistened.

"How should I know? It doesn't interest me. All I know is, that's one here, two in Harley, one in New Haven, all since the beginning of the year. Corbin says no one has a clue, and," she added, her voice lowered, "you'll notice that not a single detail has been in the papers. They must have been chopped up or some-thing."

Caroline gave Adelle the shudder she knew the woman hoped for, though she didn't turn to show her smile. "I thought you hated that stuff."

Adelle crushed the cigarette under her heel. "Oh, my dear, I do, of course I do. But one has to keep up, doesn't one? Besides, you and I, darling, are apparent-ly too old for this guy, whoever he is. We're safe in our dotage."

You and I, Caroline thought as she sucked the blood from her thumb, are twenty-five years apart.

"My goodness, don't you listen to the radio, child?"

"Can't. I have two, and they're both busted. Besides, all I could get this morning was some evangeli-cal preacher, talking about healing me or something. Plus, the damned thing gave me a shock. There's a short somewhere, I guess."

Adelle commiserated, then sighed when the harness bells nailed over the entrance sounded. She added a **groan** for good measure and hauled herself up, brushed her hands over her spotless white-and-gold apron, and checked herself in a tiny mirror propped on the desk. "Duty calls," she said.

Caroline only nodded. And scowled five minutes later when her name was called from the front. According to the scribbled orders haphazardly taped to the whitewashed wall above the table, she was going to be here all day, and probably well after supper, too. What she didn't need were interruptions, just because the older woman couldn't tell ragweed from heather.

"Darling!" Adelle said sweetly when she pushed through the hanging beads.

Caroline smiled, brushed aside a peacock's feather standing in a brass spittoon, and saw a tall man in a cream linen suit waiting on the other side of the short counter. He was lean, his long face creased and melancholy in spite of the one-sided grin he gave her over Adelle's shoulder, one that told her that interrupting her work wasn't his idea.

"Darling," Adelle said, standing to one side, "this lovely gentleman is looking for something special. One of your famous displays in wicker, or a vase, would be simply perfect." She nodded once, and left the room, smoke from a fresh cigarette a leash that drew her back in seconds, just long enough to say, "And he needs it by four."

Caroline couldn't help a grimace.

"Don't say it," the man said, raising a palm, spreading his grin. "I know. But it's kind of an emergency."

"Not a funeral or something, I hope," she said politely, pulling the order pad to her.

"No. Worse—a forgotten anniversary."

From the uncaring hang of his suit, he definitely didn't shop at Pickett's, and when he put his hands on his hips, slipping the jacket behind them, she saw a shoulder holster nestled against his side. "I hope you're a cop," she said, determined not to seem startled.

He looked down, and dropped his arms suddenly, letting the jacket close. "Sorry. Didn't mean to frighten you." His fingers raked nervously through curly brown hair that dropped just below his collar. "I'm not used to it yet."

"Oh? A new cop then?"

"Sort of," he said. "New to plainclothes, anyway." His grin snapped on, snapped off. "Glenn. Glenn Rowan."

She took the offered hand, felt warmth, felt perspiration, and asked him what he wanted. He didn't know. Something to keep his girlfriend from taking off his head when he told her he had to work tonight instead of taking her out to dinner.

"How about a plane ticket to California?" she suggested, half turning to look at the stock in the cooled, glass-front display case behind her. Rowan bothered her, and she didn't know quite why.

Liar, she thought; you know damned well why.

He laughed. "A ticket, huh? For me, or her?"

"I think ... for you. With that face, you'll never be able to lie to her. I'll bet you're lousy at poker, too."

Jesus, Caroline, what the hell are you doing?

Again he laughed, and leaned a hip against the counter. "It's a good idea, but I think it'll have to wait." He pointed. "Those roses. The orangey ones."

She told him the price.

He winced. "Ouch. I'll be eating peanut butter for a year."

She looked at him along her shoulder. "You want to live, I can do something with the roses. You want to eat, you'll have to go for the ticket."

He considered her for a moment, and for a moment she thought he was going to lean over to kiss her. Irrational. Stupid. And she looked dumbly at his outstretched hand when he offered her several ten-dollar bills. When she finally took them, still trying to shake the feeling and shake herself back to the real world in the shop, he gave her a friendly, two-fingered salute and headed for the door.

"Four," she called after him.

He stopped with his hand on the knob. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

His smile-oh god that smile!-switched on again, but she had no time to respond. The door swung sharply open, nearly knocking him over, and Stacey Jeffries rushed in ahead of a slam of construction bedlam. Her long black hair was wind-woven, blades of grass clung to her jeans, which in turn clung to legs that looked almost too thin to hold her up. Her white shirt was open three buttons down, her skin deeply tanned across the tops of breasts that seemed too large for a woman so slender.

"Caroline, wait until you hear-" She stopped when she realized there was someone clinging to the door, rubbing his wrist with his free hand. "Oh my god. Oh . . ." Flustered, she reached out as though to help, but Rowan shook his head quickly and gave her the smile.

"You'd better go before you get killed," Caroline called over the noise from outside.

"Right," he said. "Right." He nodded to Stacey and ducked into the street, the door closing with a near slam.

"Jeez," Stacey said, looking at him through the window. "Boy, I guess I'll hear about that later."

Caroline stuffed the money into the register, whose drawer never seemed willing to either open or close without scraping off a knuckle. "Hear from who? You know him?"

"Sure," Stacey said. "That's Glenn. He's a cop. Didn't you know? He found that girl on Devon Street."

"No," she said. "As a matter of fact. . .no." Then she watched as Stacey fussed around the shop, finger-dusting the shelves that held tall and short vases and hand-painted figurines, adjusting the swivel rack that held greeting and note cards. She was only a few years into her twenties and still managed to seem as if she were only sixteen. Though Caroline like her-no, *enjoyed* her-her enthusiasm could make a single day seem more like a year.

Adelle coughed in the back room, loud and hacking, and ended it with a curse before starting again.

A horn warned a jaywalking pedestrian.

A chilly draft from the display case tickled her ankles, took hold, chilled her calf. She shifted. And ignored the next cough, which was clearly a signal for her to return to work.

Something was wrong with Stacey.

And the moment the thought straightened her, Stacey stopped in the middle of the shop and said, "Caroline, I think I'm in trouble."

The town's luncheonette was on the next corner, and they were lucky enough to find a booth in back. The place was filled with dusty workers, and the noise they produced made it seem like a Friday-night bar.

Their orders came quickly—two salads, two coffees—but Stacey only stared at hers, poked at it with a fork, lifting shreds of lettuce as if expecting to find something underneath. Caroline watched her, noting how poorly she'd used dark makeup to cover the red rims of her eyes.

She waited.

Stacey said nothing.

"I have a feeling," she finally said, "that I'm going to be working until midnight at least." When Stacey looked up at her, puzzled, she nodded. "In fact, I know I am. It's because I haven't been able to practice my mind reading lately. Otherwise, I'd know what you're talking about, just like that." And she snapped her fingers.

Stacey almost smiled. "Oh."

"*Yes. Oh,*" Another wait, turning her gaze now to the T-shirted men lining the long counter, sweat staining their backs, yellow hard hats pushed back on their heads. Though both women had been blatantly looked over when they'd arrived, the men's attention was elsewhere now—on their food, and the two waitresses who didn't seem to mind the attention.

"Stace," she said, swinging her head back around, "if you're going to tell me you think you're pregnant, I don't think I'm the one to give you advice."

"Oh god, no!" the younger woman protested. "Jeez, Caroline, that's not it." Her eyes widened. "Did you think it was? God, is that what you thought? That I was ... oh no, god no, never, I'm not that dumb."

"Good." She took a bite of the salad and decided the rabbits weren't missing a thing. "So what's the trouble?" She determined then to be patient while Stacey fussed again with her own meal, fussed with the silverware, folded and unfolded the napkin in her lap. She pulled her hair over one shoulder and threw it back. She reached for her coffee, and pushed it away with a shudder of distaste.

Finally Caroline reached over and snared her left hand, held it firmly on the table, and said, "Stace, c'mon, give me a break, okay? Are we ... are we talking men here? Is that why you haven't talked to Marion?"

Stacey's cheeks flushed, but not prettily, and she grabbed up her knife like a dagger. "I can't talk to her," she answered sullenly, staring at the blade, putting it down. "She's not home. Besides, she thinks I'm still a baby, for god's sake."

"Ah. Then it *is* a man, yes?"

Stacey shrugged. And nodded reluctantly.

"Okay. Is it Nick, then? You guys having some kind of trouble?" She almost added: *again?*

As far as she understood the whirlwind of the girl's life, Stacey had been going with one of Oxrun's patrolmen, Nick Lonrow, for just about a year. Which was why the girl never left town on her days off. Caroline didn't know him. Adelle said he was just a boy.

She saw the beginning of tears then, saw Stacey jerk her head side to side to keep them from falling. Oh boy, she thought; another romance bites the dust. And she eased her grip on the girl's hand, patting it instead, wanting to tell her that losing a man this way was infinitely better than sitting alone at his bedside, watching the skin grow flaccid as what beneath it dissolved. Shrinking him. Discoloring him. Reducing him to a mockery while nameless men and women in white walked past him without seeing, stopping only

long enough to take a pulse, a blood pressure, make a note, and move on.

Infinitely better.

While miracles hid, and no god answered prayers.

Stacey snatched up her napkin and blew her nose loudly, lifted her chin and swallowed tightly. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Another woman?"

"I guess. I... he doesn't want to talk anymore, you know? He says he's busy. He wants to be a detective, and ... and he says there's no future for him here." She snapped her head around to stare at the wall. "He wants to go to Hartford. Greenwich. He says ..." She looked back, angry now. "Caroline, am I supposed to give a shit about what he wants when he doesn't want me to go with him?"

They exchanged the luncheonette for the park and walked along the winding blacktopped path, under heavy branches whose shade on a bright day would have been welcome.

The overcast had deepened. Strips and slides of cloud dangled over the trees, were twisted by a cool breeze and shredded to ghosts of fog waiting in the leaves. Three girls played quiet tag around two moth-ers who ignored them. A ball game on the playing field was muffled by the early twilight, the sound of bat meeting ball less a crack than a slap.

"What I think is," Stacey said, "I don't want him to go.

A kiosk selling ice cream and snacks was deserted; they walked past it.

A cyclist rushed past them, his passing the hiss of a late autumn wind.

Caroline saw a group of teenage boys lying on the grass, heads turning as Stacey walked by, the girl oblivious to the stir she created. Had she been alone at least one of them would have moved in; they ignored Caroline completely-for them she was much too old.

"I want him to stay." What she said was: *he's mine*.

The tears had withdrawn, the anger remained, and Caroline couldn't help smiling sadly when she remem-bered her own tears, the wailing, the demands, the swing from rage to self-pity as Harry was sucked away by the machines, drained by the cancers, as if, in some way, he had finally decided to go somewhere else without taking her with him.

It wasn't fair.

And justice, for her, had died in a room that smelled of death and cleaning.

"... preacher," Stacey said. "Jilly told me about him."

Caroline rubbed her cheek briskly, brought herself back to the park. "I'm sorry? Preacher? Jilly? Your friend Jilly?" She touched the girl's shoulder playfully. "Don't tell me you're getting religion, Stace. No offense, but I don't think that's going to help."

"No," the girl said with a single shake of her head. "Jilly's ... *was* telling me about this .. ." A shudder-ing deep breath and a sigh and toss of her head. "Jilly's the one Glenn found yesterday."

Caroline didn't know what to say, and so said nothing as Stacey talked on after much clearing of her

throat. But it seemed that Jilly Pentworth had had man problems of her own, and had discovered some radio preacher who somehow was able to reach her, who made her believe that nothing was impossible if she only believed hard enough. Clap your hands if you believe in fairies, Caroline thought, though she kept it to herself when she saw the way Stacey looked, the way her eyes brightened in spite of her anger, the anima-tion in her walk as she explained how this guy, whoever he was, never talked about Jesus, or God, or even the Bible. He simply talked, and Stacey was beginning to wonder if maybe he could help her.

"Forgive me," Caroline said gently, "but it doesn't look like he was much help to Jilly, at the end."

Stacey only answered, "She didn't believe."

At the end of the path the land began to rise, a knoll that marked the beginning of a small patch of wood-land. They turned around, headed back for the gates, in silence now while Caroline marveled at the gullibil-ity of the innocent.

Finally, passing the kiosk again, the boys gone, the ball game drawing to a close in an argument with the umpire, she massaged the side of her neck.

"I think," she said, "if Nick doesn't want you to go, then you aren't going, and no radio pulpit-pounder's going to make any difference."

"Oh, but he will!" Stacey insisted.

"Jilly's dead," she reminded her.

"Yes, but. . ." Stacey quickened her pace, slowed, turned and walked backward. "You see, he talks about the power, y'know?"

feel the power

Caroline tried not to smile. "Yeah, but Stacey, he's-"

hands lay your hands

Stacey scowled, her face instantly aging, instantly a crone, before softening, sagging, then defiant again. "You don't get it, Caroline. You just don't get it."

And before Caroline could defend herself, the girl whirled and ran off, vanishing around a turn in the path. She took a quick step after her and changed her mind. It wouldn't do any good to chase after her; she probably wouldn't be able to catch her anyway. But it angered her to see what that boyfriend was doing to her. And what the girl was doing to herself. She was still young, for god's sake, plenty of time to find someone else, to have someone find her. And to resort to a faceless voice on the radio-

feel

She raised her eyebrows as she reached the high iron gates at the park entrance. It must be the same guy she'd chanced upon that morning. But she hadn't heard anything special, hadn't noted any extraordi-nary qualities in the man or the sermon. All the son of a bitch had done was short out her radios.

Which is exactly what she told Adelle when she returned to the shop, unapologetic for the time lost, swearing on every blossom in the store that she wouldn't leave until all the most vital orders had been filled.

"But I won't be in tomorrow," she said, sleeves rolled, apron around her waist to protect her skirt. "Monday. Stacey and I will take care of everything else Monday."

"Darling, if you say so."

She grinned. Of course she did. And she was briefly ashamed for taking advantage, knowing she was the best thing that had happened to The Florist since Adelle's husband had taken it over. She didn't understand what the affinities were with the flowers, the arrangements; she only knew that her hands knew what to do, her eyes knew what was right, her sense of smell understanding what would work perfectly and what wouldn't.

Harry had said she was part rose herself.

And in thinking of him, more recently than she had in the past two years thanks in some curious way to Stacey, she wasn't surprised when Glenn Rowan showed up just at four, and threw up his hands in exaggerated astonishment when she handed him the white vase with the roses already *in place*.

"Incredible," he said. "She'll love me forever."

"If she doesn't, give me a call," she answered with a laugh that choked into a gasp. She gaped, sputtered, watched in horror as her hands batted the air over the counter for want of someplace to land, something to do. "Work," she managed at last, pointing to the beads and back room. "So much to do. Let me know how she likes it. Must. . . closing time"

And she fled, grasping the edge of the worktable until she heard the harness bell signal his departure.

"My *god*," she said to the wall. "What the *hell* are you doing?"

And again, "What are you thinking of, woman?" as she walked in the front door just after eight and threw her keys on the foyer table, didn't look for the mail because there seldom was any. Her mother, were she alive to see and hear what had happened, would have been shocked; her aunt would have called her a hussy and probably would have thrown her out of the house. She called herself out of her goddman mind and strode into the living room, poured herself a scotch from the larder on the sideboard, and dragged one of the armchairs around to face the window. She had eaten at the Mariner Cove, had tasted nothing, and **was** positive that Rowan had told all his friends about the woman in the florist shop who had come on to him like gangbusters. The patrons had stared at her, she was sure, peeking slyly around their menus, snickering to their companions.

She hadn't tasted a thing.

She had met Kanfield on Chancellor Avenue, and he laughed when she told him she'd forgotten his bou-quet.

"Not to worry," he'd said, patted her shoulder, moved on.

Now she sat and watched the sun draw the light with it over the peaked roof of the Tudor, watched the shadows crawl in angles over the street toward her front yard, watched the neighbors pop in and out of their houses like mechanical toys in shop windows while children hustled home and the first rain began to fall.

Harry.

God, she missed him.

She didn't turn on a lamp.

She emptied her glass and wished that Nabb and his musicians would play for her again. So she could hear herself in the songs, find herself in the words-though the words that she heard were only the words that she dreamed.

She wished Glenn didn't have a girlfriend.

You know, she thought, I think maybe this is what they call the coming out of it.

She drank.

She sipped.

Harry's dead, you miss him, and now the mourn-ing's over, and you hate yourself for it.

She sipped.

The sun set.

And shortly after ten, empty glass in her hand, chin trembling, cheeks wet while the window streaked wetly, she heard a voice in the kitchen:

"Lay on your hands and *feel!*"

The man on the hilltop had no dimension, was only black, his outstretched arms black cracks in the blue that pretended to be the sky, that widened until the sky retreated into night, that widened until she couldn't see him anymore, though she knew he was there, watching her and waiting for her and asking her to come to him; until she couldn't sense him anymore, though she knew he was there, patient and insistent and blotting out the stars that once were faces she recognized while she turned in a dancing circle, trying to make up her mind; until she couldn't see anything, feel anything, hear anything anymore but the burr of the alarm in the clock radio by her bed.

Her eyes were wet; she didn't dry them.

It was Sunday.

It rained.

The kitchen radio worked after she thumped it with a fist, and she decided the short hadn't been fatal after all. But she kept eyeing it, was afraid to turn the dial, even when all the music was backed by that same insistent humming, that sounded more and more like the wind.

Then she cleaned the house room to room, top to bottom, and exhausted herself listening hard for the telephone to ring, and listening for the preacher's voice that meant so much to Stacey Jeffries.

On Monday the rain was a blessing. Steady without being hard, it successfully kept the road workers from returning, brought a relative peace to the street de-spite the great gaps in its surface. Caroline opened up, but Stacey didn't come in until almost ten-thirty, her hair not quite combed, the dress she wore not quite ironed or fitting her well. And if anything, Caroline thought, the girl actually looked thinner.

"You okay?" she asked quietly, standing in the back doorway, bead strings draped over one shoulder.

At the counter Stacey nodded. "Just thinking, that's all." She propped a transistor radio against the regis-ter. "Wish to hell I could find that damned station."

"Huh?"

"The preacher," she said, as if Caroline should have known. "Jilly's preacher. You can never find him when you want him. Damn."

Caroline chose tactful silence, and when a customer came in, Stacey brightened falsely, allowing Caroline to retreat thankfully to the worktable. An anniversary wreath that was to be picked up by noon; a funeral wreath someone from Sutherland's would come for that afternoon; Bruce Kanfield's bouquet, a gift from her to him to apologize for forgetting. On a sheet of paper in the upper corner a sketch of the street-window display she wanted to set up by the end of the week. Generally, all florist shops looked alike from the sidewalk, and she hoped Adelle would let her do something different. It wasn't the competition-in Oxrun there wasn't any; it was the principle. She hated coming to work to the same old thing, the same fresh and dried flowers, the same announcements of sales for Valentine's Day, Christmas, Thanksgiving, the standard look people ignored because they already knew what was inside.

The beads rattled.

"Hey, Stace, what do you think of this?" She pointed at the sketch without looking up.

"Looks fine to me. What's it supposed to be?"

She whirled and backed up, blinking rapidly as Rowan leaned over the table to get a closer look.

"You want to put elephants in the window?" He turned his head. "In a flower store?"

Caroline glanced at the doorway and saw Stacey watching her, the beads distorting most of her face save for the resentment that narrowed her eyes and set her chin. Then she was gone as the bells jangled, and Rowan shifted to lean a shoulder against the wall.

"I'm sorry," he said, hands deep in his pockets. "I always seem to be scaring you or something."

She nodded. She swallowed. She kicked herself without moving and took a deep breath. "It's all right. It's the weather, that's all."

"Well, look," he said. "I mean, if you don't mind, you were so good with those flowers and all, would you like to have lunch with me?" He looked startled. "To thank you, I mean," he added quickly. "For what you did."

Crazy, she thought; Jesus, what-

And she told herself to shut up. All the crying was over; she had done that yesterday, and who cared if he had someone else already. This, she decided, would be close to perfect. A friendly lunch. A new friend. No hassles, no games, because he was already taken.

"I . . ." She nodded. "Sure. Yes, I'd like that very much."

He nodded back. "Okay. Fine." Pushed away from the wall. "At the Cove? Is that all right? Unless you'd rather go to the Inn. I mean, if you'd prefer-"

"The Cove is fine," she assured him before his babbling made her laugh and ruin it all. "I get lunch at one."

"Okay." He backed through the beads. "Okay. One."

And immediately he was gone, Stacey came in, her expression sullen though her lips worked at grinning. "Got a date, huh?"

Several seconds passed before Caroline realized that it was true. A date. The first in three years.

"I'll be damned," she said, more to herself than the girl. "Son of a bitch."

"Well," Stacey said as she walked away, "at least *you're* happy."

Caroline debated following her and shaking her until all that smothering self-pity was gone, then remembered her own bath of the day before. Perhaps it would be best just to leave her alone. She's a big girl. When she needs to talk again, she will.

And the rest of the morning dragged, and sped by too fast, and by the time it was one o'clock, Stacey back from her own break, Caroline was ready to take her car and head for Vermont. She didn't want to do this. It was wrong. For several hours she had tried to tell herself that it was precisely what she needed, and at the end of that time she ordered herself to realize that the reason the detective attracted her. was because he looked almost like Harry.

Almost.

The height, the leanness, the dance and quiver of the curls that refused obedience to a comb. The awkwardness with her. Eight married years, and Har-ry had never been able to shed his image of adoles-cence.

But there was, in Rowan's face, far more experi-ence, and his voice was too deep, his hands too large, the way he wore his clothes nothing at all like Harry Edlin.

"You're gonna be late," Stacey warned, still resent-ful, her face more pale in the grey-light from the window. Then, as if contrite, held out her red umbrel-la. "You better take this or you'll catch pneumonia."

Caroline smiled her thanks, and in the lee of the recessed front door, she held up the umbrella and watched the rain strike the pavement, fill muddy puddles in the street, begin to slant as the wind *strengthened and slapped raincoats against calves and* sent a golf cap rolling into the gutter.

I will be cheerful, she vowed as she swung left and headed down to Chancellor Avenue; I will be witty, I will be interested, I will explain what I do and he will be fascinated.

And heat covered her cheeks when she wondered, for a moment, if he would take her to bed.

The Mariner was red brick and white columns, a low building on the corner, diagonally across from the police station. On the right was the Lounge, a darkwood and quiet place, no children allowed and no toleration for drunks; on the left was the Cove, a larger, lighter, more bustling place, true to its name by the decor that it boasted without seeming at all forced.

Many of the center tables were still occupied when she arrived, but against the lefthand wall were a few empty booths, and the hostess took her to one without comment, just a smile, and left a single-page menu behind. Caroline was mildly surprised that Rowan hadn't made a reservation, or at least left his name, but she welcomed the time alone to get hold of her nervousness.

Control, she thought; control.

She ordered a drink, and when it came drank half of it before she ordered herself to stop.

She read the menu three times and nibbled on the bread and rolls left in a basket.

A waitress asked for her order, she told her she was waiting for someone, could she please have another

cocktail?

Thirty minutes later she didn't know whether she ought to be furious or crushed. It was obvious he wasn't coming. Though she suspected he had been detained on some sort of police business, it was no excuse for at least not calling.

Harry wouldn't have forgotten, no matter how busy he was.

Her eyes closed then, so tightly she saw not dark but whorls of orange, red, shifting islands of blues that sparked as she scolded herself. Control; she was losing control and she didn't know why, and she wished to hell Harry would just leave her alone and wished he was with her and wished Glenn had called and wished she knew what was happening to her.

The grief wasn't over.

The missing had just begun.

Fumbling in her purse for a bill. Dropping it on the table as she stumbled out of the booth. Composed herself. Swallowed. Strode from the Cove and into the light that made the afternoon seem too much like night.

Temptation turned her toward the police station and let her take a quick step, but she lashed it immediately behind her as she snapped up the red umbrella and hurried across the street, strode up the sidewalk past the shops and offices, forcing her gaze to those that were working on their facades, changing the common mansard roof lines to individual ones, old-fashioned ones. The street looked like the aftermath of some monstrous devastation, the tearing down and the rebuilding, the pedestrians picking their way over and through brackish puddles, around clumps of tarmac and cement and stacks of paving stones covered with tarpaulin that stirred with the wind.

And once in the florist shop, umbrella furled and dripping, she realized she was alone.

"Stacey?"

No one in back. Adelle still hadn't returned.

"Damnit, Stacey!"

There was a note on the register, hastily scrawled, taped to the top.

Caroline

I found him! He's going to help, I know he will. Nick won't leave now. See you tomorrow.

"Idiot," she muttered, and crushed the note into a ball she threw across the shop. A great way to end the day. Nothing was going to get done now. Just as she got to work, sure as hell some dope was going to come in and take twenty minutes to decide what he wanted, fuss over the price like an old man, and be replaced by someone else.

At the worktable she buried the fingers of one hand into her hair. Had she ever been like that about Harry? Had she ever been so consumed by him that the rest of the world had gone to seed without her even noticing?

The answer came before the question was done: of course; and she still was, despite all her efforts to settle his memory in place.

A tear she flicked angrily away.

Another that fell onto a note card before she could catch it.

Maybe Stacey wasn't all that far off the mark. Maybe she could use some spiritual guidance herself, someone to talk to about the process of getting on with it, of leaving the dead behind without killing herself with guilt.

The harness bells jangled.

"Shit."

But the smile was there as the rest of the day went as predicted, and by the time she locked up a six, her cheeks were sore, her stomach was filled with acid, and her anger toward Rowan had multiplied every minute he didn't call to apologize or explain.

The house was dark.

She was alone. Standing in the foyer, feeling the weight of the rooms above her. Swallowing so hard her jaw cracked before she began weeping, and slowly dropped to her knees, palms over her eyes while the neighbors came home, too, full of laughter and shout-ing.

She spun the dial, searching for the wind. "Damn, where are you?" she said, almost yelling. And the preacher finally said, "Lay on your hands and feel the power, feel the *dream*."

On Tuesday, Stacey didn't show at all and didn't call, and Caroline raged mindlessly through the shop, snatching up figurines and planters as though she was going to smash them, putting them back with great effort and forcing her fingers to release them. Then she slumped against the counter, and Adelle clucked over her, demanding to know what she'd been drinking, or smoking. When she protested without heat, the wom-an clamped an arm around her shoulder and said, "Darling, Corbin always says that a woman who lets herself go like you have is either a secret drinker, an addict, or a nympho."

Caroline laughed loudly, only just able to control herself when she saw the brief frightened look on Adelle's face. Then she said with a wail, "It's Harry," and began crying without caring, and they spent over an hour in the back room, crying together, hiccuping, crying again, while she said over and over, "I miss him, I miss him, I don't want to but I want him back, I want it the way it was, why can't it be the way it was?"

Over.

And over.

Among the flowers in the vases, the flowers on the table, the flowers in the window that flared at the dying sun and kept on dying.

That night she had the dream, and she saw her husband's face as he waited for her on the hilltop, smiling and nodding as she begged him to come home.

"I'm going to take some time off," she announced Wednesday afternoon, her voice as grey as the clouds settling over the village.

Adelle didn't argue, or offer a simple token protest. "Whatever you think is best, dear." And smiled around her cigarette, through the smoke, and winked.

Caroline nodded. "You don't get it, but I have to, Adelle. I'm cracking up, I'm losing control. I have to get it back or I'm going to go nuts."

And that night she called Glenn, and hung up without a word when a woman answered the tele-phone.

She stood then in the kitchen, the wooded slope reflecting the sun and slanting shadows, and she turned away from the wall to look at the radio and shake her head. If you'd only give an address, she thought, I could write to you or something, or call maybe, or something.

And massaged her forehead with the tips of her fingers, as hard as she could, trying to force a head-ache, a burning, anything to drive off the feeling that a radio preacher could help her when she couldn't even help herself.

It was cowardly.

It was Glenn.

If she hadn't met him, hadn't seen him, Harry wouldn't have been resurrected and she would have carried on the way she had been, making progress, settling debts, finally ridding him of the blame she'd nailed to his leaving.

And when the telephone rang, she nearly screamed.

It rang again.

She lay a hand on the flat of her chest and waited for calm.

It rang.

She picked up the receiver and heard Stacey say, "Caroline, oh god, help me," before the line went dead.

And the radio sputtered on.

It was too far to run.

The blocks in Oxrun were easily twice as long as any she'd seen in any city, and so she scrambled into her car and backed out of the driveway, paused for a moment to wonder if she was overreacting, then sped east on Thorn Road.

Deliberately not speculating.

Taking slow and deep breaths to maintain her composure as she wheeled around the second corner and headed up Raglin. Slowing only when a gang of kids in baseball uniforms streamed across the road, waving bats and empty gloves, streaking along the sidewalk toward the park.

At Woodland she swung right, and began to brake.

A ball game between kids too young to have uni-forms crowded the center of the street, giving way reluctantly, almost forcing her to use the horn.

Caroline, help me

And as she bumped over the curb into a graveled driveway, she hoped the girl hadn't done anything stupid.

She didn't think so.

Stacey hadn't sounded worried; she'd sounded scared to death.

The door stuck.

Caroline punched it, it opened, and she nearly fell in her haste to get out of the car.

The house was small, overgrown with rambling ivy and evergreen shrubs that clawed toward the windows. The front door was unlocked, and she slammed in, and halted.

Silence.

The empty silence of a house that hadn't been lived in for years.

"Stacey?"

The living room was to her left, a staircase to her right, and she glanced up toward the second floor as she made her way to the back. Her hands tapped her legs, her upper lip was trapped between her teeth.

"Stacey, it's Caroline!"

No echoes.

The silence.

And under it, as she stepped into the kitchen, a thrumming, faint and heavy, like a furnace gasping to work, or a wind working its patient way to a howl.

The kitchen table was littered with dishes dark with encrusted food. The faucet dripped in the sink. The back door was closed, the ivory curtains drawn and giving the room little light.

On the wall to her right, a dirt-streaked telephone- the receiver dangling, and swinging slowly, knocking lightly against the oven.

She put a hand over her mouth and turned around, undecided, until she thought she heard a footstep upstairs, the creak of a floorboard.

Oh god, suppose she's been murdered, she thought, suddenly cold, her mouth abruptly dry and the urge to cough so strong she had to press her palm against her lips; suppose the guy's still up there. Oh Jesus oh my god what the hell am I going to do?

As quietly as she could she made her way back to the stairs, looking up, squinting, listening so hard the back of her neck began to ache. Grabbing the newel post and feeling the grit, wondering how the hell two women could live like this, in such filth? It wasn't like Stacey, and it definitely wasn't like Marion, the undisputed queen of elbow grease, scrub brush, and hot-water pail.

Caroline

She blinked rapidly-did she hear it, her name, or was it just an echo of the call?

Behind her, muffled, the sound of the ball game.

Above her, muffled, the floorboard creaked again.

Oh Stacey, she thought, and took the first step up, reaching into her skirt pocket as she did and pulling out

her car keys, which she arranged between the fingers of her fist. She felt stupid, but it was the only thing she could think of, and if it worked ... if there was something for it to work against. . .

Stop, she told herself; stop right now and call Glenn, or Nick.

There were only three rooms on the second floor: the first was Marion's, the door open, no one inside; the second was the bathroom, the door open, no one there.

The third room was open as well, and Caroline pressed against the wall as she moved toward it.

The clouds thickened; the light dimmed.

And she could hear now the faint wind she'd heard before, pulsing, sighing, and abruptly dying the moment she stepped in the room and saw Stacey sprawled on the bed. She was naked, she was white, and her eyes stared at the ceiling, her mouth open in a hard smile.

There was no one else in the bedroom.

Dark blue draperies covered the only window.

Static hissed from a radio on the nightstand.

"Stacey?" she whispered, and moved to the foot of the bed. "Stacey, it's me."

Then she saw the flattened breasts, the flat stomach, the rough red of her soles, and the stains on the sheets crumpled around the girl. It wasn't blood. It was dirt, and dried sweat, and the yellow of dried urine.

A whisper: "Stacey?"

The eyelids fluttered, cracked lips quivered, and she rushed around to kneel beside her, grabbing her hand to chafe the wrist.

"Stacey, hold on, I'll get a doctor."

The hand grabbed her as she started to rise.

The mouth opened.

A long weak sigh: "Won't. . . leave . . . me."

"I won't, I won't." She searched the room for something, she didn't know what, and whimpered when the hand tightened.

Longer, and weaker: "Nick."

And the eyes closed, the mouth closed, and a sudden vile stench exploded into the room.

Caroline gagged and reeled, shaking the hand away, staggering to her feet and backing toward the door as Stacey's body rippled from neck to knee, the breasts sagging further, the stomach sinking more, her ribs stark and her hipbones sharp and her face abruptly old while her hair turned white and feathered to the floor.

Caroline screamed. Just once.

And the radio light blinked on, and the preacher said, "Feel the power, daughter," before the radio

exploded.

There was little after that she could make sense of.

A telephone call filled with sobbing; a running from the house to the yard where the boys playing ball watched her and moved away; red and blue lights; feet on the grass; doors slamming and brakes shrieking and hands that picked her up and hands that laid her down and faces that leaned over her and faces that frowned and voices that asked questions and voices that babbled and a voice that said, "You're home now, Caroline, are you sure you want to be alone?"

Automatic; she had put herself on automatic the moment the first police car arrived, and now, with Rowan hovering uncertainly at the front door, she nodded, and smiled, and didn't ask why he hadn't called, didn't say a word at his confusion, his fear, at why he only nodded back and turned around.

She shut the door.

Stood in the dark.

Looked down the hall toward the kitchen when the telephone rang. She knew it would be Adelle, offering love and comfort, and she knew she didn't want it.

Through it all, however many hours of it there had been and she didn't want to know, she let part of her mind deal with those who needed answers to questions they didn't know how to ask, while the rest of her thought about Stacey, and the preacher, and the laying on of hands.

Now she thought of Harry.

Now she thought of living.

Now she walked into the kitchen and turned the radio on.

It's dumb, she thought; voices in the air don't bring back the dead, don't make people stay just because other people want them, don't repair shattered hearts just because lovers want their loving to go on and on and on, the way it is in the movies.

She lifted the hand that had taken the first shock.

It hadn't hurt. It should have.

It had killed Stacey. It shouldn't have.

A slow smile then, slow and knowing.

The difference then between true love and truly loving-the first is an affliction on the young by the young, and the second is the way love really was, was really meant.

Stacey loved, but she was selfish.

Caroline was loving and only wanted Harry in her arms, his health returned, his smile, the way his eyes narrowed when he considered how to make love to her tonight, the way his hands slipped into his pockets when he was angry with others and too polite to show it, the way his chin tucked toward his chest when he was getting ready to tickle.

Stacey couldn't know any of that about her Nick.

Stacey was dead.

And all the other young lovers who only believed in their own loneliness, not their love.

It's dumb, she thought; you're a grown woman who knows that voices in the air don't kill, don't maim, don't suck the life from a woman and . . . give it elsewhere? Hoard it? Feed on it? Bless and keep it?

Harry is dead.

"Yes," she said, in the dark, in her home.

And through the back door she heard the mandolin playing, the fiddle, the dulcimer, the guitar, the gentle quartet that told her it was fine, all right, not to worry, just lay on your hands and feel the power.

"No," she said, in the dark, all alone.

The telephone rang.

She closed her eyes and saw the dream.

And she spent the rest of the night then, one hand on the radio, the other dialing for the wind, weeping, and laughing, and *feeling* the power bring her husband back home, while the preacher said *heal* and the mandolin said *love* and the hair on her head turned white and trembled, and feathered to the floor.

Part II The Sweetest Kiss

The wind crept in behind Saturday's new sun, a breeze that at first did little more than ruffle leaves; but as it slipped down Pointer Hill and crossed the farmland valley, it exploded, rearing over the village, shredding the night's clouds, trampling nests and flowers, bending trees to the point of snapping, and snapping the flagpole in front of the town hall. Wires hummed and clotheslines stiffened; lampposts vi-brated and window glass turned brittle; an automobile turning onto Mainland Road was caught in a broad-side that slammed it close to a ditch.

And when the explosion was over, the wind re-mained, weaker now and weakening.

It slapped a heavy branch against the bedroom window of a house on Thorn Road-the sound of a whip, the scrape of glass against rough glass-and left a leaf behind, caught on the upper pane. A lawn chair toppled on the back porch and was pushed against the wall; a hillock of mown grass in the front yard stripped itself from the top like foam off a wave, spilling in the gutter, the dried browning blades scattering over the tarmac; a pink rubber ball was chased down the driveway and into the street where a passing automobile crushed it without a sound and passed on.

A draft slid under a partially open sash and rattled the shower curtain on its rod, ruffled a bath towel, slipped under a tissue and nudged it toward the sink.

Someone groaned, a high complaining voice, and settled back to sleep.

Dust in the basement rose in bending streams from a polished hardwood floor and twisted into a cloud that tore itself apart against the paneled walls, the tables, the television, the pool table where a red billiard ball trembled for a moment, shifted, and settled.

And in the kitchen Bruce leaned against the sink, coffee cup in hand, and watched the forsythia outside

the sink window take the dying wind in stride, like a spindly green plant at the bottom of the sea, dancing with the current. The shrub was tall enough to prevent him from seeing the house next door, which was, at the moment, all right with him. All he wanted, for now, was the house in silence.

All he wanted was some place before the world came at him again.

He turned then, slowly, as if slowly sighing, and leaned back, setting the cup on the counter and shoving his hands in his jeans pockets.

The room, like all the rooms in the fifteen-year-old Tudor, was large, all wood tones and country-style, an island counter in the tiled floor's center overhung with a copper hood to which copper pots and pans, knives and colanders were fixed through the holes in their handles. A smile. He remembered Betsy, at seven, climbing up there to reach a skillet, the weight of it such a surprise that she was knocked to the floor. More surprised than hurt. Shrieking. Bringing parents and sister in expecting to find a murder.

"Daddy," she had wailed, "it jumped off and hit me!"

The ghost of the scene was instantly replaced by another nearly as strong: Lisa when she was twelve, leaning over a huge wooden bowl overstuffed with salad, elbows jutted at determined right angles as she tried desperately to toss it without littering counter or floor, and failing so miserably that she added tears to the dressing.

"Daddy," she had sobbed, "why doesn't it stay!"

He shook his head in fond reminiscence and after a long moment walked to the back door, opened it, and strode out onto the porch. He righted the lawn chair, watched it wobble, and folded it and lay it back down. The wind was still strong though the sky was bright and clear, and he slapped at a fall of brown hair that tried to stab at his eyes. Behind him he heard the utensils rattling on the hood as the wind took the house, but he didn't close the door.

The yard was nearly half an acre deep, studded with trees he'd refused to cut down, a long garden on the right where Cora tended her vegetables the same careful way she tended her house and daughters. Imagined indentations where swings and slides used to be before they had been abandoned, and rusted, and finally dismantled and carted away. A hedge along the back grown high and thick to keep Mrs. Yorr from sending her dogs over to yellow the grass.

The wind tore a leaf from the maple in the back corner and whipped it to the ground.

He shivered, thinking the temperatures odd for late August, and stepped gratefully out into the sunlight, and frowned when he realized how really warm it was. Or would have been, without the wind.

A chill tramped his spine, *someone walking over my grave*, and he decided that catching a summer cold now would not be the brightest of ideas, not when too much was going on, too many things changing; it would be all Cora needed to start her litany again.

He turned then to head back inside and make himself a proper breakfast.

The wind shifted to a slow sigh.

And he heard the music.

And someone tapped lightly on a window, and he looked up, squinting, finally scowling and shading his eyes and seeing a face there, in a gap between white curtains. A step back and a frown, a tilt of his head.

My god, Nancy?

He shivered again, without the wind, and turned his head slightly to concentrate on the music.

A fiddle calling over the voice of the wind and slower, not quite the beginning of a ballad, not quite a dance; a bow drawing memories, drawing sighs, drawing blood, as a dark guitar crept beneath it and a mandolin kept in shadow and a dulcimer added songbirds that huddled in the trees and whispered promises of sunlight, promises of night until the fiddle began insisting and the music overtook the wind and the howling and the song made him step back, scowling now, ignoring the tapping, glaring as though he could see straight through his house to the other side of Thorn Road.

It was Tallman Evers. He knew it. When first he heard the music, he had asked around the neighborhood and was told of the man and his three musician friends, who talked with their songs and didn't really bother anyone, and besides, they'd once been famous, or so a few people recalled, and it was something of an honor to have them play in Oxrun Station.

Bruce didn't care.

He didn't like the instrument, he didn't like the tune, and as he looked back to the window, the wind stopped, and the fiddle died with it.

And the pale face in sunlight wasn't Nancy, after all.

"Good lord," Cora said, five minutes later in the kitchen and not really scolding, "I almost put my hand through the glass. Were you dreaming or what?"

"Sorry," he said, absently kissing the offered sallow cheek. "As soon as you showed your face, that damned music started up." He pointed vaguely toward the front of the house.

She stopped squeezing the orange she held in her left hand. "Music?"

"Yeah, you know, that Evers guy across the street."

She nodded automatically. "Oh."

"I tell you," he said, taking his seat at the table that sat between work island and door, "I honest to god don't know what people around here see in him. If you want music, you turn on the stereo, right? What the hell does anyone want with a stupid concert? In the morning, for god's sake. On a weekend, for crying out-"

"Bruce, don't start."

He quieted immediately. He'd heard it himself—a temper daring him to lose it. It was happening too frequently these days, more since the summer began and he caught himself counting the days until the season was over.

A gust scraped the forsythia against the pain, and he wondered why he'd mistaken his wife, just for that moment, for Nancy, whose last name suddenly, curiously, hid itself from him. He scratched the side of his nose. Barter? Nancy Barter? No. His finger dropped to the small mole on his chin. Painter. That was it—Nancy Painter. Nuts. No.

Boy, he thought, but wasn't concerned. It had been over twenty years. He couldn't even see her face.

The shrub settled.

Cora finished making the juice, rinsed off her hands, dried them on a towel, pulled her quilted blue robe around her and hurried to the doorway where she called to the girls to hurry up, time's wasting, she wasn't running a cafeteria here and if they wanted to eat they'd better get downstairs before their father ate it all. "

He knew every word; he'd heard them all for almost eighteen years.

"You look nice," he said when she took the seat opposite him.

She smiled.

She looked, he thought, awful. Her face had grown too thin, her neck too long, her shoulders too bony, her hands too scrawny. Her hair, once waist-length and raven-winged, was clipped short and feathered and made her skin seem more white because she'd given up on makeup as something she didn't need just because she was a woman.

When the lapels of the robe fell open, he could see the laddered surface of her breastbone, and he re-remembered a time when the sight of it had driven him crazy.

She drew her breakfast to her: one slice of unbuttered toast, one cup of decaffeinated coffee, one glass of juice, one small plastic glass with several vitamins inside.

"If you don't eat," he said lightly, "you're going to waste away to nothing."

Her smile was forced. "I get what I need, dear, you know that."

"And if you get sick," he said, more harshly than he'd intended, "you won't have any reserves to draw on."

"Oh?" She leaned away. "You'd rather have me fat, the way I used to be?"

"You were never fat, Cora."

"I was overweight. It's the same thing." She picked up the juice. "I, at least, am taking care of myself." A quick grin. "For my old age."

"Your old age my-"

A footstep on the tile: "Dad, Lisa says you're going to New York with us! Is that true? Is it?"

Cora's look was only mildly sympathetic, not offer-ing any help. And he wrinkled his nose at her while turning to face his oldest daughter. Betsy was a taller, fuller version of her mother, with only his rather ordinary blue eyes to remind him she was his. Her hair, hastily pulled back in what, in his day, had been called a ponytail, glistened from a recent shower and inadequate drying; her clothes-clinging shirt and jeans and tennis shoes, with a gold necklace to accen-tuate her throat-was something he wished she'd change. To an old burlap bag, maybe, or a granny dress, or a nun's habit. She was too beautiful by far, and when he looked at her he ached.

"I'd thought of it, yes," he said carefully as she flounced into her chair.

"Oh, for god's sake, Dad, I'm not a child, you know."

He knew it.

Jesus, how he knew it.

"But he knows all the neat places," Lisa said, racing across the floor, skidding, prevented from slamming into the wall by the quick snap of her mother's arm. "I mean, he knows, you know?"

Something crossing the porch window distracted him for a moment, made him blink when Betsy demanded that she and her sister be allowed to go alone. For a change. For god's sake.

Lisa stuck her tongue out at her. A shorter Betsy, save for the curly brown hair and the freckles and the way, on her, the same clothes made her seem like a tomboy. "He can go if he wants to." She winked at him. "It's his money, you know."

"Well..." Betsy turned to him, expression suddenly earnest. "Dad, don't you trust me?"

He only looked at her.

Her cheeks began to flush. "Jesus, I'm going to college in a couple of weeks! Don't you think I ought to be able to shop in the city on my own?"

"With Lisa," he reminded her.

"What's the matter with me?" Lisa demanded. "I'm seventeen, you know. I mean, that's not a baby, you know." She glared at the bowl of cereal in front of her. "I'm going to college next year. Christ."

"Language," Cora said quietly.

"Right."

"Besides, two young women, alone in New York, might not be such a good idea."

"Mother!"

"The way things are down there."

"We can take care of ourselves!"

"Don't shout."

Bruce backed away without moving, listening as sweet voices turned to vinegar, became weapons, finally turned it all off and concentrated on his cereal. And when he was finished, the argument now in its silent sullen stage, he stood and made his way to the basement door. No one stopped him. With vitamins in hand Cora suggested a compromise, and the argument began again.

He opened the door and before he took a step down, he looked over his shoulder and saw them, the copper hood neatly cutting off their heads, three bodies waving arms, swaying, jerking, drawing his gaze up to the knives on their rack. Hanging there. Dully. Their points aiming at the wood.

Nancy Arrow, he thought then, the door closing behind him. Son of a bitch, Nancy Arrow.

Now what the hell made him think of her after all these years?

There were four rooms downstairs, three of them belonging in some way to the house, the fourth his office, banned to all but him and the occasional evening client who couldn't make it to his second-floor, Centre Street firm. A tiny room, a narrow window at ground level to the backyard, one weary leather armchair, and bolted to the back wall a wide blondewood plank on which he kept a portable tape deck and his computer. The walls were unfinished cinder block, no decoration save a color print-fox and hounds leaping over a deadfall, riders in the distance raising the alarm.

Beside the computer were three dark plastic boxes of diskettes, most of them containing the records of the people whose taxes he prepared, those whose investments he shepherded, the companies whose futures he charted, and predicted.

Until this year he'd been enormously proud of his success.

From a table and rickety stool in a corner of the living room in a two-family house over in Harley, to this; from his great-uncle as his first client, to so many now that he was able to pick which ones he'd do personally and which ones he'd leave to his two assistants in the office; from deciding to stay at home or leave, whatever his mood.

Until this year.

Nancy Arrow.

The stool was still here, red paint mostly chipped to memory, left rear leg still uneven enough to keep him from daydreaming. He sat on it, absently pulled a handkerchief from his hip pocket and dusted off the screen. But he didn't turn the computer on. Instead he raised an eyebrow at his face, reflected in dark gray; dismayed at the way the skin seemed no longer so elastic, at the eyebrows that almost met in disorder over the bridge of his sharp nose, at the slight bulges under the jawline that threatened to sag into jowls.

Nancy Arrow. I'll be damned.

A plain man he was, in a safely plain job he'd heard enough jokes about to last him through several life-times. Except this was his only one, and he had the sudden growing feeling it had somehow gone wrong. And the worst part of it was, he could only blame himself if the worst was to happen. One error. One stupid mistake that had cost Harvey Athland Senior several thousand when the touted tax shelter had been disallowed, when the recommended stock had dropped to nothing. One lousy distraction-of all things, his daughters arguing in the next room-and his attention had wandered, and Athland in his rage began to spread rumors that maybe Bruce Kanfield wasn't as sharp as his reputation.

He'd spent weeks doing his diplomatic, frantic best to repair the damage, accepting the blame openly, settling fears, filling cracks. Though most of his clients had accepted his position, Athland had refused, and continued even now to grumble wherever he thought he might have a receptive defector, a suspicion to fuel, a doubt to nudge and prod.

Bruce fought, and fought still, and at night wished he were ten years younger so he could summon the energies he thought he used to have.

Tired now; he was so tired.

And he still didn't know if all he'd done had been enough.

His reflection shrugged wearily, and he closed his eyes for a moment, and he was startled when he saw Nancy looking at him sideways, the way she used to, back when he knew he was going to live forever-that sweep of red hair curled on her shoulder, that mouth upturned in a faint sardonic smile. Photograph, he thought, of a young woman in high school, though in those days they were girls, and she had to suffer the inevitable nickname Nancy Straight Arrow. Because she was. He had known her since grade school, their clique seldom changing, her company safe because he knew nothing about sex or the opposite sex and she was just like having a guy for a buddy.

Until they were seniors and he had seen enough magazines on the sly in the corner store to realize that

she was more than pink and pearled sweaters and pleated skirts. A second look, then, and a third, and by graduation he fancied he was actually in love, because he knew her so well, and the comfort he felt.

They had kissed that night after the ceremonies were over and the parties were done and sunrise was only a few minutes away; and he had walked all the way home with a sappy grin on his face. Two weeks later he'd finished packing to head west for his education. He only saw her over Christmas holidays after that, though they'd written every week until his junior year, the spring he met Cora, and proposed, and was so deliriously happy that he'd told Nancy about her.

Not, he'd finally understood, the most tactful of letters.

Nancy had never answered, never called, became a memory, and became less.

A knock on the door.

"Yeah?"

"Dad!" It was Betsy.

He shook the image away, wondered at the not unpleasant chill in his stomach, and opened the door. Leaned against the jamb and folded his arms across his chest.

His daughter had her hands on her hips. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Well for god's sake, are you going or what? I-we have to catch a train, remember? It's almost nine o'clock."

Something moved behind her in the family room, on the far side of the pool table. He shifted her with one hand, but there was nothing there, just the TV. Her reflection in the screen. He rubbed his eyes lightly.

"Dad, c'mon, huh?"

He felt his hands close, looked at them and saw the fists they made, looked at his daughter without raising his head and saw Cora looking back, impatient, disdainful, and when Betsy's eyes widened a bit and she stepped away from him, he finally smiled.

"Go," he told her. "With my blessing." He took out his wallet and pinched out some bills. "And this." She grabbed them, counted them, and hurried toward the stairs. "You split that with your sister, hear?"

"Right, Dad."

No kiss, no wave. *Right, Dad.* Nancy Arrow.

That evening after supper, the girls not expected back until after dark, Cora went to the movies with a few of her friends, and Bruce, unable to settle on anything else to do, grabbed a rake from the garage and worked on the front lawn, dragging for the leaves the wind had knocked down that morning.

It was quiet.

It was warm.

The sound of the rake's teeth, the sound of crunch-ing leaves, relaxed him, and he thought with a satisfied smile that there was a certain balm about being able to glance at the house as he worked-the overhanging

second story, the two chimneys, the slate roof-and know that it was his. Nearly paid for.

And ready, he realized, for the family to begin leaving. One by one. Doubling the size. Tripling the silence.

Christ, he scolded at the almost maudlin thought; you ain't old yet, y'know, you ain't senile, you jerk.

Maybe not.

But something sure wasn't the same.

He worked on without thinking, the rake digging in just a little too deeply.

He wore a T-shirt and cutoff jeans, sneakers without socks, and a wedge of perspiration darkened his back. Shouts from a gang of kids playing in the woods behind the houses across the way; down the street someone racing an engine in a driveway, and stop-ping, and starting again; Hela Yorr walking by with her three Yorkshire terriers on red, white, and blue leashes.

"Evening," he said pleasantly as the woman paused to examine his work. She wore a lilac print dress without definition, a floppy straw sun hat, sunglasses, white gloves. A straw purse swung from the crook of one arm.

"Mr. Kanfield," she said with an aristocratic nod. "You labor too hard, I think."

He looked around at the yard. "It isn't really work. I kind of enjoy it."

Pale lips pursed. "Health," she declared firmly. "One must watch one's health when one gets to a certain age." And she walked on, the terriers yapping painfully at a squirrel eyeing them from a bole.

A certain age? Holding the rake to one side, he looked down at his stomach. Not flat, slightly bulging around the waist, and he'd sure as hell never run a mile again without collapsing. But honest to god ... a certain age? He was tempted to run after her, either to argue with her or throttle her, or tell her that at least he'd lived longer than poor Caroline Edlin, a pitiful suicide at thirty-something, the house still empty, the yard tending toward overgrown.

"Bullshit," he said when a leaf fluttered to his feet, and he dragged the rake back to the garage. For several minutes he stood in the entrance, his gaze shifting from the Edlin house to Rimer Nabb's, down to the left. No music tonight, and for that he was grateful. As it was, what they played was older than he, and suddenly he didn't want to know how old that was.

"Shit."

He sniffed, dried his face with his forearm, and decided that he needed something to drink. By the time he got inside, however, he'd changed his mind about drinking alone. He showered, dressed quickly in slacks and shirt, and left a note on the refrigerator in case anyone returned before he did, and gave a damn where he was. Then he locked up the house and turned right at the sidewalk, walked up to the end of the street, where Northland Avenue began, and turned right again.

The blocks here, like everywhere in the Station, were long and heavily shaded, street lamps merely gas lamps with bulbs instead of wicks. The houses were set back on large comfortable lots, veiled behind century-old trees, trimmed hedges, fences or stone wall, with lawns and gardens that were well kept without the fanatical grooming of a suburb. Houses, in Oxrun, weren't torn down, they were repaired, which gave the village its anchor in age, and often made newcomers uneasy because they had no notion of the time.

The setting sun, nothing but mottles on the side-walk, drew with it all the heat the day had fostered, twilight heading to dusk, vision somewhat strained. Occasional wisps and slips of ground fog drifted over the yards, coiled in the streets where they were scattered but not broken by the occasional passing car, sometimes rising high enough to surround him for several steps before retreating again.

He wished with a shudder he'd brought his jacket.

A certain age; what a crock!

Across the street a teenage couple strolled in the opposite direction, hand in hand, giggling, their foot-steps muffled.

What the hell's the matter with forty-four, for god's sake? It isn't the end of the world.

Right, he told himself; goddamn right.

The sky wasn't dark enough for all the stars yet, but dark enough for all the shadows; a drifting twilight breeze touched his hair, a woman's fingers caressing; the next street was Poplar, and when he looked down its length he saw nothing but shades of dark and darker, and started when the street lamps abruptly buzzed on and were immediately hazed by the fog that gathered its courage and rose.

Damn, he thought, hunching his shoulders, hands in his pockets, head lowered; damn.

Forty-four; and he winced when it came to him: *your life's more than half over.*

And: *you don't want to sleep because that's what it'll be like when you're dead.* "Oh, give up," he whispered scornfully.

But at Woodland Avenue he didn't look; he kept on walking.

And nearly bumped into a woman who had stepped out from under a tree.

"God, hey, I'm sorry," he said, half turning as he walked on, smiling an apology.

"That's all right," she said. "It's all right, Bruce."

He gave her a quick wave, a quick smile, and hurried on, rolling his eyes at himself for being so stupid, anxious now to get to the bar at the Chancellor Inn. If he wasn't careful, he was going to walk straight in front of a car, and where the hell would his girls get their money then?

He grunted then, surprised at the bitterness of the thought, and told himself he was nuts, was almost halfway along the next block before he realized that the woman had called him by name.

He stopped and turned.

She was gone.

Nothing left of her but the nightfog more like gauze, more like mist.

A shrug, and he moved on, and smiled when he reached the Inn, a farmhouse once, now a fine restaurant and watering hole owned by a lean aristocratic man named Peter Lee. Not many people saw him, fewer still ever spoke with him except when they called for reservations; he was one of Bruce's clients. Bruce had only seen him twice.

Another glance behind him as he hurried up the steps, and then he was inside and gasping at the warmth,

not realizing until now how really chilled the night had grown. A cheerful greeting to the hatcheck girl in her alcove on the left, and he rubbed his hands together briskly, thinking the chill queer considering the sun that afternoon, turning his attention to the voices that filled the building-quiet, though not whispered, without making him uneasy. The hallway, thickly carpeted and dimly lighted, ran back to narrow carpeted stairs that led to the restaurant's second-floor rooms, more intimate than the public rooms on the first. The bar itself, on the right, had two entrances, one near the door, one back by the staircase, and he chose the first one, stepping into a large room walnut-paneled, lamps on the tables, the chairs leather-padded. The bar was at the back, mahogany and long, divided by squared post, backed by the inevitable etched mirror.

He was pleased at the patrons who raised greetings as he passed, and he greeted them all in turn.

Smoke. Talk. No music. Much laughter.

The way, he thought, God meant such things to be; and none of them, he was sure, whispering about him behind his back.

At the bar he found a place near the outside wall. Almost instantly the stool next to him was taken by Corbin Vanders, a beefy man with beard and moustache a startling white against the solid black of his thinning hair.

"You're batching it?" the attorney asked, one liver-spotted hand raised to order from an expressionless bartender who seemed to have multiple arms.

"Cora's at the movies."

Vanders snorted his disgust. "Too much money for too little time, if you ask me. Trust me, Bruce-Saturdays should be spent wenching and eating, with time out for some booze that won't stop you from the first two."

Bruce shrugged and accepted a bourbon he held in his hand, watching it, turning it, sipping at it and sighing. Vanders said nothing, but Bruce could feel him watching. "Y'know," he said, looking at but not seeing the tiers of bottles in front of the mirror, "a lot of people these days seem to think I'm getting old."

A burst of laughter from a far table.

Vanders chuckled. "You're kidding."

"Nope. The way things are going, if I'm not careful, they're going to have me in my grave before Monday."

Vanders twisted sideways and closer as two women and their escorts made room for themselves beside him. "It's that Athland stuff, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Probably. The man has a mouth I'd love to staple shut."

Vanders guffawed, clamped a hand over his mouth and looked guiltily around. "Kanfield, you do some-thing like that, this town'll make you a hero."

They toasted the thought.

Vanders watched for a second over the top of his glass before lowering to the bar. "Bruce, you're not going to tell me you think that way, too? About the old stuff, I mean."

"Hell, no."

The attorney leaned forward and said, "Liar."

Bruce tilted his head back to keep the larger man in focus. "The hell I am."

Vanders grunted. His free hand stroked the white beard thoughtfully, mockingly so. "Forty?"

"Four."

"Ah." Another stroke. A half-closed eye. A negli-gent wave to a man who tapped his arm as he passed. "I'll bet. . . no, don't tell me . . . I'll bet you started feeling sorry for yourself and broke out the old college yearbook, didn't you? You looked for your senior-class picture and couldn't find it. You couldn't recog-nize yourself." He nodded sharply. "Am I right, or am I right?"

Bruce finished his drink and said, "Wrong," while he signaled for a refill. "Actually, Corb, I had the damnedest vision today."

"Oh Jesus, spare us," Vanders said, crossing him-self. "You're not getting religious."

"No, not that kind. It was dumb, but for some reason, I started thinking about an old sweetheart, that's all." And as soon as he said it, he felt incredibly foolish.

"How old is old?" Vanders asked, grabbing a hand-ful of peanuts from a crystal bowl on the bar. "Col-lege? First job? What are we talking here, ten years or twenty?"

"High school."

"Oh, Christ." He popped the nuts into his mouth one by one. "I don't even know if my high school's still standing. And if my high-school sweetie came up to me this minute, I wouldn't know her from Adam." He blinked and chewed slowly. "Eve." He blinked again. "Whoever."

Bruce emptied his glass.

Vanders grabbed some more peanuts.

A third drink offered and accepted, and Bruce laid a bill on the bar, shaking off Vanders's reach for his wallet.

They drank in silence.

And after the fourth one, he felt the weight of the room on his back, and the heat, the dampness, heard the shrill cry of the women laughing and the snort-ing of answering men. He was getting drunk. He knew it. He labored to turn around, and winced when he saw someone who used to be a client, one of those who had left him because they feared he'd err again.

Part of him, that part that had driven him since college to the house and the bank account and the decent clothes and his children's schooling, told him setbacks weren't always a blade across the throat, that he wasn't, for the love of god, perfect; but in his chest he felt the question: *after all these years, is this all you've done?*

A man's high-pitched laugh drew his attention to a table near the front. He squinted. He leaned back. It was Ian Johns, one of his assistants, sitting with a woman he'd never seen before. She was grinning at him, bobbing her head, reaching out suddenly to push back a lock of rusty hair. Johns took her wrist, leaned over, and kissed the thumb.

Bruce looked away.

The man seemed too young, and the woman couldn't be long out of her teens.

He looked back.

Johns waved and mouthed *hi, Bruce, nice to see you*, and whispered something to his date, who waved in turn and blew him a loud kiss.

"Wise-ass," Vanders muttered beside him.

"He's all right," Bruce answered absently. "A little raw, but he'll be good."

"Damn kid, that's what he is."

"No." Yes, he thought; Ian's a damned kid.

old man

And: okay, that's it, pal, on your way. Keep think-ing that way and you will be dead by Monday.

He rose.

Vanders slapped him a good-bye on the shoulder.

A glass broke behind the bar, and there was laugh-ter, some applause.

Johns was invisible, caught in haze and shadow.

For several seconds he looked across the room and finally knew he'd never make it between the tables without stumbling into someone, upsetting someone's glass, so he made his way along the bar stools, touching arms and backs to guide him as if blind, until he reached the fresher air of the hallway. A deep breath. A roll of his eyes for so much drinking. A glance back at Vanders, and he moved carefully outside where the air stung his cheeks, the fog rose to greet him, and as he walked across the street a van nearly ran him down.

He woke past midnight, snapping stiff as though bracing for a fall. Cora slept on beside him. The girls slept on down the hall.

He wiped the back of a hand across his eyes, placed a palm on his chest to be sure his heart was still beating.

He was cold.

Chattering cold, yet he didn't want a blanket.

He'd been dreaming he was dead, and the dark was so deep and the silence so vast and the touch of air so absolutely flat that he was more terrified than if he'd found himself walking through hellfire.

"I don't want to die," he whispered.

Cora moaned in her sleep.

"Oh Jesus."

And he lay awake until dawn, afraid that he'd learn more about what he was, what he'd become.

On Sunday afternoon, Lisa went out with her current boyfriend, and when she returned, long after nine, he was standing in the backyard, looking up at the stars, listening to the fiddle play his song.

"Dad?"

"What can I do for you, Button?"

"Suppose I got married instead of going to college?"

He looked at her, faceless in the dark. "You wouldn't dare."

She couldn't; she was a baby.

"Just asking."

"Well, don't."

She drew away. "Jeez, Dad, I'm just asking, I said. Boy, you're a grump. I mean, don't you want to know when you're going to be a grandfather?"

He came home late from work on Monday, and found Betsy modeling her new clothes for Cora. He stood in her bedroom doorway, arms folded, bemused and skeptical at the styles, though not denying she enhanced them, until she started to unbutton a silky cream blouse.

She stopped when she saw him. "Dad!" She sounded close to outrage.

He looked from her to his wife. "What? What'd I do?"

She pointed to the rest of the clothes on her bed. "Do you mind? I want to change."

"But I'm your father, for god's sake!"

"Dad, c'mon, this is serious."

"Yeah," he said quietly. "Yeah, I guess it is." And he left, whistling falsely, and sat in his basement office, staring at the blank screen, wondering if Nancy Arrow had ever married, had ever had children, had kept herself as lovely as he remembered her being.

A few trees in the park already carried yellowed leaves when he took Tuesday afternoon off; it was warm, and he didn't want to go home. He left the blacktop path at the entrance and crossed the open grass, watching a dog chase a ball, a young woman chase the dog. When she glanced in his direction, he snapped his head around and moved on, past the ball field and the bandstand, hearing just for a moment the Fourth of July concert.

The ground began to slope upward, a knoll just high and distant enough to see over the trees to the village beyond. He leaned forward, trudging as if through snow, grunting to himself with each step and watching the grass pass beneath his feet.

He was alone.

The young woman and the dog were joined by a boy wearing a baseball cap and soccer shorts. They didn't notice him; he didn't mind.

Once the land leveled again, he faced a tangle of trees and shrubs that jumbled down the other side. Shadows despite the sun. A breeze that didn't quite take the edge off the day's heat. He turned around

and sat, pulling his knees to his chest, hugging them, resting his chin on them, and did his best *to* believe that the malaise he felt, the fog he carried with him, was nothing more than a simple and overdue recognition that he wasn't going to live forever, brought about by his efforts to keep his firm intact. Nothing more complicated. Nothing more bizarre. The intellectual acceptance of what whatever mortality was had come long ago, the day he had seen his mother in her coffin; now the rest of him had caught up, and had caught him from behind.

All right, he thought, all right.

Is this all you've done?

, His right hand wiped his face, forehead to nose to chin, gripped his neck lightly, slipped fingers into his shirt where they waited for the heartbeat.

And jerked out when he heard a footfall soft behind him.

"Bruce?"

A woman's voice.

He looked over his right shoulder, squinting into the shade. "Hi," he said, smile puzzled.

She moved around to put the sun behind her, lower than he, her face level with his; he stared until she laughed and knelt beside him.

"I thought you'd recognize me the other night." A pale yellow dress that buttoned up the front, sleeves shy of her elbows and edged with scalloped lace. "I waited, but you didn't come back." Hair, red hair parted in the center, that curled to her shoulders and shimmered when she moved her shoulders back and forth. "I was going to call..." She looked down shyly. "I didn't know what to say." Hands clasped in her lap. Eyes raised and glinting. "You haven't changed a bit."

He couldn't say her name.

"It took a long time to find you, you know," she said, settling back on her heels. Breasts larger than he remembered, but not large, simply . . . right. "I don't know why I even tried. It just came to me that I should." Waist tucked. Bare arms made softer by a faint covering of down. "Dumb, isn't it."

He couldn't say her name.

She picked up a pebble and rolled it between two fingers. "I guess I wanted to know how my old sweetheart was doing." And she laughed, and covered her mouth, and raised her head, and frowned. "You do know me, don't you?"

He couldn't. He couldn't say it.

She nodded. "You do. I know you do." One finger reached out to touch his knee, hopped from there to his cheek. "You said you were going to grow a beard. I'm glad you didn't. You'd look too old."

"Forty-four," he said, and immediately cleared his throat.

She shook a mocking finger at him. "Never tell your true age, Bruce. Especially to someone who was born the same year." A half grin. "Especially if it's a woman."

"Jesus Christ," he exclaimed, whirling to kneel, too, and almost falling on his face. "Jesus Christ, it *is* you!"

She nodded with her eyes.

He swallowed and looked around and saw the bandstand and the trees and heard the dog barking and heard a car over on Park Street and felt the August sun and saw a butterfly and a crow and threw his arms around her and closed his eyes and smelled her and felt her and decided not to cry.

"So," she said sternly when he finally pulled away and she let her own arms fall, "tell me about you, Kanfield. What the hell have you been doing since ..." Her hand waved at the years. "Since."

The story came to him before he could stop it: he was single, fairly well off, rambling around a too-large house like a typical movie bachelor. And then he swallowed it, and sighed, and gladly told her the truth, including his continuing problems with Athland's apparent vendetta that stopped just short of slander.

"Can't you sue him or something?"

"I wish I could. My lawyer says no. The man is smart. He won't do anything so obvious. But I know. I know in those clubs of his, at those white-tie parties he gives, he's doing his damndest to rip up my back."

She touched his leg.

He watched the hand slide away and float over the grass, and he heard himself speak again, this time of the dream of dying and the unshakable feeling that at the last he'd wasted time.

"And that letter," he said then, and opened his palms toward the sky. "If I had to do it over again, I'd cut my hand off, I think."

She half-closed one eye. "Lord, are you still brood-ing about that? Still?"

"Well, not every day, no." He scratched an eyebrow. "But I still feel like shit."

"You were deep shit to me then," she said, then playfully punched his arm and laughed. "I didn't hate you though. I don't know why. I just thought. . ."

you loved me

He finally met her gaze: *I did, god I did, and I wish to hell I'd really known it.*

A bird called, and broke from the trees to glide over the grass.

"So," she said at last, "are you really as rich as this town seems to be?"

He shook his head and talked again, and when the sun finally reached the tops of the trees that masked the park's high iron fence, he realized he was babbling and making a fool of himself, so he leaned over and kissed her cheek and felt the warmth and velvet of her skin.

She touched the place with her thumb.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, not sorry at all but pulling away. "I just had to do it. You don't. .. *god*, I'm happy to see you!" He grinned and shook his head. "God, you'll never know how good it is to see you again."

She laughed at his enthusiasm, and he laughed back and rocked, and saw the first shadows slipping toward him across the field.

"Oh good lord," he said, scrambling to his feet and dusting at his slacks. "Jesus, look at the time! I'm going to get killed." He took her hand and pulled her up, and gave her a sudden grin. "Hey, look, Nancy, will you come home with me? I want you-"

She lifted his hand and cupped it in hers and brought it to her lips and shook her head and said, "No."

"But why? Don't-"

"No," she said again, and brought the hand to her cheek where she nuzzled it for a moment before letting it go. "I just wanted to see you. That's all." She looked away, looked back. "That's all."

"Tomorrow," he said.

"I can't."

"Tomorrow night," he insisted, a step toward the path. "I'll see you tomorrow night, okay?"

"Bruce . . ."

He clapped his hands on his hips. "After more than twenty years, you're going to leave it at just a few hours listening to me bragging and feeling sorry for myself?" He turned his head, looked at her sideways. "You'd really do that, you rat?"

Her hands disappeared into pockets he hadn't noticed in her skirt. "No, I guess not. You rat."

He smiled his relief.

She reached out to shake his hand.

He took it and felt a finger draw slowly across his palm, and he inhaled deeply while she closed the distance between them and kissed him quickly, and softly, and kissed him again when he begged her without speaking.

Quickly, and softly, before yanking on his ear, laughing at his yelp, and racing back into the trees without daring him to follow.

He couldn't have anyway; his legs were lead and his chest was filled with helium and his head told him he was drunk and his stomach told him he was hungry, and when he took the first step he nearly fell to his knees.

Son of a bitch, he thought, rushing out of the park; son of a bitch, ask and ye shall receive and Jesus Christ am I in trouble.

He wanted to run, but he was too self-conscious; he almost skipped, but he'd forgotten how; he charged up the steps and banged into the foyer and Cora was in the living room, reading a magazine and talking with Betsy.

They looked up; neither smiled.

He said, "Sorry, ladies. I forgot to call." He scratched his temple quickly. "Cora, you aren't going to believe this, but you'll never guess-"

"The college called right after supper," Betsy told him stiffly. "They wanted to ask you some questions."

He lifted a placating hand. "I'll call them tomorrow. Don't worry about it. Look, you'll-"

"It might be important."

He checked at his watch and groaned aloud. "Damn. Well, they're closed now, kitten. It'll have to wait."

"Jesus, Dad!"

He frowned, and let it die. "Tomorrow," he said, and looked down the hall. "God, I'm hungry. I'll grab myself something in the kitchen."

"There's nothing there," Cora told him.

"There's always something there," he answered with a smile, and found the makings of a sandwich that he ate while standing at the back door, watching the hedge shake as Mrs. Yorr's terriers tried to bull their way through. Go ahead, you little bastards, he thought; make it and I'll skin you alive.

Just as he finished, Cora came up behind him. "We were worried," she said flatly. "Your office said you'd left in the middle of the afternoon."

He turned and wiped the crumbs on his thighs, then put his arms loosely around her waist. "I said I was sorry. I had things on my mind."

"I guess you did," she answered. Her hands slipped up between them and flattened against his chest. "You should have called, Bruce."

"Did anyone die?" he snapped.

"Don't be flip."

"The house didn't fall down."

"That's not the point and you know it," she said, turning to break the embrace, to walk to the sink and turn again. "Something could have happened to you."

He conceded the point. "But since when do I have to check in every time I decide to go for a stupid walk?"

She stared pointedly at the kitchen clock. "The college called."

He opened his mouth, and closed it; an argument that begins with an apology is an argument he couldn't win. So he decided to take a shower, and ignored the look she gave him when he walked out of the room, and ignored the snub his daughter tried as he hurried up the stairs and slammed the bathroom door before he knew what he was doing.

These are tense days, he cautioned as he stripped; tense days, Kanfield. One kid leaving home, one fretful mother, one high school senior testing sexual waters, and one middle-aged husband who . . .

He looked in the mirror.

Nancy stood behind him.

Oh shit, he thought; oh shit, I should have told them.

But the time had passed, he judged, to make it sound more casual than he felt; to say anything now, with the mood they were in, would probably start a new fight, one he realized as he washed and let the water pound his head, he almost wanted. The dialogue was already slipping into place—their snide comments,

his civilized, telling responses-and the result foregone, his victory sweet and permanent.

He dried himself so roughly his skin flushed, then burned.

She's forgotten. Cora's forgotten the way it was when we started. Everything is taken for granted, the struggling and the cold nights now back in some fairy tale to tell her grandchildren by the fire.

She thinks we've made it.

He was afraid they hadn't.

Then Cora knocked on the door, opened it, and waved her hand at the steam still floating about the room. "There's someone downstairs to see you."

"Aw, Christ, Cora, couldn't you-"

She swung the door wider. "It's a man named Rowan. He's a policeman."

He frowned, pushed past into their bedroom and grabbed a pair of jeans from his closet. "What, parking tickets, charity? What does he want?"

Cora watched him dress.

"C'mon, Cora, what does the man want?"

"He wants to talk to you. And me." The tone was accusatory, but he saw the anxiety in her eyes. "He says Harvey Athland was murdered tonight."

She left him then, leaving the door open, and he buttoned his shirt hurriedly, jammed his bare feet into sneakers, and stopped at her vanity for a second to run his fingers through his hair. When he saw his reflection, he froze-he was smiling. When he tried to tell himself this was a man's life they were talking about here, the smile wavered, faded, so reluctantly he turned away and had to stop himself from running to the top of the stairs.

Rowan, a pleasant man evidently uncomfortable with his role, explained that the body had been found by Athland's wife. He was in the garage where he'd been tinkering with his car. His back had been slashed, throat open, a kitchen knife with an eight-inch blade plunged into his chest.

Cora sat on the couch, smoking, legs crossed at the knee. Her hand was shaking. She wouldn't look at Bruce when he tried to ask her in silence what all this had to do with them.

Then he exhaled, almost sighed. "I see," he said.

The detective smoothed a dark tie, smoothed the lapels of a cream suit. "We have to ask, you know. Everyone who had trouble with him. Or might have. His wife mentioned your name."

"He didn't do it," Cora said loudly.

Rowan looked at her. "I didn't say he did, Mrs. Kanfield."

"He was here."

"Cora," Bruce said. "Take it easy."

"But he already checked our knives!" she cried, and lit another cigarette. She looked at it, and grimaced,

and stubbed it out. "I've quit, you know. Six months."

"Mr. Rowan," Bruce said then, "why don't we talk outside?"

On the porch he learned he was the second person visited, learned he wasn't a suspect, learned that Detective Rowan wasn't very good at lying. And he supposed he ought to have Corbin here, though he told the man everything he'd done since leaving the office. And yes, there was a good chance he'd been seen either in the park or on his way home. A neighbor. A driver. Someone. But no, he had no idea where Nancy Arrow was staying-she showed up, they had talked, they were going to meet again tomorrow to talk over old times before their lives split again.

Rowan shook his hand.

Bruce watched him climb into a brand-new convertible and drive off without looking back.

Cora opened the door and stepped out beside him. "He knows you hated that man," she said. "God, Bruce, he knows."

His arm slipped around her shoulder and he took back inside. "I'm not the only one, love. There must be dozens of others."

"Well, at least he didn't arrest you."

He started up the stairs, "I have to make a statement in the morning. I imagine they'll want my fingerprints or something, at least they do on TV." He looked down at her. "I don't mind. I didn't do it."

And was shocked when he realized that his wife didn't quite believe him.

That night, after midnight, he woke and was sweating.

I don't want to die, he cried silently; oh Jesus, I'm afraid.

His office overlooked the small parking lot behind the building, the houses and offices on the far side facing Park Street and the park. His chair was leather, beaten into shape, and he leaned back with his feet up on the sill, staring at the trees.

"Bruce?"

He grunted. He'd made the statement, no one treated him badly, yet he couldn't help feeling that they wanted to, that they wanted him to be the one.

Lois Outman, his most enthusiastic worker, walked in, a file folder in her hand. "We've got to do something about this letter from the IRS, the one about Mrs. Vanders's deductions for the shop."

He nodded absently. Another wall the world had thrown up against him. He wondered what the hell he had to do to get away. To escape. And wondered in the next second what the hell he was talking about.

Lois waited until, finally, "Well?"

He waved a hand over his shoulder. "You know what to do, Lo. Why the hell are you bugging me?"

He felt the stiffening, didn't turn.

"You said," she answered, "you wanted to do it yourself."

"I changed my mind."

After a second's hesitation, she came around the desk and stared at him, one hand at her neck as if there was something to hide. "Are you all right? I mean, everything's okay? The Athland thing and all?"

He looked up at her and smiled. "I think-yes. I think everything's just fine."

Her expression doubted it, but he wouldn't move the stare until at last she nodded and left the room. The door closed quietly, as if on a patient, and he strained for a moment to see if he could hear them out there, whispering, gossiping, maybe even comparing resumes they were, at this very minute, sending around town.

The hell with them, he thought, and watched the trees again. Thinking about miracles and sock hops, the Ponytails and Paul Anka; football games in the rain and an English teacher with blue hair; the dirty jokes he laughed at, though he didn't understand them; buying his first bowling ball and watching it smack down the gutter the first time he used it; the girls who made him blush, the girls who danced in his dreams-danced and nothing more because he didn't understand them; the old gang he lost touch with the second the diplomas were handed out.

How in god's name had she found him?

She said he hadn't changed a bit, a gracious fiction that made him love her. But she hadn't changed a bit. She was exactly the way he remembered, and his only memories of her were more than two decades old. Some people aged well, some used surgical help, and those like him weren't the same at all.

How had she known him?

His hand rested lightly across his mouth, fingers drumming on his cheek. He crossed his legs at the ankles, recrossed them, and again. He felt a cramp in his left calf and put his feet on the floor, waited for the pain to pass, then swiveled around and stared at his desk. It was empty. Everything neat and in its place, everything dusted, everything clean. It didn't look right; it wasn't his.

How? How did she know?

Someone knocked, and the door opened, and Ian poked his head in. "Bruce do you want me to-"

"Goddamnit," he said loudly, "would you just leave me the hell alone?" His fist hit the desktop. "Damn! God damn!"

The door slammed.

He put his palms over his eyes and tried to find some calm.

It wasn't as if he hadn't taught them anything, right? It wasn't as if they were helpless children, for Christ's sake. If he died and went to hell tomorrow, all they'd have to do was change the name on the door.

His breathing was shallow and fast.

Why couldn't they, just once, just leave him alone, pretend he wasn't here?

His hands curled into fists, knuckles at his temples.

Lois opened the door and he leapt up to his feet-"Out! Get the bloody hell *out!*"-and she gasped and backed away and he looked at his left hand and saw the letter opener in it and looked back at her and wondered what it would be like to drive it home.

Johns reached around her and then closed the door again, and Bruce sagged into his chair, trembling until the silver blade dropped as he pressed his hands against his legs as hard as he could. As long as he could. Until his arms began to quiver, and he relaxed, and he smiled, and he decided to give them the rest of the week off. Under pressure, he would tell them with his best forgive-me smile: I think we all need a vacation, so what the hell, school's out.

But they were gone when he decided he could walk without stumbling. The outer office was empty, terminals off, copier covered, blinds lowered over the windows that looked out on Centre Street. When he pulled back his cuff to check the time, his eyes widened in surprise. It was after six. They'd left for home an hour ago.

And they hadn't said good night.

"Well, damn," he said, and went back to his desk, where he dialed his home and listened to the busy signal. Five minutes later he tried again. Ten minutes after that. He cupped his hands behind his head and closed his eyes, determined to be patient.

And thought about a warm and wet graduation night and the yellow summer dress and the way she held his hand and the way she bumped into him now and then and the way she hugged his arm whenever he tried to tell a joke; sitting in the school's bleachers during gym class and watching her on the field, thinking nothing of the uniform that showed her legs, hugged her chest; a biology teacher who ate raw hamburger for lunch and slept at her desk until her lunch hour was over; Fats Domino and the Everly Brothers; his best friend telling him that college was a drag and the air force was the way; the math teacher who threw chalk to keep the back row awake.

He dialed again.

The line was busy.

He rolled his sleeves above the elbows, left his jacket on the chair, and locked up.

On Centre Street he watched a handful of construction workers cleaning up, the bricks just about laid, the parking meters gone, the trees at the curbs looking somehow better without the cars. A wave to someone who called from across the street, and he hurried up to the corner, turned right, and tried not to rush as he headed for the park.

Where he found her in the same spot.

And he embraced her, and kissed her, and she drew him away from the knoll and into the trees, the two of them shuffling awkwardly to keep the kiss from breaking; kneeling in the shade; working each other's buttons; and leaning away while he stared at her breasts and held his breath because he couldn't believe it, and held his breath as he touched them, tracing his fingers from the tops, across the nipples, to the tight space underneath where he felt a line of perspiration before he traced on down to her stomach.

The snug waist stopped him.

She pulled the yellow off, lay back, held out her hands.

"I don't..." He shook his head. "I don't..."

"Yes, you do."

The shade cold on his back, cold on his buttocks, cold on his soles as he held himself over her and looked down and saw her, and saw her hands move to guide him, and they were cold, like the shade, so

cold he almost softened. Until he looked into her face and saw her eyes wide open and her lips parted to show her teeth and tongue and her nostrils flaring slightly and her jaw trembling with tension.

He said, "God, I've never-

"Now you have," she whispered, and yanked him down, and in.

And when he closed his eyes and kissed her, there was Cora, for just a moment. Staring. Without expression. Until he felt her tongue brush along the under-side of his lips. Cora vanished. The shade was cold.

And Nancy Arrow said, "I want you."

They walked down the slope, angling to the right toward the brush and trees and the path beyond.

No one else was in the park.

Night had fallen under the boughs.

"You're in trouble," she said. Quietly. Not looking.

"In more ways than you know," he answered. Just as softly. Not looking.

She kicked at an acorn. "They won't arrest you."

His head turned. Her profile a shadow. "You heard?"

"People talk in this place," she said.

He couldn't see her lips move.

"I don't know how you stand it," she went on. "It's like living in a dorm."

"You went to college?"

"Is that so surprising?"

He gestured innocence. "No, of course not, don't be silly. It's just that... well, you haven't exactly been feeding me your life story, that's all." He poked her arm and grinned. "So, how many kids?"

"None. I never married."

He slowed. "Now that I don't believe."

Her face appeared over her shoulder. "I was waiting."

He stopped, uneasy. "C'mon, Nancy, that's impossible."

"No, it isn't. Some people do, some people don't." Her hair shifted, her face vanished. "I happen to be one of those who do."

"Nancy, that's ..."

the silliest thing I've ever heard of.

He hurried to catch up to her, but he didn't take her arm.

No, it's not. I waited. I loved you.

The trees backed away as they approached the entrance; light stabbed the dark. Several automobiles swept past. A policeman strolled by with a young man chattering at his side. Neither looked around as Bruce stepped between the iron gates and paused when he realized Nancy had stayed behind. When he turned, she was adjusting her skirts while mottles of leaf-shadow, pinpricks of sunlight, drifted her in and out of focus.

She smiled and winked and lay a finger lightly beneath one breast.

He remembered the scar there, so tiny, so hard, hidden away from everyone except him. Her lover.

He waited, but she didn't move; he beckoned, and she shook her head; he felt confused and he frowned and she mouthed *tomorrow night* and waved him on with a blown kiss. Which he trapped in a fist and slipped the fist into his pocket and she laughed and shooed him again and he laughed and walked away, and it wasn't until he'd reached Chancellor Avenue that he realized what he'd done.

A look back.

She stood on the sidewalk, small and dark and watching him and smiling.

He had just committed adultery. The first time. Looking had never counted because being married hadn't struck him blind; sometimes dreaming didn't count because dreams weren't even wishes; and casual flirting didn't count because Cora was always home.

Doing, on the other hand ...

And as he walked, fist still in his pocket, the ghostly kiss against his palm, he worked honestly hard to find a measure of guilt or shame. And when he failed, he only smiled and cocked his head and stopped on the pavement in front of his house when one of Mrs. Yorr's terriers charged at him across the lawn.

He heard the woman calling from down the block.

He looked down at the dog and said, "Touch me, you little fucker, and I'll tear your throat out."

The dog barked.

Without a second thought he kicked it in the chest with the side of his foot. Not hard, but hard enough to send it sprawling to the ground.

"I saw that!" Mrs. Yorr shouted, huffing toward him, hat flopping. "I saw that!"

He watched her for a second, watched the dog stagger to its feet, then walked up the driveway, the walk, and didn't stop when Cora opened the door to let him in.

"I saw you," she said in harsh amazement, closing the door on the woman's shouts. "What the hell made you do it?"

He went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and pulled out a milk container. "Because it bugged me, that's why."

"I don't believe it."

He drank and wiped his lips. "So? That little son of a bitch had it coming. And if it attacks me again, I'll do it again." He replaced the milk, closed the door.

"Attack?" Cora laughed. "You can't be serious. Bruce, you can't be serious. It's only a little dog!"

He took his hand from his pocket and stared at it, opened it and pressed it to his cheek. "That thing and its bastard brothers have dug up our yard, dug up your precious garden, chewed god knows how many-

Cora wheeled and left him, and when he finally went to bed, he couldn't help noticing how far away she lay, how still she lay when he slipped under the covers.

Cora, he thought, you'll never guess what I did today.

And he slept without dreaming, without night-mares, without waking until morning, when he heard his family in the living room, exclaiming outrage over something he couldn't understand. He stretched and rose and looked out the window to the yard. The sky was faintly overcast, the sun a haze, the heat pressing the leaves down as the air conditioner kicked on.

Nancy stood by Cora's garden.

He lifted a surprised hand to wave, and she faded into a rosebush that had as yet borne no blossoms.

Then he looked over at the bed and saw her lying there, fitting perfectly beside the space he usually slept in, one hand resting over her head on the pillow, the other slowly, so slowly, drawing the sheet down. He smiled. She returned it. Slowly; so slowly. He moved to sit on the edge of the mattress, his left hand hovering over the flat of her belly, then pressing down gently, until he reached the sheet beneath and she was gone and Lisa was at the foot of the stairs, screaming at him to shake a leg because he was going to be late.

The shower was cool, and he felt hot.

At the breakfast table he said to Betsy, "What were you all arguing about?"

"We weren't arguing," she huffed from the sink.

"Sure sounded like it to me."

"Well, we weren't."

"Okay, you weren't."

Lisa, in tight white T-shirt and tennis shorts, raced in, a knapsack on her back. "Hey, Dad, did you really kick that dog last night?"

Betsy turned and waited.

He finished his coffee and stood. "Yes," he said.

Lisa made a face.

Betsy said, "That's disgusting."

And Bruce took the distance between them in three strides, looked down at his oldest, and said, "Young woman, you are not as old or as wise as you think you are." A forefinger touched her shoulder, prelude to a push. "And I'm not quite as stupid as you think I am."

Betsy opened her mouth to protest, but Lisa said, "God, Dad, what's bugging your ass?"

He whirled as Lisa's hand snapped up to cover her mouth, and she slipped to one side when he walked to the hall, stopped, and glared. "Before you leave this house, young lady, you will put something else on." He pinched the neckline of her T-shirt. "And you will bloody well put on a bra."

He was at the foyer before they came after him, shouting without being loud, and he spun around as he opened the door, silencing them with a look.

My house, he wanted to say; this is my goddamned house and as long as you still live here, you'll do things my way.

He said nothing.

He only stared until they stomped into the living room, calling for their mother's support. Then he went outside, and in spite of the early heat and the promise of worse later, he walked to work briskly, grinning at the sweat running down his sides, ignoring the sweat he felt on his brow. As he crossed over Poplar he was tempted to make a detour, to knock on Mrs. Yorr's door and explain as best he could that the next time her beasts even shit in his direction, he was going to call the police and have them shit. The temptation made him laugh aloud. He walked on. Finally crossed Chancellor Avenue and turned right, arms swinging, sweat dripping, not slowing until he came abreast of the police station.

Glenn Rowan was getting out of his car at the curb.

"Mr. Kanfield!"

Bruce gave him no expression. "Detective Rowan."

Rowan, wearing the same suit and tie, squinted up at the pseudo-Grecian facade. "Mr. Kanfield, I don't mean to bother you or anything, but I can't seem to find that friend of yours. "Miss Arrow?"

"So?"

"You said she'd be able to vouch for your time."

Finally he frowned. "Is this an accusation?"

"No, Mr. Kanfield," Rowan said, his voice abruptly deep, his lean face abruptly hard. "But you know how it is with something like this."

"No," he said. "No, I don't. And if you want to spring another interrogation on me, you'd better give me time to call my lawyer. This is, I believe, what's called harassment."

Rowan's smile was brief. "Come on, Mr. Kanfield, you don't really believe that."

Bruce's smile was just as brief, and colder, and he walked up to the corner and turned it sharply, neatly dodging a wheelbarrow loaded with new bricks, duck-ing between two trucks and cutting across Centre Street to his office door. The staircase was cool, and he sighed at the chilling touch, paused for a moment on the landing before going inside.

Lois was the only one at her desk.

"Holiday?" he said, looking around in annoyance.

Lois seemed puzzled. "Bruce," she said at last, "you told us yesterday to take the rest of the week off."

"Ah." Did he? He must have; they certainly couldn't read his thoughts. "Then why are you here?"

She held up a folder. "The Vanders thing. As soon as I'm done, I'll leave."

"With a gold star on your paycheck," he answered, ignored the fact that she didn't laugh, and walked into his office, shut the door, and saw Nancy in his chair.

The yellow dress was unbuttoned all the way to her waist.

"There was no one home," she said, raising her arms over her head, "so I just walked in. Is that okay?" Then she stood, and with a sweep of her hands, knocked everything to the floor.

"Bruce, come here." She sat on the edge and pushed herself back until her legs were out straight, her shoes kicked off. "Come on." She hiked up her dress. "Come on."

There was a lifetime's worth of panic before he whirled and locked the door; a lifetime's worth of daydreams as he crossed the carpet to the desk; a lifetime of sighing as her right hand unzipped him and her left hand reached over to take his arm.

"Do you remember," she said, "the first time we kissed?"

He climbed onto the desk and straddled her. "Like it was yesterday."

"It was the sweetest kiss I ever had," she told him.

"And me," he whispered. "Dear Jesus, and me."

"Then do something about it," she said as he entered her, and cried out when he kissed her neck, whimpered when he kissed her cheek, wept when he said, "I love you," and laughed as she said, "You're mine."

He dressed slowly.

She didn't dress at all.

He unlocked the door and poked his head out; Lois was gone, the light through the front windows giving a brief impression that the whole room was covered with dust. He shook his head. The dust cleared.

He turned around.

Nancy was sitting on the edge of the desk, dress covering her lap. "They won't arrest you," she said. Her eyes were bright.

"I know. But I have to admit it's getting a little scary. You're going to have to talk to the police, Nancy. They need to know where I was."

The telephone rang on the floor.

"If I have to," she said, and slipped her arms into the sleeves.

The telephone rang.

He considered ignoring it, knelt beside it instead and grabbed up the receiver.

"Mr. Kanfield?" It was Rowan.

"Yes."

"Mr. Kanfield, that woman-

"Is here with me now," he said, settling on the floor. "I'll have her over in a few minutes so you can ask her your questions and get off my back."

"Sir?"

He groaned silently at the man's lack of perception. "The woman I was with the other day, remember? You asked me about her not an hour ago."

"Oh." Muffled voices in the background; someone shouting. "That's just fine, Mr. Kanfield, thank you. But I was going to say that the woman who lives behind you, a Mrs. Hela Yorr, has filed a complaint against you, and I think you'd better call that lawyer of yours."

He sat up abruptly, scowling. "Complaint? Com-plaint for what? Kicking her goddamn dog?" He looked up to Nancy; she wasn't there.

"No sir."

He stood awkwardly. She wasn't in the office.

"For killing them."

Neither was she in the outer office.

"Someone cut their throats early this morning."

He covered the mouthpiece with one hand. "Nancy?"

"And cut off their legs."

Corbin Vanders had his offices three doors up and across the street. By the time Bruce reached them, he was sweating again.

"Killing dogs?" the bearded man said incredulously.

Bruce could only nod.

Where was Nancy?

"Ridiculous."

"I'm going to need you, Corb."

Where the hell was she?

He'd checked every shop on the block, every door-way, every alley, and would have run straight to the park if, suddenly, he didn't fear that the first cop who saw him would shoot him down.

"The trouble is," Vanders said, toying with a pencil, "I can't help you."

"What?" Bruce almost lunged at him. "What are you talking about, Corb? You've gotta help me, for Christ's sake!"

"I have to stay out of it," Vanders answered calmly. "You see, Hela is my client, too. I can't represent both of you, and since both of you are friends, I'm going to have to represent neither of you."

"That's insane!"

Vanders spread his hands. "I'm sorry. But I'll give you the name of someone-"

Bruce left, slamming every door he passed through, and stood on the sidewalk. The heat hunched his shoulders. Sweat stained his chest. And he decided that the first thing he had to do, if he was going to face all this nonsense alone, was go home and change his clothes. Take a shower. Find a suit. Tell his family, if they were there, what was happening and not to expect him for dinner.

But Cora was in the kitchen when he arrived, and he could hear the girls downstairs, laughing about some-thing as they played a game of pool.

"Cora," he said, and stopped.

She was at the island, chopping lettuce for a salad.

daddy, why won't it stay?

"I heard," she said before he could speak. "Where were you last night?"

He blinked slowly.

She placed the knife beside her and faced him, her expression brooking no nonsense, no flattery, no evasion. "You've been seeing another woman, haven't you." Her hands twisted spastically in her apron. "Deny it, you goddamn bastard, and I'll cut your balls off."

sweet

"Cora, I am about to be arrested for the goddamn killing of some goddamn dogs."

kiss

"And unless I can get Nancy to cooperate, I'm going to be arrested for killing Athland, too."

mine

"Nancy?" Cora's eyes shut tightly. "Oh, you bas-tard! Oh, you goddamn bastard!"

you're mine

He walked up to her; she backed away.

"Cora, all I've been doing-"

"I know what you've been doing."

He braced himself on the counter. "Oh really?"

Her eyes opened; he wished they hadn't. "For weeks I've known. Mooning around here, moaning about dying and losing your shirt and being alone for the rest of your life . . . you think you've been kidding anyone? Do you really think you've fooled anyone?"

"Damn it, Cora, Nancy Arrow was a friend of mine. I told you about her often enough. Jesus, all we did-"

She slapped him.

He stumbled one step back.

"Nancy," she said tonelessly. "Nancy Arrow."

"Yes," he said, one finger at his cheek.

"Never heard of her."

I don't want to die, he thought.

"From high school, remember? We were going together when I met you."

Don't want to die.

"I said I never heard of her."

He picked up the knife and slashed the blade across her face. She was too startled to cry out, and he slashed her again, slicing open the bridge of her nose, peeling back her left cheek. When she screamed at last, he punched her, and she fell, and he reached down and drew the knife down from the hollow of her throat, between her breasts, to her stomach.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

Before straightening, and turning, and walking to the basement door where he heard Betsy calling.

"What?" he demanded.

His daughter came up the stairs, trying to look around him. "Was that Mother?" she wanted to know. "Those dogs, Dad. How could-"

"Shut up," he said; and the knife caught her belly just as he saw her eyes widen at the blood on his face. On his shirt. On his hands. On his legs. And she stumbled backward, one hand clutching at the open wound, the other scrabbling frantically for the railing, until her legs stiffened, then collapsed, and she rolled down to the floor.

He followed.

Lisa screamed.

Once. And no more.

"Detective Rowan, please." "Speaking. Mr. Kanfield? Mr. Kanfield, is that you?" "I didn't kill him, Rowan." He hung up, and wiped the blood off the telephone.

Time enough, he decided, to wash himself off and put on clean clothes.

Blood.

Where did it all come from?

He drove to the park and left his car at the curb even though a patrolman began yelling from down the block.

He walked through the open gates and trotted up the path. He knew now why Nancy wouldn't talk to

the police. It was so obvious he felt stupid. She was the one who had killed Athland. To protect him. To save him. And she had probably slaughtered the terriers as well. To save him from aggravation at a time when he needed all the strength he had left. It was crazy. It was insane. It was the mad act of a woman who loved him so much she didn't care about herself, as long as he was all right. It was the first battle in a war she would wage against the world, because in her life he and only he was important, was what counted.

Now it was his turn.

Now he had to save her before Rowan in his plodding way figured it out, discovered where she was staying and arrested her, and broke her down, made her talk, and took her away from him.

He ran.

Away from him.

Never.

Not again.

He had lost her once because he had been too young and therefore blind; he wouldn't lose her a second time because he was a coward. As she had fought for him, so would he for her; as she had risked her life, so would he; as she had love for him, so he had for her.

From that very first kiss on the knoll in the park they had somehow been bound, and now it was up to him to be sure the binding held.

Faster; a whistle blew far behind him.

Darting through the shrubs to the slope, upward now and slowing, panting, finally gasping to his knees when he reached the top and hands grabbed him under the shoulders and tried to pull him up.

"Hurry," she said.

Yellow dress.

Red hair.

"I'm trying," he said, one hand out for balance.

"Hurry," she said.

And fairly dragged him through the bushes, to the place where they'd lain, and they fell together on the needles and the leaves and the fallen wildflower blossoms.

Holding each other; holding their breath.

"I'm yours now," he said when he could speak without choking. "God, Nancy, I'm yours now. You were right. I'm-"

She giggled.

He raised himself up on an elbow and stared. "What?" he asked, a puzzled smile flickering.

"You're mine."

He nodded. "I know. And you're mine."

She shook her head. "No, Bruce. I'm not yours."

The frown deepened.

"I never was."

A breeze rode in from the valley.

The branches stirred, and parted, and let the sun in to highlight the way the flesh on her face was stiff and laced with cracks, the way her dress was yellowed, the way the points of her elbows pierced the skin without her bleeding, the way her eyes watched him as he backed away to his knees.

Dead, he thought, and covered his face.

"You're dead," he whispered, looking out between his fingers to see her lips part and turn to dust, to see her teeth blacken and rattle down into her throat, to see her dress get blown away by the breeze that exploded into a wind that tore the leaves and cracked the branches and flung dust at his eyes and made him turn as he sobbed with fear.

Dead; she was dead.

Dear god, he'd loved a ghost.

"Ghost," he whispered hoarsely.

"No," Nancy said.

And as he pulled his hands away he saw blood drying on his knuckles, blood drying on his wrist.

"You're a ghost!" he screamed. "Jesus, you made me kill them all!"

"No," she said.

He reached for air, to strangle, to hold. "But you're mine, goddamn it! Goddamn it, you said you're mine."

And Nancy Arrow laughed, in the shadows, in the wind, and said, "I'm not a ghost, my darling."

Blood on his shirt, on his trousers, on his shoes.

"To be a ghost, I have to die."

Cora; Jesus, Cora!

"How can I die?"

All the blood; Lisa!

"I never was."

Part III As We Promise, Side by Side

The heat did not die with the setting of the sun; it shifted instead to the back of a breeze that barely moved the curtains, barely stirred the leaves, barely rose high enough to slip into bedrooms and pass over those who tried to sleep without sheets; it touched lawns of dying grass, beds of dying flowers, made mock of the sprinklers that hissed in the dark; it kept night things from prowling, night birds from singing, and made lovers of the night look forward to dawn.

Engines overheated even under the stars.

Tempers overheated at the lift of a raised brow.

And Lois sat on the porch steps and thought about moving to someplace like Maine. Surely Maine, in late September, didn't have heat waves like this. And it was, she told herself, a lot easier getting warm again when you're cold than getting cool again when you're drooping from the heat.

Besides, how difficult could it be? You pack your bags, you put them in the car, you drive away from OxrunStation never to be seen again. How hard is that? So what's the big deal?

Her shoulder lifted as she took a slow resigned breath, lowered when she exhaled and rubbed a palm across the damp back of her neck, trapping beneath it curls and coils of pale blonde hair before drawing it down over her shoulder, her breast, watching it flop on her thigh. The arm was leaden. The thigh was hot. She considered going inside and changing from jeans to shorts, and changed her mind because the effort would be, right now, too great.

Besides, going to Maine would mean giving up the house.

And though a marriage had died here, bludgeoned out of existence by indifference and arrogance and a hundred other things that had no name, it was also the place where she knew all the corners, all the cobwebs, all the boards that creaked and all the walls that weren't true.

How could she leave?

Above and behind her, poking out of the bedroom window, the air conditioner banged, sputtered, settled back to a growl. She glanced up at it, hidden in the dark, and nodded.

Easily, she thought; I could get out of here in a second.

A cyclist hushed past, heading up Western Road toward Chancellor Avenue a block away, white helmet glowing in the light of the street lamp at the corner. She watched him, flickering in and out of still shadow, until there was nothing left but that white helmet, until even that was gone.

A brief frown; a tilt of her head; following his image until that, too, was gone.

He rode by every night, never stopping, never slowing, too fast for her to see his face, too quick to guess his age; a twilight ghost, she had thought once, always timing his exercise for just after sunset, when the foliage and the chimneys blended into the early night. She had once deliberately walked to the curb to catch a better glimpse of him, pretending to light a cigarette when he popped out of the dark at the end of the block. Tires silent. Silent pedals. Veering gently to the other side just before he reached her.

She'd almost called out to him, to bid him a good evening, but something in the way he held his head stopped her. It was as if, just for a moment, he had turned slightly to look at her, and just for that same moment she couldn't see his face, didn't know if he had one.

She hadn't tried it again. Nor had she been able to rid herself of a faint unnerving belief that he was only

biding his time, that one of these nights he was going to pull over and greet her.

And when he did . . .

Maine, she thought, briskly rubbing one bare arm; definitely Maine.

Across the street then, behind a low barberry hedge and the screen of two young willows, a yellow bulb snapped on, and she stiffened for a moment, held her breath, and relaxed when a screen door opened and the shadow of a woman stepped out onto a porch twice the size of her own. It was only April, sneaking out for a cigarette because her husband had quit three months ago and refused to let even an ashtray sneak back into the house.

Lois sympathized. She had had a husband like that, once upon another lifetime ago. And once the honey-moon had been relegated to photograph albums and old letters cached in the backs of desk drawers, once Paul had decided he was the man of the house, even she hadn't been blind enough to miss the coming fire.

The conflagration that began the day he had pro-tested loudly, almost madly, when she'd refused to quit her job at Kanfield Investments. He had unilaterally decided it was time to put her degree in storage and start a family; and he left six months later, more confused than angry, when she told him for the hundredth time she was only there for the training, that sooner or later she was going to strike out on her own, come hell or high water, and the babies would come when she thought she was ready.

He had suggested, more calmly, that the cost was too great.

She had argued quite reasonably that it wouldn't cost her a thing.

It had, at the end, with a judge and the lawyers and all the papers to be signed, but she didn't mind. Not now. Not after four years that often seemed like forty. Working out of the house he'd left her in lieu of alimony hadn't been easy, especially when the firm had died; but a few of Kanfield's old clients knew her and knew what she'd done for them, and they had agreed, temporarily, to let her prove what she could do.

It was nerve-racking.

It was driving her up the wall.

And she suspected that she loved it.

If only, she thought then, Todd were here. Now. Sitting right here. So I could-

She put a cautioning finger to her lips and laughed silently when she felt a blush begin to work her cheeks. It was incredible how she reacted even to his image, floating calmly there above the sidewalk, his head cocked just so, his left eye closed, his right forefinger resting against his cheek in an attitude of *I'm listening but I don't believe one word you're saying*. The blush warmed. She pinched her cheeks. Then she deliberately forced him away before she did something stupid- like run inside call him and ask him over.

Not yet.

Too soon.

Not yet.

Damn it.

A bat flickered through the trees in the yard, too fast for her to follow.

But as she turned her head anyway, lifting her face to try to catch some relief from the desultory breeze, she was distracted by the sound of a guitar drifting out of the dark. Thank you, she thought then; thanks for coming tonight.

The first time she'd heard it, just about a month ago, just after the firm had shut down and forced her out on her own, it had frightened her without her knowing why. There had been no source; just the music. Curious music that she'd sworn had been somehow written just for her.

A song with her name as the title.

A song that was only played on the cold side of midnight.

But in time she grew used to it, came to expect it, came to like it. For a while she had even walked around the streets, following it patiently like a spoor, eventually tracking it down to Thorn Road only two weeks ago, and realizing what she ought to have known all along-that it was Willy Peace and his friends, playing for themselves on the back porch of an old Cape Cod that never showed the street its lights.

She hadn't walked around the side to see the musicians; that, she thought, would have killed it.

So she listened now in the heat, as the guitar waltzed around her so slowly she grew sleepy and sagged, feeling the bass notes touch her heart and match it beat for beat, while a fiddle lamented as if it were lost in autumn fog, and a mandolin played hide-and-seek with the melody it knew, and a dulci-mer hammered her name sweetly, like the hurried whisper of a child who had the best secret in the world and only a minute left to tell it.

Her head snapped up then, and her eyes snapped open, and she rubbed them harshly with the heels of her hands.

The guitar.

She heard her name.

A one-sided smile drew back her lips, a shake of her head and a motionless shrug put the conceit in its place.

But the serenade left the moment the cyclist re-turned.

Speeding now. Tires hissing. White helmet, white shoes, a jagged white stripe down the length of the frame. Straight down the center of the street. And suddenly she felt a terrifying urge to scream. It lay down there now, somewhere near her stomach-a scream so loud it would be heard in the village park. It brought sweat to her cheeks, a quivering to her jaw, an acid to her mouth that made her turn her head and spit.

"You could be fined for that, you know."

She jumped, hand clamped to the flat of her chest. "Jesus!" she said. "Jesus, I didn't hear you coming."

April Quick grinned. Her left hand held a burning cigarette, her right drifted back through short greying hair. "You looked like a zombie. I thought I'd come over and see if you were dead."

Lois looked away quickly.

April sat beside her, frowning now. "Hey, are you all right? What's the matter?"

She shrugged. "Just thinking, that's all. That guy," and she pointed, "spooks me."

April peered down the street. "What guy?"

"The guy on the bike."

"Oh. Him." She blew smoke at the stars. "You know who he is?"

Lois shook her head.

"Neither do I. But I'll bet he's damned healthy." She laughed, more a bark. "I hate healthy. It kills you too soon. Besides, it makes you sweat."

Lois smiled without moving her lips, looked up and down the street, and said, "Nel."

"Huh?"

"Nel. Nelson Glawford. Maybe it's him."

"Who," said April, "the hell is Nelson Glawford?"

"A guy who tried to get a job with Bruce before ... before. He was a health nut, I think. And I think he had a thing for me."

April snorted.

"Well, damnit, maybe he did!"

They sat quietly for several minutes, feeling the heat, hoping for cool, watching the lights in the houses snap off one by one. Then April crushed a second cigarette under her heel and stretched her arms above her head. Lois didn't look around. Her friend was overweight and hated herself, and lately it seemed that she took every glance, every look, as a condemnation of her size. Before that, it was her age. And before that it was something else.

April wasn't on a diet; she claimed they didn't work.

"You look a bit on the sour side yourself," Lois said when the stretching was done.

"Blood," the older woman told her.

"What?" She didn't know if she ought to laugh or be concerned.

April gestured in disgust. "There was blood on the kitchen floor tonight. I had to clean it up because His Royal is off in Hartford, or so he says. Have you ever noticed how he times it perfectly every time? He goes, and the effing car dies; he goes, and the furnace blows up; he goes, and four hundred screaming creditors come pounding on the door. And I'm supposed to play the helpless-woman bit to keep them off our backs." A sideways look. "I mean, it does come in handy, don't get me wrong, but *god*, it gets tired awfully fast."

Lois nodded. "So how'd you cut yourself?"

"I didn't."

"But-

"How the hell should I know?" April said. "Probably from the steak I whipped up for dinner. That crap drips all over the place before you can get it from the fridge to the stove. You'd think I was a butcher, the mess I can make." She grinned. "Too bad it wasn't His Royal's. No jury in the world would convict me."

Lois did laugh then, because April and her husband, Gavin, despite their recent financial troubles, despite the occasional arguments that never seemed to happen when the windows were closed, were about the most stable couple she knew, if not the most loving.

April stood then, and squinted into the dark. "Well, gotta go, Lo. Tomorrow, some marvelously handsome young man with muscles up to here is going to come early to start cleaning the carpets." Her hands gripped her hips and massaged them. "And if he isn't handsome, I'm gonna rape him anyway."

Lois grinned.

April strode to the curb, looked both ways with such exaggeration that Lois giggled, and hurried across the street. As she climbed the porch steps she waved over her shoulder; Lois waved back, lifted her chest in a deep breath, and decided that she might as well call it a night.

The cleaners for April, for herself a business meeting with Todd Zaber's father, who was, Todd insisted, serious about looking into an investment or two. As if, she thought as she stood and stretched, the old man didn't have enough already. At least enough to furnish a house on Williamston Pike so large Todd had once jokingly drawn her a map so she could get from the center hall to the front sitting room; the first time she'd gone over, just three weeks ago.

When she saw the map, she didn't think the joke was funny.

"Todd," she'd said, "this is a mansion!"

Todd had shrugged. "So?"

"So . . . it's a mansion! You live in a mansion! You're a professor, and you live in a mansion?"

He'd nodded, dumping a mass of dark hair over his forehead. "Yeah, so?"

"So that means you're rich."

"I guess, yeah."

She'd grabbed his tie then and yanked him down to her level with a growl that hadn't been quite feigned. "Todd, you didn't tell me you were rich. And don't give me that bit about you're not thinking it mattered."

"Well, does it?"

Her mouth had opened to tell him yes, it damned well did matter; then it closed when she told herself she was being an idiot. He was rich; she wasn't. He liked her; she liked him. And if he had money, that was pure gravy.

Some gravy, she thought as she climbed the steps and pulled open the screen door, and thought no more when she heard the kitchen telephone ringing. She hurried down the hall and grabbed the receiver, and leaned heavily against the side of the refrigerator when a voice said:

"Lois, this is Paul. I've changed my mind. I want the house. I'm coming back."

The wind that took her soul was fresh off the desert, dry and searing, filled with sand, stoking her like a

furnace as she slammed the receiver back onto its cradle, winced when she thought it had cracked, and stomped in rage to the front door. Her arms swung as if she were marching. Her heels slammed on the hardwood floor. She turned and put her fists hard on her hips, glaring at the foyer all darkwood highly polished, the grandfather clock by the wide entrance to the front parlor, the oak coatrack and its beveled mirror set under the staircase on the left. The small table where she left her mail. The Oriental runner. The overhead light and its milk white globe.

Mine, she declared silently; goddamn it, it's mine.

A quick turn to the right around the clock, a slap of her hand that turned on the lights in a large room she called the parlor because it suited her mood and suited the house. Bookcases darkly stained and built into the walls, four high windows across the front, two on the far side. Furniture meant to be sat and sprawled in, claw-foot standing lamps with dark tas-seled shades she thought wonderfully tacky; decades-old wallpaper of oak groves, puffy clouds, all of it faded nearly to white; a high plaster ceiling beginning to show cracks.

She touched the back of an armchair.

Mine. It's mine.

To her left then, and she pulled open the doors that slid into the walls, and stepped into the living room where she kept her stereo and her television, where the windows were open, the shades up, the love seat dark wine and her favorite armchair brown leather. No carpet here; she hadn't gotten around to it and didn't know when she would. Wallpaper just as faded and partially covered by framed Audubon prints. A tum-bled stack of magazines by the chair. A fireplace on the back wall, and on the ornately carved mantel a ragged row of silver bowls and silver goblets parted in the center by the only photograph she owned- standing at the side of the house after the porch had been painted and the last new step installed. A proud grin at her lips, defiant at her eyes, her right arm up and out as though showing off her work, or gesturing to mark a friend.

Mine.

In the center of the lefthand wall was the entrance to the dining room, which she stormed into and glared at fiercely-china closet, sideboard, square table, small cut-glass chandelier, the shelves on the papered walls where she kept her collection of brass hot plates and china deer.

The large kitchen was to the right, the deep foyer to the left along a short hall barely long enough for the name, barely long enough to hold the coat closet, and she didn't know which way to go, which room to reclaim next.

"Mine!" she shouted. "You son of a bitch, it's mine!"

The house didn't answer.

It didn't have to.

Paul had left the small Victorian in varying stages of renovation; she had done the rest, well into every night with tears and coaxing and vows to keep it sound, ignoring the hammered thumbs, the splinters, the backaches from lifting and the bruises from dropping. Learning from manuals, from Todd, from Gavin, from April; by the book where she could and makeshift where she had to. She had replaced most of his jarring contemporary furniture with things that held promise of comfort and long life; he had painted most of the upstairs walls white, and she had already picked out the paper to cover them up; he had bricked up the fireplace in the front bedroom while she'd been in New York, attending a seminar, and the

argument that had resulted was no argument, it was a fight.

The bricks were gone.

And suddenly she wondered if they really were.

Up the stairs at a headlong run, grabbing the top post and swinging herself into the wide upper hall, skidding, then racing into the large master bedroom where she stood at the hearth, panting and gulping, staring at the ashes she hadn't cleaned out last winter, listening to the air conditioner wheeze and clunk in its window.

Perspiration drenched her chest and face, crawled down her sides, and she tore at her clothes, bending a nail and sobbing though her eyes remained hard and dry. Then she stalked across the hall to the narrow, green-tiled bathroom and turned on the shower, and in the hot shower felt the soul-wind shift from desert to winter.

She hugged herself under the spray.

He can't do it, you know, she thought, trying to regain the fury; there's no way he can do it, the goddamn prick. He signed the papers. He agreed.

Her teeth chattered despite the steam that became a fog.

He can't.

"Can't," she whispered as she dried herself, clothed herself, stepped into the hall and realized that she'd forgotten to close the bedroom door. All that cold air escaped into the house, warmed before it reached the stairs, hot when it reached the foyer. She groaned, closed the door, and leaned against it for a moment before returning downstairs. To the kitchen.

He said he was coming back; she glanced at the back door and shuddered at the dark, at her reflection so pale and insubstantial. He'll kill me. He'll hurt me. He'll-

She ran to the door and locked it, put her back to it and closed her eyes tightly, to see the sparks and the spirals and the image of him striding toward her through a swirling fogfire that ignited everything about him. Except him. Always except him.

The refrigerator coughed on.

She opened her eyes.

The first thing she saw was the telephone on the wall, and before she knew what she was doing, she called Todd and babbled, called April and wept, stood with the receiver in her hand and stared at it dumbly, suddenly annoyed, then angry, then furious at herself for cracking so quickly at the first sign of trouble. It wasn't like her. She was, as her father had often told her in gentle exasperation, a fighter to the death and then some; there was no reason on earth why she couldn't handle her former husband on her own. He wasn't that terrible; he couldn't have been or she wouldn't have married him.

Slowly, deliberately so, she hung the receiver up and pushed a hand through her hair, down her shirtfront, down her thigh. Then she walked just as slowly into the living room and looked at her silver bowls. One was from Paul, engraved with grape leaves and satyrs. A first-anniversary present that he swore would be-come a tradition.

It was the only one he gave her.

The rest she bought herself.

Each one of them a promise to keep the house, to keep the love, to keep ... everything the same.

A tear, then, and she thumbed it away.

And the telephone rang.

She touched a finger to a slender goblet that had once been her mother's, and she went back to the kitchen, opening the refrigerator door as she picked up the receiver.

"Lois?"

She held her breath.

"Hey, Lo, you there? It's Nel."

She exhaled and closed the door. "Nelson? Nel, is that really you?"

He laughed and said it was.

"My god, do you have any idea what time it is?"

"Well... yeah, sort of."

She leaned against the refrigerator and smiled at the room. Nel, after failing his chance to get a job at Kanfield, was now on his own and forever calling her for advice. She didn't resent it; in fact, she was

"Hey," he said, "I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"No. Sorry. What can I do for you? Assuming you're not drunk."

"I'm not, shame on you. And since you have no intention of marrying me, would you mind saving a spot on your terribly crowded social calendar for my engagement party?"

She gaped. "What? Nelson, you? Getting married?"

He laughed so loudly she had to pull the receiver away. "Yes, my dear, me. I know it crushes you, but that's the way it is."

"Oh god, Nelson, I'd love to. When?"

"November. The fifteenth."

She waited a moment.

"Lo?"

"I'm checking, I'm checking."

He growled, she giggled, and told him there was nothing that would keep her away. When he thanked her, and she felt him blushing, she blew him a kiss and hung up, and sagged against the doorframe. Slightly saddened. Slightly pleased. There was Todd, of course; there was always Todd. But Nelson, for some reason, was never far from a daydream.

The telephone rang again.

"You forgot to tell me where," she said, laughing.

"I'm back," Paul said, laughed, and hung up.

All the lights upstairs were off except for a wall lamp in the hall.

The kitchen was dark.

The dining room.

The foyer.

She had gone down to the basement through the door under the stairs, checked to be sure the narrow windows there were locked; then she tore up several empty cartons and taped the pieces over the panes.

The garage was behind the house; she couldn't bring herself to go out there to be sure the door was locked.

Locked.

So many locks, so many bolts, and before she returned to the living room where the others were waiting, she imagined herself mistress of some crum-bling medieval castle, raising the drawbridge, sending the archers to their places, firing the vats of boiling oil and hiding the women in the dungeons.

She almost smiled.

Then April laughed.

When Lois entered, Todd came in from the parlor and joined her at the hearth. One hand gripped her elbow lightly, the fingers stroking her arm. "You all right?" A rugby shirt, soccer shorts, sneakers; his arms and face were tanned, and the sun had drawn a streak of auburn from his left temple to his nape. "Do you want something to drink?"

They had arrived less than ten minutes after her calls, all of them at once, storming the porch as if Paul were already inside and throttling her. Or worse. It had taken ten minutes more before she'd convinced them she was fine, that she had simply panicked, and that she was thoroughly ashamed for bringing them out on such a hot, miserable night for nothing more than a severe case of nerves.

Gavin sat in her chair, slumped with long legs crossed, suit jacket folded and draped across the back. His tie was yanked down and off to one side, collar button open and the next button down. His hair was plentiful for the white that it was, and in almost comic contrast to the black of a mustache that made his face seem almost pudgy.

The room was warm, no breeze through the open windows.

"Thirst," he said tonelessly. "So that's why I'm dying of."

He'd only just pulled into the driveway, home early from Hartford, when April dashed out of the house and dragged him over, so quickly she hadn't had time to put on her shoes.

Lois blinked at him. "Oh." Her hand fluttered. "I'm sorry, Gavin. I'll-"

"I know where it is," Todd said gently. "You sit down. I'll get it."

"Nothing too strong for me, love," April called after him from the sofa. "I'm on a diet, remember?" Then

she turned to Montgomery Zaber, seated beside her, in the corner. "If I was smart, I'd drink water or some kind of diet soda, but Lois doesn't believe in that stuff." She laughed quickly. "I don't either, but what the hell."

The elder Zaber sat stiffly. He was dressed in a three-piece white suit, diamond stickpin, diamond cuff links, black leather shoes that reflected the lamp-light. His lean face was flushed, and his eyes were narrowed, as they had been the first time Lois had met him, outside his law-firm office. He gave the impression of eternal disapproval, and the first time he'd laughed Lois thought it was trick.

His smile to April was brief; the one to Lois was longer, and brushed with concern. "My dear," he said calmly, "if you don't sit down, you're going to make it worse than it is."

"But it isn't bad," she insisted, staying where she was, glancing at the photograph and finger-dusting the frame. "I told you I just panicked for a moment. He sounded so ... so ..." She shrugged helplessly.

"Well," the attorney said, his voice giving the impression his fingers were tented thoughtfully under his chin, "if it'll make you feel any better, from what you've told me, there isn't a thing the man can do to take this lovely place away from you. He gave it up willingly, signed to that effect, and now ..." He spread his hands. "But I do wish you'd call Wes Martin. He's a good man, one of the best policemen we have on the force. He's certainly done a fine job as acting chief."

She shook her head. The police would only complicate matters, and if Paul was really in town and saw them at the house, he might do something more stupid than he already was.

Todd returned with a tray of drinks he passed around without comment, saving Lois for last—a squat glass of bourbon.

"Oh, how sweet, you remembered," she said, closing her eyes as she sipped.

"It wasn't hard. It's all you have."

Silence.

The chime and crack of ice cubes.

"I don't know," she said suddenly, softly, sinking to an ottoman on the hearth that matched nothing in the room. "I just don't know what he's up to."

"Sick," April told her. "The bastard's sick, that's all, and he ought to be locked up."

Gavin grunted, and drank.

"A business or personal reversal," Zaber suggested over the top of his glass. "It happens more often than you think. A man, or a woman for that matter, suffers some sort of economic or emotional loss and he strikes out at an easy target." He stared at the glass. "In this case, you."

"But it's been over four years. Nearly five now."

"And you still have the house," the man reminded her. "In five years I would imagine the value of this property has appreciated considerably. In Oxrun that's not unusual, not in these times." He glanced around the room in frank admiration. "Taking into consideration all the work—"

Love, she thought.

"—you've put into it, I've no doubt a sale would realize a substantial profit. Quite substantial."

"I'd never sell it," she whispered. "Never. It's mine."

Silence.

The snap and sigh of ice cubes melting.

Todd knelt beside her, leaned back on his heels, and she smiled at him in thanks, smiled at the others, and marked how much the man alongside her resembled the man over there in the white suit. There was more than a father-son similarity; it was the way the head was held, the way the lips tightened, the cheeks sucked in, the way the left hand was used for emphasis while the right hunted for a pocket to dive in and hide.

At times it was uncanny.

"Gavin," April said, rolling the sleeves of her plaid shirt above her elbows, "why don't you check around outside?"

Gavin moved his eyes, not his head. "Should I bring a shotgun?"

The woman's lips parted, brittle but not a smile. "Just sing to him, dear, just sing. That'll take care of him until we can call the cops."

Gavin emptied his glass and pushed out of the chair as if he were ten times his age. "I'm going for a refill." A blank look at his wife. "No. I'm going to get the bottle." He reached for a small ice bucket resting on top of the television console. Then he looked at Lois, who grinned and nodded. "You are civilized, child. I am a shit."

He left.

The silence.

April rolled her sleeves back down and looked over her shoulder out the window. "Todd?" she said.

And Lois realized then that her friend was truly afraid, far more afraid than she was. The calls had been frightening, of course, but as soon as she'd gathered her surrogate family around her, heard their voices, saw their faces, she felt less foolish at her reactions than she felt, at last, comforted. They had come without questions; they were staying until they were convinced she would be all right alone.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt," Todd said, setting his glass on the brick and grunting to his feet. "Where do you keep the shotgun?"

"I don't have a shotgun," she said. "And the cannon is in for repairs."

He snapped his fingers. "Nuts. Then I'll just have to tear his head off with my bare hands."

When he left, Lois saw April trying not to sigh her relief, and saw Montgomery Zaber purse his lips in a silent, disapproving whistle.

Gavin brought the bottle.

Every glass was refilled.

"You were lucky there weren't any children," April said, and said, "Oops," when a dribble of liquor escaped her mouth and ran down her chin.

Lois didn't answer, though she didn't think "lucky" was exactly the word she would have chosen.

Gavin folded his hands around his glass and stared at the ceiling, nodding once in a while, his right foot tapping the air. "You know," he said, "could it be the guy was just plain drunk? Maybe feeling sorry for himself?"

"No," she said. "He wasn't drunk."

"Sick," April said. "Like I told you."

Zaber shifted, glass in hand, the other hand in his lap.

"I don't know," Gavin said. "It seems to me-"

The telephone rang.

Lois jumped up, bourbon slopping over her hand. She swore, wiped it off on her jeans, and pushed herself to her feet when no one else moved.

"Don't answer it," April urged, drawing her legs quickly under her, cupping her bare feet in one hand. "If it's him, the bastard, you'll only-"

The back door opened as the telephone rang again, and Todd called, "I'll get it," before Lois could take a step.

She listened. Frowning. Licking her lips until she realized what she was doing and clamped her teeth together, pushed her tongue against them. And held her breath until he came into the room and shrugged.

"Nobody there."

"I'll bet," April muttered.

"Wrong number," Gavin suggested, and his wife stuck out her tongue.

Say something, Lois ordered herself then; don't just stand here like an idiot, like some helpless female without a brain in her head. Say something. Tell a joke. For god's sake, grab Todd and kiss him!

Todd reached her then and picked up his glass. "Look," he said, "there was no one outside-I locked the garage, by the way-but I think ... I don't know, but I think someone ought to stay with you tonight."

"Me," April said quickly.

Lois set her drink on the mantel and shook her head. "No. I mean, I think I'll be all right."

Todd gripped her shoulder firmly, easing her back to the ottoman, though she didn't feel like sitting. "I think I should be the one. And I promise, Lo, that-"

"No, don't!" she snapped, yanking her shoulder away. "You can't promise. You can't. You don't even know what's going to happen, so how can you. . ."

She stopped when she saw his stricken expression, the hurt, and she reached up to take his hand, to squeeze it in apology, and let it go.

But she didn't say yes.

Too many promises.

She rubbed her palms together, placed them on her thighs.

There were too damn many promises made too damn easily. I promise you this, I promise you that, and all them soon shattered like cheap dishes on the floor. Made without thinking; made with good intention; made without understanding the implicit commitment-and once understanding, looking for the loophole that would salve the conscience, save the words for reuse.

No more promises; I love you, Todd, but the house is the only promise I have left.

"Lois," Montgomery said, "may I offer a suggestion?"

After a long moment she nodded warily.

"It's apparent that none of us, myself included, want to leave you here by yourself. It's also apparent that you have no intention of letting any of us stay." He smiled then. "Including my son."

Todd sputtered.

Gavin smiled.

Lois looked up and gave him her best lewd wink.

"So why don't we simply relax. All of us. There's nothing we can do, nothing has been done to either Lois or the house, and as long as we're behaving like the proverbial cat in a room full of rocking chairs, we're going to be more uncomfortable than if we hadn't come at all. I think, since I have absolutely no appetite or desire for parlor games and such, we might find something suitable on the television, find something to nibble on in the kitchen, and make pests of ourselves until Lois finds it in her heart to throw us all out."

He drank.

Gavin slapped his thigh lightly in applause.

And Lois did her best not to laugh aloud. It was, she thought, the perfect solution under the circumstances. None of them could pretend there was nothing going on, but neither was there any sense in just sitting around, waiting for something to happen. For all she knew, Paul could have been calling from Boston. Or New York. Or even from across the country. In the meantime, the least they could do was find a distraction, a release, anything that would keep them from staring at her as though they expected her to suddenly burst into tears and start throwing things, or try to slit her wrists.

"Do you like baseball, Mr. Zaber?" Gavin asked.

"Hate it."

"A movie then," April said, leaving the couch to kneel in front of the TV. "Something stupid. Mind-less." She pulled the on-off knob. "Any requests?"

And had just glanced away from the sudden brightening of the screen when an explosion knocked her to her rump, and a flare of orange light flooded the room for a moment.

"What . . . ?" April said.

But Gavin was out of his chair before anyone else could move, leapt over his wife's legs, and raced into the front room.

"Jesus!" he shouted. "Jesus Christ, it's my house!"

They crowded around the windows, April weeping and clutching her husband's arm, and saw flames spread along the Quick's sagging porch, saw shards of glass on the lawn reflecting the fire, saw smoke in pale strips streaming through a broken window. Bits of flaming wood and brush lay in the street, on the lawn, rolled and stopped on her porch and immediately burned out.

Lois knew her mouth was open, knew her lungs sought air, and she could almost feel the heat that rose in waves above the roof; she could hear the fire give itself a voice, and throw its shadows to the street to make the flames seem brighter by turning everything else pure black.

One of the willows was burning.

Part of the hedge had sprouted fire.

Gavin pushed them away and ran for the door. April right behind him and shouting for someone to call the fire department, the police. Todd immediately headed for the kitchen, his father right behind him.

But Lois didn't move.

She couldn't.

Though she had felt the house shudder under the impact of the explosion, she thought she felt something else. A settling. A hardening. As though the air had congealed for the briefest of moments. It had startled her so much she found it difficult to breathe, and when breath returned she felt dizzy and had swayed.

No one had seen her.

"Damn!" she heard Gavin shout.

"Well, turn the damned lock," April snapped, one hand scrabbling to help until he slapped it away.

Something banged in the living room. Lois turned just as Todd darted past along the hall, calling to her something about the telephone being dead, the lines were down, the fire. She looked again at the Quick house, then hurried back, scanned the room, and saw nothing fallen, nothing broken.

"Damn it, Lois, how the hell do you open this goddamned door?"

They were crowded around the door when she got there, made way reluctantly, and she took hold of the knob. *Seel* She wanted to say; *you don't have to panic, all you have to do is. ..*

The knob wouldn't turn.

"C'mon, c'mon, open the damned door! My house is burning down!"

April ran for the back, bare feet slapping the floor.

Lois fumbled with the lock, twisting the tiny latch one way, the other, back again, while she yanked at the doorknob and kicked at the frame.

"I don't know what's-"

With a sharp short curse Gavin shoved her to one side and tried it himself, his face an ugly scarlet, a vein raised and dark across his brow. "Shit," he said, drew his arm back and punched at the pane.

The glass didn't break.

Todd backed away, pulling Lois with him. "We'll have to bust a window or something," he said.

"What?"

"I can't get out!" April screamed from the kitchen. "Lois, how the hell do you open this thing?"

"Here," Todd said, and Lois followed him into the parlor. Watching as he looked around, finally picked up an ashtray from an end table and walked to the nearest window.

"Todd, c'mon," she said. "Don't be silly. There's got to be-"

He slammed it against the glass.

"Lois!" April screamed.

Gavin picked up the mail table and hefted it awkwardly over his shoulder.

"No!" Lois cried.

Todd hit the window again.

The table was already in motion by the time she reached the foyer, and she stood with hands clasped to her mouth as it struck the door's pane and bounced off, throwing Gavin off balance. He stared at it, at her, and tried again.

April screamed.

"The heat or something," Gavin muttered to him-self. "I don't know. The heat. Air pressure. What the fuck's going on!"

Two of the legs snapped off at the next blow, and he flung the remains at the stairs, hesitated, then ran up to the second floor just as Lois heard glass shattering, turned, and saw Todd with a piece of ashtray in his hand.

His fingers were bleeding.

There was blood on the pane.

"The kitchen," she said immediately, taking his arm and tugging him gently out of the room. She paid no attention to the thumping upstairs, nor to April still shrieking hysterically at the back door. She ignored it all because none of it made sense. She had been stunned by the explosion, logic gone and reason suspended, and only Todd's blood was real, and the moan that slipped from him when a thick sliver of glass fell from his palm to the floor.

"Lois," Todd said, voice low and slurred, "I don't know what happened. I... what's the matter?" His face was pale, his lips unnaturally dark. "It hurts."

April was at the door when she brought Todd to the sink, turned on the cold water and eased the hand under the flow. He hissed and pulled his lips back, shut his eyes, turned his head, and turned it back to watch.

April tapped on the pane, rattled the knob. Her shoulders shook; one heel tapped the floor.

"It's not too bad," Lois said, pulling open a drawer to get her first-aid kit. "You're not going to faint, are you?"

"I want to get out," April whispered.

He shook his head. "No." A quick false laugh. "It startled me, that's all. That thing broke like I was hitting concrete."

A series of tiny pricks along the inside of his fingers, a half-moon cut across the center of his palm.

"Stings like hell, though."

Lois heard April kick the door lightly, heard Gavin still charging around upstairs. Don't think, she or-dered; don't think, not yet. She grabbed a square of paper towel from its holder and dabbed the hand dry, then held up a small bottle.

"You think that stings?"

"Aw, Jesus, Lo, not iodine, c'mon."

"Then you do it."

He did, face taut, sucking air in spurts and shaking his head quickly. "God." He poured a bit more. "God."

April walked out of the room, calling for her husband.

Quickly Lois bound the hand as best she could, watching Todd's face so intently she didn't realize he was mocking her look until he stuck out his tongue and said, "I think I'll be fine now, doctor."

Sirens cut off her response, high and falling rapidly, and she ran back to the foyer and stood at the door, watching as a fire engine slammed to a halt at the curb across the street, a police cruiser just behind it, a second engine coming from the opposite direction. Flames had painted the entire front of the house, had punched through all the windows, were dripping like liquid from the still-burning willow.

The men that scrambled from the vehicles were little more than shadows against the fire, and she had her hand on the knob before she remembered.

Then one of the firemen fell, losing his helmet and flinging up one arm as he sprawled into the hedge. A policeman suddenly slumped against the hood of his car. Another fireman, wrenching open the hydrant in the front of the house one door down, straightened, looked around, and fell onto the curb.

The fire bellowed.

Burning leaves glided.

Gavin shouted from the landing, "Jesus Christ, did you see that? Someone's shooting them out there!"

* * *

They stood in the parlor, ranged before the win-dows.

The stage they watched was empty-the police had left, leaving one care behind; the firemen had run for their lives, those few onlookers on the pavement had scattered to their houses. There was only the fire, the soundless collapsing porch, the few tiny flickers as the second willow caught.

"It's Paul," Lois said, hugging herself and shudder-ing.

"Don't be silly," April said evenly, though her voice was filled with tears.

Lois gestured impatiently. "He called, he waited until you were in here, and then he did something. I don't know what. Now he's . . ." And she nodded toward the bodies still shimmering in the lighted heat.

April took a deep breath and lifted her chin. "I'd like to leave now, Gavin."

"Right," he said sourly. "Just tell me how, okay? Just tell me how."

April stiffened.

Lois turned then and walked into the living room. Alone. Rubbing one arm while she tried to make sense out of glass that didn't break, doors that wouldn't unlock, windows that wouldn't open. She stared blindly at the mantel, firelight from over her shoulder sparking in the silver. She looked to her right and saw the windows, the ones that had been open when her friends arrived, the ones that were closed now.

She heard a voice raised in the other room.

She looked at the ceiling, at the hearth, wandered into the dining room and glanced down the hall, and the other way, toward the kitchen.

I do not believe in ghosts, she maintained the second the idea surfaced; I do not believe in poltergeists, in voodoo, in spirits, in mediums, in ESP, in hauntings, in zombies and vampires and werewolves and ... She held her breath. She turned around and stared behind her at the couch.

"Todd," she called. "Where is your father?"

He stepped into the foyer as if expecting to say *he's right here, can't you see him?* and suddenly frowned. "Gavin, did you see Dad when you were upstairs?"

A grunt.

April demanded they leave.

"I'll check again," Todd said, and took the steps up two at a time.

What? she asked; what's going on?

And in a curious way was unafraid, so unafraid it was paradoxically fearful. What was happening to-night couldn't happen, that much was clear-yet if she'd been outside, Paul might have killed her; if the Quicks had been in their house, they'd surely be dead.

Out there.

But in here there had been no threats, no matter what the others thought.

She wandered into the short hall and idly opened the coat closet door, shut it again and moved into the foyer.

The clock chimed eleven; the man-in-the-moon didn't move, it never had.

She looked to the wall beneath the staircase and widened her eyes.

The basement.

He must have gone to the basement to find another way out.

She called for Todd as she hurried over and opened the door. Narrow steps led down to the right, a bare bulb on the top landing unlit. She pulled the string chain and shaded her eyes as she started toward the bottom, almost sideways, one hand leading along the unpainted banister.

"Mr. Zaber?"

There was dark at the bottom, not even a shadow.

"Montgomery?"

A chill that defied the heat that filled the house.

Midway down she flicked a wall switch, and another bare bulb blossomed in the uncovered ceiling.

"Mr. Zaber, are you all right?"

The basement floor had been cemented and painted gray, the walls were of gray-painted stone, and in the far corner by the furnace and hot-water heater there were lines of rust stains where the boiler had once leaked. Cobwebs. The scent and must of dust and oil and the age of the beams along which wires were strung and the pipes were attached.

Aside from a few empty cartons tucked in the space under the stairs, a cluttered worktable along one wall, a rusting metal cabinet that held most of the tools she used for repairs, the area was empty.

There was no room to hide.

There were no doors to the outside, and the card-board she'd taped over the windows hadn't been disturbed.

"Anything?"

She did her best not to scream as she whirled and glared up at Todd on the landing.

"The attic door's stuck."

She started up. "You have to kick and pull at the same time. It's temperamental."

He was gone before she reached the top, but not before she realized how silly her instructions sounded after all the trouble with getting out.

She snapped off the bottom light.

She pulled the string.

She closed the door just as April came out of the parlor and said, "Listen, bitch, if you don't tell me what the hell's going on here, I'm gonna tear out your throat."

Gavin appeared behind her then, put his hands on her shoulders and tried to turn her around.

"No!" she said angrily. "Damnit.. . no!"

He whispered in her ear; she sagged a little against him, but her face was still twisted.

"Lois?" Gavin said.

She felt the first tears then, tasted the salt, and blinked as fast as she could before they could fall. "I don't

know." She lifted one hand. "I swear to god, I don't know."

April raised a fist, but it was instantly covered by Gavin's hand, lowered slowly, held at her side. Her lips trembled for a smile. "Drunk, huh? I guess we're drunk, right?"

Two drinks each, Lois Wanted to say; how drunk can you get on two lousy drinks?

"God, it's hot." April lifted a shirttail and wiped off her face. "Maybe next year you could invest in some air-conditioning, okay?"

Todd came down the stairs. "He's not up there."

Lois had no chance to argue that he *had* to be there, there was nowhere else to be, but the sudden blare of a bullhorn snapped their heads around. A squawk, a high-pitched whistle, and someone began to talk, the words slurred but the intent clear-it was a warning to the gunman to stop firing and come out from wherever he was hiding.

The answering shot made them start, and Lois backed against the wall.

The bullhorn spoke again.

Another shot, and one of the fire engines exploded.

April turned-"Oh, Jesus!"-and thrust her face against Gavin's chest, who pulled her gently through the parlor into the living room. Lois watched them, watched the fire, watched as Todd came to her side and took her arm with his good hand.

"We have to talk," he said.

She didn't say a word, only allowed herself to be led to her chair, where she sat with her hands clasped in her lap.

The Quicks were on the couch, close but not touching.

And suddenly Lois said, "It's the house."

Todd lowered himself to the ottoman and stretched his legs out, crossing them at the ankles. "The house," he repeated flatly.

She nodded. "It's crazy."

"Yeah," April answered.

"I think . . ." The heat, of course; it was the heat that made her think this, that made her remember the windows that closed on their own, the window glass that hardened to protect them from the blast, the doors that wouldn't open to let them out to face Paul's madness.

She said all this haltingly, without conviction, offer-ing it without looking up to see what the others were thinking, minding instead the way her fingers squirmed around each other, bloodless and stiff and unbelievably cold. It wouldn't have mattered anyway. She herself didn't know where the idea had come from, why it had come, why as she spoke she found increasing belief and no fear at all.

After all, why not? As long as she was going nuts, why shouldn't it be true? Hadn't she protected and bound and balmed and spruced up the house all these years, on her own? Hadn't she talked to it when she came home, said her good-byes when she left, thought aloud to it when she was troubled, and

laughed with it when she was happy? So why couldn't it be time for the thing to reciprocate?

She giggled.

The thing?

My god, she was acting as if it were alive. A pet. A pet dog that gives her protection because she feeds it and nurses it and makes sure it gets all the exercise it needs.

When she felt them staring, she told them, but only April laughed. Only April saw the absurdity.

"What about my father?" Todd asked. His face streamed with perspiration; blood seeped into the bandages she'd wrapped around his hand. "If you're so goddamned smart, where the hell is my father?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't even believe what I just told you, for Christ's sake."

He rose and took a step toward her, eyes in a squint, one hand jammed into his waistband. "Of course you don't know," he said, almost sneering. "All these great ideas of yours, it's just like always." He slapped his thigh. "Just like always. You speak before you think. For god's sake, it's a wonder you can still make a living."

He stomped out of the room.

She heard him on the stairs.

And drew back when April suddenly appeared in front of her, kneeling and smiling tightly and patting her knee so rapidly it was almost like punching. "It's okay, Lo, it's okay, don't let him get to you, okay? It's hot, we're a little drunk, you know how it is."

She felt the tears again.

She forced them back.

Gavin stretched out on the couch. "Then I suppose, if we're going to follow this ridiculous line of thought to its logical conclusion"-he laughed shortly-"that when all the danger's over, this place will let us go." He coughed back another laugh. "In which case, I'm going to rest, if you don't mind." He turned his head and grinned. "I'm still a shit, Lois. But I'm getting old, and I need my rest."

He closed his eyes.

April glowered at him and pushed herself up. "I'm thirsty," she said to the room. "I hope to hell there's something cold in the refrigerator."

When she left, Lois sat there, hands still clasped, bobbing without lifting off the cushion. What the hell did they want from her anyway? She didn't have any answers. She didn't know why or how or whatever the hell the right question was.

All she knew was, she was hot. Her shirt was drenched, her hair felt weighted, and when she finally rose because she couldn't stand the silence, she had to wait a few seconds before a pass of dizziness let her keep her eyes open. Then she walked to the front door, tried to open it, and sighed when she couldn't.

She didn't know, she told them all; she really didn't know.

Until she saw a man standing behind the hedge across the street, not much more than a shadow, all the light at his back. He shifted, and the fire raged; he leaned forward, and the willows burned. He took two

steps sideways, away from the blackened shell of the fire engine that lay smoking on its side.

"Oh no," she said.

It was Paul, and he saw her, and before she could react, could scream, could call Todd, he had a rifle at his shoulder, his cheek on the stock.

She took one step back, and he fired.

She took another step back when the bullet struck the pane and didn't so much as cause a crack.

She knew it all then, and knew she was right when he fired a second time and a third, and each time the glass shuddered and each time she jumped and each time the glass settled without losing a chip.

He ducked out of sight.

And the trunk of the first willow cracked down to the ground as it spit fire and sparks, part of it toppling onto April's house just as the roof collapsed, the rest of it falling onto the hedge and the pavement, flames surging and growling, Paul standing in flames and screaming silently as he waved the rifle over his head, then jerking and falling back and merging with the dark the fire left behind.

"Oh," she whispered.

A step. Another. Her palm against the glass, and she yanked it back.

It was cold.

Dear Jesus, it's real. Do I laugh, or do I cry?

The sound of breaking glass drew her toward the kitchen, muttering to herself, swiping at her hair, not at all sure she wasn't floating instead of using her legs, not at all sure she was completely sane.

More glass, and a muffled sob.

She sighed as she glanced into the living room and saw Gavin still on the couch; April had found the other bottle, the one in the cupboard above the stove. With everything else, that's just what she needed; and she knew that if she was right, then she faced one of her friend's self-pitying tirades against her husband and the world.

And once there she felt no satisfaction at the prediction when she saw April kneeling in the center of the floor, bits of a broken bottle around her, dark liquid pooling by her knees. The room stank of bourbon. It stank of sweat. It stank of fear.

"April," she said wearily, leaning against the jamb. "God, April, c'mon. We haven't got time for this crap, all right? We've got to figure-

April looked up and smiled, and her eyes were too wide and her teeth were too bright and her chin quivered as if she wanted to speak and couldn't say a word because lodged in the hollow of her throat was what looked like a blade, partly rounded, partly jagged, the broken bottom of the bottle. Her left hand tried to sweep away the mess; her right hand fumbled with the glass in her neck until it came away and she didn't bleed but she couldn't speak, she could only gasp and form deep red bubbles that glimmered on her lips before breaking, before running, before smearing down her chest while she rocked

back on her heels and grinned and winked and shook her head slowly and pointed at the ceiling and pointed to her heart and pointed to Lois, who didn't have the strength to take a step toward her or turn around or look away, while April said through the bubbling of the blood, "He's never home the son of a bitch is never home and when he's home do you know that I have to clean up after him every goddamn minute of every goddamn day and what the hell do I have to show for it but one goddamn abortion and one goddamn broken arm and holy Jesus, Lois, you don't have any goddamn idea how goddamn lucky you are," while she tore at her buttons and bared her breasts, tore at her hair and yanked it out, tore at her thighs and her calves and the soles of her feet until her fingers dripped flesh and blood and blood beaded on her brow and spilled from her nostrils and dribbled from her ears and welled in shimmering droplets at the corners of her eyes.

Lois screamed.

The lights went out.

And April said, "Jesus God, I'm so damned tired."

The screaming.

All the screaming.

And it lasted until the burning in her throat made her choke. Then she spun away from the kitchen and collided with the corner of the sideboard, went down on one knee with her hand pressed against her hip. It felt as if she'd been gouged; breath took a while before it returned to her lungs; strength took a while longer before she was able to stand.

"Todd!"

The only light now danced in from the dying fire, catching the edges of the windows, blinding the clock, turning everything to shadow.

"Todd!"

She limped into the living room, leaning against the wall, the television, reaching for the arm of her chair and freezing when she saw Gavin stand up and face her.

"I am not a passionate man," he said, stepping around the coffee table and walking to the mantel.

"Gavin," she said, tight with pain, "there's-"

"And I am not a man who believes in ghosts."

He turned toward her and smiled without a shred of mirth. "You do not know what it's like, not to have a real home." He held his tie up and stared at it. "When you're on the road so much, home is only another hotel room, if you know what I mean."

She fell into the chair, still holding her hip.

Firelight reflected in his eyes, the bowls and goblets behind him lit like candles.

Then he reached over his shoulder without looking away and picked up a goblet and brought it around and held it up while with his free hand he began to unbutton his shirt, pulling every so often to free it from his trousers, finally finishing and letting it hang open to expose his hairless chest, breasts sagging like an old woman's, paunch slipping over his belt, which he tugged at and shifted until the buckle parted and he

slipped it off his waist and draped it over his shoulder, pulled down his zipper and let the trousers fall to the brick hearth, legs thin, knees inward-turned, high dark socks sagging in the middle until he kicked off the trousers, took off his socks, hooked a thumb in the waistband of his boxer shorts and still he stared at the goblet as if it were the Grail, shaking his head and grinning and cupping it now in both hands, a priest with the wine he brought to his mouth and sipped, and licked his lips, and smacked his lips, and pursed his lips and kissed the silver and drank again and said, "I would have taken you to bed if I'd had half a chance, you know, Lois, and it would have been pretty good, not perfect, but you wouldn't have been too disappointed, though I suppose, being you, you would have thought about good old April while I wouldn't have thought about her at all, not a single damned second while we were fucking because odd as it may seem I don't think I've ever made love to anyone in my life and it doesn't matter now anyway because the house is gone and the company's gone all to hell and I haven't the damndest idea what the hell I'm going to do with all those bills and all those phone calls in the middle of the night and all those people who keep *pounding* and *knocking* and *screaming* at my door, what's a guy to do except screw the brains out of his neighbor?" and he drank from the goblet again and threw it behind, into the mouth of the fireplace, where it bounced off the ashes and landed against his bare foot, the rim slicing through his ankle and making him wince and look down, and take the belt from his shoulder and knot it to the tie he hadn't yet taken off and throw the end of that into the dark that hovered below the ceiling.

He was lifted.

Lois screamed.

His face purpled.

Lois screamed.

Blood dripped from the gash and darkened the hearth, and he looked down at her and he smiled and he shrugged and he sighed and he laughed once and he said, "Once a shit, Lois, always a shit, and don't you ever forget *it*," and closed his eyes and shriveled and wrinkled and was rocked by her screams side to side like the pendulum of the clock in the hall.

When she found the way to breathe again, she bolted from the chair and caught her shoulder on the doorframe, stumbled into the hall before she finally fell.

"Please," she whimpered.

Her eyes were closed, her mouth gulped for air, her left leg twitched as she tried to stand and failed.

"Please."

Sirens outside.

The weakening voice of the fire and the rush of water from several hoses.

"Please."

Pushing herself up to her hands and knees. Letting her head hang, panting, using the ache in her shoulder and the burning in her hip to keep her from fainting while she used the closet door to get her to her feet.

"Todd," was little more than a sob and less than a whisper, a drop of acid in her throat that felt now filled with blood.

A step toward the staircase, and another that launched her into a shambling run she broke off as she passed the door. She tried the knob; it wouldn't turn. She saw police and firemen and neighbors in the

street, and she pounded on the glass and the wood and shrieked wordlessly until she lurched away, unheard, unseen, and hauled herself up the stairs, reeling from banister to wall until she reached the top.

"Todd?"

The dark here was nearly complete, only an indistinct glow that barely touched her from below. But she didn't need the light; she knew her way around, and she felt somewhat better when she made it to the bedroom without crashing into the wall or stumbling over the carpet's loose edge.

The door opened before she touched it.

Cold air closed her eyes, made her sigh and shiver, and she stepped hesitantly over the threshold and said, "Todd," before she saw him.

He sat cross-legged on her bed, naked, an open book cradled in one hand.

"Do you have any idea," he said, flipping over a page, "what it's like to stand in front of a class every day and try to teach them about the history of the world?"

His skin was tinged faintly blue, his nails were dark, his hair crusted with frost, his eyelashes white, his breath more like smoke when he spoke again and said, "Every day-can you believe it?-while my father sits on his ass and makes money without lifting a finger because he has all those flunkies to do it for him and you make a call and read the papers and stick out your damned chest so the men will fall over themselves trying to kiss the hem of your goddamn skirt except that the last time I saw you wearing a skirt was last spring, when we went to that inane party for my sister who spends more time on her back than a goddamn mechanic."

She wept without a sound.

The air conditioner was off.

She looked to the ceiling and swallowed.

Todd turned another page and rose to his knees, held the book out and nodded and smiled wider when the frozen skin on his cheeks began to crack, began to split, began to whiten along the edges where the blood should have been.

Todd jabbed a finger at the page; the finger snapped at the first joint.

"Can you believe that in the year of Our Lord seventeen and twenty-two, Easter Island was discovered?"

He stabbed again after turning several more pages, a different finger that splintered at the knuckle.

"How about this one, my darling-did you know that Ivan the Terrible died in 1584, and the son of a bitch was only fifty-three?"

He laughed and turned to the end of the book.

"And in 1951, Todd John Haverford Zaber is born. God! I mean . . . *God!*"

Lois clamped her hands to her ears.

"I mean, my love, who the fuck gives a shit! Who in this entire, everloving, blue-eyed world gives a damn about Easter Island or Ivan the Terrible or Todd John Haverford Zaber, when all this other shit is coming

down around our heads and we're all going to be dead in twenty years anyway, so why bother except that some fathers demand that their children be educated and other fathers demand that their children do the educating, and while I'm at it why the hell what the hell who gives a damn I sure as hell don't give a damn anymore."

And he stood and swayed slightly and batted a forearm at the smoke of his breath, both smoke and arm shattering to glittering crystals that fell in slow motion to the blanket and bounced and fell and bounced again and fell and caught the firelight and turned to fire while he raised his face toward the ceiling and laughed harder and louder and beat his chest and cracked the bone and beat his temple and cracked the bone and ran his fingers through his hair and watched with louder laughter as it snapped away from his scalp and slid off his shoulders and sliced grooves along his stomach and split open his knees before reaching the blanket; laughing so loudly Lois could no longer hear him, bouncing on his toes until they snapped off, bouncing on his heels until they snapped in half, bouncing on stumps when his feet cracked like ancient marble and fell away in shards and icy dust and rose to his knees in a twinkling cloud and rose to his chin and whirled around him and blew away again when he blew, and fell when he slowed and turned his head toward her ponderously and opened his mouth to lose his teeth and snapped his hips to lose his penis and snapped his tongue to shred his lips and dropped to his knees and lowered his head and showed her the skull that had turned a darker blue, listed it again to show her his eyes still moist and still watching and still mocking the silent laughter the gap that was his mouth tried to give her, until he slumped forward on what was left of his arms, until he closed his eyes and trembled, until the blue began to fade and the crystals began to melt and the flesh that was his flesh began to flow like reddened water and he reached behind him and grabbed her pillow and hugged it to his chest and laid his chin on it and said, "I just don't give a damn, not even when I want to," and winked at her and fell back and let the blood begin.

She flushed the toilet four times before the vomiting stopped, washed her face twice to take the heat from her skin, and squeezed toothpaste into her mouth to take the taste away. Once that was done, and once she stopped her shaking, she staggered into the hall and stared at the bedroom door.

Her room. *He* was in *her* room.

"Not to cry, Lois," she said. "Not now."

Voices outside.

A fading siren.

She moved to the steps and looked down into the foyer, and heard the clock still ticking, gears grinding as the mechanism gathered itself to chime.

She waited unmoving.

One, she counted and took the first step down.

Two, and someone ran onto her porch and began ringing the bell.

Three; another step.

Knocking on the door.

Four. Step. Five. Step.

"Mrs. Outman, are you there?"

Six. Step. Seven. Step.

"Jesus, will you look at this mess? It's a wonder the house didn't burn down, for god's sake."

Eight. Step. Nine. Step.

"Mrs. Outman?"

Ten. Step.

"Hey, go around and try the back, okay? See if her car's in the garage."

Eleven.

Step.

Are you going to let them in?

The house didn't answer.

Twelve.

The last step.

A flashlight's beam poked into the foyer, darted along the floor, caught the edge of the clock, would have caught her if she hadn't pressed against the wall.

"Mrs. Outman?"

And he left, whoever it was, calling out to someone else not to bother, she wasn't home, but she sure was going to raise hell when she got back and saw the mess.

She started for the kitchen, and stopped; thought about going into the living room, and changed her mind; sat instead on the bottom step and looked around her, and wondered if she could make it until dawn.

I'm okay now.

She put her hands over her face and smelled the soap and fresh water; she brought them down to cover her eyes and saw the spots on her jeans. She smiled. That bit of paint there was the guest bedroom she'd turned into her office; that one was the trim around the bathroom door; that one was the garage; those were what was left of the gray in the basement. She picked at a tiny lump on her inner thigh and figured it was something left from the last papering she had done. Her hand turned over; the scar that could only been seen in daylight at the edge of her thumb, a nail that had snagged her while she was fixing cupboards in the pantry. A touch of dirt seemingly embedded in some of the smaller lines of her palm, from any one of a thousand jobs with a thousand yet to come.

Honest to god, I'm okay.

Her knees popped when she rose, when it was quiet outside and she saw only one engine left, two firemen watching the ruins. They didn't see her. She didn't try the door. She walked into the empty kitchen and ran the cold water, filled a glass, and carried it with her into the living room.

The lights flickered and stayed on.

She shut them off again.

Then she stood in front of the photograph-Lois and House, she thought, side by side.

She giggled.

She drank.

This, she decided, was exactly the kind of protection an old-fashioned husband was supposed to provide.

She giggled, and drank again, closing her eyes at the cool that eased her throat.

But what can you expect from an old-fashioned house?

A bead of perspiration crawled down the side of her nose.

God, she thought, it's hot.

And when she took a slow deep breath she realized it was too hard, there was too much heat inside, it was stifling, it was close.

She emptied the glass and set it on the mantel, wiped her lips with the back of her hand, and decided that what she needed was fresh air, a breeze, perhaps a long solitary walk while she did some thinking. It was kind of flattering, in a way, she decided as she left the room; and she grinned when she realized that any future boyfriends were going to have to watch their step in more ways than one.

She laughed.

She hiccuped.

She stopped at the clock and reached up to the ledge hidden behind the ornate top. Her fingers found the key, and she opened the glass door. A pull on the chains brought the weights up. The clock ticked on and she closed and locked the door again, and as she laid the key in its place, she saw the man in the moon, frozen above the frozen trees.

"Oh," she said, neither frightened nor concerned.

The man in the moon was Montgomery Zaber. His eyes were closed. He wasn't smiling.

"Justice," she said with an admiring nod.

And stood at the door and watched the two firemen share a match, saw spirals of smoke in what was left of April's house, and felt more than heard a rumble of thunder. The breeze snapped a gust at her and rattled the panes. One of the firemen turned his head, and shook his head when his hat spun into the gutter.

Rain, she thought, absently wiping at the dampness around her neck. Thank god. It's about time.

But the doorknob wouldn't turn, and the glass wouldn't break, and when she screamed, "But I'll be back!" the furnace grumbled on.

Part IV The Chariot Dark and Low

The house is burning.

His nostrils twitched, upper lip pulling away from his teeth, head snapping across the down pillow as if escaping a stench someone had shoved under his nose. A soft moan muffled by sleep. His left hand scrabbled at the blanket, caught it, pulled it up toward his chin and away from his feet. One eye opened partway, and closed. He stiffened sharply. Relaxed. And in the dream he was losing he sprinted across a snowfield under a sky of lowering slate, shivering violently at the cold that penetrated his soles, crawled up his legs.

Both eyes now, fluttering open just wide enough to show the whites, closing again, opening fully so he could stare at the ceiling and wonder, in that brief moment before he thought he smelled the smoke, why his feet were so cold.

The house

He sat up so quickly he had to bow at the waist until dizziness passed, his hands sliding down his legs to grip his shins tightly. That his fingers embraced flesh made him blink in the dark, and he cursed at the dream that had pulled the blanket from his feet.

Then he remembered the smoke—a pungent, un-mistakable wood smell that struck him again as he wondered if it had been dreamfire. He sniffed twice to be sure, and was out of the bed and struggling into his bathrobe while he hurried across the floor.

Jesus, Jesus, the house . . .

Cautiously he opened the bedroom door. He step-ped into the square hall and lifted his head to test the air. And smelled nothing at all but the old wood and the old paint and the dust that sifted down from the ceiling no matter how many times he'd replastered and repainted.

"Nice," he complained to the empty house.

A yawn made his jaw pop.

He shook one foot, then the other, until the ice vanished.

"Nice."

Outside was a soft wind; inside, the furnace.

His left hand reached out to take hold of the wood railing that blocked off the wide stairwell, and his palm brushed absently along it, back and forth, pol-ishing, while he tried to wash the sleep from his mind, to think straight again.

Not four feet away in the right-hand wall was the white door to the bathroom; across the hall to his left two more doors—one matching his that led to the other front bedroom seldom used and not by him, one facing the bathroom that led to his study. The back wall was broken only by a tall unshaded window that let in the moonlight, falling onto the window seat, slipping to the brown carpet, spilling down the stairs.

He looked down.

It was dark; no hint of flames, no suggestion of fire.

He considered using the bathroom and shook his head; he considered his study and groaned, turned around, and fell back onto his bed.

The burning smell was gone.

Someone's fireplace, he thought not very clearly; god knows how long after midnight and someone still had something burning in a fireplace, and you'd think that after all these years he'd learn to know it by now.

Something's wrong, I should be up.

He stirred.

He fell asleep on his back, right hand holding the robe closed, left hand clutching the blanket, trying to pull it toward his chin.

A clock in another dream. Hands jerking backward from before midnight, to seven. A gong. A chime. An echo of a voice that scolded with a laugh.

"Damn," he said, snapping awake a second time. "Oh damn, I'm dead."

Nevertheless he moved in a slow curl, bringing his knees to his chest and lowering them again, arms stretched over his head and down until his shoulders cracked, curling, straightening, sitting up and looking down at the robe as if he'd never seen it before. It was red plaid. He hated plaid. But it was a gift from Livy, one he deliberately left draped over the wood valet by his closet so she could see it readily and believe he used it when she was gone.

He smiled at the little deception. He was sure it didn't fool her, but it had grown into a private game that he hadn't lost yet, no matter how many times she'd connived to head upstairs without him. It was one of the things he loved about her—even if she'd found it hanging in his closet behind the suit he never wore, she wouldn't say a word. And on his next birthday, she'd probably give him two.

Seven o'clock, the dream warned; he was supposed to meet Livy at the Mariner at seven, for a quick dinner and a drink before walking over to the Regency and a film the title of which he couldn't remember.

"Late" was a word she did not recognize.

With a loud groan to let the house know he was finally up and about, he stretched one last time and shoved himself off the bed to his feet. Cool air hovered above the floor, curling his toes, tightening his ankles. The clock radio on the nightstand winked 5 at him, and he scowled, scratched his chest, scratched his stomach when it growled. Light on in the bedroom, light on in the hall. And in the bathroom, he winced at the lights framing the mirror over the basin.

He stared at his reflection.

"You are truly ugly," he said, and the dark-haired reflection stuck out its tongue.

Toilet, shower, shave, brush; as he dressed in a tweed jacket and black wool trousers, he talked to the mirror about the date he had tonight, about Livy- god Livy!-about loving her so hard there were times when he feared he was going mad with a pain that sometimes paralyzed his breathing, about needing her with him so badly, so goddamned badly, it sometimes sent him to bed with more than one tear in his eye. He didn't stop until he realized he was treating it like a pet. A cat. An old cat that had been through all his ablutions before and tolerated them because it knew food was coming.

He leaned over the green-and-white marble sink, nearly nose to nose with the glass; he crossed his eyes; he lowered his head and looked up, raised his head and looked down; he leaned back and told himself he'd been alone too long, it was time to force Livy off the mark and get the hell married and bring some noise to this place.

This time, however, he would do it right.

This time he wouldn't organize an engagement party before the engagement was fact.

She had nearly thrown him through a window, that time; and he had nearly left town for the embar-rassment-to him, to her, to all those people gathered downstairs, trying not to look at him, at her, trying to be cheerful and friendly while Livy, dear Livy, pre-tended it was a joke.

She had nearly thrown him through the kitchen window, with only a look, and only his "I'm sorry, god I'm sorry, but I love you" had stopped her from walking out.

Down the carpeted stairs two at a time, left through the small dining room and into the kitchen, where there was, as he fought his tie into a knot, a glass of orange juice just tart enough to warn him the carton wouldn't last another day.

A glance at the clock over the stove-he had twenty minutes, plenty of time.

There had to be time. Otherwise, he'd have to explain why he'd been undressed and in bed in the middle of the day.

He finished the last of the juice with a swallow and a grimace, and hurried to the vestibule closet, grabbed his topcoat and muffler and, after making sure he had his keys, stepped outside, to the porch.

"Jesus!"

The cold didn't quite punch him, but it was hard enough to made him gasp; the cold didn't quite freeze him, but it was several seconds before he was able to jam his hands into his coat pockets and stomp to the stairs, pushing through the steam that escaped from nostrils and mouth; the cold wasn't unusual time of year, but it had surprised him still holding some of the warmth of bed and shower.

Poplar Street was dark.

November dark.

Lamps in living-room windows hid behind shades and drapes and barely reached the night; lights on the porches were shallow and brittle; the streetlamp not ten feet from his front walk was out and had been for days, and the next one up was blocked by a fat twisted branch on an oak that was twisted itself. There were no shadows.

The street was silent.

November silent.

As if snow had fallen to hush tires and cries and whispers and wind.

As if the street had been smothered by a monstrous black pillow.

He shuddered, shook his head vigorously to dispel what sleep there had to be left to produce such morbid thoughts, and hurried to the pavement, deliberately cracking his heels, deliberately stepping on a twig, deliberately kicking a stone into the street and listen-ing to it skitter across the tarmac to the leaves bunched in the opposite gutter.

The cold stiffened his neck in spite of the muffler.

It was only seven; it felt like after midnight.

He turned left and hastened toward the corner, checking each house as he passed it to be sure people still lived there. And wasn't sure they were at all when he saw nothing moving, heard no music or voices, passed an automobile in a driveway and heard no ticking of a cooling engine.

He hummed; it sounded false.

He couldn't whistle; his lips were too stiff and threatened to chap.

Then he stopped a few yards shy of the corner when he heard something moving away from him down Park Street, to his left. He stopped because the sound puzzled him. It wasn't a car. It wasn't a bike. It certainly wasn't someone walking down the white line dragging something behind him. His head tilted and one eye squinted, and he tried to imagine what it could be that reminded him of something riding on an irregular wheel, grind and thump, not made of metal.

A kid's tired old wagon perhaps, but there was no squeak and scrape, and no kid in his right mind would be out playing tonight; it was too cold. Unless he was coming back from the market, carrying a bag of groceries, pretending to be a wagon train on its way to California.

He continued on to the corner, looked south toward the woods, looked north toward the center of town, and saw nothing.

And heard nothing.

And shook his head with a wry smile, stepping out now and striding, swinging right on Centre Street, marching four blocks up to Chancellor Avenue, where he saw Livy just as she reached the entrance to the Mariner Cove.

He grinned, but didn't call her; moments like this were too rare, and too coveted to surrender-spying on an angel, a goddess, a wonderment, without being noticed in turn. He watched as she looked around, stripping off dark gloves, pulling a dark scarf from her hair and shaking her head just once so her shoulders were buried in puffs and clouds of gold. Her high cheeks were nipped red, her red lips gleaming, her eyes when she saw him standing there round the corner wide and blue and smiling and touched with stars.

He grabbed her waist and kissed her, tasted her.

She put her hands on his arms and kissed him back and said as he opened the door, "You were sleeping, you jerk. Your eyes look like beach balls."

He laughed and ushered her in, where the slap of sudden warmth took his breath away; his skin stung, his eyes watered, and the voices of the other patrons bubbled at him from underwater. Livy, in dark sweat-er and dark slacks, was a dark ghost that blurred away from him without looking back, and he shrugged hurriedly out of his coat as the hostess brought them to a table near the back corner.

There was no one near them, no one in the high booths, only a few couples scattered throughout the room, their voices low, barely heard above a murmur, silverware muffled as it scraped across plates and scratched around bowls. He smiled and nodded to Wes Martin and his wife, pulled out his captain's chair and sat. The low ceiling, paneled walls, nets and lobster traps and the room's sudden shudder from a powerful gust of wind gave him the feeling that he was, suddenly, in the hold of a great ship that didn't have long to float.

The house is burning.

He passed a hand over his face.

Wood wheel creaking.

"Nelson," Livy said.

He grunted away his unease and looked-her el-bows were on the table, her fingers under her chin.

"I love you," he said, the words stealing his breath.

She smiled and nodded, two curls like horns spiraling from either side of her brow bobbing. "I love you, too, but you were still sleeping, weren't you."

He stared at her, taking her, for several seconds before nodding. He felt like a kid caught stealing a snack just before Thanksgiving dinner.

"You didn't get it."

"No," he admitted.

"Do you know why?"

He started a shrug, stopped it, looked at the silver-ware and picked up a salad fork whose tines he examined as if he were examining gold. "Livy, there are more brokers, investment counselors, financial whachamacallits and gizmos per capita in Oxrun Station, it seems, than in the entire stupid world. Nobody needs another hand. They ail have comput-ers." He balanced the fork across his index finger. "And before you start again-I don't have enough contacts to start my own firm."

"I wasn't going to start," she said softly.

He nodded. He knew that. She never started again. She would mention something once, knowing he wouldn't forget, and the only times it came up was when he said it. Not her. That wasn't her style.

Suddenly he hunched his shoulders, protection against a wave of severe depression he felt climbing the chair behind him.

"Livy."

She looked at him over the top of her menu.

"I love you."

She winked.

"I don't want to lose you."

She winked again.

This is wrong, he thought then, with a suddenness that sat up upright, that set a chill in his breast he covered quickly with one hand; this is wrong. Love isn't like this. Not true love. It's not worship, and it sure can't be fear.

So why am I so goddamned afraid?

The menu lowered, exposing her face slowly, slowly showing him her smile, the smile pursing to a kiss he wanted to reach out and touch.

"You'll get something," she assured him.

"I suppose."

Her voice was stern: "You don't 'suppose' anything, Nelson Glawford, goddamn it. You *do*."

"Is that an order?"

"Damn right."

And he knew then why *the house is burning* he felt as if he were standing on the brink of unavoidable disaster—all that he had, and wanted to have, was threatened with extinction because he couldn't find a way to set his own foundation in anything else but sand. He had thought he'd known. He had believed in his skills. But the world's markets, the world's economies, the world's everything had decided the ride was over. Their ride. His ride. And he wasn't experienced enough to know how to keep from being dumped from the saddle.

He was hanging on.

But he was falling.

"I love you," she said, and he wanted to weep.

"It won't be easy," he told her, and he didn't have to.

She knew. All the time, she had known and was just waiting for him to come down from the clouds of early successes and early praise. She knew, and she didn't push him because she trusted him.

Oh Jesus.

"I love you, too."

They ordered. They looked around. They looked at each other and held hands across the table, one hand on either side of the centerpiece candle in its amber chimney.

This is wrong, he thought again, forcing a frown into hiding; it's too right to be right.

"I need to know something," she said, leaning closer, her sweater pulling across her breasts. "If I jumped you right now, would you be embarrassed?"

He felt the laugh and choked it off. "I think it would cause a small problem."

"What problem?"

"The waitress would faint, for one thing."

She nodded solemnly. "Yes, I guess she would. You, naked, are a sight to behold."

"Hey!"

She leaned closer and whispered, "Before we leave, I'm going into the ladies' room and take off my bra. Then you can feel me up in the movie."

He moved the candle aside; the flame stretched in her eyes.

"I love you," he said. "You will never know, ever, how much I really love you."

She gripped his hands tightly, her gaze rimmed with melancholy here and abruptly gone. "Sometimes you

scare me when you say that."

"Why? I don't mean to."

"I know, I know. But you make it seem as if I have an awful lot to live up to."

Half out of his seat, he leaned over and kissed her brow. "You just live, okay? Let me worry about how nuts I am."

Dinner arrived, and the wine; they separated, and he told her about the interview and how clever and witty he had been, and how no one there was all that impressed because the position to be filled didn't exist anymore and hadn't for some time; and she told him how her father had flown in from England that morning, had taken her to lunch at the Chancellor Inn, had flown out that afternoon, so quickly she hadn't even had the time to tell him she was in love; and he told her about feeling so damned ineffectual anymore that today, when he returned to the house, he'd just climbed into bed, hoping that all his prob-blems would be solved in a miraculous dream.

"Did you have the dream?"

"Yeah. I dreamed my feet froze off."

She laughed, her lips barely parting, a throbbing in her throat, right hand brushing at her hair until it curled behind her ear.

Dessert, and liqueur.

"I love you."

She giggled, and blushed, and wiped her mouth with a napkin that barely touched her lips. Then she sat back and eyed him so steadily he grew nervous, couldn't meet her gaze, fussed with a spoon, quickly folded his napkin on the table and put it back on his lap.

"I wonder," she said thoughtfully, "if you've ever been in love before."

He raised his eyebrows. "Now that's a conversation starter."

"No, I mean it. You-and I'm not complaining, Nel-but you act like my kids sometimes, you know what I mean?"

He reached into his jacket and swore when he realized he'd forgotten his cigarettes. "Thanks." He nodded her a bow. "I've always wanted to be com-pared to rampaging high-school seniors. They're my secret idols. Bop till you drop, if you know what I mean."

"They're cute when they're in love."

His eyes widened; he put a hand to his throat. "What? Dear god, you mean I'm cute?"

She nodded, one corner of her mouth pulling slightly.

He glanced around the room, seeing nothing. "In my whole life, Livy, I have never even remotely thought of myself as cute. Cute is for baby bears, you know?"

"It's the way you act, that's all." She blew him a kiss. "I think it's cute."

A buzz filled the room and faded. He glared at the ceiling and hoped no one was about to crank up

god-awful recorded music. All he needed now was a zillion violins, or some patched-in easy-listening ra-dio station, or a throaty chanteuse hunting for love among the wrong notes.

He cleared his throat. "Livy."

From her expression he knew she recognized the tone; and he was absurdly heartened when she didn't say anything, only watched him expectantly, hands slipping below the edge of the table.

He took a deep breath, sent it out in a rush: "Livy, I want you to grow old with me." And he braced himself for the wisecrack, the joke, the artful deflection he'd become accustomed to lately, and was startled when it didn't come. Startled, and more nervous.

In for a penny, he decided.

"Livy, I want you to marry me."

Shit, he thought then; oh shit oh shit.

And waited.

You have no job, she'll say.

I know there's money in the bank, but it won't last forever, and a teacher's salary isn't exactly top of the line, even here in Oxrun, she'll say.

I love you, too, Nelson, but we've only been seeing each other for a few months, and I do remember that time you wanted to have an engagement party and invited all those people, but you didn't ask me, remember? and I don't know if I've forgiven you putting on that pressure, she'll say.

No, she'll say.

"Yes," she said.

And he stood up and looked down, and said, "Huh?"

She laughed, covered her mouth, laughed again. Then she gestured until he sat again. She picked up her purse and said, "yes," and stood.

The panic he felt was unreasonable, but he couldn't help it. He almost shouted, "Where are you going?"

She stood by his chair, leaned over, and whispered, "The bra, remember? The bra." Her hand passed over his hair and she left, following a course around the empty tables and vanishing behind a translucent silver screen that marked the alcove to the kitchen and rest rooms.

"Oh my god," he said softly. "Oh my god."

He grabbed up a spoon, put it down, rubbed his neck, grabbed the spoon again and blew on it, clouded it, put it down and tried to arrange it in such a way that no one would ever know what its function was.

She said yes.

She said yes; I'm cracking up.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered to the table, "she said yes."

A brief spurt of anger then when his eyes filled with tears, a feigned coughing spate as he grabbed the napkin and wiped them hastily away, cleared his throat, wiped again, and sat back expansively, grinning like a jerk and not giving a damn.

I have been accepted, ladies and gentlemen, he announced silently to the room. I have been accepted by the most beautiful woman in the entire world, and I feel *great!*, what do you think about that?

If he felt any better, he was positive he'd explode; and if he exploded, well, he could think of worse ways to die than dying because of love.

Idiot, he thought.

What the hell, he answered.

His hands folded loosely over his stomach, his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, and a benevolence softened his brittle-bright gaze as he scanned the room without caring what he saw because all he could see was Livy saying *yes*.

Sitting in his chair then, waiting for his future wife.

Nodding to Wes Martin as he led his wife to the door.

Finally aware of and listening to the barely audible music that replaced the faint buzz with a timing he believed could not have been better if he'd slipped the manager fifty bucks for just such an occasion.

He heard a painfully sweet dulcimer of sweet mountain air that matched his mood and temper, covering him, floating him safely above the darker tones of a doleful guitar and the sawing cautions of a somber fiddle and the prank of a mandolin that played a humorous dirge behind it all; filling the Cove so quietly he barely knew the song was there, not knowing the words but hearing them just the same until they slipped away, returned, slipped away like spring replaced by sudden winter—a spiritual, then a jig, then a two-step, then a hornpipe, then a melody the dulcimer settled over him like a veil, chilling him pleasantly, calling him by name.

He identified the musicians instantly; he'd heard them often enough on his walks through the village, and heard the talk, and heard the assessments and the wonder and wondered in turn when Frieda Harks and her friends had ever made a record and how could he get one, immediately, because this song would be his song, *their* song, from now on. And whenever he played it, he and Livy would get all misty-eyed and sentimental and probably stand up wherever they were and slow-dance until they kissed, and kissed until they made love, and made love until they fell asleep, home in each other's arms.

He felt no shame at the sentiment.

The music played on.

And played faster, and played slower, and played softer at last and he soon began to frown because he knew it was still there, he could feel it, he could hear it, but it worked now like shadows that flitted just beyond the corner of his vision, dancing for him, mocking him, popping out of sight when he snapped his head around.

Buddy boy, he thought, on one of the worst days of your life, the best thing has happened. Get hold, you idiot, and take the woman to the damned movies before you start seeing pink elephants and they haul you away.

Waiting for his future wife.

After several minutes he stopped counting how many times he had folded and refolded his dark wine linen napkin into shapes and sizes he didn't know he knew.

After several minutes more he tried to locate the elusive waitress, to catch her eye, to get the check and pay it, but she was gone, and the hostess as well, and when he sat his hands on the arms of his chair and half-lifted himself up, he realized he was sitting in the restaurant alone.

A check of his watch, and he scowled briefly; the film would start in five minutes.

He fidgeted, squirmed, exhaled loudly and craned his neck in hopes of seeing around the screen to the ladies-room door.

"I am officially engaged," he said. "She has me, the little devil, and now she's making me pay."

He grinned, stood, pushed his chair in and wandered across the floor to the screen.

"Livy?"

He glanced toward the small front table where the hostess usually sat with her leather reservation book and tidy nest of menus; her chair was still empty. And when he looked to his left, toward the double swinging doors that led to the kitchen, he saw by their circular blank panes that the lights had been switched off, as if the place had been closed, the chef gone, busboys released.

"Hey, Livy."

A self-conscious finger-brush of his hair, a palm down his tie, and he stepped lightly to the door centered by a black silhouette of a woman. He knocked with one knuckle. He knocked again.

"Livy, c'mon, we're going to be late."

She's sick.

Not a guess, a certainty. Something had happened to her, either the meal or the wine. He put a hand to the brass plate and pulled the hand away guiltily. He couldn't go in there, for god's sake. Suppose someone else came out? Suppose she screamed? Suppose he spent the first night of his engaged life in a jail cell, Jesus Christ. He touched the brass again, whirled, and strode through the room, hunting for the hostess, or a waitress, any woman he could find to send in there and see if Livy was all right.

The Cove was empty.

By the time he reached the entrance, his right hand darting in and out of his pocket, he knew absolutely there was no one else in the restaurant. Even the cloakroom was dark.

"Hey," he said, perplexed.

His foot began tapping. Eyes blinked. A quick check outside, but the pavement was deserted, the cold deeper, the wind stronger but not strong.

She's sick.

He almost ran back to the screen. "Livy!" He pushed the door open and stepped in. "Livy, I'm coming in! I'm in!" He hesitated in a small powder room simple in creams and whites, tripled by mirrors lining two of the walls. "Livy, it's me, don't worry!" He pushed through another door, to a room more practical in tiles, and called her name, called it twice, began shoving at stall doors before he knew what he was doing, slamming them back increasingly harshly to echoes of gunshots, and when he reached the end of the

endless row he went through it again, and a third time, and a fourth because she *had* to be in here, he had seen her come in, and she couldn't have gotten out because there weren't any windows.

She's sick

He returned to the main room."

She's gone.

The lights were out.

All right, he thought.

From the leaded glass of the front door a faint glow that merely turned everything he saw to shifting shadow.

"All right," he said for the sound of his voice. "All right, enough's enough."

He waited for the joker to turn the lights back on, waited for Livy to tap his shoulder, say, "Surprise!"; he waited for the music to begin playing again; he waited for his heart to stop drumming against his chest.

"All right."

He knew then she was next door, in the Lounge. She had guessed his intention (as if it were all that hard), and she'd prepared a little surprise of her own, just for him. Somehow, while he had been playing the perfect idiot to an empty room, she had sneaked out to get things ready.

That's all it was.

She wasn't sick, and she wasn't really gone.

But the least she could have done was turn on the damned lights.

His hands swept in front of him as he fumbled his way back to the table, found his topcoat and put it on. Then he finger-touched around the table to Livy's chair, thinking that he'd better bring her things with him or she'd never let him forget it. But her coat was gone, and he closed his eyes tightly, trying to remember if she had taken it with her when she'd left.

No.

But her coat was gone.

A running step brought him up hard against another table, and backing away nearly tripped him over a chair. With a snarl he grabbed it and cast it aside one-handed, grateful for the sound of collision, silver-ware clattering to the floor, and the chair overturning. Then he made his way to the front, lashing out whenever furniture got in his way, swearing at the top of his voice when his shoulder struck one of the posts that held up the ceiling.

"This ain't funny, Livy," he called when he reached the exit, damning himself for not being able to stop panting.

No one answered.

"Livy, damnit, this isn't funny!"

No one answered.

"Damn!" and he shoved his way to the sidewalk, snapped his muffler around his neck, and swung left to the Lounge door, hand out to shove it in, face set to be annoyed.

It was locked.

The overhead light was out.

Okay, he thought, okay. Nothing to it. No party; she didn't see me when she came out and she went on to the show.

He spun around and stomped to the theater several yards to his right. He muttered. He cursed. He tried and failed to find the humor in a gag that took her from him, and he didn't look up until he reached the ticket booth and realized it was dark.

And the lobby was dark.

And the lobby doors locked.

He looked back toward the restaurant, and the wind blew in his eyes.

He looked across the road, up the length of Centre Street to the Pike, and frowned when he saw that all the shop windows were unlit, all the neon signs out, no cars, no late pedestrians, not even a wandering dog.

Just the streetlamps spilling white. Nothing more.

Nothing more.

His arms spread helplessly for a moment, and slapped weakly against his thighs; his mouth opened, closed, and his breath hung before him in a pale cloud that swirled and vanished when the wind blew again; his head turned-the theater was still closed-turned again, and he said, "What. . ." before he took a step toward the curb. "What. . ." before he rushed diagonally across the street, not bothering to look for traffic. Just in from the corner he jumped up a short flight of marble steps, and slammed through the police-station doors into the lobby.

White.

It was all white.

And behind the low wood railing at the far end Wes Martin stood with his hands behind his back. He was, oddly, in a patrolman's uniform, and Nel wondered if he'd lost the Acting Police Chief job.

"Wes," he said, unbuttoning his coat as he walked, his voice betraying his confusion, "the damnedest thing just happened." He pointed over his shoulder. "You're not going to believe this, but goddamn, I've lost Livy."

Wes, nearing fifty and showing nothing but a spray of grey at his temples and a hint of jowl, rocked on his heels and puffed his chest.

"And why's the Regency closed all of a sudden? We were supposed to go see a movie there tonight." Nel unwrapped his muffler, let it hang along his chest. "I thought you and Candice were going, too. Jesus, this is weird. Something going on I don't know about?"

Wes stared at him silently.

Suddenly Nel remembered, and thought he knew why the police were acting so strangely. "Hey," he said, "I'm sorry about the market and all, Wes. I mean, that advice I gave you, it really was legitimate, honest to god, but what the hell can you do, huh? It's all a crap shoot, y'know. Besides," he added with a smile, "you didn't lose all that much, as I remember. A few hundred or so, right? Hell, you can make that up in two weeks of overtime, right? No sweat."

He forced a laugh, turned away from it when the policeman's expression didn't change at all. Instead he looked back at the doors and said, "Look, Wes, I just got engaged tonight-Livy Parker, you saw us over at the Cove, remember?-and now the funniest damn thing but I can't find her. I don't know if you're supposed to be told these things, but I can't wait twenty-four hours or whatever the hell it's supposed to be. Someone might've taken her or something, you know what I mean? The whole place is *dark* out there, a guy could kill himself just walking home. I thought maybe there was a power failure, an outage, but the street-

He turned back.

Wes was gone.

With one hand against his forehead, Nel pushed through the unlatched gate in the railing.

"Hey, Wes!"

He tried all the doors he could find.

"Jesus, Wes, I said I was sorry, for Christ's sake."

They were locked. All of them. The knobs were cold. The only sound he could hear was the sound of his shoes beginning to run on the bare floor, until he was running, vaulting the railing, racing to the exit and sprinting down the steps and across the street to the Cove, where he slammed shoulder first into the locked door, rebounded, tried again, and stepped away as if it had suddenly turned to flame.

"This isn't funny," he said.

The wind gusted.

"This isn't goddamn funny!" he shouted.

What it is, he thought, is the dream I was having before I thought I woke up and was late to meet Livy.

He smiled.

Dreams, all dreams, and when all was said and done at least his damn feet weren't bare this time. And there wasn't any snow. And the wind was worse than when he had left the house but not too bad as long as he kept his head down a little and his collar up and the muffler snug across his throat so he wouldn't catch pneumonia and die on the best day of his life. Not too bad at all, all things considered. All he had to do was wait until whatever happens next happened, and the next thing after that, and the next, and the next, until he woke up and discovered that he was late for his date with Livy.

What the hell, no big deal.

He started walking; his footsteps were too loud.

He tried humming; his voice couldn't find the tune.

A decision to count cars was no decision at all because there were none to count—none at the curb, none in the driveways and parking lots, none down the way, passing the village along Mainland Road.

He looked at his watch; it was after ten.

He looked up at the sky and saw stars, saw the moon, saw the night drifting across the village like black fog, or black clouds that were almost but not quite transparent, strings and tatters of twisting black that made him dizzy until he looked away, to his feet reaching out, pulling back, reaching out, pulling back, until they made him dizzy and he looked up and saw that he was back on his own street, not conscious of turning corners, barely conscious of moving at all, but that's the way it was in dreams, no big deal, no problem.

He crossed over and stumbled hard up the curb, jamming a toe, making him swear, toppling him against a tree where he leaned and shook his foot.

Can you feel pain in a dream?

There was a dampness inside his shoe, chilled and moving, and he thought for a frightful moment he was bleeding. Away from the tree, however, and the damp-ness spread to his arms, his chest, his back. He couldn't believe it—he was sweating, and sweating hard, and the coat sleeve was dark when he took it over his face and checked it.

Can you feel pain?

Of course you can, he told himself angrily, limping up the walk to the porch; you can feel any damn thing you want in a dream if it's vivid enough, you jerk. For god's sake, don't make it worse than it is.

He unlocked the front door and hobbled inside, tossed his coat over a wing-back chair in the living room, switched on a table lamp, and dropped onto the couch. He toed his shoe off, pulled off the sock, and winced at the nasty purple red that had spread around his big toe.

"Christ," he said. "Jam the damn nail practically up to the knee why not."

Can you feel?

Of course you can.

After the other shoe was off, kicked halfway across the room, he went upstairs to the bathroom, ran warm water in the tub without turning on the light, and sat on the curved edge, rolling up his trouser leg and soaking his injured foot while he stared out the window. At the dark. At the night. While the water cooled, became cold. While the furnace coughed and died. While the table lamp downstairs brightened and snapped out with a *pop* that made him jump.

Until he knew the dream was done, and had been done because he'd already awakened hours ago, and hadn't awakened to a dream.

"No," he said, drying the foot with a rough towel.

Can you feel, in a dream?

There was obviously something wrong with the power grids, that's all. Not the first time. Not the last. Livy was scared, she went home, and all I have to do is call her, no big deal, no problem.

On the window seat was a telephone, bleached in moonlight. He picked up the receiver and listened

before dialing, listened again before he was done-it was dead.

Can you-

"Stop it!"

In the bedroom he changed his clothes, keeping speculation in its cage by keeping his mind on one simple task at a time, moving about the room as methodically as he could. Heavy shirt, ski sweater, jeans, heavy socks, laced hiking boots; then downstairs-muffler, sheepskin coat, gloves; and in the kitchen-candles, matches, flashlight.

The matches wouldn't light.

The flashlight was empty, the batteries gone.

"All right," he said, throwing the candles in the sink. "All right."

He was crazy. Going or already there didn't matter. He was crazy. Not finding work though he knew he was good, watching the bills nibble hungrily at the money he wanted to spend just on Livy, spending more and more time under the covers in bed because his strength was nearly gone.

He was crazy.

Hell, who wouldn't be?

But he was still going to find Livy and bring her home, to his home, *their* home, and promise her the moon and the stars and all the roses in the world for the rest of her life, *their* lives, because he wasn't going to lose her now that he had gained her.

I'll ride this thing, he thought; I'll ride it, no big deal, no sweat, all the way to the end of the line.

He stepped outside.

And the bitter touch of cold didn't shock him because this time he was ready, and the dark didn't surprise him because this time he knew, and the sound of old wood grinding along the tarmac didn't send him into a panic even though he knew it wasn't a wagon.

But it was loud, almost echoed, and as he hurried down the steps and along the walk, he jerked his head back and forth, seeking, trying to locate, finally spot-ting movement up the block, passing in and out of the corner streetlamp's white cage.

The grid's out.

The streetlamp's still on.

He ran, eyes squinting against tears, seeing some-thing dark against the dark slip away behind a hedge.

"Hey!" he cried.

He angled across the street.

"Hey, wait up!"

Using a telephone pole to keep him from swerving into the street, he turned the corner and ran on, eventually swinging off the pavement to the curb when he couldn't see anything moving but his shadow.

But he didn't slow down; whatever it was he'd find it again, if he wanted.

He ran on to Quentin Avenue and angled left, not bothering to look for traffic, not checking the houses that he passed. Instead he kept his eye on a small two-story clapboard much like his own, white with tall green shutters, tucked well back from the street behind three broad-bole trees, a magnolia grown wild, and evergreen shrubs that had finally poked up in front of the windows.

There were two steps to a brick stoop; he jumped them.

The storm door was unlocked; he yanked it open and punched the doorbell with one gloved hand while he punched the door with the other and shouted, "Livy! Livy, it's me!" until the cold in his throat made his throat feel hot and raw.

Five minutes later he stopped, arm leaden and aching, hand throbbing, and he backed away to lean heavily against the wrought-iron railing he'd told her twice to replace because the bolts were looseing at the base. Gulping for air. Staring blindly at the street. One leg jumping uncontrollably until he smacked it with a fist. Listening so hard for movement inside that the first needle of a headache began to stab behind his ear.

He calmed himself breath by breath.

The headache died, the needle blunted.

Then, in a single motion, he whirled and vaulted the railing, landing on a runner of packed dead leaves behind the shrubs. He bulled his way to the living-room window, decided he didn't care about damage and tried to break the pane.

The glass shuddered, but didn't shatter.

He fumbled along the ground and grabbed up a length of branch, stout enough, he judged, to do the job.

It didn't.

Around the side of the house then, the thinning shrubs less protective, where he gave each window he could reach several direct blows before moving on; the back was the same, and the back door wouldn't open; the far side had one window he couldn't reach, so he knelt on the ground beside Livy's brick-rimmed garden and tugged one of the bricks free. He hefted it. He sniffed. He threw it, and it bounced off the glass as if the glass were stone.

The brick shattered when it hit the ground.

He walked slowly to the front and backed away from the house, staring at the upper windows, willing a light to snap on, a face to appear, a signal, and when he felt something wet on his cheek he cursed himself for weeping.

And felt something more.

And cursed the sky for bringing snow.

Large flakes, fluffy, seesawing out of the dark to settle on the grass and turn it instantly white, settle on the road to erase the black, settle on his shoulders, in the folds and cracks of his sleeves, while he dug into a breast pocket and pulled out a woolen cap he jammed hard over his hair and felt the snow there melt and run.

Can you scream in a dream and really hear it?

He backed farther away, hands fluttering at his sides, his mouth opening and closing as if he'd forgot-ten a recitation he had to make and make now.

Can you? He did.

Nelson woke up.

It wasn't a dream.

He was huddled against Livy's front door, his leg propping the storm door open to provide a windbreak though the snow found its own way around the edges. He blinked white from his lashes, slapped the white from his gloves and sleeves, and wiped his face. His teeth chattered. He had a headache. His ears had gone from numb to stinging.

"Oh god," he said; or maybe he thought it. He couldn't tell. All he felt were his joints screaming at him as he pushed against the door and pushed himself to his feet; all he heard was his breathing, trying to steady from a panting as he peered through the snowfall and saw all the lights gone in all the houses he could see.

His hands were palsied as he pulled back a cuff without removing a glove and held his watch close to his eyes. He needn't have bothered-the oval crystal had cracked and separated, one of the hands was bent. There was only the hour hand, and it had stopped at 1.

"All right," he muttered.

He staggered away from the house, sliding down the steps, nearly tumbling, windmilling for balance and not stopping until he reached the sidewalk.

A glance up and down.

Nothing.

But falling white.

The wind had stopped.

The snow on street and lawn was perfectly smooth, neither track nor ripple, and as he shuffled off the curb he couldn't help looking behind him, watching his footprints aim at him, point at him, but refusing to lead him.

The cold.

He clenched his teeth and jammed his hands under his arms.

The cold.

He expected to hear sleigh bells, tire chains, snow-ball fights, the grind and push of a plow, the bellow of a blower, the scrape of a shovel, a call, a cry, a laugh, a bark.

The crunch of snow under a wheel, and he spun around so quickly he fell back a step, finally wrapping his arms around a streetlamp to keep him on his feet.

It came out of the dark at the intersection just behind him, and he swiped the snow away from his eyes so

he could stare.

A wagon, he thought; Jesus Christ, it really is a wagon.

He was wrong.

He knew it the moment it reached the intersection's center and was pinned for a moment by the conver-gence of four lights, as if they were spotlights, as if it wanted to be seen.

A *cart* was his second thought, except the sides were somewhat lower, would be not quite waist high to him, and the front was rounded, the sides a shade below it, and there seemed to be no back wall at all that he could see. The two wheels were tall, their arm-thick spokes thick, the rim uneven as though the wood had somehow warped or had been beaten out of shape by the travels it had seen. There were no designs, no decoration; it was painted flat black.

And though the parallel traces were obviously de-signed for a horse, there was nothing pulling it. Nothing at all.

"A chariot," he said loudly. "My god, you're a chariot!"

It moved-grind and thump-out of the light, into the dark, but he didn't follow it. He knew it would be back. He knew he'd see it again.

Why? he asked himself.

He released the streetlamp and went on his way.

There was no time for thinking; there was no time for answers; once he was home and once he was warm and once he had some food in his belly, he would grab the first bottle he found in the kitchen cabinet beside the stove, and he would sit on the hearth and have a good long drink. *Then* he would entertain questions from the crowd. *Then* he would tell all he knew about the answers.

He reached Poplar and swung into it, his left foot dragging slightly.

No lights.

The cold.

The question: why?

Because, he thought in direct contradiction to his vow, that damned thing is the death of me. Some people see auras, or visions of Mary, or the Grim Reaper, or rainbows; I, on the other hand, see the chariot that's going to carry me home to the Great Beyond.

He giggled.

Swing low.

He laughed.

Sweet chariot.

He found his home and blew it a kiss, bowed to the assembled houses across the street, and threw himself into a run that tripped him up the porch. His shoulder struck the edge of the door. His cheek struck the door itself and he was positive it had shattered because it was so goddamned frozen.

His head hurt.

He hummed-a single note; he rocked as he dug for his keys, found them and dropped them and picked them up again and couldn't hold them because his gloves were too packed with snow.

He hummed-a single note; he rocked as he stripped a glove off and hissed at the cold that sliced at his fingers pinching the key toward the lock, skittering away, sliding home.

And not turning.

Not turning.

Until he forced it, and it snapped.

No big deal, he thought, lifting his head with the breath that he took; no sweat, I can handle it, I can ride this damned thing, no problem.

He giggled as he rang the doorbell.

He chuckled as he regloved his hand and punched the tiny window that let him see the postman in the morning and Livy at night and his friends when they bothered and anyone else who wanted to see how a man alone lived.

The glass held.

He hit it again.

The glass held.

The cold.

He hummed a single note, and rocked, and placed his hands flat against the door and leaned back and screamed as his head snapped forward against the pane.

The glass held.

There was no blood.

All right, all right, "All right, all right," all right, hey, no sweat.

His cheek pulled the corner of his mouth open, the cold slipped in like acid across his teeth. He laid his forehead against the wood and sucked his lips between his teeth and shut his eyes and held his breath and one leg jumped until he slammed down the heel.

"My home," he said, and it was almost a question. "Hey." He looked over his shoulder at the white light, at the snow. "Hey, I mean, it's my home, okay?" A single note, humming. His shoulders lifted, he lifted his head and turned around. "My house. I want to go in. My house. Okay? I mean, it's okay, it's my house. I want. My house."

He opened his eyes.

The chariot passed him by.

Grind and thump, and not trail in the snow.

He put his palms to his cheeks and didn't feel the ice; he bit his lower lip and didn't taste the blood.

"Can I please?"

The cold.

"My . . . home."

The snow had already covered his tracks.

A breath. Another. Quicker. Quicker. Cheeks flushed and throat swallowing and one hand rhythmically thumping his side. Faster. Faster. The leg jump-ing again, and this time he let it go, this time he watched it until the other one joined it and pulled him from the porch and ran him around the house, throwing rocks, throwing branches, throwing twigs, throwing snow, throwing himself against the walls and the doors and the windows and the chimney, lashes white and lips dark, hat iced and chin icing, tears freezing as they fell, saliva freezing as it bubbled.

The snow.

"House," he gasped.

"My house," he begged.

Standing in the middle of the street, glaring at the chariot a hundred yards away.

"I will not die," he said.

He screamed, "You son of a bitch, I'm not going to die!"

The chariot moved on.

Grind.

And thump.

He started to follow. He had absolutely no intention of climbing in there, of succumbing to the temptation that death would bring him warmth. But he couldn't help wondering just where it was going, where it had been, what it had done with Livy because he knew, he damned *knew* that whatever the hell it was, it had taken Livy from him.

Livy was going to be his wife.

The snow fell a bit harder.

In silence.

In the dark.

Livy was his darling, his treasure, his life, his goal, his future, his any damn thing you wanted to call her, she was it, and she was gone and he would be double-damned and shot to hell if he was going to lose just because . . .

. . . why?

Just because he was crazy.

Not crazy. Hell, not crazy. He hadn't axed anyone, he hadn't bludgeoned anyone, he hadn't declared war on anyone, he hadn't fleeced or conned or defrauded anyone. How the hell could he be crazy?

At the corner he stopped, shading his eyes against the snow as he searched for the chariot, listening for its crooked wheel, not really worried when he couldn't see it because once again it would come once again, and this time he'd be ready for it, this time he'd run and that thing didn't have a chance because this time he knew that he wasn't crazy at all.

And he wasn't going to die.

Unless, you stupid ass, he told himself then, you freeze to death standing in the middle of the stupid street.

He nodded.

"All right."

He clapped his hands to restart the circulation.

"Right. All right."

He started to walk. Not too fast, he cautioned himself; not too fast, you'll get tired.

And as he walked, shoulders hunched against the snow and cold, knees slowly flexing, feet losing their numbness and carrying him through the pins and needles, he decided that he needed to think of other things. Other things besides the fact that Oxrun Station had somehow shut all its doors to him, that Wes Martin had disappeared in what might as well have been a puff of smoke, that Livy was-

Livy.

He smiled.

Think of Livy, no sweat, no problem.

Think of the day you walked into The Melody to buy a record, any record, you just wanted some new music, and she was at the back where the compact discs were displayed. You found what you wanted-remember? remember?-and found a few things you didn't but you didn't want to leave because she was still there, her back to you, right ankle crossed lightly over the left, and you couldn't leave the store without at least seeing her face. And when you did-oh god, when you were signing the receipt for the credit card, she did turn, and she did look at you, and the clerk suggested that writing on the form was better than than writing on the counter.

You laughed.

Livy laughed.

the cold

And Jesus-remember? remember?-she asked you to lunch, and at lunch asked where you worked, and met you after work and took you to dinner, and after dinner took you to bed. Her bed. Then your bed. Then a bed in the park by the pond. Then a bed in the woods out by the depot. Then a bed on a hill just behind the college. Your bed. Her bed. Jesus Christ, she wouldn't stop, and you didn't want her to stop because between this bed and that bed you drove to Hartford for some shopping and went to New York for a show and walked every inch and goddamned foot of the village and saw every inch and goddamned foot for the very first time, and when you were alone you were so happy you wanted to cry. And you did, you sap. You cried for cliched joy, and it felt so god-damned *good*, you cried for joy again.

Think of Livy.

she's gone.

He stood in front of the hospital on King Street and hoped that whatever had happened hadn't hurt any-one in there.

Think of all the times-Livy; remember?-you asked her to marry you. From the second date, it was, and at least once a week since. And each time she denied you without exactly saying no. And each time she didn't exactly say no and you were heartened because she didn't, some goddamned two-by-four came out of the sky and belted you-from the way your boss lost his marbles and killed his family, subsequently losing you your last job, to the way the creditors smelled the blood of your unfed bank ac-count and came calling, shark smiles and shark teeth whether in person or in letters, and all the promises in the world didn't stop them from coming on.

But there was always Livy. Supportive. Strong. Always Livy to hold the carrot as you plodded on, you ass, and plodded on.

the snow

He held on to the iron gates that closed off the park, and peered inside, to the dark, and saw only the falling white.

He heard the chariot behind him, and he ignored it with a smile.

He sang, "I'm not going to die. I'm not going with you."

Grindandthump.

And silence.

And the cold finally slowed him as he stood in front of the Cove, thinking of the dinner, and her sweater, and her eyes, and her fingers; thinking of the food, and the wine, and the candle, and the laughter; willing himself sternly not to cry or the tear will freeze and then he'd be blind with only the chariot to guide him.

And heard it stop in the street behind him.

And turned.

It didn't move.

And he thought for a moment he heard the snort of a horse, the stamp of a horse's hoof.

But there was nothing.

The cold the snow.

"Livy," he whispered. "Oh, Livy, I'm so cold."

Sometimes, she said, you remind me of my kids.

He looked up Chancellor Avenue, toward the col-lege and the depot and the valley beyond, and only shook his head once when he saw the streetlamps winking out; he looked up Centre Street and saw the streetlamps winking out; he looked at the chariot and saw it quiver once and still.

Damn, he thought; I'll be damned.

Can you use a dream to hide in if the dreams you hide in never stop?

I really was going to find a job, you know, Livy, he told her without a word as he reached out and touched the door and looked down and saw the place where last he saw her, where last he held her. I really was.

I had to. All those bills, all those presents, and Jesus, you have no idea how much that stupid party cost. God, what a jerk. I should be shot, I guess, Jesus Christ.

And Jesus, you should have seen the look on my face when you said yes tonight. Or last night. Whenev-er. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it.

As best he could he brushed and shoved the snow from his collar, took off his cap and slapped the ice away. Then he snapped the collar up, and settled the cap back on his head, and just in case he was wrong, he tried the door again.

It was locked.

The cold.

Oh Livy, dear god, you weren't supposed to say yes.

The chariot rolled forward just a foot before it stopped.

He slipped his hands into his pockets and looked around at the village he could still see through all the white.

Honest to god, I would have paid them, he told it; I would have married her in time if only she had waited to tell me yes, waited until I was ready.

The chariot.

The snow.

He stepped into the street and began to hum a single note, and rock slowly side to side as he fell in behind the wheels that began to turn, grind.

"I'm not going to die," he said.

and thump. "I'm not, you know." The cold. "I'm really not."

And the chariot dark and low took Nel forever home.

Epilogue

The ice in the tumblers melted without cooling, another leaf coasted from the tree by the drive. The breeze gusted now and then, husking across the lawn like animals scurrying for a burrow, setting branches to stirring and the pages dropped to the floor fluttering like dying hands.

Callum asked for the photographs again, his voice not quite clear.

I handed them over, then stood up and stretched while he held them up to the dim light.

"Yeah," he said, not to me, to himself.

I walked over to the porch steps.

"Where are you going?"

I looked at him and smiled. "Where do you think?"

He shook his head. "I know what I think. And if you think I'm walking all the way over there, you're out of your mind."

I checked the sky, moistened a finger and held it up. "It's a nice night."

"Sure."

"The walk'd do you good."

"Like hell."

But he slipped the photographs and sheets of paper into their pocket in the album, put the album on the table, and pushed himself loudly to his feet. He was pale. There was a faint glow across his brow. And I didn't say a word when he joined me, when we walked down to the sidewalk, turned right, and walked again; I didn't say a word at the way the streetlamps failed to give us the light that we wanted, the way the streets themselves were empty and the only sound our shoes treading unnaturally hard; I said nothing when we crossed Chancellor Avenue and he looked toward his theater and said, "That place hasn't been closed down since the storm two years ago. I want you to know that. I haven't closed that place once before or since that time."

I knew that.

We headed toward the woods.

I also knew that just outside Oxrun, a few miles to the south, there had been a derauling, in the late spring of 1956. The engine, for reasons no one had been able to discover, had jumped the tracks doing ninety and had plowed a yards-wide furrow almost a hundred yards into the forest that boxed the village in. Four cars out of fifteen had followed it. Twenty-seven people had been injured, fourteen had been killed, the engineer crippled, one leg amputated above the knee.

Rimer Nabb, Tallman Evers, and Willy Peace were among the dead. Rimer had been thrown from the car through a closed window; Tallman had been crushed by a collapsing wall; and Willy had bled to death waiting for rescue.

Frieda Harks lasted until they got her to the hospital. Two hours later, smiling, her hands playing a ghost dulcimer, her lips singing a soundless song, she died.

No one knew why.

There wasn't a scratch on her.

"You know," Callum said, scowling at those houses that still had lights burning, "I remember Kanfield."

"No kidding."

"Yeah. He tried to sell me on some silver mine or something out on Montana. I told him I had all the investments I needed. He was really ticked. For a minute there I thought he was going to try to punch me

out."

I looked up at him, trying not to trip over shadows. "You don't have any investments, Cal."

"I know. I didn't trust him."

We passed Quentin, and moved on.

Then I told him how, late last year, Nel Glawford had come to my house, hoping, after a lot of round-the-edges talking, that I'd be able to connect him with some work down in the city. Wall Street. Madison Avenue. He really didn't care. But the only business I knew was the business I was in, and when I shrugged him an apology and offered him a drink, he had declined. Smiling. Saying, "Never mind, I can handle it, no sweat," and leaving with a stride that had told me at the time that this man wouldn't stop until he found his place, and made it big.

"You always were a lousy judge of character," Callum told me.

"I suppose."

A white cat scooted across the sidewalk in front of us, paused at the curb to check us out, then lifted its puffed tail and walked on. Not looking back once, though the tail kept twitching.

"Cats," Callum said in disgust.

"I like them."

"Right. And you like country music, too. Jesus."

A siren some blocks away made us jump, and feel sheepish, and for a moment I was tempted to run back and find out what was going on.

I didn't.

Callum didn't, though he glanced over his shoulder several times in several minutes.

I didn't know Caroline Edlin. Not really. Not enough to call her even an acquaintance. I suppose I saw her in Adelle's shop now and again, but I honestly don't remember her. Not really. Just as I don't recall Lisa Outman, whose house is now owned by a scholar-ly young couple from the Station, born and bred and ready to die here. The husband had had Todd Zaber for sophomore history, and told me it had been the worst day of his academic life when he found out that his professor had disappeared. The word was, he had run off with someone after his lady had been taken away by the white coats.

I didn't know about "the word." I did know Gavin Quick, but hadn't seen him or April for months. Not since the *For Sale* sign was pounded into their lawn, and weeks later someone purchased the land, bull-dozed the fire ruins, put in a new foundation, and had a house brought all the way from West Hartford.

We reached Poplar, and Callum peered past me.

"Looking for the dogs?" I said, grinning.

"I don't believe in ghosts."

"Then slow down, man, before I drop where I stand."

He glared at me, and slowed down, and we reached the corner and Thorn Road. Where we stopped. Hands in pockets. Looking for all the world like two men who didn't want to be where they were, and were there only because one didn't want the other to know how seared he was.

"Stockton," Callum said, "was a nut."

I shrugged.

"Well, he had to be, right?"

I shrugged again. But I didn't laugh. Callum was learning what I'd learned years ago.

"Shit," he said softly after a few minutes waiting. "This is crazy. I'm going home. My true love is probably waiting for me on the porch right now, ready to take what I have to offer, no questions asked, and serve me hand and foot for the rest of my days." He sniffed. He looked down the street, toward Rimber Nabb's house. "Shit."

"Callum," I said. And stopped.

He looked at me then as if I'd set him up for a practical joke, and paled briefly when I shook my head.

We turned then and headed back for the center of town. I had no desire to see what the Nabb house looked like now. Last week, in daylight, I had driven past it, and had seen the plywood nailed across the windows, the weeds dying in the yard, the gap in the slate roof, the chimney canted and ready to fall at the next windstorm we had; I saw that the hedge had been trimmed to within a foot of the ground; I managed a glimpse of the dead rose bushes in the backyard. Then I drove on.

Mandolin.

Thinking about how I was going to explain this to Callum without him thinking me mad.

Guitar.

Wondering if maybe listening to Abe Stockton all those years had finally made me something I hadn't been the first day I'd come here.

Fiddle.

"You put that damned album in the cellar," Callum told me when we reached the intersection of our parting. "You put it in there, okay? and you forget it."

"I intend to."

He nodded once, sharply.

He walked away, turned around and came back, and shook my hand. "You coming next Friday? I got a real bad one for you."

"Wouldn't miss it."

"Right."

He left again.

His head cocked like mine, and I knew he was listening to the night in Oxrun Station, to the song of the

nightwind, to the pages he had read and refused to believe, even now.

Even now, long past midnight, with the sweet note of a dulcimer trailing shadows in the dark.

And the guitar, and the fiddle, and the mandolin not far behind.