

# AND THEN SHE FOUND HIM...

And he found her...

**Algis Budrys**

THE SPECIAL MEETING of the Merchants, Protective Association was held on the second floor of the Caspar Building, above Teller's Emporium on Broad Street. Around seven o'clock, before anybody'd had a chance to more than half settle his supper, members began coming up the narrow stairs beside Teller's display window. Unsmiling, they sat down on folding chairs that lost their straight-rowed orderliness as small groups bunched together to talk in low, upset voices. In a short time the air was thick with cigar smoke, and the splintered old board floor was black with scuffed ashes. There was more than a touch of panic in the atmosphere.

Todd Deerbush sat alone and unnoticed in the back row, his bony ankles hooked over the crossbar of the seat in front of him. He looked tiredly out from under the brim of his khaki rainhat, and from time to time he pinched the bridge of his narrow nose. He and Stannard had rolled over four hundred miles today, and more than fourteen hundred in the past three days, to be in time for this meeting. Deerbush had driven all the way, while Stannard analyzed and re-analyzed the slim sheaf of newspaper clippings that had brought them here. Now Stannard was in a hotel room, sleeping. Tomorrow they'd rendezvous, Deerbush would give his report on this meeting, and the executive half of the team would begin work.

Deerbush was dog-tired. Because he could leave it to second nature, his mind worked on alertly, but his face fell into weary, unguarded lines. He was somewhere near forty, with features that could look either younger or much older. Most important were his eyes. They were set among radiating folds in his gray skin. Shadowed by pinched eyebrows, his eyes gave him the look of long-accustomed solitude--of a loneliness walled off and carefully, methodically sealed away.

In the front of the room, the chairman was calling the meeting to order. The minutes were approved as read and Old Business was tabled by acclamation. There was a dignified clinging to orderliness in the way the chairman ran faithfully through the parliamentary procedures. There was impatience in the nervous creak of the folding chairs. Men hunched forward, shuffled their feet, caught themselves and sat still, and then crouched again. Only Deerbush sat motionless, by himself in the back of the room.

"New Business?" the chairman asked, and immediately recognized a short, spare, balding man who'd gotten his hand in the air first. The man stood up quickly.

"I guess--" he began. "I suppose," he substituted self-consciously, "we all know why we're here. So there's no use talking about that. What we're here for tonight is to try and do something about it."

"If we can," another man broke in.

The first man waved a hand in sharp impatience. "If we can. O.K. But--what I was saying--We all know each other. I guess we've all checked with each other. It looks like my store's been hit the worst. Our inventory's short about a hundred dollars a week for the last

two months."

Other men broke in now. The short man snapped: "Well, maybe my place isn't the worst. But, by golly, what's the difference in the end? Somebody's walkin' out with stuff from every one of our places, he's been coin' it for months, we're goin' crazy, and we can't even say how he's been doin' it. And what's more, I guess there ain't a merchant here can stand that kind of stuff very long. 'Bout the only thing this feller ain't done yet is rob the bank--and maybe he's gettin' set to do that, too. The police ain't findin' anything out, the insurance detectives ain't no better, and neither's my store cop. If we don't do somethin' soon, this town--yessir, this whole town--is gonna be flat on its back and bankrupt! Now, what're we gonna do about it?"

Deerbush grunted to himself. He reached three fingers into the open package in his shirt pocket, took out a pinch of loose tobacco, and began chewing it thoughtfully.

Other men were standing up now. "All right, Henry. I'm going crazy over at my place, too. You say we ought to do something. But what? Things just disappear. In broad daylight--No one comes near them. Stock can't just float out the door--but one minute it's there and the next it isn't. I can't think of anything to do about that."

"An" by the way," another man put in, "I figure we'd be six weeks closer t'an an answer if all you didn't keep shut t'each other about it that long. What's the good of this 'Sociation if we got t'read about these things in "paper?"

"I didn't notice you standin' up and sayin' anythin" Sam Frazer," the spare man answered testily. "I don't mind admittin' I wasn't in a hurry to look foolish. Then I found out it wasn't just my place. But I guess after that I didn't try to make out I'm so smart, callin' down my fellow merchants in this community. You just sit down, Sam, and let the rest of us work this out. Before it gets to be more'n we can handle."

"We can't handle it now." The man who spoke hadn't said anything up to now. Deerbush had noticed him earlier hunched forward in the first row, a scorching cigarette held gingerly between his fingertips. He went on doggedly, in spite of his obvious embarrassment. "This isn't shoplifting as anyone has ever heard of it before. I've checked this with the men from my insurance company, and I've talked to Chief Christensen. I'm--I'm almost inclined to believe it's humanly impossible to be robbed in this particular way."

Deerbush fingered his nose again, and sat up straight. But nothing was made of that half-idea, and the man who'd brought it up had nothing more to say.

It ended with the Association's deciding on offering a reward. It was a patently useless move, but it was something to put on the record. The meeting broke up lingeringly, with men snapping at each other and at nothing.

By then, Deerbush had a fair picture of things. More and more it became obvious that he'd been right in calling the newspaper stories to Stannard's attention.

The last man to leave the hall put the lights out and locked the door behind him. Deerbush stood up and shucked out of his trench-coat. Rolling it into a pillow, he took off his hat, stretched out on the floor, and went to sleep.

It was almost noon when he woke up. He got to his feet, ran his fingers through the thin, gray-brown hair left on his shiny scalp, and brushed off his suit with a few swipes of his palms. He looked out through the windows.

Outside, he saw Broad Street in the light of a brightly sunny day, with cars moving up and down the street and shoppers going into stores. But there were policemen on duty at every corner, and they neglected the traffic in favor of stealthily watching the people on the sidewalks. People-like, the shoppers evidently had not yet let a few stories in the weekly paper really sink in. But Deerbush could see one or two pedestrians looking at the police with sudden realization. It was a small town. Once started, it wouldn't be many days, or hours, before the panic he'd seen in this hall last night would osmose out from behind the store counters, puddle up, and begin to choke the whole town.

He settled his hat on his long, narrow skull, folded the trenchcoat over his arm and left the hall. He was thinking Stannard had better clean this up today if he could.

Stannard was waiting for him on the corner of Broad and Fauquier streets. They walked slowly along together, hugging the edge of the sidewalk, while Deerbush gave his report. Occasionally people bumped into them, and always moved on without apologizing. Whenever it happened, Stannard would grimace. Deerbush paid it no attention.

Stannard nodded slowly when the report was finished. "I think that confirms it," he said in his patient voice. "You agree, don't you, Todd?"

"We never had one of us turn out to be a criminal up to now," Deerbush answered, intending it to be no more than a comment.

Stannard turned to him patiently. "I'm surprised it hasn't happened before, Todd. You must remember the pressures and strains that arise in us from being as we are. Bear in mind that it's incredible that any of us, let alone most of us, grow up to be mature personalities."

"Sure, Frank. I didn't mean to say anything special by it. It's just that this kind of thing hasn't happened up to now."

"Of course, Todd. And I appreciate your getting help from someone else, instead of trying to handle it by yourself."

Deerbush shrugged uncomfortably. He knew very well that Stannard and the other people of his kind, back in Chicago, were all of them brainier than he was. The people at the top of the organization, like Stannard, were almost as much different from Deerbush as he was from most people. Maybe more. They seemed to live a different kind of life, inside--restless, tense; like people trying to climb out of a cage. Deerbush had thought about it for a long time, and decided it was because they could always spare a part of their brains for remembering the spot they were in.

He and Stannard walked along, and toward one o'clock they stopped at a diner next to the city hall. They finally got seats at the crowded counter after missing their turn twice, and then they waited a long time for the waitress to get their order. Stannard toyed with his fork. Deerbush was accustomed to this kind of thing, being among other people much more often: he called out their order as the waitress passed by, trusting to her training to leave it stuck in her mind. In time she came back along the counter, carrying two plates and looking up and down the row of customers.

"Hot roast beef and a ham on white?"

"Right here, Miss," Deerbush said in a deliberately loud, firm voice. She set the plates down

in front of them automatically, without looking at them. She was an attractive woman, near Deerbush's own age, with laughter lines at the corners of her mouth. Deerbush looked at her with almost naked hope in his eyes. But there was no disappointment in him when she turned away without ever having looked at the man behind this one of a row of faces.

Stannard looked at him, shaking his head. "Isn't your own kind good enough for you?" he said with gentle pointedness.

Deerbush shrugged uncomfortably. He ate quickly, deft an oversized tip, went out, and waited for Stannard on the sidewalk.

They set a rendezvous, divided the town between them, and separated. Deerbush began walking along the streets south of Fauquier, turning casually into each store for a minute or two. Each time, he could smell the mute panic, thick as sour honey, clogging the air. Every place was the same; full of pale clerks who forced smiles at their customers and jerked their heads every time the door opened. But no one ever noticed him--no one stopped him to ask what he was doing. He moved along, stepping out of everyone's way, gathering urgency from the look of the people he saw.

Two o'clock found him walking quickly. By now he knew which stores had been hardest hit, and he thought he saw the pattern in the shoplifter's work. He wondered if Stannard mightn't have seen it some time ago, and possibly finished their job already....

He walked into *The Maryland Company*--"The Complete Department Store"--and began moving back and forth along the aisles.

It was worse here than anywhere else in his half of town. The clerks were worked up to an edge of desperation that made them dig their pencil-points into their sales receipts and fumble at change-making until the customers caught the infection too. No one talked in a normal tone of voice.

He saw how many people there were who stood motionless and went over everybody with their eyes, and that told him how frightened the insurance companies were. And there was a stock-taking crew, moving hurriedly from counter to counter, making spot-checks--not quite at random.

They'd seen the pattern, too. Deerbush nodded to himself at the efficiency of the system, even though it couldn't ever catch this special thief.

He went to the Misses, Dress Department. There were more tensely idle people concentrated around it than anywhere else in the store. Deerbush stopped, leaned against a pillar, and waited, ignored. And eventually, almost at closing time, he saw her.

She walked into the department with a number of packages already under her arm; a tall, pale, thinnish woman. Her brown eyes were large, her nose was short and upturned. Her lips were pursed in a cupid's bow. Her hair was short and black, carefully dressed, with just the faintest dusting of silver at the tips. She moved lightly--not gracefully, as grace is taught, but with quick, unsettled movements that reminded Deerbush of a small young bird. Her gown was pale pink and summery, with bows at the shoulders and a ruffle of thick petticoats at the hem. Except for the deep creases in her forehead and the sharp definition of her lips, it might have been easy to mistake her age.

Her glance swept the dress racks and adjoining accessory counters. She looked at

handbags, her lower lip caught between her teeth, and shook her head. She pivoted on one heel. The detectives all looked past her, preoccupied.

Deerbush was sure.

He watched her approach the dress racks and begin lifting things out. After a moment, she went over to the saleswoman, who was picking nervously at a floss of lint on her skirt.

"Hello," she said softly.

The saleswoman came to life. Her face lit in a warm smile that was all the more strange for the abstracted look in her eyes. Deerbush grunted explosively.

"Why, hello there, miss!" she beamed fondly. "My, that's a pretty frock!" And still, there was something vague in her expression.

The girl dimpled. "Why, thank you!" she smiled. And the detectives continued to ignore her, just as they ignored Deerbush.

Now the girl twined her fingers behind her back and bowed her head, blushing. "But you have so many other pretty ones here," she whispered shyly.

"Why, bless you, dear, do you mean you'd like to have some of them?" The saleswoman looked contrite for not having thought of it sooner. But Deerbush could see something trapped in the saleswoman's eyes. Something that knew there was a wrong thing going on, but couldn't get its knowledge through.

"Oh! Could I?" the girl in the summery dress exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "They're so beautiful!"

"Of course, dear," the saleswoman soothed. "Here--come with me--here's where the really nice ones are. You just pick out the ones you like."

Deerbush watched wonderingly. The girl lifted dress after dress off the racks, holding each against herself and turning in front of the big floor-length mirrors. She never looked directly at her own face--only at the dresses. Deerbush had the feeling she was too self-conscious to be caught admiring herself.

Finally, she and the saleswoman had chosen a group of dresses.

"Thank you *very* much!" the girl breathed.

"I'm glad you like them, my dear," the saleswoman said, smiling warmly. "Please come back again." And still there was something lost and trapped in her expression, but it was very faint.

The detectives stayed watchful, but all of them seemed to have found something--a curled edge in the carpeting, or a turning overhead fan--that kept attracting their attention.

"I'll come back," the girl said. "I promise." She turned to go, holding the dresses. "Goodbye!"

"Goodbye, dear," the salesgirl said. She smiled fondly, if vaguely, and drifted back behind

her counter. She looked down at her skirt, began scraping harshly at the fabric.

The girl in the summery dress moved slowly toward the doors, browsing as she went, stopping at an occasional counter to look over the merchandise. Once she waited while a floorwalker stepped abstractedly out of her way.

Deerbush moved after her. He heard a sound behind him and felt it raise the hackles of his neck. He spun his head around. The stock-taking crew was in the Misses' Dress Department and the saleswoman was doubled over her counter, sobbing hysterically. "No--no," she was saying, "there wasn't anybody here."

A man held the front doors open for the girl in the summery dress. Deerbush was on the street only yards behind her, brushing by the store detective who unobtrusively blocked the exit. He followed her as she turned off the main street away from the shopping areas, and he couldn't make sense out of what he'd seen.

But that didn't matter so much--the important thing was that he'd found her.

He could tell she'd never had anyone follow her before in her life. She never looked about her. When she turned off into a tree-lined side street, Deerbush stepped up beside her.

He walked there for perhaps twenty steps before she turned her head and looked at him, frowning a little. She peered at him with puzzled eyes. "You're different," she said.

"It's all right," Deerbush said, trying not to frighten her. "My name's Todd Deerbush and I'm not going to hurt you. I'd like to walk along with you for a while."

She stopped still. "You're different," she repeated. "You're like me."

Maybe, Deerbush thought. "I don't know," he said.

She began walking again, finally, the dresses forgotten in her arms, puzzling over it. "You noticed me," she said after a while, he; mind made up. "All by yourself. Nobody else ever did. You must be real too."

"I don't know what you mean by that," Deerbush said gently. "But people don't notice me, either."

She nodded firmly. "Unless you make them. You're real... I never thought anybody else but me was real."

"I guess there's quite a few," Deerbush answered, thinking that there were none exactly like her. "But it's hard to tell. Might be some in every town. Far's I know, I'm with the only bunch that's gotten together."

"Are there that many of us?"

"Well," he said, "there's more than fifty in this bunch I'm in."

They walked a little farther. They were in a very good neighborhood now, with big houses and wide lawns. She turned toward him again, and looking at her he realized she'd been preoccupied all the while. "What makes us real, Todd?"

He still didn't know what she might mean by that. He tried to answer her as best he could. "Stannard--that's one of our real smart people; you better ask him for the answers--Stannard says we broadcast--like a TV station, he says--something like that; it's out of my league--that makes us not be noticed. It works inside people's heads." He felt he was making himself sound confused and stupid. He couldn't help it, and he was used to it.

"That's not what I asked you, Todd. That's what happens first. But after a while you can make people notice you and be nice to you. But they can't do it to you. That proves you're real and they're just...something else. But what *does* it?"

"The same kind of thing, I guess," he answered lamely. He was trying to find out more from her than she could from him, and he didn't know what to do about it. Stannard might--but for some reason Deerbush found himself not wanting Stannard in this right now. "Stannard says it's protection. He says Mother Natures working out a new kind of creature in us, and doesn't want us to get hurt. But she kind of overdid it."

His voice was gentle. He thought of her growing up in this town, with the broadcast growing stronger and stronger as she grew; wondering why the boys didn't have any interest in her, wondering why everyone acted so strange. He could see the puzzled little child with the tear-streaked face, and the hurt teenager who came later, having to separate from her family if she was to live at all...and then the woman, blooming somehow in spite of everything, and beginning to fade....Only she'd found something.

A warm and exciting thing was happening to Deerbush. He felt he was really coming to understand her. He'd been no different, before he had the idea of setting himself up in this kind of work. Twenty years of living a settled life had let him strike a balance with himself and get along with what he was. But when he looked at the girl; thin, pale, worn and terribly lonesome, he could understand how it would be for her.

Except that it wasn't the same, he reminded himself. She had something else.

But, looking at her, he couldn't see it. He could only see, under her eyes, the hollows that makeup couldn't quite take out.

"Where're you from, Todd?"

"Chicago, now."

"I've always wanted to see places like that. I suppose I could." She touched her upper teeth to her lower lip. "But I *knew* I was real as long as I stayed here."

They reached a trimmed hedge with a white picket gate set in the middle of it, and a walk going up to a white house with window boxes and ruffled white curtains in the windows.

"My name is Viola Andrews," she said. "I live here. Would you like to come inside and visit with me?"

She showed him through the house. The living room was full of beautifully carved, heavy walnut furniture, with over stuffed divans and easy chairs. There were standing lamps with beautifully decorated shades, and delicate end-tables with china figurines on them. The kitchen had an electric mixer, a toaster, a rotisserie, an electric frying pan, a dishwasher, big refrigerator, and freezer.

As she showed him from room to room, she held his arm. Her grip grew tighter, and her voice more excited. "I can't get over it, Todd. Someone else like me! Aren't these chairs pretty? I had some others, but then I saw these, and I had them sent over right away. I've done that with most of my furnishings--there are so *many* nice things in the stores. But tell me some more about yourself, Todd, please. I'm dying to know all about you. How were you when you were a little boy? Was it as terrible for you as it was for me?"

"I don't know, Vi." He felt more and more awkward as she clung to his arm and led him from room to room. Her bedroom had gilded antique furniture, with delicate French dolls propped up on satin pillows over the pink bedspread. The dining room had cupboards full of fragile china and sculptured silver cutlery.

"Isn't it all beautiful? Oh, Todd, I'm getting more and more excited by the minute! I can't get *over* you!"

Suddenly she stopped. Her fingers dug into his arm. "It was awful, Todd," she said intently. "After I left my parents, I still tried so hard to be like other girls. I had to...not pay...for my food all of the time, but I tried in everything else. And then, one day not long ago, I was twenty-five." She touched an embroidered handkerchief to the corners of her eyes. "I suddenly realized I was going to be alone forever, for as long as I lived. Other girls were married, they had families, they had all the things a girl needs--and I was never, never going to have them. It was like a deep black closet with myself crouched in the very far corner, and no way out.

"I--I didn't know what to do. I had to make *somebody* notice me. I was ready to die if somebody didn't. And--and--" her voice suddenly rose, "and one day, I could! I didn't know how, but I just *could!* I didn't have to be a thief any longer. I didn't just have to get along on as little as I could. I could make people like me, and pay attention to me, and give me presents."

Just as suddenly, she bowed her head. "But they're just pretending, and I know it," she whispered. "They're not real. They don't really see me or like me. They forget me just as soon as I go away."

She straightened and took her hand from his arm. She touched an embroidered handkerchief to the corners of her eyes. "I'm so glad you came to help me that I can't even put it into words; but I am glad, Todd."

Deerbush shook his head. He'd been pretty badly worried when he first read the newspaper stories. But it wasn't that one of his own kind of people had turned out bad, which was what he'd been afraid of at first. It was just this girl, scared, trying to fill in what she'd been missing. He put his arm around her shoulders.

"Listen, Vi," he said, "best thing to do's get you out of here as quick as we can, and get you with your own kind of people."

"Thank you, Todd," she said in her breathless voice. "You're very nice to me." She hugged him impulsively.

"Listen--" he said, trying to think of how to tell her what he wanted to. "Vi--see, what I am, is a marriage broker."



"A marriage broker?"

"Uh--yes--see, what it says I am in the Chicago Classified is a private investigator. People never see me. They just call up the AA Agency on the phone, and I mail 'em reports on the people they want to find out about. That's how I make my living. But what I really do, for this bunch of our people, is go around the country looking for more. And when I find one, I try and fit them to somebody else that hasn't got a husband or wife. It's a thing I figured out to do, so I could be somebody useful."

That had been the easy part. Now he was stopped again.

He wished he was smarter, so he could know what was wrong with Vi. He knew there was something wrong, something that somebody like Stannard could put his finger on in a minute. But he knew too that it didn't matter. Underneath it, she wasn't bad, or vicious. She didn't do these things because she was mean. She was gentle, and hurt, and lost. If a man had time, he could bring out the good things in her. A man who understood her, and took care of her, and was patient with her, could do it.

"Vi--what I mean is, I've found plenty of women for other men. I liked a lot of them--I'm not trying to fool you about that--but I never...What I mean is, these women all had a lot on the ball. And the other men in this bunch're a lot more deserving. They sort of belonged together, and I knew it." He stopped to listen to what he'd said, and went red. "I don't mean," he blurted, "you don't stack up to 'em. I don't mean that at all, Vi. You're a lot smarter than me, and I know it. I'm not much. But what I mean is, I've always taken these women back to Chicago with a man in mind for them. But--" He reached out for her hands. "Not this time." He didn't sound like himself.

"Vi--I'm not much, and I don't have much. I do work that's bound to keep me away from home a lot, and with people like us that's going to be extra hard on you, but--"

"Oh, Todd," she said, coloring, "I'm the happiest girl in the world!"

He couldn't believe it. He stood looking at her, holding her hands, and for a long moment he couldn't get it through his head. Then he felt warmth all through him, and he had to close his eyes for a minute because he was smiling as hard as she was.

"We better get going as soon as we can," he said, "try and get a start while it's still daylight. We've still got to pick up Stannard, and my car. So I'll ask you to pack fast. Better just take one suitcase."

She pulled sharply away from him. "One suitcase? You mean--leave all my nice things?"

He'd known it couldn't last. "Well--sure, Vi. They don't belong to you..."

She stamped her foot in anger. "Leave all my *presents*? I won't! I won't do it!"

"Vi," he said patiently, "you've got to."

"No!"

"Look, Vi, feeling that way doesn't make sense. You took that stuff. Somebody's stuck for the money somewhere. But it's not just that. You've got this town scared; you've got it scared

so bad these people're going to stampede and hurt themselves. They're ready for it--it's plain as day, all over town. You want something like that on your conscience?

"If you leave the stuff here, that'll take care of it. They'll find it after a while, and they'll decide it was a smart crook. It'll be a puzzle for them, but it won't be building up anymore. They'll have their stuff back and after a while they'll forget about it--if it never happens anywhere again.

"And even if you don't think they're real anyhow--the stuff still doesn't belong to you. You didn't earn it."

"You're awful!" she shouted at him. "You're mean and awful. I don't like you at all. You hate me. Get out of here!"

"Vi--"

"I hate you! I hate you!" She pulled her hands back awkwardly and hit him with the heels of her fists. "I won't give you up my nice presents! I won't! I like getting presents--I want lots of nice things to have! I want lots of nice things--I want a lot more than I have! And I don't like you! Get away from me! Go away! Go away!"

Deerbush sighed. "All right, Vi."

"I'm going to go downtown and get more nice things--lots more. And don't you try and stop me!"

"I'm sorry, Vi," he said in a voice that had no life in it, "but it looks like I better come back in a hurry."

Walking quickly toward his rendezvous with Stannard, he saw police cars cruising the streets. The men inside them drove slowly, their heads turning as they looked at every pedestrian except Deerbush. He noticed they were paying special attention to the women, and he wasn't too surprised. But they'd never find her. They might come and knock on her door, and maybe even talk to her, but they'd never find her. It would just get worse and worse.

He wondered how bad it could get. After the first stores had to close--or if Vi began going into people's houses--what would these people living here in this town do? Would they be wearing guns here in this town, looking back over their shoulders all the time, locking everything up? And still losing things? And if it came to the militia and martial law, or the state police or F.B.I., and they still lost things--what then?

A car up the street jammed on its brakes. The doors flew open, and the detectives inside jumped out on the sidewalk. They ran up to a startled plump woman and surrounded her. One of them flashed a badge for an instant. The others had already grabbed the packages out of her arms and were tearing them open. The woman looked from one to another of them, her face white, her mouth twisted by shock.

There was nothing Deerbush could do to help her. He stood watching it, cursing in a voice so low he didn't hear it. But he couldn't help feeling a little jolt of relief as he thought nothing like that could ever happen to Viola.

"I wish I'd found her," Stannard sighed as they drove toward Viola's house.

"I shouldn't have said I wanted her to come to Chicago." Deerbush said. What hadn't worked out between him and Vi was a personal thing, and a private hurt, but what he'd done was make trouble for everybody.

"You couldn't know that, Todd," Stannard was telling him. "You had no way of guessing. She was something brand new to you--brand new to anyone, for that matter, in this variation. You're quite right--they'd never find her. Between the curiosity-damping field, and this new ability that seems to spring "You couldn't know that, Todd," Stannard was telling him. "You had no way of guessing. She was something brand new to you--brand new to anyone, for that matter, in this variation. You're quite right--they'd never find her. Between the curiosity-damping field, and this new ability that seems to spring directly from her arrested emotional development, it's--well, it's more than fortunate that I came here with you." He stared out at the dark street for a moment. "It's a horrible shame she's so completely crippled, has so little moral stamina in her makeup. But what an ability! Intelligently, maturely used--you realize, don't you, Todd, that this could easily be the answer to the problem of the damping field? I'm afraid she's past hope, but if we could learn it from her...Well, that makes no difference. We can always raise her children apart from her, so they'll have her heredity but not her hysteria."

"I guess we could," Deerbush said.

"She didn't tell you what it is she does?"

Deerbush shook his head. "Sounded like she doesn't know, herself. She just does it. People--people give her presents."

"She simply wishes people would obey her, and that's all? She walked up to this saleswoman, you say, and caused the woman to give her the dresses."

"I know. But the woman *wanted* to."

"And had hysterics afterward, claiming she knew nothing about it. Well, that part's the damping field, taking hold again after whatever else it was had done its work. Would you describe to me, again, this expression you say you saw on the clerk's face? It sounds to me as though there might be something valuable in that..."

They were in front of Viola's house. "No lights," Deerbush said, feeling almost glad. "She's gone. We'll have to look for her." Now Stannard would have to keep quiet, and leave him alone.

Stannard was peering at the dark house. "Do you think she'll come back here? We have to find her quickly. I want her in Chicago as fast as we can bring her, and I want her isolated from human beings before she has half the world giving her things and the other half howling for her blood."

"We'll find her. We just have to go down along the shopping street." *I wish I was the richest man in the world*, he thought.

They drove back toward the main street, both of them quiet. They passed a police car, its spotlight fingering the sidewalks.

"The stores aren't open late tonight," Stannard said.

"I don't think that's going to make any difference." They turned onto the main street. It lay empty but guarded, most of the storefronts lit by night lights, the parking spaces bare along the curbs except for places where occasional men--insurance detectives, Deerbush guessed--sat in plain cars reading newspapers. Foot patrolmen walked silently from door to door, each with only one block for his beat, trying locks. A radio car rolled up the street to the intersection that marked the end of the double row of stores, made a U turn, came down to the intersection of Broad Street and Riverside Avenue, made another U turn, and rolled up the street again.

At the corner of Broad and Fauquier, where The Milady Shop was located, Viola stood waiting while a middle-aged man fumbled at the shop door with his keys.

"Is that she?" Stannard asked.

Deerbush nodded. "That's her." He eased the car to a stop at the curb.

"I'll talk to her," Stannard whispered.

Viola was intent on the man opening the shop door, but she turned her head as Deerbush and Stannard hurriedly crossed the sidewalk toward her.

The shopkeeper was paying neither of them any attention. He had the door open now, and he spoke to Viola. "There you are, little honey. Now, I told you it wouldn't take but a minute or two, didn't I?"

Viola took an indecisive step toward the door. Her face was clouded up angrily, and when they were close, she said in a low, angry voice, "You get away from me, you!"

Stannard whispered to Deerbush: "My God, she's acting like a five-year-old!"

Deerbush thought of how sensitive and delicate she was, and how helpless she'd be without this extra something she could do.

"Something wrong, little honey?" the shopkeeper asked Viola, his voice full of concern.

"Make them go away!" Viola cried, stamping her foot.

"Make who go away, little honey?"

"Can't you see them? You see them. See them and make them go away!"

"Miss Andrews--" Stannard began.

Deerbush was looking at the shopkeeper. He had never seen anyone try so hard to do something that ought to be so easy. He and Stannard weren't invisible. But the shopkeeper advanced uncertainly, brushing his hands in front of him like a man going into a long hall full of cobwebs. Then his fingertips touched Stannard. For just a second, he almost did the impossible because Viola had asked him to. His eyes looked into Stannard's face and Deerbush could see them almost begin to focus. But then the shopkeeper's head lolled forward on his chest and he stumbled back against his window. He leaned on the glass, his lips slack, looking at nothing. His breathing became shallow and monotonous.

"I hate you!" Viola spat at him. "You don't like me!"

"Miss Andrews--" Stannard said again. He was pale as he looked at the shopkeeper.

Viola pointed at Deerbush. "*You* help me," she said to Stannard. "Make him leave me alone!"

A foot patrolman passed by them, turned to the door of the next shop, tested the lock, and went on.

Stannard was motionless, staring at her.

Then Stannard said to her: "Don't worry, dear--everything's fine. Everything's all right. I'll take care of you. You don't have to worry." His voice was soothing, and only someone who knew Stannard as well as Deerbush did could have noticed the peculiar note it struck, as if somewhere, too deep in his throat to win the fight, something was trying to choke off the words.

He turned suddenly and tried to hit Deerbush.

"Oh, thank you!" Viola exclaimed. "You're nice. You'll get rid of the nasty man for me."

Deerbush felt the blow on his shoulder. He tried to get a hand on Vi's arm before she could run away, but he couldn't with Stannard between them. He elbowed Stannard back, but he had to drop his shoulder to do it. Stannard swung again, and this time he split Deerbush's cheek.

Deerbush shook his head sharply.

"Get away from her," Stannard panted. "Stop bothering her!" Viola took two quick steps forward and pushed her hands against Deerbush's chest.

"You stay away from my presents," she mumbled angrily.

"I'm sorry, Frank," Deerbush said. He stepped back, holding one of Vi's wrists now, and with the other hand he hit Stannard hard on the jaw. As Stannard fell down, Vi began to scream.

Deerbush held her wrists for a long moment while she kicked and kicked at his legs. He looked at Stannard, lying on the sidewalk, and saw the man's eyes start to flutter open.

He let go of Vi's wrists and reached with his hands, drawing up his shoulders and lowering his face to protect it from her fingernails. "I'm sorry, Vi."

Deerbush waited until the police car had rolled by. Then he pulled his old sedan away from the curb, and pointed the car toward the edge of town, driving with both hands on the wheel and only vaguely feeling the hurt places in the skin of his face.

Stannard was sitting hunched in the seat beside him. He rubbed his jaw. "It was incredible," he mumbled. "I never for a moment considered that she might be able to use her ability on one of us."

"All right," Deerbush said.

"I'll never forget it. I knew what she was. I didn't change my judgment of her by one iota before she spoke to me. And then, suddenly, she was the most wonderful person in the world. She deserved everything anyone could offer her. It was right that she be made happy. It was *unthinkable* that anything should be permitted to interfere with her wishes. I would have laid down my life for her."

"All right, Stannard," Deerbush said. He was blinking, and searching the sides of the road with his eyes. He wished Stannard would be still.

"No--no, it's not all right." Stannard shook his head. "Can you imagine what would have happened? If she could make me obey her, she could make any of us obey her. God! Suppose we'd succeeded in getting her to Chicago! Fifty of us, all her slaves. You never could have stopped it. We'd all have been against you." Stannard twisted around to stare fascinated into the back seat, where Deerbush had gently laid Vi down. "You were right to do that, Todd. You were never more right in anything in your life."

Deerbush was more tired than he had ever been. He felt haunted, and he knew that that was something he would never lose.

He saw the church beside the road, its spire and walls a flat bulking shape in the darkness, solid only where the edge of his headlight beam touched the weathered brown shingles. He stopped the car and got out. He opened the trunk and then walked over to the rusted pipe railing that ran around the churchyard. He stood there for a little while, and then he went back to the opened trunk of the car. He came around to Stannard carrying a hubcap he'd pried loose with the big screwdriver from the tool box, and the flat steel top of the box itself.

"Here," he said. "We can use these to dig with."

Stannard got unsteadily out of the car. "She was like a petulant child," he said. "It was love she demanded. Absolute, complete love."

Deerbush thrust the hubcap into his hands. "Here," he said. "We'd better get this done. And quit harping on it."

"Yes," Stannard said vaguely. "Of course. Deerbush--what could stave off a demand like that? *Why* couldn't she get to you?"

Deerbush leaned over into the back seat and lifted Vi out, holding her with all the gentleness he had. He cradled her in his arms.

"All her life she looked for it--" he said, "for just one person who could *really* love her....And then she found him."

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