ANY MAN COULD HAVE HER—
IF HE PAID THE PRICE

Lust for Love

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THE STRANGE STORY OF VOLUPTUOUS
IVI — WHOSE COMPULSION WAS
TO BESTOW RAPTURE AND THEN PAIN!
Marion had never been so angry in her life. "That's the worst yet," she raved. "That's the meanest thing any man can do to any girl. Now get out of here, fast. I hope I never lay eyes on you again."

Dick's face was completely blank. "You asked me to make love to you and I did."

"You did not. It was her you were making love to in your mind. Me," she said grimly, "I was just the gal who wasn't there."

There was nothing to say. Marian was perfectly right.

It had been Vivi's lips he had kissed, Vivi's loveliness he had caressed, the thought of Vivi to which his blood had hotly responded.

Marian had plenty to offer a man. More than he had ever dreamed that she had.

But he had closed his eyes—and seen, caressed, and hungered only for a red-headed girl with hell in her eyes and heaven in her voice . . .
PART ONE

Lessons in Love
CHAPTER 1

The red-headed girl on the bed opened her eyes to the early morning desert sunshine which flowed into the room like pale liquid gold. Instantly she was wide awake and completely alive with vigorous, animal energy, eager to leap out of bed. She did, and went to the door into the adjoining room. On the bed lay a fair-haired boy, his arm still crooked across his face, just as he had placed it before he fell asleep. There was a tender half-smile on his mouth. He was twenty-one and, sleeping, he looked like a beautiful boy of about fifteen. Watching him, Vivi Brady felt a little sorry for him, and somewhat ashamed of the trap she was planning to spring on him.

Then she felt angry at her own momentary weakness.

The kid was asking for it, wasn't he?
The original idea had been for him to double-cross her, hadn't it? If he'd had the guts or the know-how he would have done it. Pity for his youthful innocence? Hell, his innocence was his own lookout. She had little Vivi to care for, and nobody else. And she'd better not forget it.

"Wake up, honey," she whispered.
She leaned over and put her lips to his cheek. The boy opened his eyes. They were deep, luminous blue with long, upturned black lashes.

After he's had a little experience, Vivi thought, those eyes are going to raise hell around boudoirs.
"Love me," he begged, and his arms went around her.
For a moment she allowed him to enjoy her proximity.
She was not without her own responsive enjoyment. There was a sharp, piercing thrill in the sensation aroused by his moist lips on hers. “Oh, you sweet, wonderful thing,” he moaned.

The phone beside the bed rang, reminding Vivi that by day she was supposed to be manager of a swank desert guest ranch.

Mike Morritt was on the line. Right away Vivi knew that she was going to have trouble with the guy. Mike was in charge of the horses and stables. One of his jobs was to escort the guests on horseback trips over the desert trails. He was expected to point out spots of historic interest and to make with a little spiel about the hardships, the fortitude and faith in Divine guidance of the Spanish priests who had first broken these trails.

On this particular Saturday, Mike informed her, he felt allergic to Hollywood dudes. He wasn’t in the mood to play nursemaid to a bunch of crummy phonies who didn’t know one end of a horse from the other. Neither was he in the mood to spout a lot of malarkey about a bunch of guys who’d been dead for three centuries.

Vivi said furiously, “You buzzard, you’ve been drinking again.”

Mike said, sure he had. Did she have any objections?

Then Vivi thought of something else. “You probably had that blonde waitress there last night. You haven’t been worth your salt since you took up with that wench.”

“Honey, your jealousy is showing.”

“I ought to fire you!”

“Am I supposed to be scared?”

Vivi slammed down the phone, wondering why a few insolent words from Mike Morritt could set her to seething inside. There were close to a hundred employees on the ranch, including the Indian girls who came in on a part-time basis to do the cleaning and dirty work around the cottages. With all of them she kept the upper hand and they were no trouble at all; one
piece of insolence, and out they went. She was as sure of herself as a fine piece of precision machinery. The waitresses considered her a hellcat to work for. They all knew she was the mistress of a Los Angeles millionaire. They also knew that the millionaire owned this ranch and had put her in charge.

She turned her glance back to the boy on the bed. "You got to get up and get out of here," she said. "Get on back to your own cottage. I never know how early the maid will come in."

Dick Wilkins lay propped on one elbow. "I don't want to go," he said. "I just want to lie here and look at you."

She was something to look at, and no one knew that better than Vivi herself. She paused in front of the mirror and looked at the statuesque perfection of her long, beautiful legs and the firm thrusting mounds of her bosom. Her hair, more gold than red, was loosened and it fell nearly to her waist.

Through the mirror, she watched Dick's eyes. She knew what he was thinking about. It irritated her. She wanted to get rough with him, tell him to get the hell out and be quick about it. Then she remembered all that was at stake.

"I'm going in to take a shower, honey," she told him. "You get up and dress like a good boy. Please."

"Stop calling me a boy," he muttered. "I'm not a child. Maybe I seem like one, compared to my old man. If an old guy is what you want, maybe you'd better stick to him."

Vivi walked back to the bed. "I thought we had all that out last night," she said. "I thought we weren't going to talk any more about that."

Dick swung his legs over the bed, lit a cigarette, and smoked it with the dejected air of a very young man who was up against a very old and a very sordid situation. On one side he saw something that seemed smeared
with dirt, on the other the loveliness of a first passionate
yearning. Until last night he had been an innocent.
This girl, who had ended all that, was his father's
mistress. For a second or two she would seem absolutely
repulsive to him. Then the very repulsion would increase
her fascination.
He looked at her as if he did not trust her at all. "Last
night you said you'd marry me. Did you mean that,
Vivi?"
Frowning, Vivi sat down on the bed beside him. "Of
course I meant it, Dick. Before we went to sleep, we
had the whole thing planned."
"Yeah. I know." His brows remained thoughtfully
puckered. "But that was last night. We'd been drinking
a lot. I thought you might've changed your mind."
"Have you changed your mind, honey?"
"No. Hell, no." He leaned over, staring at the floor.
"But—I was just wondering. I'll have to quit college. I
won't get a cent out of the old man, and—" his eyes
moved up to her face "—neither will you. He'll kick
you out of this job, fast. My line is electronics and I'll
get a job. Only it may take a little time. We might have
some tough going. I—well, I just started wondering why
you would take a chance like that."
He reached for his silver cigarette case, but instead
of lighting a fresh smoke, he just kept turning the case
over and over in his palm. With feminine prescience, Vivi
knew that his clear flunking young mind was struggling
to truth and reality. And, she realized, that would cramp
her style!
The fine scheme that promised to pay off in a big way
would be punctured like a toy balloon.
She took the silver case from his hand, extracted a
cigarette and lit it before she said softly: "You know a
lot about me, Dick. You've read that detective's report
that your mother paid—how much for? Five hundred
bucks?"
“It isn’t necessary to bring that up, Vivi. I want to forget that muck. That wasn’t what I was talking about at all.”

She corrected him. “It was exactly what you were talking about, honey. And don’t think you weren’t.” Now she was the one who was turning the cigarette case. And she smoked nervously, without real enjoyment. As a rule she had great poise and command over herself.

“A year in prison on a manslaughter charge. That’s what the report stated. Didn’t it, Dick?”

“Let it rest,” he begged, “for God’s sake. I’m not holding it against you, Vivi. Don’t torment yourself. Don’t keep on about it.”

“I was a nurse,” she went on, in a completely toneless voice, “in love with an intern whose wife of two years was dying of an incurable disease. We were to be married—afterwards. Nurses were expensive. The intern did not have much money. So I took over night duty caring for his wife, and one morning she was found dead. The inquest showed she had had a fatal injection of morphine. Later, the jury decided that I had got drunk on the job. They decided that that fatal injection was criminal negligence on my part. The fact that the woman’s husband was my lover and fiancé didn’t help any. And he backed up the story against me.”

“Stop tormenting yourself,” Dick croaked. “I didn’t want to start all that again, for Christ’s sake.”

“All that was down on that detective’s report, wasn’t it, Dick? Even to one of the headlines that made such interesting reading in my little town: RED-HEADED NURSE SENTENCED TO YEAR IN PRISON. VIVI BRADY HELD GUILTY IN DEATH OF SWEETHEART’S WIFE. We weren’t even lovers,” she continued, still in that dead, flat voice which held no feeling at all. “But he said we were, at the trial.”

She took another cigarette, but instead of lighting it she simply stared at it for a minute, then started to pull it apart.
"My old home town," she said musingly. Then she was silent, while her mind painted a quick, bitter picture of a small southern town, famous for its picturesque quaintness and tiny antique shops, for its big, imposing statues of Confederate Army heroes. And also famous, in Vivi's opinion, for never giving a girl a break. The kind of a town where a girl was either a lady or a slut. If she was a lady first, then fell from grace, it was all the worse for her. If she had anything at all to do with a married man, even though their relations might have been above reproach, she became a bad girl. And to get herself mixed up in scandal, in a murder charge—well, then she was done for. Any soft, thoughtful voices that might have spoken up in her defense were drowned out by the merciless, blatant shriek: Shameless Murdering Harlot! And if there were a few whisperings to the effect that the young doctor had pulled a fast one, that he had his own reasons for wanting to get rid of both wife and sweetheart, no one paid much attention.

"And there was all the rest of it, wasn't there, Dick?" Vivi went on. "The way I took off for parts unknown, the minute I got out of that damned jail. Disappeared for months. Turned up in Los Angeles, living for a while with a crummy little guy who had no visible means of support. Doing sordid little jobs which involved the display of my body. The kind of jobs known in polite circles as 'supplying divorce evidence.' And then, of course, the final act in our interesting little drama. Should we give that act a title, Dick?"

She smiled. "Yes. I think so. I think it deserves a title. Shall we say: Redhead Makes Good. Because in the kind of circles where I've traveled, honey, I really did hit the jackpot. In the person of your old man, Henry Wilkins, owner of the biggest restaurant chain in Los Angeles. What more could a girl ask?"

Dick had risen and was rapidly getting into his clothes. His face looked sick. "I'm sorry, Vivi. But I
can't listen to any more of that talk. It's like you were deliberately trying to castigate yourself." Then he rushed for the bathroom and she heard him throwing up.

"It was all in the detective's report," Vivi reminded him coolly the minute he returned. "You brought the thing along when you came here. You were all set to use it as a weapon against me. If I wouldn't agree to take my pretty curves out of your father's love life, you were going to run to him with my ugly past. You and Mama were going to open his eyes, by golly."

She laughed. "But the joke would have been on you if you'd tried it, honey."

There was precious little about her that Henry Wilkins didn't already know. Henry just didn't give a damn. She was an adorable creature who had been the victim of an unjust and cruel fate. That was the way Henry looked at it.

He had never been really happy in his whole damned life—until he met Vivi. Her beautiful body and her knowledge of how to please a man, they were all Henry cared about.

Suddenly angry at what seemed like stupidity, Vivi remembered herself that with Dick she was playing for the biggest stake of all. She had talked too much. Allowed her mind to betray her with too much raking into the past.

Get the boy to marry her. That was the thing to concentrate on, to work at with the cleverness of her mind and the irresistible power of her body. Once she was over that jump, she ought to be set. Henry's son. His only son. The apple of his eye. Dick married, hooked by the woman who had been his own mistress? That ought to bring Henry on the run and ready to offer anything to get the poor, starry-eyed kid off the hook. And Vivi knew exactly what her terms would be.

The ownership of this ranch. A business of her own that would mean she was sitting pretty for life. And if
anybody thought she was over-shooting her mark, just wait and see.

She went into the little adjoining dressing room. When she returned to the bedroom, she was wearing tailored slacks and a halter. Dick was standing by the window, smoking again. Way in the distance loomed the towering mountains which made a bowl of the desert. It was a stupendous sight. But Dick saw none of it. His mind was too furiously at work painting an ugly canvas of its town. He had never liked his father. When he was small, he had often wished that he could kill his father. Now he was wishing it again as he pictured the old man with Vivi in his arms.

“What are you thinking about, honey?” Vivi walked over to him, gave him a playful slap, then slipped her arm around him. “Don’t you still like me?” she cooed.

He turned his face toward her, and she saw the look in his eyes which told her all she wanted to know. She felt a little sorry for him. Poor, naive kid. He didn’t understand what had hit him the night before. By the time he found out, he’d be a wiser if sadder young man. Still, he had to grow up. Many, many years from now he’d probably be boasting to his grandchildren about the redhead in his youth. Then he would chuckle over how easily he’d been taken.

“You were right, honey,” she told him. “I shouldn’t have raked up all that dirt about myself. But I figured it was on your mind, that it would keep you from—well, trusting me. I don’t pretend to be a madonna, Dick. But on the other hand—for five hundred bucks any detective can come up with some cold, ugly little facts. They may damn a girl to hell and beyond. But they don’t tell a thing about what she’s really like. And they don’t tell a thing about what pushed her into some of the things she really did do. Were you ever hungry, Dick? I mean really hungry, and no money to buy food with? Or stuck in some jerkwater town in the west where
you couldn’t get a job, and no money to get out of town? Or stranded in Los Angeles without a room to sleep in? And wherever you asked for a job, the boss automatically assumed that a few bedroom favors were included?”

“I wish to hell you’d stop talking about it!” Dick was nearly shouting. “Can’t you understand, Vivi? Now that I know you, it nearly drives me crazy, thinking of what you’ve been through. I don’t blame you for taking up with my old man. Some woman was sure to take him for some of his money. And in a way I’m glad that it was you.”

Then he added viciously: “And at the same time I could kill him for it, the old buzzard. Any old floozy would have been good enough for him. Why did it have to be you?”

He flung his arms around her. Again his boyish face was completely open and at the mercy of his emotions. “I’ve never had any confidence in myself, Vivi. That’s been my trouble. In everything. I can’t mix with people, I’m scared of them. I’m just scared, period. At college I’m known as a grind. That’s because I feel safe when I stick myself in my room with my books. Don’t ask me what I have to feel safe from. Human contacts, I guess. I just haven’t learned how to run with the herd. I don’t have the nerve to do the things that the rest of the herd do. That’s why I never had a woman until last night. I was afraid I wouldn’t make a satisfactory lover.”

Vivi smiled. His expression was so scowlingly earnest she was tempted to tell him that she was very glad he had saved himself for her. It wasn’t every day in the week that a girl came upon a handsome boy with the build of a Greek god and a virgin, to boot. She settled for telling him: “I’m a very lucky gal, honey.”

“I was just trying to explain something, Vivi. Why I got to wondering about you being willing to marry
me. Don't you see—why would a girl like you be willing to marry me?"

"Look," she said, and she gave him a push toward the door. "I can't talk about it any more right now. I've got to get to work."

"Can I come back again tonight?" he begged.

She nodded, smiling. "I thought that was all settled, honey."

Tonight, tomorrow night, and then on Monday—Yuma and a justice of the peace.

She shouldn't have mentioned so much in one breath. It was too heady a dose for a boy who was drunk with desire. He fairly leaped at her, ready to make love again. She had a little difficulty calming him down and getting him out of the cottage.

One minute after he had left, the phone rang.

The operator informed her that Los Angeles was calling. And then Henry's rather high-pitched, nasal voice spoke: "I told you that I wouldn't drive down tonight, baby doll. But I've changed my mind. I've decided to come after all."

Vivi said only, "Oh!"

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CHAPTER 2

DURING her year in prison, Vivi's cell mate, a black-haired girl named Maggie, was doing time for stabbing her boy friend with a butcher knife. The only apology Maggie made was for not having killed him. Said Maggie, "I was working in a hash house to support this guy, see? Then I find he's milking me of every dime to turn it over to this other dame, see? So when I caught him with her, I took a butcher knife to the rat, and may I
drop dead if I ever let another rat use me for a sucker. Once I get out of this hole, it's going to be the other way around. Every guy I meet, little Maggie is going to ask herself—Now, if I give him a little fun what do I stand to get out of it? Put it on a practical basis, and take him for all he's got.”

Maggie had an active, energetic brain, and as time went on she gave a great deal of earnest thought to Vivi's future. She was fascinated by Vivi's stunning looks, awed by her superior intelligence, and unable to understand why Vivi had not hooked herself a rich guy long ago or why she had wanted to be a nurse. Nursing was hard work. As Maggie understood it, a nurse spent a great deal of her life scrubbing bathtubs and emptying bed-pans.

“And with what you've got! Well, honey, I hope you've learned your lesson from this doc who gave you the double-cross. After you get out of the can, I hope you'll turn over a new leaf and lead the right kind of life.”

Vivi often wondered how much listening to Maggie's tough, cynical talk had to do with her later approach to the man problem. Quite a lot, she sometimes thought.

During all of those dismal, horrible months in prison, Maggie was Vivi's only friend. Maggie was the only one who showed her any affection, any sympathy. She was the only one who believed that her trial had been a farce and that Vivi had been framed by a man who was the real murderer of his wife.

Having hung their heads in appropriate shame, Vivi's family had washed their hands of her. Her one-time friends had pulled a disappearing act which verged on magic. She knew that her career as a nurse was over before it had really begun, so she had no hopes and plans for the future.

She had only Maggie, and Maggie helped her to grin and bear it by showing her the importance of being tough and hard-boiled. Maggie's daily lesson of hope
and courage was as simple as A B C. The girl who got the breaks made the breaks for herself. And the hell with who got hurt.

"Don't be soft," Maggie preached. "I played it soft once. I fell for a smooth line and that sucker game called love, and look where it landed me. But never again."

Not for Vivi, either. She had walked into her prison cell, a beaten, horribly hurt girl with panic in her soul and her pride in the dust.

She had walked out, a year later, bitter, frozen, and hard as nails. She had decided to play the game Maggie's way. From now on she'd look for a rich sucker. She didn't expect one to drop in her lap, just by snapping her fingers. But she had learned to be patient. After all, a jail cell was the best place on earth to learn the lesson of patience. And she had time. Christ, all she had was time. And whenever she was tempted to be soft, or to worry about moral considerations, or to give the other fellow a break—all she had to do was think of what Maggie had said to her.

Because she had wanted to get as far away as possible from the old home town, Vivi had made up her mind to head for California. But it took her several months to get there—and a succession of gentlemen of assorted types whom she endeavored to forget as soon as they had served their economic function.

With something resembling an inner grimace, she learned how to surrender her body, and at the same time surrender nothing that was really herself.

Well, she got along and she got to Los Angeles. But some of it had been rough going.

There was the matter of irregular meals, often for days at a time, no really nourishing food. Doughnuts and coffee. Coffee and cigarettes. Cigarettes and hot dogs. More coffee and cigarettes. One day she collapsed on the street. It was a week before she regained consciousness. She opened her eyes on a shabby little room.
and a shabby little guy with red hair, ferret eyes, and an evil grin.

His name was Mickey Dorris. Next to Maggie, he turned out to be as good a friend as Vivi had ever had. He drove an independent taxi. He had been cruising around, looking for a fare, on the day that Vivi was taken ill. “I ain’t a guy for picking up sick dames,” Mickey said. “I like my dames full of hell and good health. It was that red hair of yours that made me weaken. I said to myself, hell, it would worry me all my life if I left a fancy redhead sprawled there in the street. That, I said to me, is no way to treat a redhead.”

For the best part of the year that followed, Vivi shared Mickey’s apartment, his bed, and his money when he happened to have any. Mickey’s taxi was a sideline which bored him. It took up too much time, brought in too little money. Mickey’s idea was to make a lot of dough, fast, with no work involved. His favorite occupation was studying the Racing Form, working out a system for playing the horses, then placing long shot bets. He always lost, but he never got discouraged. Vivi told him he was crazy. Not that it was any of her business, really. She was only sticking with Mickey until something else broke.

One day Mickey came home with the announcement that he was starting a detective agency. He said Vivi could be a great help in putting it over. Mickey’s “office” turned out to be a desk with phone service in a shabby, Main Street office.

The business in which Vivi was to be such a help turned out to be an old racket. When a woman was needed to provide divorce evidence, Vivi would be the woman who was “caught” in some strange bedroom with some man she had never seen before and would never see again. Her body would be the one which the camera would capture when the detective and the cameraman barged in. Mickey was to be the detective.
Mickey said, did she know any easier way to make a hundred bucks? And anyway, he'd done a few favors for her. So how about her doing a little favor for him, huh? It wouldn't kill her, doing a little thing like that. Would it?

She was squeamish at first. Then she remembered Maggie. She knew darned well what Maggie would say. "Well, it's a way to make some easy dough, kid. And I guess it won't dirty you up any more than you've already been dirtied."

Vivi played along until she had close to fifteen hundred dollars saved up. Then she walked out on Mickey, rented an apartment in the Wilshire district, and bought herself some swell clothes. She figured she was set to go. This was what she had been waiting for. Money to turn herself into a classy looking article. Put up a front.

She paid two hundred dollars for a dress at I. Magnin's. It was black and very plain. So plain that no one would have noticed the dress particularly, if not for the astonishingly seductive lines of Vivi's slender hips, her exquisitely moulded bosom.

She paid fifty dollars for an ounce of perfume. She believed in perfume. The ads weren't all lies. Once she had read an article which explained the potency of exotic perfume. It could be very exciting to some men, the article said. Not that Vivi expected to have much trouble starting the excitement, once she found the man she was looking for.

She started dining out. Always alone. Always at one of the good hotels where men with money were on the lookout for a pretty woman who looked lonely—and available.

The Biltmore was her favorite hunting ground.

It was in the lobby at the Biltmore that she first saw Henry Wilkins. A tremendously built man with a bald head and a pinkish complexion, he was seated on a lounge directly across from Vivi. He and another man
were discussing politics. He kept looking at Vivi who sat with her lovely legs crossed, leafing through a magazine. Once she looked up and met his eyes boldly. His smallish mouth wavered in an uncertain smile. Vivi did not smile back.

Presently his companion got up and left, and Henry came over and sat down beside her. "Do you mind if I sit here?"

Vivi only shrugged. Then he made some remark about the weather. She shrugged again. "I wonder," he said finally, "if you'd let me buy you a drink."

At that she turned, looked him over, gave him the icy stare. "You happen to be wasting your time." She spoke in the cool, detached, faintly amused voice of a girl who never allowed herself to be picked up.

Then she really was amused. His quick flush of embarrassment, his awkward attempt at apology, proved that he was a new hand at this old game. He fished a card from his pocket and handed it to her. "I'd like to introduce myself," he said. "I'm in the restaurant business. Anyone can tell you that I'm a perfectly respectable character. I've never," he added, "tried to pick up a woman in a hotel lobby before."

Vivi smiled. She was studying the card, which interested her strangely. "Then why start with me?" she asked.

He smiled back at her. "Do I have to answer that?"

"It might be interesting to hear the answer, Mr. Wilkins."

"Very well, then." Again the flush spread over his big, kindly face. "I think you're the most beautiful woman I ever saw in my life. I felt that I just had to get acquainted with you."

After that, they went to the cocktail bar together. Before they left, nearly two hours later, Henry had told her about his wife with whom he had very little in common, about his son whom he had never got to know
very well, about the hundred and fifty dollars with which he had started in the restaurant business, and how he had run it up to more money than he knew what to do with.

Henry said, "A man spends the best years of his life working to make a lot of money. And all for what?"

Vivi continued her cool, sweet, sympathetic smile at that query. The dear, sweet man thought he had posed the sixty-four thousand dollar question, but she knew the answer: she knew very well how to help him get rid of some of the money which seemed a burden to him! She could have died laughing. She was pretty sure that she'd struck pay dirt.

Right from the start, Henry seemed to be reliving his youth with her. It pleased him to pay court to her, like a love-struck boy in the throes of his first crush. Vivi played it his way. She cooed over the flowers which he sent, the perfume, the exquisitely bound copy of Indian Love Lyrics. Just to prove she was a gal of endless endurance and fortitude, she allowed Henry to spend part of an evening reading some of the lyrical love poetry to her. She wondered how long it would take for him to come across with a real luxury item.

It took nearly a month before he showed up with a diamond bracelet. Vivi remembered Maggie then. And so, bright and early the next morning, she was on her way to a jewelry store. She discovered that the pretty little bangle had set Henry back close to one thousand bucks. She was suitably grateful. That same night—and it was the first time—she took Henry for her lover.

For a time, Vivi was perfectly content to be his mistress and nothing else. It was nice to have no further money worries. It was delightful to see some luxury item in a shop window—a tricky hat, a silver fox fur, a stunning set of costume jewelry—and know that she could go right into the store and buy it. It was a relief not
to worry about what would happen to her if she were sick.

She even looked forward to the evenings she spent with Henry. Henry wasn't any fireball as a companion. But he was invariably kind, his conversation was not too dull and his love-making not very hard to take. And she was so damned sick of spending evening after evening by herself. Or, what was worse, delivering her favors to some utter louse.

It was a phase of contentment which was bound to pass.

Suddenly, without any warning at all, Vivi found herself bored and fed up with the whole setup. What the hell, she said to herself. This isn't getting me anywhere. Any fool knew where these middle-aged-man-and-his-dollie setups invariably ended: with the dollie out on her fanny, wondering what hit her. Vivi put her mind and her imagination to work and gave Henry the surprise of his life.

“Darling,” she announced, “a girl has to feel she's doing something with her life. You've been very good to me, Henry. But I'm not the type to settle for being supported by a rich man. How would you like to set me up in a kind of business, honey?”

“You're nuts,” Henry said. He had a rather antiquated outlook on these matters. Being a kept woman, Henry believed, was a kind of career in itself. Anyway, he liked things just as they were. Knowing that this gorgeous girl was his property suited him right down to the ground. He didn't see any reason for complicating a situation which was just about perfect as it was.

“I have a little surprise for you, baby doll,” Henry said. He put her in his car, drove her out to the beach and led her into a house which was hidden from the highway by shrubbery which grew tall over a redwood fence.

The fence surrounded the house on three sides. To
the front was a small, private beach leading down to the ocean. The house itself was small, brand new, beautifully appointed in every sense. It would have been an ideal spot for a bride and groom. It would also, Vivi decided, be a swell spot if you wanted to bury yourself alive.

“What’s the idea?” she asked Henry, after he had showed her around.

“It’s yours,” Henry said. “If you want it, that is. I’ll buy it for you.”

Vivi strolled around the rooms, taking a second look. She seemed very thoughtful. Henry followed her, step by step. He looked pretty proud of himself. “I’ve been looking for a place to hide you away, baby doll. I’ll enjoy picturing you in a place like this. Waiting for me to come to you.”

She turned and stared at him. “A love nest, in other words. A hideaway love nest.”

“Why, yes.” He smiled. “If you want to put it that way.”

Her anger flared up, and out of bounds. “Why, you damn fool!”

He looked deeply offended. “That’s a queer way for you to talk,” he said. “I don’t think I deserve that from you, Vivi.”

“Well, I don’t care what you think. I’m no damned doll, waiting for Papa to come around and pick me up and play with me. What would I do stuck away off here? Just what in hell do you figure I’d do with myself?”

Henry shrugged. “Just what other women did,” he said. “Go shopping. Go to shows. Rest. Look after yourself. You might learn to play the piano for a hobby. I would be perfectly willing to buy you a piano if you’d like one. I’ve always thought,” Henry said, “that it was a beautiful sight, a pretty woman playing the piano.”

“So I’m to spend my life playing the piano—and wait-
ing for you to show up, after your fun, two or three nights a week.”

Then, Vivi became hysterical. It was as if a tightly wound spring inside her had suddenly broken. She laughed and wept, raced up and down the room, pounded the wall with her fists. Once she shrieked at Henry, “Christ, I didn’t know there were fools like you left in the world. I thought you all died off with the dodo.”

Henry tried to calm her down. He begged her to snap out of it. “If you don’t want the house, you don’t have to take it.”

A little later he asked her, “What is it you do want?”

Finally, with great effort, she pulled herself together. “I’ll tell you what I want,” she said. “I’ll tell you exactly what I want.”

He was incredulous. He told her that she was crazy and the whole scheme was perfectly preposterous. Buy a large stretch of desert property. Start a swank, desert guest ranch. Play for the big money, Hollywood crowd. The rich sucker trade from the east. And let her run the whole thing. Let her prove what she could do with it.

“You don’t know anything about catering to the public,” Henry reminded her. Furthermore, he was not looking for any more plus investments. It would simply mean more outlay, more taxes, something more to worry about.

Aside from all that, why in hell should he let Vivi get that far away from him?

He could come down on weekends, Vivi said. “So I could,” Henry said glumly. “But in-between,” he said, “I’d be worrying that some other man was getting you away from me. I’d be jealous as hell.”

“I didn’t know,” Vivi confided sweetly, “that you were the jealous type, honey.”

But even if he was, Vivi still had to consider things from a practical standpoint. “Say you were to die suddenly, Henry. Then where would I be?”

“Are you counting on my dropping dead after my
next hearty meal?" Henry spoke sarcastically. He was hurt and disappointed about Vivi's reaction to the house.

"Darling," Vivi said, with the utmost earnestness, "I hope you will live to a ripe old age. But a girl never knows, does she?"

Anxious to get the argument over with, Henry decided to concede a point. "If that's what's worrying you," he said, "I'll draw up a new will. I'll see my lawyer about it tomorrow. I promise to see that you are taken care of in the event of my death. God knows," he added vehemently, "the last thing I'd want would be to have you left high and dry. You mean too damn much to me."

"I don't think I'm asking for anything so unreasonable," Vivi said. "All I want is a chance to make use of my energies and my creative ability. And to train myself in a line of work where I can always make a good living."

She did not add that she had every intention of getting this ranch entirely in her own name. One step at a time. Don't try to feed the guy more than he could swallow at one dose. Was he ever likely to find her like again? Wasn't she pretty to look at? Didn't she please him in bed? Hadn't he himself said that it was worth having lived, just to have known the hellish loveliness of her body twisting and springing in his arms? Just to have her wrap the rope of her red hair around his neck and whisper that he was her lover and her slave boy?


But it took over a month for Vivi to win the battle. And from the day the ranch opened and Vivi moved down to the desert to take over, Henry began proving that he'd been absolutely right about one thing. He no longer trusted her out of his sight. And since she was out of his sight most of the time, with two hundred
miles of valley and desert between them, that meant that he did not trust her at all.

From fairly mild beginnings, Henry's jealousy had sprouted new shoots and spread like wild fire until it had become an obsession with him. He was the typical middle-aged, balding, fat man who mistrusted his own powers to hold a beautiful young girl. Recently he'd become a damn nuisance. He would make unannounced trips down to the ranch, walking in on Vivi at midnight. If he phoned and could not get in touch with her immediately, he was surly and suspicious when he did get her. When he came down to the ranch for a day he would make it his business to snoop around among the employees.

"Spying on me," Vivi had shouted at him on one occasion, very recently. "Trying to get the help to gossip about me. Trying to stir up some dirt. Well, you listen to me, Henry. I won't stand for very much of that, believe me."

"And I won't stand for your cheating behind my back, you damned red-headed witch."

Immediately he was all humility and apologies for having said that. "Christ, baby, I'm sorry. It's just that I'm so crazy about you. It's just that I'm so scared some other man will steal my baby. I think about it all the time and it makes me sick. I think it's given me my ulcer."

But shortly after, a few malicious rumors came to his ears about Vivi and Mike Morritt, the stable man. The way the stories went, Vivi made unnecessary trips to Mike's shack. And Henry could see for himself that Mike was a big, husky brute. Mike was just the kind of man that Henry was not and never had been; he'd been after Vivi ever since to fire the fellow. When she refused, they had one of their worst fights.

But this was one week that Vivi had felt perfectly certain that she was safe from Henry's unannounced visits. Henry was thinking of selling his restaurant chain.
If he could get a good enough offer he would sell. A prospective buyer was flying from New York and Henry was to have been tied up with him this evening and all day tomorrow. That was the reason Vivi had felt safe to make her arrangements with Dick.

It had looked like clear sailing. Now Henry was on the phone, telling her that his plans were changed and he’d be down this evening. She knew that she was in a tight spot. She felt scared, trapped, even a little cheap. She had a quick vision of how Dick would take it if she told him that his father was coming and he’d have to scram. That would be the end of that pretty scheme.

She sparred for time, asking Henry what had changed his mind. He said that the New York man had postponed his trip, and he himself had picked up a cold. He thought the desert air would do him good. Vivi struggled frantically to grab a quick, plausible excuse from her usually quick mind. Anything to make Henry stay where he was. But her mind produced only a blank, and Henry repeated that he was coming.

She heard the door open and glanced around. One of the ranch guests, complete with hangover, came stumbling into the room. The identity of the intruding guest surprised her as much as Henry’s call had alarmed her. She spoke into the receiver: “I’ll call you back later, Henry.”

Then she turned with a discreet smile to ask Barry Gordon what she could do for him. He was the Barry Gordon, the famous screen lover. The producer of synthetic thrills for teenaged school girls and fortyish housewives. At the moment, and in the flesh, the poor chap didn’t look as if he had what it took to thrill a healthy fish. Vivi felt sorry for him. Too many women suing him for fathering their unborn love babies, she supposed. Poor devil.

It had him all confused, no doubt. It would confuse any man.
“I’m sorry for butting in here like this, Miss Brady,” he apologized. “But—I’ve got to talk to somebody. My wife is threatening to kill me. I think she’s losing her mind.”

CHAPTER 3

Vivi invited him to sit down. Few women were so singularly blessed as to have Barry Gordon seated on their bed, even with the most innocent of motives. No doubt there were women who were able to watch Barry’s impassioned kisses, hot enough to burn up the celluloid which reproduced them, without wishing they could be on the receiving end. But Vivi was not one of them. And she had never been one to condemn Barry when one of these sordid paternity suits were brought against him. She regarded the girls as blackmailing chiselers and Barry as more sinned against than sinning.

“Would you like a shot of brandy, Mr. Gordon?” Vivi asked, after she had lit a cigarette for him; his hand was shaking too badly to light it for himself. She wondered if there was any truth to what he had just said about his wife. Everyone knew that Blanche Gordon staged screaming, jealous scenes when she was drunk. And she’d been drinking steadily during the week they’d been here, a week that was to have been a “rest cure” for the Great Lover who was caught in a squeeze between finishing a picture that was to be the best of them all, and another messy law suit which might mean the end of everything.

“No, thanks. Not a thing, thanks. I’ve already had too much to drink. I have a slight heart condition and too much liquor is the same as so much poison.”
Then, with a sudden smile which flashed life and charm back into his face, he changed his mind. "Maybe just a very small brandy," he said. "And by the way, please call me Barry. Please think of me as just a plain, homespun, farm boy who made the mistake of his life when he left the farm."

He sipped the brandy which Vivi put in his hand. He glanced around the room, then he glanced at Vivi who had seated herself on the edge of the bed beside him. His first grin wavered across the wide, sensually curved lips which were one of his photogenic assets. "You think I'm nuts, don't you?" he inquired, a little sheepishly.

Vivi smiled. "We all have our low moments, Barry."

"Oh, sure. Only my wife really did try to shove me in front of a moving truck. Last night, I like to take walks late at night. I like to get out by myself, away from her vicious tongue. Blanche hates walking. Last night she insisted on coming along. She'd been giving me hell all day and all evening. You'd think she'd run out of spleen but she never seems to. All I've got to do is look twice at a pretty dame. That starts her off. Then she starts drinking. The more she drinks, the worse she gets."

He looked around at Vivi again. "This time it's you she's beefing about."

"Me?" Vivi was astonished.

She laughed. "That doesn't make any sense at all."

Barry explained again that nothing had to make any sense to start that dame beefing.

He asked Vivi if he could have a little more brandy. When she brought it, he got out a gold case and offered her a cigarette. He seemed to be getting himself under control. It had been more a matter of nerves ready to crack than hangover. Vivi understood that now. And she also began to understand something else. For all of his touted success, his fantastic salary, his beautiful cars,
his beautiful yacht, his supposedly irresistible appeal for women, at rock bottom Barry Gordon was just a very ordinary guy. Not a moron, as some of his critics would have it, nor a depraved despoiler of teen-aged school girls.

Maybe it was the flesh and blood man sitting here beside her that made her see the difference. Seeing him without a jacket and tie and needing a shave, his black beard casting its morning shadow, Vivi sighed. She regretted having an illusion destroyed.

On the other hand, she rather liked the guy as he really was.

"I still don't see where I come into the picture," she reminded him.

"Well, you're a very stunning looking girl," said Barry, twirling the brandy glass between his fingers. "I made the mistake of asking Blanche if she'd ever seen more beautiful red hair. I suggested that you should enter one of those contests. You know the kind. Women with the most beautiful hair in America. And right after that—" he made a grimace, "I decided I'd like to stay on for a month. I told Blanche I liked the service, the food, the general atmosphere. I haven't been feeling up to par. Too many enceinte dames dragging me into court, I guess."

He made another grimace, then drained the brandy glass.

"Anyway, I said I wanted to stay on here. She said I was after you. So then the fun started, and she's been on my neck ever since. Last night comes the climax. She screams that I've cheated on her for the last time. Then she gives me a push. If that truck driver had been liquored up, I sure wouldn't have any more paternity suits to worry about."

Vivi stared at him in wide-eyed astonishment. "It doesn't seem possible, Barry. And on account of me . . ."
figure it out, either. Of course, he explained, Blanche had denied vehemently that there was anything intentional about what happened. She claimed that her ankle had turned, that she had reached for him to keep from falling.

“Maybe that’s the truth, Barry.”

“No. There have been too many other things.”

He got up, walked over to the mirror and took a look at himself. Then he threw a grin over his shoulder to Vivi who sat watching him from the bed. “I look like hell, don’t I? I wonder if you’d mind if I went in and used your shower.”

Vivi said, “No. Of course not.”

She led the way into the bathroom, making sure there were fresh towels.

“I guess I’ll just never understand the feminine make-up,” Barry declared, as he stripped off his shirt. “In a lot of ways, I’m an ideal husband, as Hollywood husbands go. Blanche helped me get my start, and I’ve always been grateful for it. She was a pretty good Broadway actress at one time, you know. And she had the contacts that got me my first Hollywood contract. Well, I always figured that ingratitude is a lousy, stinking human trait. Me, I’d feel like cutting my own throat if I kicked Blanche out because I’d got to the top of the heap and she was only a has-been. I’ve never thrown it up to her that she is ten years older than I am. And another thing I’ve never done—”

He pulled off his socks and for a moment stood flexing his muscles and admiring his own physique.

Vivi stood admiring it, too.

“She,” Barry was saying, “has had her affairs on the side from the minute I married her. I always knew it, and I’ve never said a damn word about it. Never.”

This was another piece of information which Vivi found hard to swallow. “But if she’s so crazy about you, Barry—”
He tried to explain it to her, as he lathered soap over his face. He said that Blanche had supported him for two solid years, before he made a dime. That was another thing he'd never forgotten, and another reason why, in the beginning, he hadn't put up a howl about her stolen trips into other men's bedrooms. He knew that it didn't have anything to do with how she felt about him.

There were women, Barry continued to explain, who were simply incapable of getting the passionate satisfaction they wanted from any man. It had something to do with stuff that was put into their heads when they were kids. Set up inhibitions, and they could never get rid of them. Deep down, they really believed that sex was sinful and shameful. It spoiled an awful lot for them, later on. They could be passionate as hell, and still know they were missing something. They could be madly in love with one man, yet something would keep driving them to try other men, always hunting that something they craved.

"It's all beyond me," Vivi said, laughing. She started to leave the bathroom.

"Stick around," Barry said, swinging his leg over the stall shower enclosure. "I'm not proud." He drew the shower curtain around himself. But he was so tall she could see his head projecting above it—and she could see the outline of his body.

"I never expected to watch the famous screen lover taking a shower."

"This is a memorable moment for you, Vivi," he kidded her, scrubbing himself with soap until he was all lather. "You may well brag about this moment to your grandchildren."

He turned and moved his back for the stiff spray to catch it.

"By the way," he said. "You don't happen to know of a nice little business that's up for sale, do you? Say, a
cigar shop. Or a hot dog stand. Or even a lingerie shop. Preferably a lingerie shop," he added.

"Are you thinking of working for a living?" Vivi laughed. She assumed that he was being funny.

Barry assured her that he was not being funny. He said that he was perfectly serious about looking around for a business to invest some money in. He might need it, with all these law suits brought by silly girls who claimed he had assaulted them on his yacht by the light of the moon.

"Assault them!" he snapped. "Hell. They begged for it. Me, I just wanted to be kind, don't you understand?"

"Maybe you should sell your yacht," Vivi advised. "Or else have it equipped with a machine gun. Aim the gun at every female under seventy who tries to get aboard." She laughed.

The studio big-wigs, he said, were raising hell about all the ugly publicity. This last suit might be too much for them to stomach. Church organizations were writing in, threatening to ban every Barry Gordon picture. He had no assurance that his option would be taken up.

"I could be down and out before I knew what hit me," he said.

He wouldn't be the first one it had happened to, Vivi thought.

The phone rang and Vivi tossed the towel to him, went into the bedroom, and there was Henry again.

"What made you hang up on me in such a hurry?" he snapped.

"Someone came in, Henry."

"You had a man there with you!"

"You're crazy, honey. Stop being so suspicious."

"Who came in so that you had to hang up on me right away? You weren't even civil."

"I'm supposed to be running a business, Henry."

"Not in your bedroom. Who came in?"

"If you must know, Barry Gordon. He and his wife
are here at the ranch. He had a little business matter to talk over with me."

"Why doesn't he talk it over in your office? What's that phony lecher doing in your bedroom at eight o'clock in the morning?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake. Honestly, Henry, if you don't cut out this nonsense, you're going to ruin everything we've got. I'm getting good and sick of your carrying on. I've told you, he came here to talk to me about business."

"I'll bet. And I know what kind of business."

"Don't be vulgar, Henry."

"You've been sleeping with that phony thrill artist. I've heard you rave about one of his pictures. How any woman would want him for a lover. You probably had him there all night."

"Oh, shut up, Henry."

"I won't shut up. I may have made a fool of myself over you. But I'm not such a fool that I can't figure out what you're up to."

"Henry, is your ulcer troubling you?"

"I suppose if the truth were known, you've been double-crossing me from the very start. How did the two of you work it? Give his wife sleeping tablets? Then he came sneaking over to your cottage?"

"Henry, for the last time, cut it out."

"By God, I won't cut it out."

"Please, Henry. Stop saying things you don't mean."

"I intend to say exactly what I'm thinking, Vivi."

"Okay. Then say it to yourself. I don't have to listen."

She hung up.
Vivi turned to Barry, who was sitting on the edge of the bed again, still in his shorts. He was smoking a cigarette and grinning at her. The shave and the bath had done wonders for him. He seemed to have got his nerves calmed down, and completely forgotten that his wife was determined to make a widow of herself.

"The boy friend giving you a bad time of it?" he grinned.

Vivi walked across the room to draw the drapes at the low picture window which ran the width of one wall. It had just occurred to her that anyone strolling down the path might easily look in, recognize her companion, and in ten minutes flat it would be all over the ranch that the redhead and the movie actor were engaged in the more pleasant things of life.

If that word got to Dick, he would be gone from the place like a streak of greased lightning.

And if the word got to Barry's wife . . .

Vivi locked the door and wished she had a cup of coffee to go with the cigarette she lit.

Wordlessly, she returned to the bed and sat down beside Barry.

She noticed that Barry's glance seemed to be concentrated on her with considerable interest.

"You're a damned pretty girl," he remarked suddenly. "You've got it all over some of these Hollywood lovelies. You ought to see some of them before the makeup artists go to work on them. They look like hell and that's a fact. Me," declared Barry. "I like a dame that's built."
His fingers began to trickle up and down her back, as if he were playing the piano.

Then he said, “That guy you were talking to on the phone. Did he get sore at you on account of me being in your room?”

Vivi said, “Look. If you were serious about wanting to buy a business, how would you like to consider buying a restaurant business?” Then she amplified that. “I said consider buying it. Not actually buy. Just consider it seriously enough to make an appointment to talk the deal over with the owner. I’m talking about the Wilkins chain of cafeterias. I guess you’ve heard of them.”

“Who hasn’t?” Barry whistled softly. The Wilkins eating places were spread all over the Los Angeles area. They specialized in excellent coffee, hot cakes like Gran’ma used to make, sausage that only Wilkins could make, low prices. It was one of the business sagas of the town how Henry Wilkins had started the business on a shoestring and built it into a gold mine.

“Sure, I’m interested,” Barry said. “Only where do you fit into the deal? I mean—what’s your angle?”

Vivi jumped up to pace the floor. She was nervous as a witch. Too many schemes buzzing around in her mind, she supposed, and she was afraid of getting her wires crossed. She didn’t want to appear childish, silly, asking Barry Gordon to do this favor for her. But she had to think of something to keep Henry off her tail and this was all she could think of.

She stopped in front of Barry. “I’ll make it short and tawdry. Henry Wilkins happens to be my boy friend. My sponsor, so to speak. He owns this guest ranch. He thinks that he owns me. I want to get out from under and I have a little plan that may do it. But I’ve got to work fast and I’ve got to keep him away from here tonight. Everything depends on it.”

Barry was watching her with a heightened show of
interest. "So you're Henry Wilkins' sweetie," he said, "Well, well, well."

The idea seemed to intrigue him. "He's an old guy, isn't he? Isn't that kind of hard to take? Don't misunderstand me, Vivi. I'm not criticizing. It just happens to be something I've often wondered about, how a beautiful young girl can take on one of these old hogs." He grinned. "Maybe it's because—like I told you—I'm still a farm boy at heart."

Vivi was watching him, a hard little smile twisting the corners of her mouth. "Money," she said harshly. "A girl can make herself do anything—if she just keeps her mind on how well it will pay off."

Barry scrubbed the rug with his toes. "Well, I like money myself. God knows. Look here, please don't think I'm preaching. Hell, I'd be a fine one to preach about moral values. It's just that I've always figured the guy and dame stuff ought to be strictly for pleasure. There's nothing on earth can beat it. I'm a sucker for it." He grimaced, lighting a fresh smoke. "I guess that's the reason I've been easy pickings for so many cute, chiseling little dishes. But that's the way I'm made. That's the best reason I know of for making a lot of dough. To buy plenty of good old amour."

"And I," Vivi snapped, wondering why she should get so heated up on the subject, "take exactly the opposite viewpoint. I like money. I want money. I think a girl is stupid who doesn't use her amour, as you call it—and I do so admire your dainty choice of words, Barry—to grab all the money she can."

"So you grabbed off Henry Wilkins. Now the guy wants to sell his business. You want me to buy it." He grinned, reached for her, and she was aware of his fingers piano-playing again. "I never did care for women who put the cart before the horse. You want me to do a big favor for you, honey. And you have just explained, in a roundabout way, how you proceed about getting favors
done for you. Okay, beautiful. Let's proceed. I'm all for it."

"Well," she said, "now how would you say I stack up beside those bosomy Hollywood operators?"

He gathered her into his arms. "They aren't in your class, beautiful. You're in a class by yourself, believe me."

He took her lips then and he held them for a long time. Slowly Vivi felt the excitement begin to rise in her. Various elements seemed to fuse, producing a sharper and more profound sense reaction than any other man had ever given her.

He was Barry Gordon, the great lover—by remote control—of millions of women. He was all vigorous, strong, tall, handsome male—and when she stopped to think, she had never had that kind of a lover before.

Giving herself up to Barry's embrace, closing her eyes with a small sigh, she searched her mind for memories of pleasure with any man. There were none. With shock verging on horror, she realized that never in her whole life had she known the beauty and rapture and excitement that love was supposed to hold.

There had been only the urgency and drive and grim desperation of a girl set on achieving some selfish, ulterior end.

Right now she felt as if she were dreaming. Well, it was good to dream sometimes. It was good to give oneself up to sheer sensation, and the hell with all the rest of it.

Then she remembered something. She opened her eyes. A poignant feeling of sadness assailed her. Even now, when she hungered to give herself up to the passion and the promised ecstasy, she could not afford to. Again the self-seeking angle had to enter into it.

He was looking at her out of eyes that had darkened and had a new shine in them. His face seemed to have thinned and sharpened in a way that changed his whole
expression. His mouth had dampened, loosened. She felt his body tremble violently against her.

He was completely in the grip of his passion, Vivi could see it, could feel it. Why, she thought, he doesn't just take his love-making casually. Because he discovers something nice it would be a shame to pass up. She began to see why those baby-adventuresses had been able to put the squeeze on him. "Oh, Christ," he whispered. "You're so beautiful. You're so soft and sweet to touch. You're driving me crazy."

Then he picked her up, put her on the bed, and stretched himself beside her. "Don't move," he begged, when she tried to. He was leaning on one elbow, looking at her. "I'm trying to remember something." Her head was flung back and her red hair, loosened, spread like a gleaming, fiery shawl over the white sheet. Excitement began to race inside her.

"I think," he said softly, "that I saw you a thousand years ago. Just as you are now. We were lovers then. We promised each other that we would go on being lovers, on down through the corridor of time and the ages. We promised that we would always manage to find each other."

This flowery verbiage, which no doubt had been snatched out of one of his movie scenes, jerked Vivi back to a consideration of the practical.

"The question," she said wryly, "is not what we planned a thousand years ago. The question is—will you make a phone call to Henry Wilkins? And an appointment to see him this evening to discuss the sale of his business."

"Don't spoil this," Barry pleaded. "Don't spoil this heavenly moment with mundane talk about business." He drew her closer, put his lips to her throat. "The hell with business. I hate the word."

"But you said you wanted to buy a business. You said so."
"I know. But that was some minutes ago. Now my mind is on something else—something so beautiful, so sweet, so wonderful. Oh, you perfect creature, you. Do you know that I've fallen madly in love with you? All my life I've been seeking love. Now, at last, I've found it."

Vivi couldn't resist a grin. So the gal who brought that last suit against the guy hadn't been lying after all. In her interview with reporters, the girl had been quoted as quoting Barry: "He said I was the first and only real love of his life."

"Listen," Vivi said matter-of-factly, "in my own way I'm enjoying this as much as you are, you big handsome hunk of man," and she smiled at him with her beautiful green eyes, her juicy red mouth. "I'd like to relax and let nature work its own sweet will with me, the same as you. But I never could enjoy love properly when something was worrying my mind."

"Stop worrying, beautiful. I always let the directors and the tax experts and the old boys with one foot in the grave do the worrying. Those guys like to worry. Me, I like to love a beautiful woman."

"Please get this straight, Barry. I'm not asking you to really buy those damn restaurants. I just want you to phone this friend of mine and say you're interested in talking it over. Considering that you're supposed to make a quarter of a million on a picture, Henry will believe that you're a serious prospect. He'll think it's on the level."

For a moment Barry gave himself up to raucous laughter. "Honey," he declared, "that's the joke of the year. Me. A quarter of a million to invest in a business. Where's the brandy bottle? I'd like you to join me in a drink and a hearty laugh on that one. Honey, would you believe that I'm next thing to a pauper?"

"No. I wouldn't believe that," Vivi said. "Not that it matters. All I want you to do—"

"Well, it's a fact. First, the federal tax boys take me
to the cleaners. Then the state boys come up for their inning. Then my agent needs his dough because his sweetie has discovered inflation, and keeps telling him about it. Then come the sweet little innocents who claim that I made mamas out of them, sticking their greedy little paws in the till. And if there's anything left, after all those vultures take their pickings, Blanche takes over. That witch says I haven't enough sense to handle money, so she handles it for me."

It sounded pretty fantastic. It was also the literal truth, just the same, Vivi realized.

"My heart simply bleeds for you, honey," Vivi told him teasingly. She ran her fingers through his dark hair which had a nice, springy wave in it. She leaned over and traced the wide, full curve of his mouth with the tip of her tongue. Barry reacted as if he'd been plugged into a high voltage circuit.

Then he groaned, as he found her strong little hands stubbornly holding him at a distance. "A one-track mind," he sighed. "A most deplorable trait in a beautiful wench."

"Shut up, you," and laughing, she clapped her hand over his mouth. "This time you let me finish what I want to say. And for the last time, I'm not proposing that you even consider putting out any money. I just want you to make this appointment with the guy. I want you to tell him that you'll see him in Los Angeles this evening. Make the appointment for—oh, say around seven o'clock. You won't show up, naturally. But around eleven o'clock, you phone him again. Say you were unavoidably detained. Say you'll see him sometime tomorrow morning. There, now. That's all I'm asking you to do for me. That isn't so much, is it?"

"Well, for God's sake. If that's all you want, why didn't you say so? Here we've been wasting all this time talking. Sure, I'll do it. Why, beautiful, the way I feel about you, I'd be damn well tempted to go out
and rob a bank if you asked me to. Honest, Vivi. I’m in love with you. I mean it.”

Relaxing again, she smiled up at him. “In a way,” she said thoughtfully, “this may add up to a form of bank robbery. But I’ll be doing it, not you. I’m playing for big stakes, Barry.”

She clasped her hands behind her head, stretching her body so that it lay white, still, the delicate curves running into slender, fluid lines, as perfectly symmetrical as a statue. “I’m not exactly proud of what I’m up to,” she said with a trace of bitterness. “But pride is a luxury and some girls can’t afford it. They have to make up their minds what they want, then go after it and not be too choosy about their methods.”

Her eyes, somber for a moment, went back to Barry’s face. “You asked me how I could stomach a proposition like Henry Wilkins. Well, he happens to be my way of going after what I want.” She smiled, crossing one leg over the other, swinging one slim, high arched foot gently back and forth. “He hasn’t been too hard to take. He’s a nice, kindly, decent guy—except when he gets on one of his jealous rampages. He takes me to shows and restaurants and night spots when I’m in town. That part is perfectly okay. It’s sort of like going around with your father. As for the rest of it, well—” She laughed. “A girl learns to grin and bear it. She learns to do dress designing in her mind.”

She laughed again, with real amusement. “You’d be surprised at some of the snappy little models I’ve designed—at the oddest moments!”

“While the old boy was working on his snappy little model.” Scowling, Barry finished her sentence for her. Then, with a groan he pulled her into his arms. “Stop talking about the old buzzard,” he croaked. “Don’t you know that its terrible psychology to talk about—things like that? When another guy is so crazy and hungry for you?”
He searched again for her lips. Then for a little while there was no sound except the soft intake of their breathing, the soft whisper of a desert wind ruffling the shrubbery outside the cottage. Then the wind ran away, forgotten, and there was only a man sighing in delight as his lips kept returning again and again to the sweetness that was her giving mouth.

Vivi lay with her eyes closed. Then suddenly she became a wild and violent lover, deeply alive with this strange, first giving of herself, tortured with this first frantic need to give—and to surrender. There was genuine passion in what she gave to Barry Gordon, and in the final, triumphant conclusion, a fierce joy which she had never known before.

Later, breathless, exhausted, it was a strange thing to realize that this was her first real giving of herself. She understood that it was no particular quality about Barry himself that had brought on this frenzied experience. Strip him of his synthetic glamour, and he still looked an ordinary guy to her. But he appealed, he was a wonderful lover, and for the first time in her life she had accepted passion for the sheer enjoyment of it. The little by-play about Henry didn’t really count. She knew she could have wangled that favor. She sighed blissfully.

When he was ready to go, Barry came over to the bed and leaned down to kiss her. He remarked ruefully that Blanche would probably be in the dining room, waiting to give him hell.

Vivi sat up, jerked at his ear lobes, and gave him a quick, spicy kiss. At that, Barry said that he was in love with Vivi and just wanted her to remember that this wasn’t the end of it.

Vivi jumped up and pushed him toward the door. She told him she was very glad that he was in love with her and in her language, he was a honey. She understood that as soon as he glimpsed a new set of
fancy curves down by the swimming pool, he wouldn’t be in love with her any longer. But he’d still be a honey to her.

Then she opened the door, shoved him out to get his breakfast and whatever little viperish pleasantries Blanche might have cooked up and had waiting for him.

As a parting reminder, she told him not to forget to phone Henry Wilkins.

CHAPTER 5

When Dick Wilkins left Vivi that morning, his one thought was to be alone where he could dwell on the delights and wonders the night had bestowed upon him. It seemed astonishing a woman could give a man so much happiness. There was no question in his mind but that what had happened to him was love. Being an introvert and a reader, he had spent a great deal of wasted time trying to understand it from the pages that other men in love had written, to grasp how it felt, without having experienced it. He understood now how perfectly silly all that had been. And another puzzling thing was now made clear to him—all the beautiful, moving stories of the passionate love of men for the wantons of the world. Now he understood just how that could come about. Not that he wanted to classify Vivi as a wanton, exactly. And yet—how else could he classify her?

She was, he told himself angrily, what a cruel world had made her. And anyway, a man’s love did not settle on such and such a person because they had or had not conducted themselves according to certain standards. Love made its own rules.
Deciding to by-pass the ranch dining room, he got in his car and drove to the village two miles up the highway.

He went into the small coffee shop, ordered coffee and a Danish pastry, and was well along on his second cup of coffee before he realized that the waitress was asking him a question.

"You wouldn't happen to know anybody in Los Angeles who would give a girl a job, do you?"

He looked up, managed to clear a little of the love daze out of his eyes, and saw that she was a blonde. The delicate, angelic-faced type of blonde who made a man feel, instinctively, that she was too rarified for the gross male touch. She reminded Dick of something he had been striving mightily not to think about.

Her voice belied her appearance of remoteness and delicacy. She was the garrulous type. Leaning across the counter, she confided: "I came all the way out here from the eastern shore of Maryland to marry a guy, see? He's a Marine, see. And no matter what anybody tells you about the courage and bravery of the Marines, this guy was a buzzard, see? He lets me spend my last cent on bus fare, and he waits until I get right out here in the middle of this God-forsaken desert, and then the guy tells me."

"Tells you what, miss?"

"Why, that he's already married to another dame. Been married to her for three months and never says a word to me. Lets me spend my dough and make a fool of myself. Oh, well." She helped herself to a drink of water, remarking on how good the water was. That was one thing you could say for this lousy, lonely, stinking desert. The drinking water was okay.

Dick made a casual observation as to the grandeur and magnificence and beauty of the desert. The girl tautly gripped the counter.

"Look, mister. The next person who says to me
how magnificent and beautiful the desert is, I'm going to knock his teeth right down his throat. I mean it."

Then she grinned. "Oh, it's not so bad, I guess. It's just that everything went wrong here. I guess you always hate a place where you get hit below the belt. Anyway, I happened to fall into this job. I'd like to go on to Los Angeles. But I don't know a soul in that town. I haven't much of a stake. If I couldn't find a job right off—well—" She shrugged. "I just thought I'd ask you. It never hurts to ask, does it?"

She was silent then, and the delicate, angelic mask came back over her face. Dick couldn't take his eyes off her. Why did this have to happen now?

The girl spoke again. "What makes you look at me so funny, mister?"

"Nothing. Not a thing." Dick gave her a friendly smile and a card with his father's office address, told her to apply there for a job. "This guy," he said, "this marine who let you down—maybe he had his reasons for what he did. Something you don't quite understand."

She looked at him.

"What's to understand?"

"Well, what I mean is—things can happen to a man. Things he could not possibly have foreseen, big things. Something big enough to change the whole course of his destiny. And so big it's quite out of his control."

The blonde suddenly wearied of the conversation. She laughed, started down the counter, then came back to remark, "You sure use a lot of fancy words to describe the old doublecross, mister. A guy gives a girl a lousy, stinking deal, and you want to drag destiny into it." She laughed sourly. "You guys are all alike. You go all out for some fresh and fancy curves. Right away it's destiny!"

She gave the counter a vicious swipe with her cloth. "I thought he was a right guy. I thought he was a guy you could trust. So I trusted him. So look at me now.
Look at that damn desert outside and me stuck in the middle of it. The beautiful, beautiful desert sands! Brother, what I think of the beautiful desert sands wouldn't be fit to say over a telephone wire. And at night, when I want to have a real time for myself, I go out and stare at the desert stars. I think it's driving me nuts, if you want to know the truth of it."

She shrugged, clammed up, and walked away to lower the flame under a coffee machine.

When she was talking, the expression of her face changed, becoming as cheap and commonplace as her resentful diatribes. When she closed her mouth, her expression sweetened and the angelic look came back to the blue eyes, the cast of her face. It was as if she had two personalities, directly in conflict with each other, and when Dick went back outside and got in his car, all that he thought of at first was that saint-like expression.

In spite of the fact that the coloring was different, the girl bore a startling resemblance to Marian Hunt. For hours now, Dick had been struggling to push all thoughts of Marian down to the lower depths of his consciousness where unpleasant realities conveniently bury themselves.

From the moment when Vivi had let her taffeta housecoat whisper off her shoulders, given him his first glimpse of her provocative loveliness and let him understand that all this, and heaven too, was his to enjoy, Dick had been playing a kind of game with his mind.

It was a question and answer game, and it all had to do with Marian Hunt.

What the answers added up to was that he and Marian were simply kids who had been pushed together by their mothers. Both children were shy, neither any good at mixing with the crowd, and neither knew the first thing about life and love. Just two thoughtful
children, really, who had enjoyed being together, taking nice long walks in the country, and having long, deep talks about life and things that they did not understand.

It was absurd, really, Dick said to himself, perfectly absurd to regard an engagement based on such a platonic friendship seriously. As a matter of fact, he and Marian were not engaged. It was more of a—well, of an understanding. Dick felt he was perfectly justified in ignoring the whole thing.

He had not even mentioned to Vivi that there was another girl. He had not wanted her to feel that there was anything piecemeal about the passion and adoration which, along with himself, he longed to lay at her feet.

Dick scowled at his wrist watch which told him it was only nine o'clock. The hours loomed ahead like an endless eternity. Vivi had ordered him to get lost for the day. Doubts started to gnaw at him again. Maybe she'd simply been amusing herself with him. Maybe it had all been a trick to stop him from groping about her relations with his old man!

That thought sent raging jealousy tearing through him. That old louse. Having her to enjoy. Hell, that burned him. He thought of his mother, once beautiful and vapid-looking, now simply vapid-looking.

Having always been bound and trapped in the obsessive love of his mother, Dick had always been on her side. He had taken stock in her jealous neurotic complaining, and believed that his father was chasing other women long before Henry had actually set out to do some fancy picking.

It was Lucy, his mother, who had kept after him to "do something about your father and that woman." First it was, "You're his son. If he'll listen to anybody, he'll listen to you. Try to make him see that he's cutting up like a silly old man in his dotage. Tell him you're ashamed of having a lusting old fool for a father."
So Dick had had the talk with Henry, which had come to nothing except to arouse Dick’s secret, childish urge to hit his father over the head with a club.

“Son,” Henry had said, “you’ll never understand how it is with a man of fifty—until you get to be fifty. And wonder if you’ve missed the boat.”

In other words, the old guy had no notion of giving up his other interests. The next thing Dick knew, his father had asked Lucy for a divorce. Lucy refused, and took to bed with a heart attack. As soon as she got out of bed, she went to the detective agency. Then she had Dick called out of a college math class to tell him that he must go right straight to that awful woman and deal with her. And now he was going to marry her—his father’s mistress.

Dick put his car into gear, released the brake, and drove for five miles or so. He gazed at the towering mountains in the distance, willing himself to enjoy the magnificence of the view. He gazed at the sun-baked desert sands, stretching as far as the eye could reach, trying to capture the feel of it.

But when he held his glance on the distant mountains, all that he saw was the rounded, provocative curvature of Vivi’s body. And when he tried to capture the feel of the desert, all that he felt was a beautiful devil wrapping her arms around him. He listened for the soft, whispering sounds of the desert and what he heard was a voice whispering, “Love me, honey. Come on and love me.”

To hell with the desert. The blonde waitress was right. The desert was much over-rated. He drove off.

He discovered that he’d driven around in a circle and was back in front of the coffee shop again. He stopped the car and lit a cigarette. The blonde girl came out to take in a stack of magazines which had just arrived. She looked surprised. “Are you still here?” she said.
"How would you like me to drive you to Los Angeles?"
Dick asked.
"Now?"
He nodded, marveling at the tricks a man's mind could play on him. He had always been the owner of a busy little conscience. Apparently his mind and his conscience had got together while his emotions were busy reliving ecstasy in a redhead's arms. His conscience refused to allow him to give Marian a dirty deal, especially since it might start raising hell with him at the wrong moment. Marian was a nice girl. She deserved to be told that he'd gone overboard for another woman.
The blonde waitress said: " Anything for a free ride. Give me five minutes to quit my job and get out of my uniform into some decent clothes."
While she was gone, Dick studied his watch some more and worked out a mental schedule for the day. Easy driving would get him into Los Angeles in less than three hours. Another three hours back. Allow for an hour with Marian. He doubted if it would take that long. She was a very proud and dignified girl. She had frequently observed to Dick that in her opinion, people who allowed themselves to be carried away by sexy, animal instincts were more to be pitied than scorned. Dick intended to tell her the exact truth—up to a point.
In his heart, he thanked heaven that Marian was as she was, and not the kind to make a scene. No doubt she would hear him out with her usual dignity, pity him a little, then wish him well and send him on his way as quickly as possible.
The blonde girl turned out to be a surprisingly satisfactory traveling companion. She told Dick to call her Peg, that he was a sweet thing to give her this ride, and then she fell silent. Now that she was on her way out, she felt more kindly disposed toward the desert scenery. "It's kind of pretty, at that," she said once.
“Look, Peg,” Dick said, after a ten-mile stretch of companionable silence, “sometimes a guy has a lot of stuff on his chest he’d like to talk over with somebody. He wouldn’t tell his closest friend. But he might tell a stranger. He might like to get a stranger’s slant on—well, on what a lot of things add up to.”

“Like whether or not to make a certain babe?” Peg inquired in perfect earnestness.

“Well, not exactly.” Dick grinned. “Let’s say—whether there’s any chance of bringing down his temperature after he’s made the babe.”

Some moments later Dick was wishing that he’d kept his mouth shut. It seemed a shameful thing to be discussing his experience with this cheap girl, even though no names had been mentioned and she did not know who he meant. It was like doing an emotional strip-tease.

While he talked, the girl smoked and stared at the scenery. When he had finished, he waited for her reaction. She only shrugged and remarked that she’d heard it all a million times before.

The blonde yawned. “It’s a very touching story of a beautiful love that doesn’t happen to one guy in a million. That’s what you want to think, isn’t it? So go ahead and think it. Who am I to stick pins in love’s pretty dream?”

Dick managed to take it with a grin. “I’m afraid you don’t have a very sympathetic nature, Peg.”

“Maybe not.” She yawned again, then she smiled. “I’m just not the type who hands out good advice or helpful hints about how to have your fun and play it safe at the same time. I guess the only guys who are safe from the high-powered tramps are very little boys or very old men.”

She reached over and patted his shoulder. “Well, honey, you’re too cute and sweet to be an iceberg. And I don’t think you’re the type, not with those big blue
eyes and those pretty long lashes. If I were you, I'd go right ahead and cut my eyeteeth on this red-headed babe.” She laughed. “Once I heard a man say that a hot-blooded redhead was more educational than four years of college. I pass that on to you for what it’s worth. A real tip.”

Dick grinned. On the outskirts of Los Angeles, Peg decided that she’d better stop at a motel for the night. They picked one that looked all right, and Dick stopped the car. The blonde hesitated before getting out. Then she remarked that if Dick really wanted to get himself unscrambled and make sure what was what, there was one tested and proven method. He’d been awfully nice, giving her this ride. She wouldn’t mind a bit doing a little favor for him in return.

“You can come in here with me if you want to,” she said. “You can stay for an hour. Or you can stay all night.”

Dick felt his face flushing red with embarrassment. Never before had a strange girl invited him into her room. He felt that his lack of experience must be showing all over. He felt like a fool. The girl said politely: “You don’t have to if you don’t want to. I don’t make a habit of this. But you’re really very attractive and—I wouldn’t mind a bit.”

He looked at her thoughtfully, trying to visualize exactly how it would be. He could not. He could not imagine himself spending an intimate evening with this strange girl, watching her go through her paces. How in hell did a man start even kissing a woman who didn’t appeal to him?

Then he wondered why she did not appeal. She was a blonde, in repose her face had that sweet, angelic prettiness, and through her thin silk blouse her obviously firm and well-rounded figure showed with frank coquetry. Why, simply because he was a man, did he not feel the normal male’s ripple of excitement?
She moved closer to him. As she did so, she took a deep breath which forced open the throat of her low-cut blouse. The little hollow between her breasts was soft and white and inviting. It was a little valley of temptation, but he did not feel tempted. Then the sight revealed by the blonde’s parted blouse reminded him of something else, and it was as if a firebrand had been set off inside him.

“Well, no thanks.” He smiled stiffly at the blonde. “It was very kind of you to suggest it. But—well—I guess not.” He looked at the floor.

She seemed to understand, and she was not offended. She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. “We might have had some nice fun,” she said, half regretfully. “But I’ll tell you what. After you get this red-headed witch out of your system, you look me up. I still owe you for the ride, and it’ll be a pleasure to pay up. Any time.”

“I may never get her out of my system,” said Dick in an earnest, dreaming voice that would have been funny if it had not been a little pathetic.

“Want to bet?” said the blonde, and climbed out of the car.

CHAPTER 6

The apartment, two blocks away from The Strip, where Marian Hunt lived with her divorced mother was not the swankiest. On the other hand, it was far from shabby. The address was a good one. A fairly well known screen actor occupied the flat to one side of the Hunt’s. To the other side lived a pair of gentlemen, joint owners of an interior decorating shop, a French
poodle, a Cadillac—definitely in the money and lovely neighbors, really.

Linda had started thinking about getting her daughter married shortly after Marian was born. She had been thinking about it ever since. That was the reason she had taken this apartment where the rent was considerably more than she could afford, and had developed a "bosom friendship" with Lucy Wilkins. There was all that lovely restaurant money, and that lovely son.

Dick drew up in front of the apartment shortly after twelve o'clock. He was feeling more uncomfortable by the second. Faced with the towering heights and hard brick wall of the building where Marian lived, this visit seemed wholly absurd. Marian was a wonderful girl. He knew that she was a virgin. Once they had discussed that subject, rather gingerly, and Marian had told him with her face sweetly flushed and that look of purity in her eyes exactly what she intended to do. She intended to keep herself untouched until the time came for Dick to take her as his bride.

Dick had been slightly embarrassed. He had also been deeply moved. He had cried a little, and had thought at the time that this was one of the moments which he would long remember. A memorable moment, indeed.

Marian had never looked more like an angel to him than when she had so delicately suggested that her body would be his alone.

He thought of that angelic look as he left his car now and paused in front of the apartment building. His glance went up to the top floor where the Hunts lived. Dammit, how could he go up there and tell Marian what he had come to tell her? No matter how delicately he might try to phrase it, she'd be hurt. He would feel like a heel.

And what was the good, anyway? Why not write her a letter? Send her a telegram? What was so partic-
ularly noble about looking a girl right in the eye while he told her that he’d met another girl who was a fast operator?

Marian opened the door to him. She smiled and said in her sweet, calm voice: “Why, Dick. What a nice surprise. You haven’t phoned me for days. I was wondering if you were sick. Mother said I should call you. But you know how I am about phoning a man. It’s so hard to make myself.”

That was Marian for you. Old-fashioned in the better sense. No one realized better than Dick that he was tossing aside a real jewel.

She led the way into the living room. Dick seated himself on the divan, Marian in a large chintz-covered chair. Large chairs became her. She was a long-legged girl, very graceful, and she had a languid air, sort of the Hollywood version of a belle of the old South. She had black hair, very shiny, which she wore parted in the middle and sleeked plainly back. On Marian, the severe style looked good. It accentuated her small, even features and her Madonna-like expression. Her eyes were the large, heavy-lidded, languorous blue eyes of a very passionate girl. Her mouth was tiny. She wore a cotton dress, buttoned down the front. She wore no stockings, and as she lounged in the big chair with her legs crossed, Dick saw that she wore little else either.

For some reason, this observation both shocked and offended him. On Marian, it seemed out of character. He supposed he had better not say anything. It might embarrass her if he suggested that she go put a few more clothes on. Still, it really was a helluva thing, trying to think up the right words to explain to Marian that they were washed up, and all the time, to see her skirt keep going higher and higher.

“Listen, Marian,” he said finally. “I’ve got some bad
news for you. That is—I suppose you'll think it's bad news. I don't know how to put this, but—"

"What makes you so fidgety, Dick?" Smiling, she reached for a cigarette, then recrossed her legs. "Does it make you nervous, Dick? Me sitting with my legs crossed like this? Hmm?"

It was a very little thing, but for the very first time it set Dick to wondering about Marian. The more he wondered, the harder he stared at her.

And Marian continued to smile back at him. A smile that had more in common with a sly cat than with a Madonna.

"You haven't been coming around so much lately, Dick. A girl gets to wondering. There are an awful lot of pretty legs around Hollywood. So I just got to thinking, maybe it would be a good idea to let you know that I had pretty legs, too. They are pretty. Don't you think so, Dick?" She held one leg out for his inspection.

It was nice, no question.

But Dick's indifference was written across his face. "Listen, Marian, let's not discuss your legs right now, please. I came here to talk to you about something serious. It's damn serious, believe me. I've got to say something that I hate like hell to say. Your asking me to admire your legs isn't making this any easier, let me tell you. Of course you have beautiful legs. You're a very beautiful girl. Marian, I want you to believe me when I say that. You know that, don't you, Marian? You know how much you've always meant to me, don't you? By God, we've had the kind of a boy and girl friendship that a man can never forget. Maybe you get what I'm trying to tell you, Marian. Maybe I don't have to say any more. I always will think of that. We've been friends since we were kids. You've been one of the few real friends I've ever had."

For a moment the girl said nothing. Her eyes gave
away nothing. But they were watchful. Presently the
tiny rosebud mouth twisted into a curious little smile.
"Exactly what is all this about, Dick?" Then she changed
that. "What I mean is, who is it all about?" She laughed.
Then she scowled. "I always knew this would happen.
I knew it. Brother, did I play it dumb."
"What do you mean, Marian? What did you—know
would happen?"
"That some tramp would get hold of you, that's what.
Me, wasting my time. Walking. Talking. As if that
was any way to hold a man. I knew better. All the
time I knew better. But mom kept yapping at me.
'Dick is such a nice boy. If dear, darling Dick thought
you were easy, he'd be off you like a dirty shirt.' So
now some tramp has done a fancy job on you, and you
are off me."

Her skirts came down, her back jerked erect, and her
beautiful face was contorted into ugly lines of rage.
She was still very young. And she was very angry. There¬
fore she was giving away more than she intended to.
Dick said, "I don't understand you, Marian. I never
heard you talk this way. You were never—vulgar."
"All too true. And that was exactly where I made
my mistake. I was so busy being a nice girl, I passed
up being a smart girl. Anyway, it's quite a trick, being
nice and smart at the same time. I don't think it can
be done. Who's the woman, Dick?"

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Marian. I can't tell
you that."
"But there is another woman. Isn't there?"
He nodded, his eyes bleak and sorrowful. He was
sorrowful because he felt that a lovely illusion was
being shattered before his very eyes. Marian did not
seem at all like herself. He tried to make allowances
for her. Nevertheless, she seemed greatly changed from
the gentle-eyed, gentle-voiced girl he had always known.
"And you've slept with her, haven't you? And please,
Dick, don’t expect me to conduct this conversation like a nice little lady. I don’t feel like a lady. I’m damned angry. You and I were engaged, I thought.”

“I know, Marian,” he said miserably. “I know all that. And I meant every word I ever said to you. I did figure on our being married. I figured that as soon as I was through college—”

“Only now you don’t mean it. Now I’m out on a limb—and you’re cutting it out from under me. And you still haven’t told me anything about the fancy operator who’s been teaching you the facts of life.”

“Listen, Marian, there’s no need for that kind of talk. I’ve told you everything I think it’s necessary to tell you. I’ve tried to be honest with you. And—”

His face colored with sudden anger. He felt that Marian’s remarks were needlessly sneering. He saw no reason why they should not discuss this decently. He had never realized that Marian had such a temper and such a nasty tongue.

“You have no right to talk as if I didn’t know anything about women, Marian. Just because I’ve always treated you with respect—”

“If you knew the first thing about women, Dick, you’d known how silly that sounds.”

“What do you mean?”

“No flesh and blood girl gives a damn about being treated with respect. She tries to endure it, if she has to. She plays along and tries to hold up her end if she has to. But it’s mighty tough going.” She started to laugh.

Dick wondered if she was getting a little hysterical. She sounded like it.

“Marian, I want to say again that our friendship has meant a great deal more to me than I can ever tell you. But as for love—I don’t think we ever were really in love.”
“No?” She had quieted again. Her eyes were watching him thoughtfully.

“No, I really don’t think so, Marian. We thought that we ought to be in love, and so we called it love.”

“And what were you doing, Dick, when you made this great discovery? Were you with this new honey of yours?”

“I wish you wouldn’t say things like that.”

“Don’t let it throw you, Dick. I’ve known all the four-letter words for a long time. And what makes the world go round. And exactly what happens when a nice boy goes straying into the bedroom of a girl who isn’t so nice. You’d be surprised how much I know. A lot of my pretty little ways are just window dressing. I’ve thought for some time that I ought to discard the window dressing. I knew our beautiful friendship would get a damned sight more beautiful if I started showing you a few of my trump cards. I put off the beautiful event too long. That’s where I made my mistake.”

“This isn’t like you. It’s—why, it’s like having a dear sister suddenly talking gutter talk.”

“Dear sister! Who the hell wants to be treated like a sister? I want you to treat me like a woman. That’s what I’ve always wanted. I am a woman and I have the right to be treated like one. Walking in the country, studying bird life, talking about books! There’ve been times when I thought I’d go out of my mind!”

She stood in front of him, her small rosebud mouth baring her small sharp teeth. “You tell me what she’s like. I want to know! Are you going to marry her?”

Looking perfectly miserable, Dick stood up. “I don’t want to talk any more about it,” he said. “I’ve found somebody I love, that’s all.”

“Love? Listen, maybe you can kid yourself. But you can’t kid me. I know what you’ve found. I know exactly.”

He put his hand on her arm. For a moment he was over-powered with tenderness. He felt that she was
completely distraught with shock. That must mean that she loved him more deeply than he had ever realized.

“Take your hand off me, you dirty louse. Don’t start pawing at me now.”

He tried to put his arm around her. “Marian, please. I—”

“Listen!” She was shrieking at him again. “If you mention our beautiful boy and girl friendship once more—”

She sank on the divan and began to sob. Dick sat beside her, trying to comfort her. The difficulty was to think of the right thing to say. “You wouldn’t want me to marry you when I love someone else, would you?”

Her voice calmed a little. “How do you know you love her?”

He was silent, and after a minute Marian asked him matter-of-factly, “Whoever she is, you have been her lover, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.” She seemed pleased. “Look, Dick, all this time we’ve been going together there hasn’t been anybody else, has there?”

He shook his head. “Dammit to hell, Marian, maybe I’ve got some queer, old-fashioned ideas. I just never figured there was any percentage in a guy doing a lot of promiscuous sleeping around. I was never any ball of fire around girls, anyway. I couldn’t get up the nerve to go on the make for a nice girl. And I didn’t want a cheap one.”

“But when this dame came along, all those ideas went out the window?”

“This was different, Marian. For me, this was it.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I’m just sure. That’s all.”

“I’ll be back in a minute, Dick. You wait here.”
He looked at his watch. “Really, Marian, I’ve got to run.”
“You wait!”

CHAPTER 7

In her bedroom, Marian discarded the cotton dress with one quick, angry gesture.
She was trying hard to get herself under control. She needed to keep her wits about her. She was not the smartest girl in the world. But for her nineteen years she was wise enough and quite different from what Dick had always imagined her to be. Besides, she had sense enough to know that when she was playing for high stakes she couldn’t afford to miss a trick.

Marriage to Dick Wilkins represented high stakes.
It was to have been the core of an easy, cushy, indulged existence around which she could build the kind of a private life she had known for some time was her meat. Dick would have been a good provider, a charming husband and easy to handle. On the side she planned to have some attractive lover—or two or three. She was still quite young. But she had been considerably younger when she had discovered that erotic passion was the only thing that really interested her, and that different men kept the interest at high pitch.

She ran into the bathroom adjoining her bedroom. She stood under the icy shower spray for half a minute. She gave herself a merciless scrubbing with a heavy towel until her flesh came pink and glowingly alive. She stood in front of the long mirror and admired her body. She had never believed that the screen stars, the ones who became famous because of what they could
do for a sweater, had anything on her. And she was right. Marian could have stacked up beside the best of them.

She snatched up a big box, shaped like a flower, and proceeded to dust her body all over with powder.

She finished with the powder and went on to the perfume. She doused it on lavishly, then rubbed it into her flesh.

She scowled into the mirror, infuriated at herself for having played it dumb. It all came from listening to her mother's advice. That was where she had made the risky gamble that was turning out a total loss.

But her mother had kept harping and harping on it. "I'm warning you, Marian. I know how headstrong you are, but for once I beg of you to take your mother's advice. In spite of everything you hear about modern youth, there are still boys who want to marry a virgin, and Dick is certainly one of them. That kind of a boy likes to keep a girl up on a pedestal. And you cannot allow even him to take liberties with you. If you do, he'll imagine you've allowed other men to take them. I know what I'm talking about, Marian."

A girl never went wrong by taking a mother's advice, Marian thought grimly. But she sure could end up feeling like the sap of the century.

She decided to wear a long pearl necklace, wound around her throat three times, the luminous stones touching and teasing the white hollow between her full breasts.

She hurried back to her bedroom, wearing her pearls, a bracelet that matched, and makeup cleverly applied. The eye shadow and the brilliant lipstick stripped away the angelic look as completely as a skin peeled off an onion. Now she looked bold, a little common. But far more beautiful. And about ten years older.

She went to her closet and took out a cerise-colored garment. It was neither a housecoat, nor was it a
negligee. It was the kind of a garment to which no precise name could be given. But obviously, when attached to a seductive chassis, it had a very precise mission. The mission was to reveal what it pretended to conceal, and to provoke serious thought, if by any unlikely chance the thought was not already in the man's mind. Marian had purchased it for a recent weekend trip to the beach where she went to visit a "girlfriend."

Marian's mother always accepted these improbable stories as if she believed them. She went on the theory that so long as Marian handled the Dick Wilkins affair discreetly whatever else she did was her own business.

It was funny, really; almost like being two entirely different people.

She fastened the pearl-studded belt which was the keystone to the cerise marvel, took a final appraising look in the mirror, and went drifting into the room where Dick was waiting.

She understood that it was late in the game to throw in her chips. If she failed, she would fail. But no one could ever say that she hadn't tried.

Dick was pacing restlessly around the room, staring absently at a Gauguin painting on the wall, feeling like hell about this whole business with Marian, and feeling a little confused, too.

He had always realized that he didn't know a helluva lot about women. Now he wondered if he knew anything at all.

Marian had opened his eyes to a few things about himself, as well as about her. Once he had read that all women were congenital harlots, just as all men were congenitally promiscuous. The so-called good woman, so this piece had said, was simply an unnatural product of civilization and of the male's selfish determination to know his own son. He had never believed stuff like that. There were so many things he had never
believed and the things he had believed were turning out all wrong. Maybe life wasn’t that simple.

When he heard Marian coming, he turned.

He was befuddled again. This was a siren coming toward him. She didn’t look at all like Marian. Then it hit him, and he frowned. “Look, honey,” he said, and his voice was very kind, “I wish you hadn’t done this. I wish to God you hadn’t.”

Exotic perfume, heavy-lidded eyes, thinly-veiled curves flowed up to him. She put her arms around his neck. She smiled seductively at him. He smiled pityingly back at her. She murmured, “Kiss me, Dick. It won’t hurt you to kiss me, will it?”

He gave her a kiss. It was the kind calculated to enrage a girl whose every intent was to fan a few dying embers back to life.

It was also a kiss which filled Marian with a deep sense of injustice.

“Kiss me right, Dick,” she whispered. “For once in your life, give me a kiss that has a little steam behind it.”

They tried again. She was getting nowhere. Dick showed about as much interest in her as a stuffed dummy. She decided on a change in tactics. She left the room and came back with cocktails.

Dick seemed to enjoy the drink but he wouldn’t even look at her. He kept looking at the floor.

She waited until they had finished the first cocktail and were started on the second. Then she said: “Listen, Dick. I want you to look at me while I tell you something that—well, that I’ve just got to tell you.”

He looked at her, very tenderly, with a faint pickup of interest.

“We’ve been sweethearts for a long time, haven’t we?”

He nodded.

She moved a little closer to him, so that her bare arm touched him. She crossed her legs and the cerise folds parted. She didn’t bother to pull them together.
Her smile wavered a little. "As the ads say, I was beautiful, I was adorable, I was engaged. Only now I'm not engaged. I'm just a disappointed girl who's had the rug pulled out from under her. Well, okay. I can take it. I'm not going to whimper and whine and say you can't treat me this way. I'm not going to be a cry baby, Dick."

She moved closer to him, the cerise draperies proving again that they had an independent life of their own. The object of their life seemed to let Marian's intriguing curves go their way without interference.

Dick's hand made an involuntary movement, touched warm, firm flesh. It gave him a pleasant sensation. Then the pleasant sensation collided headlong with his preconceived conception of Marian, of her niceness, her purity. He felt vaguely repelled. And then the image of Vivi flashed across his mind. He felt quite confused.

"For years," Marian said softly, "I've dreamed about us being married. I've dreamed about our wedding night. I've lain awake at night, trying to imagine just how it would be, alone in a hotel room together. The lights going out. You taking me in your arms. I've got my gown made, Dick. The gown for our wedding night. I made it all by hand. Would you like to see it?"

"Christ, no."

Marian gave him another cocktail. She began to feel her own liquor. Until now, every word she had said had been coolly calculated to draw some response from Dick. Without quite realizing it, she had been play-acting at the same old role. Her display of her body was telling him the real thing about her. Her words were still dabbling with the romantic girl and her pretty dreams.

She finished the cocktail, and threw away all the nonsense about dreams.

Suddenly she was a leaping, violent girl with her arms around Dick. "Dammit," she husked, "I've played with
you all these years. If you want to walk out on me, okay. Walk out. But love me first. I've got a right to that much. I've got a right to have you for my lover. I want to know what it's like and I've got a right to know."

His arms gripped her, held her for a moment, then went limp. Marian put her lips to his, held them close. She made him hold the kiss for a long time. Oh, she wanted him now. This was the real thing. This was no clever little game to get him back. Past a certain point, she was always like this with a man. Her crying senses took charge. And she was pretty sure they would take charge of him, too.

Just hold the kiss long enough. That would do it. That would start the flame going. For the next thirty minutes, at least, he would be all hers.

She'd make him forget all about that other tramp, whoever she was. If she couldn't, she'd certainly be a great disappointment to herself.

But she wasn't one to bet against herself and her own beautiful body.

Dick leaned on one elbow, beside her. He was caressing her now and she was sure that everything was going to be all right.

Suddenly she looked into his eyes and saw a queer lack of expression. He was looking at her as if she had no identity. She might have been a marble image that lay under his blank gaze.

Or—she might have been someone else; someone who wasn't here.

She began to understand what it was all about. But she waited. It could be that she was wrong. It could be.

She waited until he had explored the rounded luxury of her body and gave every sign that—it would be. He made a little moan of love in his throat, and closed his eyes against her . . .

"Open your eyes," Marian said. "Look at me."
But he would not, and after a little while longer she was sure.
Marian had never been so angry in her life. She was away from him like a leaping tigress. Now she did the best she could to make herself modest in the cerise robe.

“That’s the worst yet,” she raved. “That’s the meanest thing any man can do to any girl. Now get out of here, fast. I hope I never lay eyes on you again.”

Dick’s face was completely blank. “What have I done now?” he said. He rose, was straightening his tie, smoothing his hair. “Good Lord, Marian, I told you it was a mistake. But you asked me to make love to you and I did.”

“You did not. It was her you were making love to in your mind. Me,” she said grimly, “I was just the gal who wasn’t here.”

He tried to think of something to say. There was nothing to say. Marian was perfectly right, although he wondered how she knew.

It had been Vivi’s lips he had kissed, Vivi’s loveliness he had caressed, the thought of Vivi to which his blood had hotly responded.

When he attempted to say good-bye to Marian, she slammed the door in his face. He felt badly about it. In a way, he was sorry he had come. In another way he was very glad.

This had been a most peculiar day from start to finish, but it had proved one thing to him. Vivi was no mere passing fancy. She was in his blood.
Marian had turned herself into a wanton right before his eyes. And Marian had plenty to offer a man. More than he had ever dreamed that she had.

But he had closed his eyes—and seen, caressed, and hungered only for a red-headed girl with hell in her eyes and the promise of heaven in her voice.
PART TWO

Blossoms of Hate
Vivi had not been altogether pleased with her day.

After Barry Gordon left her she dressed, assumed her usual businesslike poise and demeanor, and headed for the dining room which was in a central building, adjoining the lobbies and the office. Right away trouble had started.

Before going to her table and giving her breakfast order, she had gone to the kitchen. As she went quietly through the swinging door, she heard her name being mentioned. She paused.

The pastry cook, a Frenchman with Charles Boyer eyes, was remarking that he had never seen it fail. A bowlegged woman was green-eyed with jealousy of any woman with beautiful legs. The salad cook, a hard-working Swedish girl who possessed a sterling character and a pair of legs which should have made nature ashamed of herself, was threatening to knock the pastry cook over the head. Just one more crack about her legs, which were useful if not decorative, and she'd let him have it.

And if he thought she was jealous of that sluttish redhead, he was crazy! Throwing her weight around with the help like she was somebody. Well, she was a somebody, all right, kept by one rich man, handing out her favors to any other man who came in sight. She was a tramp who made a clean, virtuous, right-living woman ashamed of her own sex. And what with the things that had been going on the past twenty-four hours, and everybody whispering about it, it made a
decent woman feel that she was dirtying herself, simply by being a woman.

"Now she’s carrying on with that movie actor fellow and right under his wife’s very eyes. Why," said the Swedish woman, who taught a Sunday School class, "I feel like I’m living right in the middle of Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Marveling, as she always did, at the swiftness with which bedroom secrets traveled, Vivi advanced into the kitchen. She made it short and simple.

Not for the world would she have a good woman subjected to such a contaminating atmosphere. And not for one minute would she have a nosey, snooping, big-mouthed, filthy-minded gossip working for her. The salad cook was fired.

She returned to the dining room, where the girls were changing the tables, arranging fresh flowers, readying things for luncheon. It was ten-thirty.

“I ain’t supposed to have to serve breakfast to anybody this late,” the waitress informed Vivi.

“Indeed!” said Vivi. She unfolded her napkin, glanced at the menu card, then glanced up at the blonde girl whom she suspected of being Mike Morritt’s most recent bedroom interest. This in itself was enough to annoy Vivi extremely.

“Gertrude,” she drawled, “you look very efficient in that blue uniform. Very pretty, too. It brings out the color of your eyes. But perhaps you’d be more efficient at a line of work which doesn’t call for a uniform, where your pretty blue eyes wouldn’t show, since the room would probably be dark.”

“Miss Brady, I want this job. I have to support my brother who has to live in the desert for his health. Because of him I’ll put up with a lot I wouldn’t otherwise. I’ve taken a lot of snooty talk from dopes who think they’re better than me, because they’ve got more dough than me. But brother or no brother, I’m going
to stick up for my rights. I've got a right to walk out of this dining room at ten-thirty. I got a right to the next hour and a half to myself. And—"

She hesitated, stared at the red-headed girl whom she hated, and allowed her impulsive tongue to get the best of her solicitude for her brother.

"And I won't have my free time interfered with just because breakfast hour happens to interfere with you having yourself a high old time!"

When Vivi spoke, she was perfectly calm. "Do you think that was a smart thing to say, Gertrude?"

"No. I don't. It was dumb—if I want to keep my job. But a job ain't everything." Her mouth worked, she looked ready to cry.

"Since you have said it, would you mind explaining exactly what you mean?"

"You'd know what I mean without my telling you—if you'd heard Barry Gordon's wife right here in the dining room. She said her husband was over in your cottage and she had a notion to go after both of you with a gun. First she told her waitress. Then the hostess came up and she started telling her. Everybody could hear her. Then she looked as if she was going to have some kind of a fit. She had to leave the dining room in a hurry. Well, am I fired, Miss Brady?"

"Gertrude, dear, if you want to get along in this world, you must learn to control your nasty little tongue. When you call another girl a tramp right to her face, you only make trouble for yourself. In this case, you have simply spoiled a few of your own trampish activities. Because you have taken a little fancy to our stableman. Haven't you?"

The blonde colored angrily.

Vivi said softly, "Yes, dear. You're fired."

Ten minutes and two cups of coffee later, she changed her mind. It seemed both wise—and unwise—to let Gertrude go. Unwise, because it would simply add more
fuel to the conflagration of gossip that was going the rounds. And why should she care how much they gossiped about her? She should be used to that by this time—only, of course, a girl never really got used to it. No matter how many times you said to yourself, I don't care what they say about me, you did care.

It was all very well, too—trying to convince yourself a lot of slanderous, envious talk never hurt a girl. But it didn't happen to be true. It could hurt what little pride you happened to have left. It could make you afraid, deep inside, that somehow, some day, the malicious rumors would serve as a bombshell to blow you higher than a kite.

Maybe what it really got down to was that a girl never felt truly safe, once she'd embraced the life of an adventuress because an adventuress was at war with society, and in war there was no such thing as safety.

She finished her breakfast. Then she hunted up Gertrude to tell her she could keep her job—provided she kept her lip buttoned up and provided she discontinued her sojourns to Mike Morritt's little shack behind the stable.

"Let's strive to avoid even the appearance of evil, dear."

The ironic sarcasm was not lost on Gertrude, but she was thankful to have her job back and she kept her mouth shut.

Vivi spent the next three hours in her private office back of the lobby desk. Here, as a rule, she was able to lose herself completely in business procedure, going over the accounts, checking reservation lists, answering mail; and in working over some sketches for expanding the ranch.

Vivi liked to think that, in some ways, her mind operated more like a man's than a woman's. Men were able to keep their sex life and their business life completely separate and so could she. A man never carried his
fleshly pleasures of the night before into the business routine of the day—and neither did she.

Only—today she did.

The account books bored her. She didn’t really understand figures, anyway. She only tried to pretend that she did.

Glancing over the planned menus for the following day was worse than boring. It started up a nervous tension inside her. What was so important about what people ate, anyway?

Today she had no appetite at all. She hadn’t an idea why. Loving was supposed to make a girl good and hungry. Well, she certainly had no kick coming about the amorous attentions received in the past few hours.

She flung down her pencil and stared out of the window. She could see the semi-naked women and men sunning themselves around the swimming pool. It was one of the largest and finest plunges on any of the desert spots. It had helped to draw some of the monied crowd away from Palm Springs. So had the cabana cottages, each with its private patio, which curved in a long semi-circle to the right of the pool. Henry had given in after much persuasion, allowed her to shoot the works on those cottages. And when it came to bright colors, expensive finishing and furnishings, they couldn’t be beaten. From the picture windows, to the thick-pile wall-to-wall carpeting, to the Beauty-Rest mattresses, the cottages were tops. They provided as much solid comfort as any swank, first-class, New York hotel room.

And all at once, as she stared out of the window, the whole thing reminded Vivi of an idiot’s dream. What a way to spend her life. Catering to a lot of well-heeled phonies who had nothing better to do than trot around to expensive resorts.

“Dammit,” Vivi muttered to herself, “how I despise the whole lousy lot of them!”

Then she told herself to snap out of it.
What in heck was wrong with her? She thought about it—and knew it for exactly what it was: Self-disgust!

She thought for a moment about the Barry Gordon episode. Well, that wasn't so bad. That, in fact, was good. Just so his jealous wife didn't take that little gun of hers seriously. If there was a woman in the world who wouldn't jump at an hour with one of the Barry Gordons of the world, she'd have to be made of sheet metal.

But what about Dick Wilkins?

Dick was the sore spot, and she'd known it all along. Taking that kid in a big way had been as easy as taking candy from a baby, and as cruel. In her previous relations with men, nobody had stood to get hurt. When she played Henry for what she wanted out of him, he was fair game. The boy was not fair game; not if she went through with her scheme to marry him, simply to use him for a bargaining angle.

If she did, she would hate herself for it afterwards. And if she didn't go through with it, she'd want to kick herself forever afterwards. If she got cold feet on this deal, she was crazy.

Vivi went back to work. Then another idea occurred to her. Maybe the real problem was spelled Mike Morritt.

Mike was the guy Vivi tried to think about as little as possible. Because she disliked admitting that there was any guy in the world she really wanted—and could not have. And if Mike was an outstanding gent for any one reason, it was for never having made a pass at Vivi.

Any other hussy around the place would do, anything with curves that was not nailed down. He was the kind who could take his pick—so pick he did. But never her.

I think I'll fire him, Vivi decided early in the afternoon. He was really too high-class for the job, and he knew it. She decided it would be sensible to replace Mike with someone whose real interest in life was looking after horses, not women.
At two o'clock she went back to the stables to talk it over with him. Mike wasn't there.

He was not there when she returned at three o'clock. At four she found him. He was just heading into the corral from the bridal path. Directly behind him, riding a black, ugly-tempered horse named Devil, came his woman companion, a faded blonde who looked every one of her forty-five years. Blanche Gordon looked as if she was having all she could do to keep from taking her riding whip to Vivi's face.

“Devil,” Vivi remarked coolly, “is not supposed to be ridden by any of the women guests. You know that, Mike.”

“What business is it of yours what horse I ride?” Blanche Gordon spoke in the high, brittle voice of the neurotic.

“It's entirely my business, Mrs. Gordon. As manager, I'm responsible for the safety of the guests. And Devil is a dangerous brute. He isn't safe for a woman to handle.”

“No? Well, between a devil of a horse and a devil of a slut, I'll take my chances with the horse. And that reminds me, Miss Brady. If you want to stay healthy, I'd advise you to keep your bedroom eyes off of my husband and keep my husband out of your bedroom.”

“Why, Mrs. Gordon,” Vivi drawled, “a clever wife should consider it her job to keep her husband from straying into the wrong bedroom. That isn't supposed to be other woman's job. Didn't you know? Everybody else does.”

It wasn't nice to taunt another woman that way. Neither was it nice to feel the sharp-stinging bite of that other woman's whip across her cheek. “You red-headed witch, you!”

Mike hated to break it up, but he decided he'd better. He patted the blonde woman's arm, told her to take it easy, and not to forget to drop by this evening for that
drink. His remarks seemed to pacify Blanche so quickly and easily that Vivi was immediately suspicious.

“You son-of-a-gun,” Vivi snapped, the minute she was inside Mike’s cabin. “So now she’s after you. And you, as usual, aren’t passing anything up.”

Mike grinned and asked her if she’d like a drink.

CHAPTER 9

Mike Moebitt was tall, dark, rangy, and on the homely side, with the kind of sexual magnetism which no book has ever explained.

Wherever Mike roamed, he was offered more than his share. And he had done a lot of roaming.

Between women, wars and trips on tramp steamers around the world, Mike had once studied law. There had been every indication that he would make an excellent lawyer, if he wanted. But he decided against it.

He had made up his mind a man was a fool to drudge away the best years of his life making money and success. And there was very little he really wanted which required money. He liked this desert country. He liked good liquor to drink, good books to read, good women to love. This job offered enough money and opportunity for him to have all of them.

Mike had been married once. It lasted less than a year. For a time, after it was over, he had tried to forget the marriage. Later he realized there was no marriage to remember, and now, when people asked him if he ever had a wife, he said no.

The girl had been one of the most delicately beautiful creatures he had ever laid eyes on. A golden-haired wraith of a girl with golden eyes, a golden voice, and
even the flesh of her body had that rich, golden shade. That came from so much lying around in the Florida sun. She had got the idea that if she lived outdoors and got plenty of sun on her body, it might help cure the dope habit which had her hooked, body and soul.

But of course the sun couldn't help. And neither could Mike, although he had loved her enough to marry her in the hope of helping her. That had been the one completely gallant and completely unselfish gesture of his life. He had watched the girl live with her habit, and finally die of it.

Through some complicated line of reasoning, Mike then sold himself on the idea that he was incapable of falling in love with a flesh and blood woman. They came to him too easily.

He knew too much about them. How their blood pressure rose under his lightest touch. How, once a man scratched the surface, a woman was simply an amorous, sex-hungry animal.

But that fragile, gossamer experience which men spoke of as love—Mike believed it to be a matter of imagination. His imagination, he had decided, could be captured only by a dream.

He brought a bottle of whiskey and put it on the table in front of Vivi. He told her to pour her own. And if she wanted soda, she knew where to get it.

Then he turned his back on her and got busy at his stove. He said that he was hungry and was going to fry some ham and eggs. If Vivi wanted any, just speak up.

Vivi fixed her drink, lit a cigarette, and sat watching Mike doing his cooking. He had rolled up his shirt sleeves, and his arms were lean and muscular, tanned to a rich bronze shade by the desert sun.

"Are you on the make for that Gordon woman?" she inquired suddenly.

Immediately she regretted the question. After all, Mike's little affairs were really no business of hers.
Yet she was constantly asking about them, giving him the chance to come back with his mocking jibes that she was jealous. Well, maybe she was.

Mike waited until he had the ham sizzling before he told her, grinning, "It seems that Blanche is quite jealous of that moron with the profile she's married to. All this jealousy gives her a lot of nervous tension. And you know how sorry I always feel for ladies with nervous tension, Vivi."

"Barry Gordon isn't a moron. It isn't his fault that a million little dopes chase after him. He's the one who deserves the sympathy, tied to a jealous fiend who ought to be in a psychiatric ward."

"Good. I'm glad to have the real inside dope on the pretty screen gents. Congratulations, kid. Damn few gals can boast of having entertained Barry Gordon for two solid hours. I suppose he spent all that time confiding the sad story of his frustrated, misunderstood life?"

"Not at all," Vivi snapped. "We were playing Post Office."

She scowled over the rim of her liquor glass. "How did you know Barry came to see me this morning?"

"How could I help knowing it?" Mike brought his plate of ham, three fried eggs, and buttered toast to the table. When he was all set, he stared across the table at Vivi and for once he was not grinning. "You can't be so stupid you don't realize the guy was seen going in and coming out. You had one piece of luck. Blanche didn't get wise in time to stage a scene. But it wasn't very smart of you, Vivi.

"You'd better watch it. If what you've got is what you want, then you're sitting pretty. Do I need to remind you that a rich man's dolly simply cannot afford to make slips?"

The words were a deliberate slap in the face. Before
she had time to think up exactly the right retort, Mike let her have the rest of it.

"I understand that you've taken on Junior as a side interest. If that's true, you're a bigger fool than I thought you were. Is it true?"

She poured another drink and announced with perfect calm that it was indeed true. "Only Dick Wilkins will be the featured attraction—for a little while."

"Meaning just what?"

"Meaning, Mike dear, that I'm considering marrying the guy. Any objections?"

Mike looked at her. Then he went on with his eating. He did not say another word until he had finished his coffee and lit a cigarette.

Vivi had always figured Mike as a man with brains that he knew how to use. It was all part of the makeup of a guy whom she respected, feared a little, disliked sometimes to the point of hating him—and was crazy about.

"All this time," said Mike, "I've been figuring I knew all there was to know about cheap, scheming, unscrupulous tramps. But if you pull a deal like that on a decent kid—by God, you're hitting a new low."

And when she said nothing, he went on, quiet fury behind every word. "I've watched you in operation for some time, baby. I know exactly how that twisted mind of yours works. You decide to open his bright young eyes to the facts of life. Then you decide it's such easy picking, you might as well play all the angles. Tell him it's love. Then tell it to the preacher. Then tell it to papa. In case you're interested, it makes me sick to my stomach."

Vivi said sullenly: "Stop shouting—and stop preaching. So what if you're right? How about him coming down here to butt into my affairs, threatening blackmail, because his mama had hired a detective to rake into my past? Maybe you're one of those sentimental
souls who thinks a boy's love for his mother is too beautiful to mention without bowing the head?"

"I wouldn't know about that angle," Mike replied coldly. "I never knew my mother. I came out of an orphan asylum."

He got up, poured a big drink of whiskey and swallowed it in one gulp. "But I do know this. If you don't get that twisted brain of yours straightened out—"

She was on her feet in a sudden fury. "Stop saying I have a twisted brain. It isn't true. Stop saying it."

"It is true." He caught her wrist. "It's true—and it's time you realized it. This damned ranch, you've got owning it on the brain. Well, the way you've got that old guy going around in circles it's only a matter of time until he'll turn it over to you. But that's too simple for you. You've got to think up some devious, cunning, twisted scheme—"

"Stop using that word. It makes me sound half nuts."

"And that's exactly what you are." He still held her wrists but his grip loosened. And for a minute he seemed to pity her. He spoke more quietly.

"Once you told me a lot about yourself, Vivi. About that woman dying, you being framed on a murder charge. But there was one thing you didn't tell me—and I'm not sure you've ever told it to yourself. You're not too sure you were framed, are you?"

"That's a lie!"

"I don't think so, Vivi. Way down deep in your mind, you wonder if maybe you did get drunk and give that fatal injection. Ever since, you've been resorting to all sorts of mental tricks to prove to yourself that you didn't."

"I didn't do it. I did not!"

"I didn't say that you did. I don't believe that you did. But you've developed a guilt complex you won't face. Instead, you've worked out this elaborate device of getting even with the world for the wrong that was done
you. Every time you say that to yourself, it helps to convince you that it was injustice. Make suckers out of men, because one man made a sucker of you. Keep proving it to yourself. You just have to do it, don't you?"

She was silent. She took her hand away from him to reach for a drink. The hand was unsteady, and so were her lips at the rim of the glass.

He went on, even more gently. "It's turning into an obsession, Vivi. It's made an evil person out of you. No matter what comes up, you resort to trickery and cunning. You want to hurt men, but in the end you will only hurt yourself. You're a beautiful woman, Vivi, and you're clever as well. There was no reason why you shouldn't have gone about things differently—and ended up as well off as you are."

"A lot you know," Vivi said sullenly. She did not taste the liquor. Her eyes were empty.

"Yes, Vivi. A lot I blow. I know that you didn't have to settle for a boring, tired-out, middle-aged man and a job like this. It's a shabby role, Vivi. It's a compromise and an admission of defeat. That's all."

He turned away.

After a minute he turned back to her with a grin, his expression relaxed. "Forget it, kid. Every boy has to get his first experience somewhere. They all have to learn that women aren't made of sugar and spice. So maybe you'll do the Wilkins boy as much good as harm. And—come to think of it—maybe I'm jealous."

Vivi looked up. "Jealous? You? Don't make me laugh."

He walked back to her again, caught her arms. "Why do you suppose I've never gone on the make for you, Vivi?"

"I've often wondered." She smiled.

"You didn't imagine it was because you didn't have what it took?"

She looked full into the eyes behind his steady, unsmiling gaze, and the warmth rose in her blood. It be-
came the hungry, melting, lost feeling no other man aroused in her. She longed to fling herself at him, to beg him to love her, to cry, “Take me and do what you like, Mike. Make me back into something decent. I can’t do it for myself, but maybe you could.”

His fingers roamed up and down her bare arms. He was kissing her with his eyes. “You want me, don’t you?” he said softly.

“Are you asking me?” Vivi said. Now she had no willpower to draw her eyes away from him, to stop the trembling weakness in her body.

“No,” he said. “I’m not asking you.”

“Why, Mike? Why?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t like it.”

“Tell me!”

“I’m afraid of vultures. Once I saw a man clawed and picked at by a vulture. It wasn’t a pretty sight.”

CHAPTER 10

That Saturday evening Henry Wilkins sat in his red-wood-paneled study, coughing, sneezing, and dictating letters to Miss Nelly Randall.

Nelly, fiftyish and unmarried, had slightly stooped, thin shoulders and a girlish giggle, and knew of no more pleasant way to spend an evening. She had been secretly in love with Henry all the twenty years she had worked for him.

This particular evening held a peculiar excitement of its own. They were alone in the big house together. Henry’s wife had announced that there was no reason
for her to run the risk of catching his nasty cold germs. Lucy had taken herself off to spend a few days with friends in San Diego. So Henry and Miss Nelly were shut off from the rest of the world by the big, beautiful study. But suddenly the phone rang.

Henry lifted the receiver and the beautifully modulated tones of Barry Gordon's well-trained voice told him that his prospective client had been delayed by car trouble. But he would, most assuredly, try to keep his appointment by eight-thirty.

Henry slammed down the receiver. He had mistrusted that yarn from start to finish. Why in hell would that Hollywood thrill artist be wanting to buy into a restaurant business? He had made some phone calls to find out if the fellow had any money behind him. He was told there could be some money there. In Gordon's wife's name. The wife, some years before, had resorted to the device of incorporating. Most of Barry's salary, outside of living expenses and an allowance, went into the "corporation," which Blanche controlled.

But the whole episode had a bad smell, with Barry staying at the ranch and in Vivi's bedroom when Henry phoned this morning. Vivi had the most inventive mind on record when it came to excuses to keep Henry in Los Angeles.

Hell, Henry thought, it's getting so she treats me more like a kindly, well-heeled uncle than a guy who's supposed to have the inside track. He hated to think he was being played for a sucker, because Vivi made him feel young for the first time in twenty-five years. In holding on to Vivi, he was holding on to his youth.

During the whole of this long, miserable day Henry could retain no control whatever over his mind. He had stayed in the house, drinking more than was good for him. The doctor had told him to cut out liquor, but he had not told him what to do when crazy with worry and jealousy over a red-headed woman.
Having little to do but think, he had thought of little but Vivi. He had gone back over the whole affair, from the evening he had picked her up in the Biltmore lobby. Had she been playing him for a sucker from the start?

Late in the afternoon he had phoned Nelly to come help catch up with some work. There were letters that needed doing.

Suddenly he stopped, in the middle of a letter, and asked Nelly if she'd like a drink.

Nelly replied, startled, that she rarely indulged. When she was a very young girl, she added, she had signed a temperance pledge, and had always tried to keep it. In case of sickness, of course, she occasionally took a spoonful or two.

Henry studied the bent, energetic little woman, and realized that he had never before considered that she was a woman. Well, after a manner of speaking, was she, really?

“Miss Nelly,” he asked her, “if you had to do it over—and assuming you had any choice in the matter—would you choose to be born?”

The woman stared at him with shocked eyes. Every so often, during the past year, her employer would blurt out some question which thoroughly outraged her religious and spiritual foundations. Of course, she understood why. The poor man had never really been himself since he took up with that other woman. Until it happened and Miss Nelly—along with everyone else in town—found out about it, she would never have taken him to be that kind of a man. But of course, she had read a lot—having so little else to do with her life—and she understood even the very best of men sometimes fell victim to their fleshly weakness.

“Such a question, Mr. Wilkins. We are all put into the world for a certain purpose. We have no right to question it.”

“And what purpose do you think you were put here
for, Nelly?" Over his snifter of brandy, Henry grinned at her. "Now you take a lot of women—their purpose in life is to sleep with some man. Or, if you will, with quite a number of men. Have you fulfilled any such purpose, Miss Nelly?"

He felt a little ashamed of himself. He was deliberately baiting the old woman. Why? Because, he supposed, he was in such a rotten mood. And anyway, it was a great kick to watch her shocked and blushing reaction. Yup, by golly. The old sister was actually blushing. Well, good for her. It proved she had a few drops of red blood left.

He wondered if Vivi had blushed an honest to goodness blush in years.

Miss Nelly rose slowly, her shoulders straighter than they had been in decades, outraged dignity showing all over her.

"Even you, Mr. Wilkins, cannot talk to me in such a vulgar, suggestive manner. It makes me feel unclean. I hope you'll forgive my saying this. But even if you don't, even if it means the loss of my position, the time has come when I must speak out. In all of the years I have worked for you, Mr. Wilkins, you always treated me with the greatest respect. You never addressed a single suggestive, uncouth remark to me. But for the last year, Mr. Wilkins, you have been a changed being. You have told me quite a few stories which I do not consider appropriate for an employer to tell an unmarried lady."

She gasped for breath, tightened her thin lips in fierce determination, and went on.

"Mr. Wilkins, I just have to say it. Ever since you started running with that red-head who has you in her clutches, you've taken to talking exactly like my old grandfather. He was one of the dirtiest minded, foul-tongued old men who ever lived. When my grandfather was sixty-nine years old, he went off and married a
farm woman of thirty and had three children by her. He was a disgrace to the family."

"Well, good for him!" Henry chuckled. Then he insisted that Miss Nelly have a shot of brandy. She took it, strangled over it, then admitted that it did make her feel sort of nice and warm inside.

"Okay," Henry said. "I've proved that I'm human. When I reached the dangerous age, I did what quite a few million other men have done. I went for a fancy little dish with red hair. People around town are saying Henry Wilkins has been hooked by a redhead who's after his dough. Maybe they're right, Nelly. What would you advise me to do about it?"

"Mr. Wilkins, you have a good wife and a fine young son. I believe if you thought hard enough about your duty, it would help you to overcome all this other unpleasant business."

"But it is not unpleasant business, Nelly." Henry permitted himself a grin. "It's damned pleasant. A good wife can also be a nagging hellcat. And as for my fine young son, whom I love more than anything in the world, that boy figures he's doing me a favor if he takes my checks and gives me a kind word. His mother taught the boy to dislike me when he was very young, and he's always been a quick one to learn his lessons."

He sighed. "The truth of the matter is, Miss Nelly, I'm a lonely man."

One of his coughing spasms came on and it was a moment before he could go on. He took a swallow of cold water. "But there's one thing these moral critics never think of, Miss Nelly. I'll bet you've never thought of it."

He studied her face without seeing the pasty white skin, very dry, with the lines around her eyes and small, unpainted lips. He did not see her at all. Actually, he was seeing the complete emptiness of his life.

"These red-headed babies," he said, "and all of the
other sirens who trade on their charms—they work at it like a business. And their business, as they look at it, is to make a man feel happy, relaxed, and quite a man. If you imagine all they do is look fancy on a bed, you're nuts. And if you think all they do to keep a man interested is just one thing, you're wrong again."

He looked up, repressed a grin at the woman's rabbitly little lips working at the rim of the brandy glass. He had given her a fairly stiff shot and he wondered if it could possibly make her drunk.

"They drink with a man, butter him up, kid him along, make him feel like he's quite a man," he said again. "They laugh when he's in the mood to laugh, and they sympathize when he needs sympathy. 'Just let me know how you want it, honey, and I'll deliver.' That's the theory. And that, Miss Nelly, is the reason there's so much of that brand of stealing going on." He paused.

"But of course—" he scowled at the phone which was ringing again. "When the day comes that the poor guy discovers it was all just a classy, high-powered act—that isn't so good. So his friends were right, he was all wrong, and he sees himself in the role of just another sucker who's been had." He laughed bitterly.

"That," he proclaimed to Miss Nelly who had become suddenly dizzy and fled from the room, "raises hell with a man. If he's still crazy about the slut, it's been known to lead to a front page murder story." The phone jangled.

"Yes?" he barked into the receiver.

He wasn't surprised. He wasn't in the least surprised. But he'd be damned if he'd let her get away with it!

Barry Gordon again. Another delay. "Perhaps we could arrange an appointment for tomorrow morning, Mr. Wilkins. Right after breakfast, perhaps. What time do you have breakfast, Mr. Wilkins?"

So it was a stall, just as he'd suspected.
“What the hell business is it of yours when I have my breakfast?” Henry snarled.

Ten minutes later he had killed the brandy bottle, locked up the house, and was on his way around to the garage.

For the first time in his life Henry understood what murderous jealousy was all about.

He understood how a man could become so obsessed with his animal hunger that it was closer to hate than love, that he could be perfectly capable of killing the woman rather than leave her for another man to enjoy. And he could kill the man, too.

As he headed for the desert, Henry was fully aware he had lost all control over himself. He had allowed his jealousy to torture him for months and months, until finally it had pushed him to the cracking point. He thought it altogether likely that he had gone a little insane.

A life filled with too much hard work, plus a year filled with lush, tempting redhead, might very well have pushed any man over the brink.

Henry took a fresh bottle of brandy along with him. He drove his Cadillac as if all the fiends of hell were racing after him.

The only thing that had not turned out a disappointment was his determination to make a lot of money. Now that he had made it, what was it all for?

After Vivi came into his life, he thought that maybe he knew what the money was for. Now he was no longer sure about even that. But so help him, before this night was over he was going to be sure about one thing. He was going to find out if that red-headed witch was pulling a fast one.

Every so often, Henry would stop to take a few swigs from the brandy bottle. He would clench his fists and mutter selected oaths. If he caught her up to any monkey business, there’d be hell to pay.
It was pushing two o'clock when Henry rounded a curve and saw the neon signs of the ranch in the distance. By that time the brandy bottle was empty. Henry's hands were unsteady on the wheel. Drunken laughter chortled in his throat.

He really belonged under a table, or stretched out on a bed, with an accommodating pal to take his clothes off for him.

His laughter became downright gleeful as he came up to the ranch and jerked the car into the driveway. "I wonder if the witch will be surprised to see me," he mumbled.

CHAPTER 11

Whenever Vivi was emotionally upset, she liked to go for a walk on the desert. She did not particularly care for walking, nor did she prefer the desert by-paths. The sun beat down, inescapable as a fiery furnace. The sand worked its way through open-toed sandals, torturing her feet with every step. There was nothing to look at except occasional cactus plants which, when they grew tall, reminded Vivi of grotesquely weird half-men. Nevertheless the desert was the finest place on earth if a girl wanted to get off by herself. And when Vivi was upset, that's just what she wanted.

She was dreadfully upset when she left Mike's shack that afternoon, and so deeply thoughtful she did not realize where she was heading until she found herself well along on the bridle path which led to one of the desert springs.

It had been a long time since she had yielded to that secret, self-condemnation which had tortured her during
her first months in that jail cell, which now seemed several million years in the past. But Mike had laid bare an old fear. She had been perfectly sure through the trial, and afterwards, that she had had nothing to do with that woman’s death.

Yet in the dark, still, dreadful hours of long, sleepless nights she had not been sure. The day nurse, coming on at seven in the morning, had testified she’d found Vivi in a drunken stupor. Vivi’s defense had been that the doctor had given her a drugged drink. And suppose he had? How did she know what propensities for murder lay within her? How did she know that under the influence of drugged liquor, she had not deliberately destroyed the wife of the man she craved?

She did not quite follow Mike’s reasoning as to how this carefully buried guilt feeling had turned her into an abandoned wanton, but for a few minutes she forced herself to concentrate upon the kind of person she had become.

Step by step, her mind led her along the path of years. She shrank from the picture of her own wantonness, yet deliberately continued to castigate herself. She paused, scooped up a handful of sand and let it dribble down under her blouse. She wondered why she should do such a thing.

Then she realized that the gesture was symbolic.

It was remindful of a certain good-time Charley who had just made a killing on the horses. Boasting that he was really loaded, he had ordered six bottles of champagne to prove it. And then to prove that there were other uses for champagne besides drinking it, he had insisted upon letting some of the champagne trickle under what little there was of Vivi’s dress above the waist.

After that, Vivi had asked him to prove that he really appreciated a beautiful redhead and that he had a heart as big as all outdoors. The best proof she could think
of was for him to turn over what was left of his horse
winnings. So he had. Then she fed him another drink.
She had left him out cold, his face buried on the table.

Suddenly she threw herself on the sand and began
to laugh. The laughter turned hysterical. Oh, how proud
she'd been of that little episode, always so pleased when
she could show up a wolf for a lecherous sap.

Her wild laughter turned into the first honest tears
she had shed in years. She cried as any girl might over
the loss of someone near and dear. She did not know
she was crying over the grave of the decent girl she
had once been.

Presently the tears stopped and she lay very still. A
small desert breeze kissed and teased her legs where
her anguished writhing and twisting had pulled her skirt
far above her knees.

She sat up. With a funny little gesture, as if in obe¬
sance to modesty, she pulled the skirt down carefully,
smoothing and wrapping it around her legs. She took
a cigarette from her bag and lit it.

Smoking thoughtfully, she stared at the horizon which
seemed to band the world, and she considered her belief
that her present manner of life was exactly what she
wanted.

Never mix things up by figuring on marriage, a home,
roots into what some women called the real things of
life. Vivi saw nothing satisfying or desirable about such
a deal. She wanted no part of this real stuff, so-called,
nor of a man whom she could learn to love.

She said it all over to herself now, as she'd said it
dozens of times before. Not for me, dearie.

But this was the very first time she'd ever asked her¬
self: Honey how far and how long can a girl swallow
her own lies?

Rising, tossing away her cigarette, Vivi started slowly
back along the trail to the ranch and her cottage. As
she walked, her thoughts seemed to run like water racing downhill.

If Henry were to cut Dick off without a dime, or if some other woman were to get hold of Henry and milk him dry of everything, even so, Dick was a bright boy, Electronics. That was Dick’s specialty. Dick’s know-how—with her aggressiveness, her clever brains. It all added up to money if she could be patient.

She thought it over for the first time.

She considered the interesting possibilities, and wondered why it had taken her so long.

Mike? Mike was a kind of devil. A devilish master of a horse or a woman, with a tongue that could make Vivi feel shame and self-contempt.

All right. Play it Mike’s way. Call a spade a spade. Did she want to go on being a female vulture until it was too late for her to be anything else?

And by that time, of course, her green eyes would have lost their sparkle and the only hell that would be left in them would be the hell of bitterness and loneliness she would feel inside herself.

The rich, tender curves of her figure would have turned into fat. The huskiness of her voice would be simply the rasping thickness which came from too much smoking. She would wear too much makeup to keep up the illusion of youth, and only succeed in making the face look older.

When this hypothetical day arrived, about the only thing that remained unchanged about her would be the mean, selfish, greedy little heart of stone inside her. And that, no doubt, would be meaner and greedier than ever. Vulture.

It was an apt word, at that. She had seen women who looked like vultures, with hard bright eyes and tight, set lips that hadn’t smiled a tender, generous smile in years. You saw such women at the race track, their blood-tipped claws raking in their winnings. You saw
them sitting in hotel lobbies, wrapped in mink, dripping diamonds, like sleek, well-preserved old cats—but looking lonely as hell.

She went into her cottage and immediately poured a drink.

Then she went to the phone and called the office. She said that she had a headache, and please tell the dining room hostess to take over her duties for the rest of today. She asked the clerk to have a boy bring her a thermos of coffee and some sandwiches.

She went to the closet and got out a large, silk oriental rug which Henry had given her. She spread it over the bed, turning it into a wide, luxurious appearing lounge. She brought cushions. Then she brought another drink and sat down on the lounge.

“You're going soft, honey, and it's all the fault of that guy, Mike. He got under your skin. Nobody else has been able to do it,” she told herself.

She drank again.

Then she closed her eyes, and Mike's fingertips were trailing flame up and down her arms again. His eyes were kissing her. Him and his damn appeal! Oh, damn him, damn him, damn him!

She gave her liquor glass an angry toss, then gazed regretfully at the smashed fragments on the floor.

She threw herself back on the couch, closing her eyes. Thoughts kept blasting at her mind. The thought of Mike's sex appeal kept blasting at her body. And then she thought of something else. Damn, how she'd like to hurl that word, vulture, right back in the guy's teeth.

She'd like to walk right up to him, look him in the eye, and say to him, “Okay, wise guy. I was a real woman at heart, after all. I've decided to embrace the life of the frying pan, the alarm clock to send the little man off to honest toil, and the marital bed where no other guys need apply. So now maybe you wish you'd
helped yourself while there was still time! How about it. Huh?"

She opened her eyes, got up to pour another drink, and made up her mind to marry—Dick Wilkins and play it on the level.

Then she said to the empty room, “I think I’m crazy.”

CHAPTER 12

It was the kind of a decision which required quite a few drinks to make it something she really intended to go through with.

It required some more drinks to keep her from wondering how rough a deal it would mean for Dick. To marry him, then have Henry purchase an immediate annulment—to her way of thinking, that would have figured up to no worse than a small dose of disillusionment, a few bad weeks while he absorbed the unhappy fact that a beautiful woman could also be a witchy, double-crossing woman. Then Dick would have been over it. A little older, a little wiser, but not too much hurt by the wear and tear.

But to marry him for keeps?

A boy like Dick Wilkins deserved a girl with stars in her eyes and an untarnished, unused body. He could never get any of this from Vivi, because she had none of it to give.

Oh, well.

She had what he thought he wanted. And maybe that was good enough. As long as he did not change his mind about what he wanted, everything would be okay.

Dick came a little after eight o’clock.

Vivi told him at once: “I’m a little drunk, honey.
I've had a lot on my mind. I started drinking to get certain things off my mind. Then I thought of some more things, and the new things called for some more drinks."

Dick said, "I'm a little drunk, too. Thinking about you makes me drunk. You're beautiful tonight, Vivi. I think you must be the most beautiful girl in the world."

"That's saying a lot, honey." Vivi smiled. "That sure is saying a lot. And even if you don't mean it, I like it."

She made him comfortable on the couch with a drink, a cigarette, and a kiss that was lighter than her usual brand.

Then she stood in front of him and pirouetted for him to take a good look at her. Her dress was cleverly designed to imitate a modest and discreet version of a striptease costume. The swirling skirt was more like a succession of sheer veils over-lapping each other. Pale pink shaded into violet. Violet shaded into a rich plum purple. The purple faded back into lavender. What little there was to the bodice repeated the lavender shade. A very intriguing dress.

"Like me?" Vivi said, flashing him a smile which convinced Dick all over again that he was looking at the sum total of all of the angels in heaven.

She flowed down beside him, let her loosened red hair spray against his shoulder, gave him a quick hard kiss. Then she told him that for the rest of the evening she was going to behave like a nice little lady.

Dick said, "What's the idea?" He couldn't keep his hands off her. When she tried to push him away, his eyes reproached her as if she were pushing him right out of heaven.

"I've taken the vow of chastity," Vivi smiled. She poured more liquor and drank it fast. "Until our wedding night! According to the leading authorities, everything is much more thrilling if a bride's chassis is pure
and undefiled. So I've decided to keep mine pure for forty-eight hours."

She gurgled laughter. She seemed to think what she had said was awfully funny.

He remarked savagely and scowlingly that he wished she'd stop saying such things. He wanted to forget all about her past. He wanted to think about the future, when she would belong to him. And that included the present. Right now. Tonight. He caught her and held her and she could hear the violent thudding of his heart. She could feel him tremble.

"All day long," he whispered, "I've been thinking about tonight. Just how it would be. I've been living for tonight. Don't disappoint me, honey. Please. For God's sake."

He was learning fast. Even his kisses showed a marked improvement over last night's kisses which had been a little on the awkward side.

Tonight the awkwardness was gone, and the heat was definitely on. Full blast.

Vivi pushed him away from her. "You still like me as much as you did last night?" she asked him.

"I love you."

She got up, danced out of the room, came back with the tray of sandwiches and coffee.

"I'm suddenly starved," she told him. "I didn't have any dinner."

Dick said that he hadn't had any, either. All day. He couldn't stand the thought of food. He'd been living on love.

Vivi told him that he was a sweet, sentimental idiot.

After they had finished the sandwiches and coffee, she tried to impress him that she really meant what she said about tonight. No heavy loving. And would he please play it her way?

Dick wanted to know why.

She said that she didn't know why. Just an idea. May-
be she was trying to prove something to herself—only don’t ask her what. She didn’t know what.

“Don’t you like me as much as you did last night, Vivi?”

“More.” And she meant it.

“But I don’t want to leave you! Don’t make me leave you tonight, honey. Don’t leave me.”

“You don’t have to leave,” she said, “Not if you promise to keep everything under control. Will you promise me that?”

“You mean I can stay all night if I promise to behave?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And we’ll talk?”

“Sure, honey. We’ve got a lot of talking to do. We still have to get acquainted, don’t we?”

“Can we turn down the lights—and you let me hold you in my arms, honey? If I promise not to go out of bounds, will you let me hold you and touch you and kiss you?”

She stared at him in a kind of wonder. He meant that so much. So little would content him and make him happy. Suddenly Vivi reached out and put her arms around his neck, pressing him to her in a little frenzy of pain. The sordid ways she had walked these last years had forced her into a hardened shell, and all of the softer, womanly part of her nature seemed caked and sterile. She had begun to think of herself as no longer capable of the softer emotions. Now something seemed to break inside her. It was not love of this boy, since she did not love him. But it was the tenderness and honest loving which he brought to her.

“I’ll be satisfied if I can just hold you and kiss you.”

How long since she had known a man who could say that to her—and mean it? Had she ever known one?

She clasped Dick’s head to her breast for a moment. His eyes looked up into hers bewildered, full of wonder. She smiled down at him, with real tenderness.
She felt a little as if she were loving her baby.

Then she got up. She switched off the lights and lit candles. She had always thought that candles made a pretty glow for sentimental lovers.

She went back to him and allowed him to hold her close. He did not seem to be in the mood to do very much talking. His arm stayed around her and his lips kept seeking her face. After a little while, she turned her mouth to his with opened lips. A little while after that, she got up to get some more drinks.

The question was no longer, could he stick it out? The question was, could she?

Then she learned something she had never known before. Or if she had known it, she had forgotten.

That a girl and a nice man could spend a pleasant evening talking and holding hands and kissing.

Hours could pass quickly with such simple little amusements. The candles could flicker lower and lower. It could get to be midnight, and you just had to wonder where the time had gone to so pleasantly.

A very nice guy. If she had come to know him about a thousand years ago, before her eyes grew wise and her soul grew old, she might have fallen in love with him.

But it couldn’t go on forever and it wasn’t sensible to expect it to. Suddenly she felt him gripping her close, felt his convulsive shuddering, more violent than before. Then he was on his knees by the couch and it was as if he was kneeling to a goddess. His face was white with the sickness of love, his hands were shaking, and so did his voice. “Let me look at you, darling,” he begged. “Be kind. Please be kind, sweetheart. Let me look at how beautiful you are. Let me touch your beauty. And if that’s all you want it to be tonight—then let me have a night of desire. Give me the pain of desiring you and not having you. Please, darling. See, I’m begging you on my knees.”
Vivi changed her position. She moved so that she could put her arms around him and her face rested on his head. She felt tears in her eyes, and for a moment she wept noiselessly. She wondered why this kid, with passion-sick eyes and all the adoration in the world in his voice, stirred her so deeply. Maybe it was because he was so young—and she felt so old.

She released her hold around him. Then she lay back against the cushions, her hair sprayed out, the hell back in her eyes as she reached out her arms to him.

"If you're going to start rubbing it in because I'm not a chaser—"

"I didn't mean it that way, honey," she said.

Sounds.
The groan of choking excitement in a boy's throat.
The whisper of veil-thin silk ripping.
A girl's soft, loving laughter.
A candle sputtering.
A man's unsteady step pounding, a door slammed wide open, Henry in the room, his lips blasting drunken rage.

"So I've caught you, you slut." Drunken laughter burst from the fat man's throat, the murderous rage in his eyes deepened as he heard Vivi's shrill laughter.

She scarcely knew why she laughed as she jumped up, trying to fasten the torn dress as best she could. Maybe because the whole scene was so corny it was positively ludicrous.

"Have a drink, Henry," she suggested. That was always the thing to say, was it not?

Dick was making gestures toward playing the protector. She told him for Christ's sake to shut up. Let her handle this.

"The old goat," Dick was muttering. "The sickening old goat. Barging in here like this. I'll tell him a few things."
“Shut up,” Vivi said again. “Never speak ill of the father who sired you.”

Henry, half-blind with liquor, stumbling through the dim light of the room, had no suspicion as yet that he was in the room with his son.

Certain things he saw. Vivi coming toward him, then receding, in what seemed to be veils that left her and returned. He saw a demon who had made a mockery of something he had called a new reason for living. He saw a devilishly beautiful voluptuary in a cloud of whirling veils, and he would like to break her neck.

It took a few moments before Vivi understood that Henry was temporarily insane. Then she saw that huge, drunken body stumbling toward her and she knew. She saw his big hands reaching toward her throat and her blood froze.

“God damn you, let her alone. Keep your hands off her, you old bastard!” That was Dick, lean and strong in his youth, and quick as a fox. He moved in.

Henry, like an infuriated bull, turned his body toward the man who was coming at him. His drunken eyes seemed to see the faces of three youthful men weaving in front of him. He went madder. “Me keeping her,” he roared. “Her taking young boys on the sly.”

“It’s your own son,” Vivi shrieked, as she saw Henry’s huge fist smash into Dick’s face, drawing blood. “Sober up, you old fool. Do you know what you’re doing? It’s Dick—your son!”

She might as well have howled at an angry, roaring sea to be still. Dick flung himself at the fat man, landing blow after blow. Once he made a flying leap and brought Henry’s heavy body down to the floor.

“Sit on him!” Vivi cried. “Make him stay still while I get help.” She ran to the phone to call Mike.

But before Mike got there, Henry was up again, and his last smashing blow tore a groan of real agony out of Dick. He stumbled toward the couch, his face bloody,
making horrid, strangling sounds just before he passed out.

“You damn fool,” Vivi kept shrieking. “Doing that to your own son. Suppose you’ve killed him? What then?”

She turned on lights. She saw Henry’s nose bleeding, saw him put his handkerchief to it as he stood and stared stupidly toward the couch.

Then she saw his shoulders slump as sanity slowly returned to his eyes. He made for a chair, lowered himself into it, began to shudder and shake.

Vivi saw his face turn a hundred years old as she watched. She brought him a drink which he swallowed without knowing what he was doing.

“Oh, my God,” he kept muttering.

“I’ve often wondered,” Vivi said coldly, “why people always call on God after they’ve made fools of themselves.”

“Do something for him,” Henry croaked. “I’m too sick to help. Are you going to let him lie there and die?”

“I doubt if he’s dying, and I don’t want to do the wrong thing. I’m waiting until Mike comes. He’ll get the doctor.”

“What in hell was he doing here?”

“What did he look like he was doing?” Vivi retorted, swallowing a drink fast. Then she took another one. She needed it.

“We were making plans to get married, among other things,” she announced coolly.

That ought to start something, she thought—as if a little more excitement was needed around here to liven things up.

“On Monday,” she added.

That put the big man right back on his feet again. He came lumbering toward her, fists clenched and shaking. “Say that again.”

Vivi said nothing.

He came up close to her and spoke through clenched
teeth. "If you've got any fancy schemes like that up your sleeve, you little tart, you'd damn well better forget them."

She looked at him, laughed in his face, and told him to simmer down. She walked away from him to take another swallow of brandy. She lit a cigarette and took a deep drag on it before she spoke.

"I'm not fresh out of boarding school, Henry. You can spare me the rest of that little lecture. I was good enough for you to play around with, and I'd have been good enough for you to marry if you could have worked it out. That is, if I had wanted to be stuck permanently with an old guy who wanted to play like he was still young."

She dragged again on the cigarette, pausing for a moment by the couch to touch Dick's wrist. His pulse seemed steady.

She walked back to Henry and puffed smoke straight into his face. It looked like a face that was falling apart.

"I was important enough for you to come barging in here like a maniac, all set to fix yourself up for a nice long jail sentence. I understand that murders of passion rarely rate the death sentence. They are supposed to come under the heading of 'irresistible impulse.' Well, you sure as hell were suffering from some irresistible impulse when you brought your drunken fists in here tonight. You'd better thank your lucky stars it didn't turn out any worse than it did. Instead of standing there ranting and raving about how you would never allow your son to marry my kind of a girl."

"I'll never allow it," Henry roared. "Never!"

"Won't you?"

"In addition to everything else—why—it's positively indecent."

"Really?"

"Of course it is. After I've had you, after you've be-
longed to me for over a year, why, it's next thing to obscene."

She smiled, and turned her glance toward the door.
"I'll never stand for it," Henry shouted. "Never. If it's money you're after, and I presume it is—"

"Please, Henry. This hardly seems the time for financial discussions. A little later, I'll give you a briefing on what a sweet, old-fashioned girl I've turned into. How I yearn for a home of my own and a good man's love. I may even point out that I am not composed one hundred percent of sluttish blood and dollar signs."

He snarled jeering contempt at everything she had said. "You never gave a good goddam about me, did you?"

"Let's put it this way, Henry. You had something that I wanted. I had something that you wanted. It was a fair exchange, and I don't see what you have to gripe about. I made you happy, didn't I? What do you expect for your money? Miracles?"

Then Mike came in.

CHAPTER 13

Vivi sank down on a chair and let Mike handle everything; he told her to relax and he would take over. He called the resident physician. Between them they got Dick over to a room equipped for emergency illness.

Mike returned and said there was nothing to worry about. He turned to Henry who had slumped down in a chair. All the argument had suddenly gone out of him. He looked more sick than drunk, and he was both. Mike said, "Come on, you. Let's get going." And he put a
rough hand on the big man's arm, half pulling him to his feet.

Close to hysteria, Vivi started to giggle. "Treat him with tenderness and kindness, Mike. He's feeling his liquor and his age—and he's fresh out of his redhead, the poor guy."

She had found a fresh bottle of brandy, and she was nursing it in her hands. She kept on giggling. Mike shot her a worried look as he pushed Henry out of the door. "Take it easy, kid," he said.

"Vulture," she reminded him. "I'm a vulture. Remember?"

"You'd better lay off that bottle and go to bed."

Vivi watched them go out the door.

She was alone. Then the crackup began.

She had been drinking, on and off, all afternoon and evening. Yet when she stood, she seemed perfectly steady on her feet and her mind seemed as clear as a bell.

A papa and his baby had slugged it out over her, and the boy had gone down for the count. Yet she was the one who had really been slugged. And she had schemed with such care, such foresight. But she had lost. Everything. Yet she did not feel as if she had lost anything at all. Funny. By all the rules, she should feel terribly depressed and disheartened. Because if it was not a disheartening thing to have a door open and have it mean you were clean out of both a sugar daddy and a fresh, pretty husband-to-be, she didn't know what was.

Still, she did not feel at all disheartened. She felt merry.

"I must be drunker than I ever was in my life," she said to the empty room. She sure knew how to take things in stride. She gave herself a mental pat on the back.

"I'm a damned gallant, well bred person," she remarked.

She drank to her own gallantry and lovely breeding.
Then, for the first time, she heard the voices outside. It was the first time it had occurred to her that all the commotion and shouting and drunken hullabaloo must have awakened everyone. She pushed back the drapes.

Well, what do you know! You’d think they were watching a circus parade.

She had once been young enough to tremble and ache with excitement over the big lumbering elephants and the painted lady atop the golden caravan. Now Henry was the big, clumsy elephant; she was the glittering, painted lady, and she had just fallen down, boom on her fanny, right off the caravan. And all the king’s horses and all the king’s men could never get her back up again.

I’m getting a little mixed up, she thought.

She giggled again.

Then, holding fast to her bottle, she snatched up the first thing in sight which would serve as a wrap. It was a bright colored Navajo rug flung over a chair. She wrapped it around her. Now she looked like a squaw. Look, she was so many, many people! A squaw. The lady on the circus caravan. The ex-mistress of a Los Angeles millionaire. She was an ex-convict, and the police records proved it. She was a sweet, innocent, Goldilocks who used to gape wide-eyed at the circus parade, and whose First-Families-of-Virginia-mama used to teach her that good blood meant everything. She was a girl who had done things with strange men to earn a hundred bucks.

Who in hell was she? What was she? What was she, really?

She held the Indian blanket tight with one hand, the brandy bottle with the other, and opened the door.

"Would you all care to join me in a drink?" she said.

She walked down through the little patio. Her eyes were a little blurred, after all, and it looked to her as if there were at least a hundred people gaping at her.
Nosy snoops, she thought, suddenly not liking it.

"Have a drink?" Vivi said, extending her bottle to a nice appearing man whom she did not recognize at all. She really did not recognize any of them, although all of them were guests.

The man said he didn’t care for a drink. But thanks just the same. "Why don’t you go in and get some sleep, Miss Brady? If you’d like, I’ll try to get things quieted down. We heard the noise, and we came out to see what the excitement was about. I think I can persuade everyone to go back to their cottages."

Vivi informed the man that he was a nice guy. She put the bottle to her lips. "Well," she said, "if no one wants to join me, I suppose I’ll have to drink alone."

She held up the bottle. "None of you lads and lassies want to join me? This is your last chance! If you think I’m going to hang around here all night trying to moisten a bunch of snoops, you’re nuts."

"Well, if you insist, Miss Brady, I might join you in a shot," said an elderly, stoutish gentleman with his skinny wife keeping a firm hold on his bathrobe cord. She held the cord almost as though she had a dog on a leash.

"You’re an old dear." Vivi patted the man on the chin. "Don’t you ever get away by yourself, honey? Don’t you ever leave Mama at home?"

He chuckled.

His wife looked about to pop.

Vivi turned and wandered off by herself. Her mouth kept testing and sipping at the bottle. She had forgotten all about those silly people, pretending to be so disgusted by a couple of guys brawling over a girl. A bunch of dirty-minded dopes. The hell with them.

She wandered along the path that led in front of the cottages. She seemed to be hunting some particular cottage, without knowing just why. Or exactly whom she expected to find when she got there. She felt a little
as if she wanted to go calling on somebody, but she couldn't imagine why. Here on the ranch, the manager did not go calling on the guests because that simply wasn't done. In Los Angeles she had not gone calling because kept women never seemed to know the type of people you made formal calls on.

Nevertheless, that was in Vivi's mind right now. She wanted to pay a call.

More by instinct than clear thought, she selected a particular cottage. Behind drawn drapes, she could detect the glow of lights. She could hear voices, too, as she walked up on the porch. It sounded a little as if a man was giving a woman hell, but she couldn't be sure. The floating away feeling was becoming more pronounced, and she was afraid that she was beginning to feel her liquor.

She took another short drink. She knocked on the door.

Blanche Gordon opened the door.

"I want to see Barry," Vivi announced.

"What do you want to see my husband about?"

"Don't look so mad, honey. Here. Have a drink," and she extended the bottle. "Nothing like a drink to cheer you up."

"You're drunk."

"Sure, I am," Vivi agreed. "Can I see Barry?"

"You cannot," You've got your nerve. Traipsing over here after my husband in the middle of the night. You must be crazy."

"No, I'm not," Vivi said mournfully. "I'm just lonely. I want somebody to love me and say a kind word to me. I'm sort of sorry I was ever born. Are you ever sorry you were born, Mrs. Gordon?"

"I'm sorry for the day that buzzard I married was!"

"You shouldn't call your husband a buzzard, Mrs. Gordon. Barry is a great blessing to women. Old women fall in love with him. Young girls fall in love with him. I'm too drunk to be in love with him, but I want to
know if Barry still loves me. He said he did this morning. I want him to tell me if he still does. It sure would cheer me up.”

“Get out, you drunken trollop!”

“Come right in, sweetheart.” Barry, in silken dressing gown, took his wife’s place by giving her a push which knocked her to the floor.

“You bet your life I still love you, honey.” He put his arm around Vivi and drew her into the room which looked as if a cyclone had struck it.

“Home sweet home,” remarked Barry, offering Vivi a sip of his cocktail. It had a nice flavor but she was not sure how well it would mix with what she had already had.

“No matter where I roam,” proclaimed Barry, “when that devil starts ranting and going to work on the furniture, I know I’m at home.”

“You’ll call me a devil just once too often, damn you.” Blanche struggled to her feet. “You’ll bring one of your trollops into the house just once too often, you dirty swine.”

“You see?” Barry gave one of his graceful, carefully rehearsed shrugs. “You see what a nice little battle on the home front we’re having? If you think you can take it, stick around and watch the fun.”

CHAPTER 14

Later, when Vivi tried to pin down what happened, flashes would run into complete blanks.

She could remember, for instance, that she still had the wits to be embarrassed when Barry pulled the Indian blanket from her shoulders. She had protested. She
had protested some more, but all to no effect, when she heard Barry saying: “Isn’t she a beauty, Blanche? Just look at her! Smooth, soft skin. And what curves! Just look at her! Then go take a look at yourself in the mirror.” And he had taken her in his arms and just before he kissed her lips he had jeered at his wife, “Watch this one, you old hag.” Then one of the blank spots.

She never could be sure if Barry had kissed her or not.

It might have been a second later that Blanche was telling her, “He’s drunk, and he should never drink. The doctor has warned him. He has a heart condition, and I have a very strong maternal instinct. That’s the real reason I put up with the lecher. He shames me, humiliates me, and when he drinks too much he turns into a brute. But afterwards he’ll be as sweet and repentant as a dear, cute little boy.”

“You poor, sweet, put-upon thing.”

Blanche suddenly calmed down and became sweet. She acted as if she wanted to be friends with Vivi. Vivi had wound her arms around Blanche.

She vaguely remembered making a date with Blanche for the following day.

And Blanche had said okay. Vivi was sure that she had said that. It would be a very fine thing the way they would get to love each other.

And she was also very sure that Blanche was surprisingly calm and sweet about everything for the next few minutes.

“What’s wrong with your heart, honey?” she asked Barry, who had thrown himself across one of the beds and was insisting Vivi join him.

“There’s nothing wrong with my heart that a change of wives wouldn’t cure, baby. Maybe I can talk old Blanche into giving me a divorce? Then you and I can get married. Okay?”

“He’s had a tricky heart ever since he was a little
boy," Blanche said. She walked to the table beside the bed and pointed out a small bottle of pills. That was another thing that Vivi was absolutely certain about.

Blanche said that Barry had to carry the pills around with him, and he always kept some on the table at night. She had made quite a point of it. If he felt one of his heart attacks coming on, he was supposed to take one tablet immediately.

"I've been telling my loving little wife all day what powerful medicine you were, baby. Only medicine is bad stuff. You were good stuff."

Blanche had seated herself on the opposite bed. She was curiously calm. Dizzy-headed as she was, Vivi could remember thinking how peculiar it was that all the fight seemed to have gone out of Blanche. "Maybe you're just what he needs when he's in this condition, Vivi. Maybe you have a soothing effect on him."

"I'm tense only because I have to keep looking at you day in and day out," Barry announced, rolling over on the bed, putting up his hand to stroke Vivi's hair, encountering the headboard of the bed instead.

It was as if behind Vivi's liquor-befuddled brain there was a small, clear, sober little brain which had painted this picture for her to remember later, so that she could see for herself exactly what had taken place. And yet—how could she be sure?

If you were high enough, you could imagine anything. And afterwards, you could convince yourself that what you imagined had really taken place. When it had not.

"If they don't take up your option," Blanche reminded him, "you'll be just another bum in three weeks flat. Then see how many women you can get."

"I'm a masochist," Barry said. "That's why I make her sleep in the same room. So I can look at her prickled-balloon of a face when I wake up in the morning."

"I don't think I can take any more of this. I think
I'll go out and take a little walk in the desert," Blanche said.

Vivi was pretty sure that right then was when Blanche got the bright idea about taking a little walk. And she was also sure that Barry had tried to talk her out of it.

Vivi had tried to sit up and decide if she could negotiate the floor as far as the door. She managed to get up on her feet. Then the floor had moved right out from under her feet, and as she staggered toward the bathroom she had kept shrieking that it was an earthquake.

She took about ten minutes being sick, and by the time she came back to the room her head had cleared just a little. So she knew exactly what happened during the next few minutes.

Barry and Blanche had started wrangling again, but as soon as she joined them, Blanche had shut right up. "I'm not going to say another word," Blanche had declared. "You're a devil, and I think you're deliberately trying to drive me crazy. Well, I've taken all I'm going to take. I'm through talking. Do you understand me, damn your lecherous hide? I'm through talking. I'm through with letting you drive me crazy. I'm through with a lot of damned things."

Barry was sitting up on the edge of the bed. He held out his arms to Vivi who remarked that she'd better go.

"Come here, gorgeous. Come here and let a devil give you a nice, juicy kiss."

Blanche had got a coat out of the closet and slipped it over her shoulders. She had lit a cigarette. She stood, perfectly silent for a moment, staring at Vivi. Then with a loud laugh, she deliberately pushed Vivi onto the bed beside Barry.

Her voice held all the torment in the world. "Go on," she said. "Give him a kiss. I don't mind. I'm past minding anything that he does."
Barry swung his arm around Vivi and leered up at Blanche. “What’s become of your maternal instinct, dear? I thought I was your precious little boy?”

Barry had gone to work on more cocktails, and he was pushing the glass to Vivi’s lips. Now that the sickness had passed, Vivi felt hysteria coming back. She started to laugh and she couldn’t stop. Voluntarily she leaned over and gave Barry a quick kiss. “I don’t think she ought to call you a devil, honey.”

Still laughing that crazy, uncontrollable laughter, Vivi patted his cheek. “Well, don’t you mind. I like you, honey. I want you to be happy.”

“That’s just fine.” Blanche walked over to investigate the cocktail shaker. “You stick around and make him happy, dear. I’m only the torn-up little pieces of what was once his wife. I don’t mind a bit.” Then she announced that the cocktail shaker was empty.

“It wasn’t empty a minute ago,” Barry said.
Blanche smiled. “How would you know, dear?”
“It was nearly full a minute ago,” Barry frowned.
“You’re just mixed up, dear.”

She left the room. Minutes later she returned, carrying the refilled shaker. There was the pretty little tingle if ice cubes as she set it on the table within Barry’s reach.

“There,” she said. “Now you’re all set.”

She had a cocktail glass in her hand, and when she had emptied it she set it down with a small sigh, followed by a very gay laugh. “Don’t give me another thought,” Blanche said, her tone as gay as her laugh, and even more brittle. “You two go right ahead and enjoy your drinks. I’m going out for a walk.”

And she went.

Vivi said again that she’d better be going. Barry told her how silly that would be, now that they were alone. Vivi said that his wife was certainly acting very peculiarly and she did not like it. She said: “I’ve got
mixed up in enough peculiar things tonight. I think I'd better go." But when she tried to stand, the floor started playing tricks on her again.

Barry pulled her back against him with a laugh and the explanation that his wife was a very peculiar woman. Personally, it was his belief that his wife had moments when she was downright batty. He assured Vivi that the thing for them to do was to kill the fresh cocktail shaker. Then, without question, she would discover the floor would stay put when she stood up, and it would be plenty soon enough for her to go.

So they went to work on the shaker.

They kissed some more. Then they renewed operations on the cocktail shaker. They smiled at each other. They agreed again that Blanche made drinks that carried authority. They sighed, fell back on the bed in each other's arms and finally, slept.

Vivi was going to sleep for a long time.
And Barry Gordon was going to sleep forever.

When Vivi returned to consciousness, it was well along in the following afternoon. And the Los Angeles papers, not to mention other papers all over the country, were already setting up the big, black sensational headlines:

BARRY GORDON FOUND DEAD UNDER MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES WIFE'S STATEMENT INVOLVES REDHEAD

CHAPTER 15

It was early in the morning when the man with the police badge and the questioning face came to Vivi's cottage, heaved his weight in the chair beside her couch,
and told her not to be frightened. He told her that he was not putting her under arrest. He just wanted to ask a few questions. He was querying everyone around the ranch. And he requested that they stick around unless they had permission to leave.

“So far, it’s just routine,” he said, and he smiled.

But he did not know, as yet, that Vivi had heard that one before, that she knew all about the friendly, disarming smile that went with it. Oh, she knew! She had found out about the whole routine, back in the nightmare of her past. Now she was back in the nightmare again. Being questioned about a murder that had taken place while she was in a drunken stupor.

There seemed no doubt that it was murder—unless Barry Gordon had sobered up, decided on suicide and deliberately swallowed enough stimulant to stop his heart forever.

But Blanche had stated that her husband was not the suicidal type. He liked living. He was afraid of dying. And while she realized the tremendous responsibility of accusing another woman of murder of her husband, nevertheless she could see no other explanation. Barry must have swallowed two dozen of the heart tablets, Blanche declared. And the autopsy proved her right.

Vivi Brady had been staggering drunk when she came to the cottage, Blanche declared.

From there on, Blanche had an explanation for everything. She had been quarreling with Barry over the red-headed girl. She had thought it a sound idea to permit Vivi to come in and have it all out right then and there. Between the three of them. A little later she decided that that had been a mistake. There was only one thing for Blanche to do—unless she wanted to start one of those sordid, vulgar, triangle brawls that were so commonplace among the Hollywood stars.
The thing to do was to ignore it completely, turn her back and walk out.

She had walked out—and she had not returned until seven o'clock in the morning.

In recent months she had been very unhappy. She had been considering divorcing her husband, but it was hard to reach a final decision. She never seemed to get enough time to herself to think it all out. Last night she had found the time.

She had returned to the cottage with every intention of telling Barry that she had decided to go to Reno. She had found him dead. And quite alone, Blanche conjectured. The girl already had too much man trouble on her hands—that disgusting fist fight between a father and son—really! Even a girl of Vivi Brady's type must understand when it was time for her to—well, take the heat off herself, so to speak.

Something of that sort, Blanche imagined, must have happened. Barry may have turned into an absolute licentious animal, as he was capable of doing when he was drunk. He may have threatened Vivi. And the girl, under the influence of liquor, may have decided that enough was enough—and that there was one very sure way to quiet the wolf call.

The heart tablets were on the table, and Miss Brady had once been a nurse. No doubt she knew how many should be used for a mild stimulant, how many for a lethal dose.

So she had done her little job of murder, gone quietly back to her own cottage and left poor Barry to die alone.

“Well,” said the police officer, “that’s Mrs. Gordon’s story. What’s your story, Miss Brady?” He was still beaming the friendly smile.

Vivi did not trust herself to say anything at all. All that she had to go on were the flashes of memory,
checked by the blank spots, all of which had gone into
the making of the worst hang-over in her life.

She still wore the lounging robe she had put on when
she came out of her drunk; she was sipping orange
juice, the only nourishment she had been able to take.
But she did not have the foggiest idea how she had
got from the Gordon cottage back to her own home
and into her own bed.

She lit a cigarette, smiled back at the police officer,
and wondered if it would be smart to tell him the
few things she did know.

That Blanche Gordon was a psychopathic case who
had made a deliberate attempt to push Barry under a
truck only two nights ago? That she had deliberately
pushed Vivi into her husband’s arms? That she had
left them alone together—with spiked drinks strong
enough to knock out a mule?

Vivi decided that it would not be smart to tell what
she did know, or to try tying these facts into what the
officer might conclude was a very fancy piece of fiction.
I’ll just keep it simple and uncomplicated, she decided.
Then, at least, they could not damn her out of her
own lips.

“I had a terribly upset evening,” she said. “I’ll have
to confess that I drank twice as much as I ever had
before in my whole life. All in one little operation, I
mean.” She paused as if trying to remember.

“Officer, I am afraid I can’t help you,” she went on.
“I can’t recall a single thing that occurred. Why, I
can’t even remember going to Barry Gordon’s cottage.
If I was really there, you could never prove it by me.”

“As bad as all that, eh?” The officer studied her
with calm, thoughtful appraisal. Obviously, he believed
that she was lying.

The man stood up. Something seemed to be puzzling
him, and before he left he told her what it was. “One
guy dead,” he said. “Another guy nursing a broken jaw.
A third guy, old enough to know better, suffering from the shakes because he let a girl take him for a dizzy ride."

The officer pounded a fist into his palm. "Miss Brady, I'll never understand why a beautiful girl has to go around stirring up so much trouble. Are you still sure you don't want to talk?"

"I can't think of a thing to talk about," Vivi said.

He went out.

Vivi was alone.

She allowed the nightmarish terror to catch up with her.

Facing the terror, looking right at it, she thought: \textit{How do I know I didn't do it? Oh, my God, how do I know?}

\textbf{CHAPTER 16}

Terror held her in a sick half-paralysis until she could force herself to go back to sleep. No one came to help drive the fear away. Mike did not come, and she wondered how Dick was doing, but no one came to tell her. No one had come near her that other time, either.

She slept, finally, and the terror stalked her sleep. It hung close, in nightmarish dreams. In the dreams, she was back in the jail cell and Maggie was telling her how to play it once she got out.

Then the jangling close to her ear awakened her.

Vivi opened her eyes to morning sunlight. She reached for the phone, and heard Henry's voice telling her that he'd be over in ten minutes. He wanted to talk with her. It was important.
Vivi told him to make it in thirty minutes.
She phoned to the dining room and ordered coffee sent over.
She showered and got into a robe.
The coffee came and she drank it. Three cups, strong and hot. She smoked two cigarettes. Then Henry arrived, and she lit another cigarette.
She asked him how he felt, and he said okay. She asked him how Dick was coming along, and Henry said okay.
Then, for the first time, he looked straight at Vivi. She was moving restlessly around the room, and he told her to sit down, relax. She would need to be comfortable and relaxed, he commented, while he said what he had to say to her.
Vivi turned, looked straight at Henry, and did not like what she saw. He was no longer a man with the shakes, as the police officer had described him.
His face looked hard as granite. His eyes were shiny little stones. His small lips looked like razor blades.
Vivi sank on the couch with a fresh fear in her heart. She would not have believed that the day could come when Henry would look at her with such cold, deadly dislike.
On the other hand, why should she be surprised? Take one of these smart, hard-headed businessmen, let a smart gal give him the works—what man could take it?
Henry was no exception.
Momentarily, Vivi closed her eyes against the cruelty she saw in Henry's face. She opened them and saw Henry recross his legs, settle himself more comfortably, light a cigar.
Then the razor-thin lips seemed to quiver around the words, "Vivi, what I have to tell you is just this. I'm going to break you. Do you understand me? I'm going to see that you're put away behind bars, where
a woman like you belongs. I'm going to see you're put where you'll do no more harm to me—or mine. Is that clear?"

"Not exactly."

Inside, Vivi had begun to shake all over again. Outwardly she appeared calm. There was a little coffee left in the thermos jug, and she got up to get it. She brought the cup back to the couch.

He seemed to be studying her as if she were someone he had never seen before. He remarked that she was a clever girl, all right. But the trouble was, she had underestimated his cleverness. And she had underestimated his power as a respected businessman.

"Let's skip all the window dressing, Henry. You don't have to build yourself up for my benefit. You've made a lot of dough, you're a big shot. Everybody admits that. I admit it. Now suppose you tell me what you're getting at."

"My son," he said reflectively. "That's where you made your big mistake, you cheap, evil slut of a woman." He puffed his cigar.

"When you dared to get your dirty, sluttish, tricky paws on my son, you simply proved to me that the smartest of tramps never knows where to stop. A good, clean, decent kid. Didn't know the first thing about women. Never even went around with girls much. Halfway engaged to some nice youngster who was as innocent, as unsophisticated as he was. And that's the kind of girl I want Dick to marry. Not you, by God. I'd rather see that kid dead than married to you," he concluded.

Vivi finished the coffee, set the cup on the floor. She still appeared perfectly calm, even a trifle amused.

"I wish you'd stop talking nonsense," she said. "I have no intention of marrying Dick. Not now. I assumed that Saturday night finished that little idea. It did, as
far as I was concerned. I suppose you know why Dick came here in the first place?"

Henry said nothing. He simply watched her and continued chewing at his cigar.

"Your wife sent him. His mission was either to brow-beat or blackmail me into returning you to the bosom of your family. It made me angry—understandable, don't you think? It seemed a smart idea to persuade Dick to stop hating me—and start liking me instead."

She shrugged. "So I used the usual womanly tactics to win him over. He was won more easily than I expected. He thought he was in love. In a way I suppose he was. He suggested getting married. I said not one word. In fact, I was surprised myself."

She gave another shrug, reached for another cigarette. She explained the rest of it with complete honesty before she added, "You don't have a thing to worry about, Henry. I'll let him alone. I'll give you my solemn promise—if that means anything to you."

Henry said that it didn't mean a damn thing to him. Vivi asked him what the point was.

Henry spoke thickly as he rose, walked toward the couch and stood staring down at her.

"The point is," he said, "that you have that boy hypnotized. You've turned him against me. He asked the doctor to keep me out of his room. When I finally got in, and tried to make things right with him, when I tried to tell him that he was my son and that I loved him, do you know what he said to me?"

"What?"

"He said that he hated the sight of my face. He said that he never wanted to see me again. He told me to get out and never come near him again. He said that you were the only being on earth he really loved. If he couldn't have you, he was going to kill himself."

"He's just an infatuated boy, Henry. He'll get over it.
He'll come around—if you'll just have a little patience."

"Not at long as you're on the loose, he won't."

Then he pulled the paper out of his pocket and handed it to Vivi. "Here," he said. "Read this. Read it carefully. Then, if you're really such a smart girl, I think you'll sign it."

Vivi lighted a fresh cigarette before she started to read what purported to be her own confession of having murdered Barry Gordon. Every word of it was framed in such a way as to make her flesh creep. Any jury would believe it. It was hard for Vivi not to believe it herself—the way fact faded into fiction and back into stark, undeniable fact again.

It began with Barry's two-hour rendezvous in her cottage Saturday morning. It moved right on through Vivi's activities of the afternoon, evening and night, to that early hour when Vivi pushed the tablets into his mouth and forced him to swallow them "... because he was threatening to make trouble for me if I did not promise to become his mistress. I was half tight, and I was already in a jam because of two men. All I could think of was that I just couldn't afford to have any more wolves making trouble for me. So I decided to kill him."

Vivi tossed the paper aside, snuffed out her cigarette, and smiled up at Henry with real amusement.

"You must have sat up all night writing that piece of nonsense."

"Are you going to sign it?"

"Of course I'm not going to sign it. Do you think I'm mad? And furthermore, how come you're playing policeman, Henry?" She laughed. "Forcing a lying confession out of an innocent girl! Why don't you stick to your racket and let the cops work at theirs?"

"Are you going to sign?"

Vivi began to get really angry, and that helped. It helped her ignore that crawling, sickish fear inside her.
That big, fat, mean face staring down at her. She wondered for a moment how she had ever endured a lover with such a fat, mean face. Then she remembered that some of the meanness stemmed from the fact that Henry would never again be a lover to a beautiful young girl. And he knew it.

Suddenly his lips were smiling, his eyes a little amused. "You'll pardon me if I seem amused," he said. "This is the first opportunity I've ever had to watch a tramp squirm. I must say that I find it rather enjoyable."

"I'm not squirming."

"Then I'd advise you to start, so you can work into it gradually."

He leaned toward her. "Vivi, if it takes the last dollar I've got, I mean to see you tried and convicted for the murder of Barry Gordon. I don't give a goddam whether you did it or not. I don't care if his wife is a psychopath and made up the whole story. It will become more logical when a trained, legal mind goes to work on it, then tells them about the other time you were found guilty of a drunken murder!"

"You sound like a maniac," she said. "I tell you, I did not kill Barry Gordon."

"Let's not bother about whether I'm a maniac. I don't care if you killed him or didn't kill him. I want you behind bars. I want you stuck away where my boy can't see you. I want you kept there for ten years. Even five would be enough. After five years in a penitentiary, I doubt if there'd be much left of all that glamour."

She stared at him, almost in horror.

"I mean what I'm saying, Vivi. I'll spend any amount of money. Of course, it would make everything much simpler if you agree to sign this confession. If you do, then I'll do a little favor for you in return. I never ask for favors unless I am willing to make some generous concession in return."
"What favor did you have in mind doing for me, Henry?"

"Why," he said, "I thought I'd deed this ranch over to you. That's what you've always wanted, isn't it? I don't care to bother with it, and I can afford to lose the money. When you come out of prison, it would be something for you to fall back on."

"The ranch," she murmured.

Then she shrieked harsh laughter, and made herself stop only by pushing her hands against her throat, as if she were trying to push the breath—and the life—out of herself.

Henry crossed the room. "Frankly," he said, "I consider it a most generous offer." He returned to her. "I'd consider you a damn fool if you don't take me up on it. Because just remember, confession or no confession, you're going to prison. But—no confession, no ranch. Is that perfectly clear?"

She came up off the couch, and she went a little crazy, while Henry stood unmoved, watching her. Chewing at his cigar, he watched her crack up. He watched her finally go on her knees, begging him not to do this to her.

"Get up, Vivi. You're only making a fool of yourself. Your corny act isn't impressing me one bit. Guilty or not, you're going to the can. And if I had to bet on it, I'll bet that you're guilty as hell."

"Don't say that!" she screamed. "Don't you say it!"

He shrugged, turned away from her with an air of complete indifference and looked out the window. He stood for a moment as if admiring the scenery. He said, without looking at her, "I'll give you another ten minutes to make up your mind. If you aren't ready to sign by that time, the deal is off."

In the end, she gave in. She signed the paper which lied her freedom away.
She didn’t even look at him. Her eyes stared woodenly at space.

Five minutes after he had gone, she began to wake up to what she had done. She went to her mirror and said, “Well, honey, it’s been quite a ride, hasn’t it? But I think we’ve come to the end of the line.”

Then, seeing the tears flooding her eyes, she made a smile for the tears, “Oh, cheer up, kid. What’s to cry about? You never wanted to live to be a battered old hag, anyway. Did you?”

CHAPTER 17

There was a terrible urgency in every move she made. She ripped a zipper loose in her haste to get it closed. She tore a stocking. Laughing. Hushing the laughter, because from here on it was important to do everything as quietly as possible. She thought of fixing a sandwich, but the very thought of food nauseated her. She did manage to gulp down two glasses of water. People said that wanting water was the very worst part of it. Oh, well. Every plan had its drawbacks.

She decided to give herself one or two little breaks, just to cheer herself up toward the end: a pack of cigarettes, and a chocolate bar. As she hunted the candy bar which she had stuck away somewhere, she thought of something else.

A bullet through her head would have been simpler and quicker, and a bottle of sleeping tablets certainly more pleasant. But the law prohibited the sale of sleeping tablets. If a girl wanted to end it all, the law said she must do it the hard way. And she’d always been afraid of guns.
She put on dark glasses and a big, floppy hat. She must disguise herself as much as possible. She kept reminding herself of that. She had to be so careful or they would never let her get away with it.

"I believe I've gone crazy," she said suddenly.

When she got out under the blazing hot sun she was thankful that she had worn the hat and glasses. The air seemed to be raining heat, and she began to wonder if she could go through with it.

Then her mind, filled with fear and desperation, drove her on. Her mind told her that she could go through with anything.

The path she took led her past Mike's shack and she decided to go in for a minute.

Mike was the one person on this earth she would like to say good-bye to. Mike was one guy who hadn't tried to dirty her up in order to have himself a time. Mike had simply seen through her, told her exactly what she was, and let her alone.

The door was unlocked, as usual. Mike was not there. She found an unused envelope and a pencil on the shelf beside Mike's pipe.

Dear Mike:

I always figured I'd like somebody to get plastered in my honor when I head out on the long, long trail. Would you care to oblige?

Take a drink to a redhead who wasn't much good, but who wasn't all bad, maybe.

Take another drink to a tramp who was fresh out of good breaks, and had no stomach for the bad ones coming her way.

Then take another drink—and make this one the real McCoy—to a guy who could have made the red-headed tramp and never did. Why the
hell didn’t you, Mike? Sorry I can’t stick around long enough to find out that answer. And isn’t it funny how I keep thinking maybe we both missed something damned good? You might take a last drink on that one.

To the fun we missed, dammit.

Vivi.

She left the shack, walked up the bridle path for a short distance. Then she headed out toward the middle of the desert where all trails ended. The world turned into blistering hot sand underfoot and a sheet of baking hot sun wrapping and torturing her body all over.

It was late in the afternoon before she gave up and decided that this was it.

She was faint and dizzy from lack of food; sick and dizzy from the sun. She was parched, crazy for water, and smoking a cigarette made it worse.

When it was too late, she wished she’d figured it out some other way.

Oh, well. That was her. When she tried to do things the right way, they turned out wrong. When she deliberately took the wrong way, it turned out hell.

She stretched herself out on the sand. She closed her eyes.

It would be a good idea, she thought, if she were to say a little prayer. But she couldn’t think of one. She had learned some prayers, once. She used to say them regularly. Her father used to say grace at the table, she recalled. That made her laugh. That was a thing she hadn’t thought about in years. But it had been such a long, long time ago. It was just another one of the millions of things that had been wiped off of the blackboard.

She whimpered softly, like a little animal in pain. Damn, what she’d give for a drink of water. Or to walk
into a bar and kid with the bartender and give the eye to some good-looking man. Or to feel a man's arms around her again. A kind of man like Mike. Come to think of it, what she'd give to have that all to do over. She'd played it all wrong. She could see that now.

Oh, sure, she thought. If I had to do it over, I'd be such a reformed character I wouldn't know myself. In a pig's eye I wouldn't be thirsty and sick with hunger and heat, so I'm trying to make a deal with God. That's what I'm doing. Trying to kid God into believing I'd play it on the level if He would just get me out of this hell I've walked myself into.

Then she blacked out.

It was a good eighteen hours later when she felt someone forcing water between her lips. She opened her eyes to Mike who was cursing her for having less sense than he had given her credit for.

"I figured you for a babe with some guts," Mike said. "Here. Can you sit up? Can you drink some more of this water? Walking around in circles. Less than a quarter of a mile off of the highway. What did you think you were doing, anyway? Making a movie?"

He had brought sandwiches, and she ate half of one. He had some cold milk, and she drank a little of that.

"Of all the corny acts! Hell, it would have served you right if I'd left you out here to die."

"It wasn't any act, Mike. Believe me." That was later. After he got her back to his car and out of the heat.

"Then you must have been nuts."

"I probably was." She told him about Henry. "I went a little crazy, I think. Next time I'll put a gun to my head. Then there won't be any saving me from myself. What have I got to be saved for? You just tell me that! To rot in some damned jail cell? And to keep wondering if—I do murder people when I'm drunk?"

Mike gave her a shot of brandy. Then he lit a cigarette and put it in her mouth.
“Forget it,” he said. “You never killed anybody in your life. And your pal, Henry, won’t like this—but he’s up the creek with his fancy plans, and no paddle. I spent the better part of last night giving Blanche Gordon the works. It cost me a lot of good liquor. It also required some rough tactics that I don’t like using on a woman. But before the night was over, she sang. She killed the guy, all right. She belongs in a psychiatric ward, and that’s probably where they’ll put her. As for you, you’re in the clear. So stop worrying about it. Let’s talk about something else. Vivi, how would you like to get married?”

Vivi moved her head and her mouth relaxed into a smile.

“To whom?” she said.

“Me.”

“Are you kidding?”

“I don’t think so.”

Vivi smiled some more. “I do think so. And look, Mike. You know me. I know you. Just because you rescued a potential suicide from her sad fate, you don’t have to get so damned gallant that it hurts. It isn’t in character. I like you best when you stay in character. See what I mean?”

Mike was silent for a moment, staring into space. His thoughts were turned in on himself. A guy who had roamed the world, played the field, and wanted to keep it that way.

He shook his head over his thoughts. It would be one son-of-a-gun of a gamble. But—what the hell!

He kept looking at her. He saw her mouth tremble, the tears splash from her lashes to her cheek.

“What are you crying about?” Mike said.

She shrugged. “Nerves, I guess.”

She started playing with an unlit cigarette. “Let’s drive somewhere,” she said. “Anywhere. And stop ask-
"We could try it and see how it goes," Mike said very gently. "If you're scared of the marriage deal—well, okay. We could try it the other way."

She turned her eyes full on him. "You're really serious, aren't you? Why? Tell me why, Mike."

Mike shrugged. "I came back to my place and found your note. I nearly went nuts. Last night I did things I'm ashamed to think about—to get the truth out of that woman. Today I've been searching this desert. Wondering if I was going crazy. Maybe I would have if I hadn't found you. You want to know why? Hell. I don't know why. Ask me something easy. Ask me about the Einstein theory. I haven't much dough to fancy up the deal with. But I'm a pretty good hand at loving a dame. When I got around to loving you, I don't believe you'd have a single kick."

Vivi wasn't saying a word. Something hot and choking and wonderful was blocking her throat. She just kept pressing her lips in and out. When she tried to smile, it came out some more tears.

"Look," Mike said finally, "if you don't think it's worth talking about, just forget it. I never begged a woman in my life, and I'm not starting now. We'll just forget the whole thing. Okay?"

"I'm not saying anything because I don't know the words."

Vivi tried to swallow the aching block in her throat. "I'm not talking because it's—it's too damned wonderful to talk about."

She looked around at him and slowly her smile came. "Listen," she said, "just give me a little while to get used to the idea, will you? I've spent all of my life going after things I kidded myself into believing I wanted. Now I'm being offered something I want like
hell. I just discovered I want it. And that I can have it. So
give me a little time, Mike.”

“That’s all right.” Mike put out his arm and drew her
close to him, and after he had looked at her face for a
long time he moved his lips down to her mouth. Then
he smiled at her. “You and me,” he said. “We’ve never
found real happiness, not the real McCoy, anywhere
else, have we? Together, I figure we’ve got a chance to
find something good.”

Soft laughter lay behind her words. “Well, if you ask
me, we’ve lost an awful lot of time, Mike. We’ve been
passing up a certain something that ought to be very,
very good. I really don’t think we should waste any more
time. Do you?”

He grinned and told her not to be so impatient. “The
best things of life are worth waiting for, baby.” Then
he put the car in gear and headed down the highway.
PART THREE

Balance of Nature
Henry Wilkins sat behind the large oak desk in his library. The room was paneled and dark, padded by heavy drapes; the sun was never permitted at any time, and the only illumination now came from the shaded desk lamp.

The dim light did not compliment Henry's appearance. The resurgent youth, so apparent during the good months of his affair with Vivi, was nowhere to be seen. The mass of his paunch seemed to drag his shoulders down; his bent head, the heavy jowls and thick wrinkles made Henry Wilkins look more like a completed avalanche than the vital, robust lover he so wanted to be.

"Henry," Lucy's thin voice glided through the darkness of the room like a silent cat.

Henry did not move and he did not answer. He made no gesture to indicate that he was aware of his wife's entry into the room. But when the dim light picked out her frail figure and lavender dress, he spun his chair to face the rear of the room away from her.

"Henry!" She walked around the desk and stood behind him.

He winced, then turned around, to find her standing directly in front of his knees.

"Must you stand so close? The room is large enough for both of us." Henry's tone was not a playful one.

Lucy Wilkins sat down in the large wing chair. Henry watched her, distaste growing with each instant. He noticed her feet, booted as ever in health shoes; Lucy insisted that other shoes were positively dangerous. As
if aware of his scrutiny, she crossed her legs and gently swung her health-shod feet. Irritation burst in Henry.

"Dammit, can't you get a foot stool? You're not going to sit there and—and dangle!"

Lucy did not move; she merely smiled.

Henry left his seat, found the stool and placed each of Lucy's feet upon the maroon velvet. Then, feeling a little foolish, he sat once more behind the huge desk.

"Henry," Lucy began, "you haven't paid the detective—"

"And I will not," Henry declared, leaning forward in his chair. "The whole damned report was your idiotic idea and I will not pay the man a single penny. Hear?" He thrust himself back against the seat, face flushed with anger. "Not one penny!"

"Nonetheless," Lucy began again, "the man performed a service, Henry, and he deserves payment."

"Rot!"

"Now, Henry—"

"Why on God's green earth should that Peeping Tom get any money? What the hell has he done?"

"Well," Lucy replied, "he saved our son—"

"Our son?" Henry sprang from his chair. He paced across the room, rubbing his hand back and forth over his eyes. "Our son?" He stopped before Lucy. "Your son! And don't forget it."

"Oh, Henry." Lucy shook her head, a patient smile on her face. "Dick is as much your child as mine, Henry— in every way."

Henry turned away. "Our son," he said, "your protegé, has been upstairs in this house for one week. He will not come downstairs. And he will not even say good morning to me when we pass in the hall."

"It's your fault." Lucy was convinced. "You've not been a good father."

"The hell you say."
“A good father,” Lucy continued, calmly sure of herself, “does not support a slut.”

“A slut? Vivi was not a slut. Oh, hell!” Henry had not meant to defend Vivi.

“What was she, then? The Queen Mother?”

“Lucy, for God’s sake, what is all black or all white? She was not wholly a slut. Not by any means.”

“No?” Lucy began tapping her foot. “She doesn’t have a family, a home, or a husband.” The tapping was almost a dance. “She was a hot hussy, a bed-burglar, an unwed merry widow!” Lucy withdrew a lacy handkerchief from her sleeve and opened it on her lap, ready to continue her name-calling. “She was—”

“She was good to me.”

Henry’s quiet statement cut through the air and brought thick silence. Once more, he took his seat behind the desk.

Lucy used the handkerchief to pat the palms of her hands. Head down, she repeated, “Good to you…. .” She raised her head and looked at Henry. “In other ways than with—with sex, Henry?”

“I’m not a young man, Lucy,” Henry said in answer.

“In other ways, then.” Lucy’s eyes widened as if she were making some great discovery. She dabbed absently at her forehead. “In other ways,” she murmured to herself.

“Dick won’t speak to me,” Henry went on. “And I did not know that you had sent him, my own son, to confront Vivi with that filth. I didn’t know what you were up to, you and your disgusting investigation. My God, Lucy what do you offer that would make me want to stay leashed up in this castle? Just what?”

As though waiting for an answer, Henry paused. Then he continued.

“Constant, never-ending suspicion—that’s all. And a badly raised son who adores you and who you taught to despise me. What do I have here, Lucy? When even my own son despises me?”
As if in reply, the clock struck. And in the silence that followed, they both heard the sound of their son's footsteps overhead as he walked in broad circles around his room.

Henry sighed deeply. "All right," he said, "pay the detective."

"I will tomorrow." Lucy tried to smile at him.

"She wanted to marry my soul!"

As if recalling some terrible forgotten memory, Henry stood and once again began to pace back and forth. Son pacing upstairs. Father pacing downstairs. His revulsion and anger at discovering Vivi's plan returned anew and Vivi became the twisted seducer of the innocent, the worst of Magdalenes, a vulture picking at the bones of the weak. A moment before he had been involuntarily defending her, but he conceived her now as the most despicable and loathsome of beasts, perhaps because he believed he had seen every side of her.

Henry had seen her purr, had seen her grab, had seen her grovel. He had made her sign a confession and that, even though he knew it was useless, had made him feel a profound thrill of triumph and revenge. He had seen her as no other person had seen her, but now that she was free, still running the ranch, married to her stable-keeper, resentment and contempt rankled once more in Henry. Somehow, he would make her crawl again; somehow, he would make both of them crawl in the filthiest of dirt.

"She wanted to marry our Dick," Henry said to Lucy. "Can you imagine that? Oh, that woman is unbelievably, Lucy, unbelievably. And she has the luck of Satan himself. Extraordinary luck. Look at that film, Casanova's death. Sheer luck. The wife confesses. Did you ever in your life—"

Sheer exasperation silenced Henry. He walked to the drapes and absently moved to push them aside, as if to let light come in and flood the subject.
“She wanted to marry our Dick—and he’s upstairs crying over his loss. Well, he doesn’t know just how much we saved him from. And I’m not finished with that woman yet, not yet!”

“What are you going to do?” Excitedly, Lucy switched the balled handkerchief from one palm to the other.

“She wants that land, she wants that land,” Henry kept repeating to himself as he paced through the library. “She wants that land—so I’ll sell it to her.” Henry started to laugh. “I’ll fix that witch.”

He stopped in front of Lucy and waved his finger.

“I’ll set an extravagant price on that ranch, but she’ll pay because she wants the damned place. I’ll make sure she’s cleaned out almost completely. And then—Lucy, it’s absolutely brilliant—Lucy, then I’ll buy up the land around her, and—” Henry smiled in sheer enjoyment.

“And—”

“What, Henry, what?”

“Hell, Lucy, we’ll make it a snake farm or a swamp or the biggest leper colony in the hemisphere. I’ll donate it. Philanthropic Henry Wilkins donates land for contagious diseases hospital. Hal”

“Henry, that’s wonderful!”

“Oh, she’ll squirm, yes indeed, that slut’ll squirm.” Henry sat down behind his desk again.

“Like hell!”

“Dick!—” Henry rose quickly; Lucy sprang from her seat. “Thought you were upstairs,” Henry said.

“You can’t do that.” The white bandage on Dick’s jaw shone dully in the dimness; he looked close to tears. He spun around and in a moment they heard the front door slam shut.

Henry was quickly after him. Running, he shouted, “Dick, Dick, stop!”

But the boy was younger and faster. Henry soon lost his breath and stopped, defeated, when he heard the garage door open.
But Lucy had surprising energy. She passed Henry and ran swiftly toward the garage.

“Dick!”

He heard her and paused, fingers on the handle of the car door.

“Dick.” She came through the bushes and stood stolidly in the middle of the driveway. “Dick, stop this instant.”

Dick looked at her, then opened the car door.

“Mother, go back. Get out of the way.”

He slid in behind the wheel, started the car and gunned the motor mercilessly. But his mother did not move. He dropped his forehead to the wheel. “Please, please.” He looked in the rear-view mirror. His mother had not taken a step. He got out of the car.

“Mother, move!”

“No.” She folded her arms. “I will not. Never.”

Henry’s exhausted shape came plunging out from behind the hedges. Visibly panting, he stood beside the rigid Lucy.

Dick looked at his mother and father in silence for a moment. Then he quickly slipped behind the wheel of the car, released the brake, and backed down the driveway at roaring speed.

“Look out!” Henry and Lucy scuttled against the hedges. Safe, they ran to the curb and watched Dick turn the corner at breakneck speed.

“He’s going to her,” Lucy stated. “We have to stop him. Henry, we have to stop him!” She started walking rapidly back toward the garage.

“Henry!” He had not moved. “Henry, stop behaving like a ninety-year-old. Come. We must stop him!”

She went into the garage and opened the door of the parked Cadillac. “Henry! What’s the matter with you? Don’t you care about your son, your only son?” Her voice rang fervently.

Henry, still breathing heavily from his exertions, came
slowly to the car. As he climbed behind the wheel, he suddenly remembered that not too long ago he had made the same trip they both would make now. Depression descended on him. He started the car and backed it out of the driveway.

“Drive faster,” Lucy commanded.

Henry complied. The Cadillac roared through the traffic of the city, and soon shot down the broad superhighway that led to the desert.

Lucy was certain that she spied Dick’s smaller car not too far ahead.

Henry didn’t care.

Dick Wilkins knew his parents would follow him. He turned off the main road and parked the car on a side street not four blocks from the house. He adjusted the rear-view mirror to get an unobstructed view of the road he had just left, leaned back in the seat, and waited for the appearance and passing of his father’s big Cadillac.

Dick did not feel well, mentally or physically. His eyes felt tired and bleary, and the sporadic dizziness that filled his head frightened him. He wondered what was happening to him; he wondered just what had already happened to him.

Until a few weeks ago, he had been a perfect innocent. A woman’s thigh was something he had seen only at swimming pools or on beaches. In fact, in the past he deliberately would attend girls’ water polo matches because the view of the combatants could be so richly informative.

Now here he was, the rival of his father, nursing a broken jaw and trying to trick his parents. He felt years older, and extremely confused.

But confused or not, he wanted to see Vivi without his mother and father present—he had to warn her of
his father’s plans. If Lucy and Henry reached the ranch before he did, discovered he had not arrived, they would think they had been mistaken about his destination and go quietly back home. Or so he hoped.

“All this for a woman,” he murmured to himself. “For a woman, a stupid slut of a woman.”

His eyes closed and he thought of Vivi’s uncovered breasts—full and beautiful—as he had seen them on that one morning by her side. He remembered the exquisite loveliness and softness of her skin. A bolt of reminiscent desire shuddered through him as he recalled the surprising strength of her arms and legs.

“Vivi,” he called out almost in agony. “Oh, Vivi, how I need you. How I need to hold you. . . .”

He rested his forehead against the steering wheel and closed his eyes. Fists balled, teeth clenched, he hunched this way for several minutes. Then, suddenly, he sat sharply back against the seat, started the engine, and began the trip to the ranch once more. He no longer remembered nor cared about his mother and father and what they might do.

He had to see Vivi.

CHAPTER 19

The night clerk, a very long and thin young man, sat sprawled and asleep behind the desk in the main lobby. It was the sleep of the contented.

He had a job and he had some money in his pocket. The job was a good one and the work was easy. In his one week at the night desk, he had done no more than take a few calls and hand out a few keys. That was just fine with him. He had assured Vivi that he knew
how to take care of any situation—after all, he had worked at some of the roughest and some of the richest hotels and resorts on the east coast. That’s what he had said; Vivi had looked as though she believed him. Truth be known, his rather extensive night-time experience with hotels had little to do with the front desk—other than fear of it.

But here he was—in beautiful country, meals free, room cheap, debts forgotten, and enemies miles away. And the job was a snap. His sleep, to repeat, was the sleep of the contented.

“Young man!”

“What?”

He jumped up, the magazine on his lap spilling to the floor.

“Young man, I want some information. Wake up.”

Lucy Wilkins stood before him, face grim, hand that had slapped the wood still resting on the desk.

“What? Oh, yes, ma’am.” He shook his head to clear it. “Yes. Can I help you?”

She eyed him suspiciously. “Not if you’ve been asleep all evening.”

The young man blushed. Then, angry, he said, “Madam, my eyes were closed, that’s all. I was quite awake. Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for someone,” Lucy started abruptly. “A slim young man with a bandage on his face. Have you seen him?”

The clerk shook his head slowly, as if thinking. “No, ma’am, I haven’t. Maybe I wasn’t on duty. What time was he supposed to arrive?”

Very patiently, Lucy said, “Unless he crawled past the desk, he must have walked right by within the last hour.”

The woman’s determination and anger were beginning to unsettle the clerk. The accusation in her tone frightened him, and she seemed so certain that he mo-
mentarily doubted himself. But then he shook his head.

“No one like that has been here tonight,” he said.

The woman prodded. “Are you sure? Are you absolutely certain? You couldn’t have missed him?”

“Ma’am, you can’t miss someone with a bandage on his face.”

“You couldn’t have been asleep?”

Once again offended, he drew himself up. “Madam, my job is to stay awake here behind this desk.”

Lucy studied him carefully. “I don’t believe you,” she decided. “He has been here.”

“Madam, why should I lie to you?”

“We’ll get the police!” Lucy threatened loudly.

“Sh,” he pleaded. “Please, ma’am—sh! It’s late. Everyone’s asleep.”

“Hmph!” Lucy snorted. “No one sleeps in this—this den.”

“Lady, I swear I haven’t seen—”

“Young man, are you certain? A slim boy with a bandage on his face. My son. You have not seen him?”

“I have not.”

“Very well.” She turned on her heel and began to walk out of the lobby. In the doorway, she hesitated.

“Where’s the slut who runs this house?”

“Who?” the clerk asked, confused.

“The famous Vivi Brady, young man. Who else?”

Lucy’s voice had become loud again.

“Sh! Ma’am, please!”

“Oh—”

“And I haven’t seen your son, either.”

“And you know no Vivi, that vulgar red-headed slut? She probably has my son with her, at this very instant.”

“I haven’t—”

“Perhaps he’s met with an accident.” Lucy considered this for a moment. “After all, he’s not well. Perhaps he took ill on the way. Henry drove so fast we could have passed right by. He might need help. Oh, the poor dear.
LUST FOR LOVE

Henry!" She turned and headed out the door. "Henry? Henry, we must go back."

The clerk heard her talking as she opened the car door. He heard the door close and crept to the window to watch. The old couple were waving their arms and obviously shouting at each other in the car, but in a moment the sharp-finned vehicle puffed exhaust smoke and busily began to purr back over its former route.

The young clerk returned to his seat behind the desk and picked up his magazine.

"Boy" he commented to the room, "there sure are some far-out characters in this world."

He opened the magazine and tried to read. But he was too rattled to concentrate; he closed the pages, leaned back, and shut his eyes. Soon he was asleep.

A few minutes later, the lobby door opened and Dick Wilkins walked briskly into the room. He looked around, saw no one, and headed toward Vivi's office.

The clerk woke and saw him. Fear leaped in his throat—it was the bandaged kid that lady wanted! But he quickly decided that the entire thing was much too complicated; he would only get in trouble if he said anything about the earlier visitor.

Instead he said, "No one's there, sir."

Dick jumped and spun around.

"Oh." He sagged with relief. "Just you. I'm looking for Miss Brady."

"She's in her cottage."

"Still the same one?"

"Can't answer that, sir. With her husband, that's all I know."

"Her what?"

"Her husband. Yeah," he nodded at Dick's disbelief, "she's married, all right."

"I don't believe you."
“Mister, you don’t have to believe me.” The clerk turned away.

“Wait—I mean, who did she marry?”

“Mike Morritt, the riding master.”

“Oh.”

“You know him? Hey, mister, you all right?”

Dick was not all right. He fell to the floor with a sickening thud.

“Hey, mister!”

Cautiously, the clerk crept out from behind his counter. He was thoroughly frightened.

He approached the motionless figure of Dick Wilkins as one would approach a quiet lion. He slowly circled the prostrate form and, displaying more courage than he usually knew, ventured a step closer, bent from the waist and observed Dick’s face closely.

He stood up. “He’s breathing. He’s alive,” he said to the silent room. “He’s alive,” he repeated, this time filling the announcement with the sound of complete relief.

He stalked the body once more, then prodded Dick gingerly with his foot. “Hey.”

He prodded again, more sharply.

“Hey, mister.”

Dick did not respond.

“Jesus, maybe it’s something serious. You never know.” For a long moment, the clerk stood and watched the motionless body. Suddenly, will-lessly, he felt panic start down deep inside him and start to burgeon up through his stomach. “Jesus!”

He darted toward the exit.

But when his hand hit the knob, the telephone rang. He hesitated briefly. But then: “Oh, hell.”

He returned to the desk and answered the phone.

“Yes, ma’am—we’ll call at nine.” He hung up and turned around to look again at the body on the flagstone floor.
“I'll just have to call.”

He lifted the receiver and dialed one digit. He put the receiver down. No. He would not phone.

Taking a deep breath, the clerk marched up to the fallen body and, holding Dick under the armpits, dragged him over to a sofa. Attempts to get him on the cushions failed—Dick was difficult to handle, and the clerk was not strong; he propped the unconscious body in a sitting position against the side of the couch.

“I think I should unbutton his collar,” the clerk said aloud, and opened Dick's shirt. He slowly waved his hand back and forth before Dick's face as if to create a breeze. When that accomplished nothing, he kneeled on all fours before the figure. He stared directly into Dick's bandaged face.

“Wake up, boy,” the clerk whispered.

There was no response.

“Wake up, boy, please. Please don't get me caught here with you and me not knowing what to do. I need the job. Please wake up, boy.”

Dick's pale face remained unchanged.

“Omigod.” The clerk's face grew very worried; his long fingers began nervously to stroke his own lips. “Omigod,” he repeated, “you're not going to—to die on me, are you?”

Almost as a reply, Dick's head rolled to one side, “Omigod—you are!”

The clerk rose and started walking quickly around the room. He seemed to flutter like some scraggly moth as, head moving from right to left, he nervously clasped and unclasped his hands.

He stopped in front of the desk and stared in rigid silence at the inert body. Finally, decision reached, he moved his head up and down.

“I'll call.”

He executed a sharp about-face and lifted the receiver. Soon the phone was ringing in Vivi's cottage.
Mike stirred at the soft insistent ring. He had to un¬
fetter himself from the soft strands of Vivi's long red hair before he could sit up and reach for the phone. 
“Yes,” he mumbled.

Vivi turned over in her sleep. Her arm stretched out to find Mike's body. Seeing this, he placed his hand over hers and held it; her fingers softly tightened.

“This is the night clerk, Mr. Morritt.”

“What is it?”

“Well, sir, there's—there's a young gentleman lying here.”

Vivi murmured. “Mike, come back,” she purred. He gently stroked her hair.

“Well, pick him up,” was Mike's reply to the clerk. “Sir,” the clerk answered, “sir, he's all bandaged and out cold and I don't know what to do with him, sir.”

“All right,” Mike said. “I'll be over shortly.” He hung up.

“Mike? Mike?”

“Here I am, honey.” He slid down on the bed once more.

Eyes still closed, Vivi held out her arm for him. But he took her hand and kissed the palm. Lips against the skin, he looked at Vivi's womanly and sensuous body, lying in relaxed satiation, lying so near his own he could feel her soft warmth.

He glided his hand over the smoothness of her stom¬ach, then brought his hand up to her breast. Watching her, in a moment he saw her body begin to move slightly, her face begin to become alive and lose its sleep-filled cast.
Mike bent his head and brought his lips down on the warm curve of neck and shoulder; lightly, he kissed the smooth flesh.

Vivi sent her hand up to the back of his neck and pressed her fingers through his hair. "Mmm, Mike, darling." Her body shifted slightly and moved close to him. "Oh, honey."

Mike raised his head. "Sweetheart," he said, "there's some trouble in the lobby. I better go over."

Face against his chest, Vivi murmured, "Can't it wait a little while?"

He kissed her ear. "I'll be back as soon as I can, darling."

Vivi pouted. "But I'll fall asleep."

Mike laughed. "Don't worry, honey, I'll wake you up."

He pulled the covers over her shoulders. "'Bye, sweet."

"'Bye," she answered, almost asleep already.

Mike slipped out of bed and hurriedly dressed; in a matter of moments, he was on his way to the main house.

He was greeted by a very disturbed clerk. "I don't know what's the matter, sir. But at least he's not dead. He came in looking for Miss—I mean Mrs. Morritt and then he just passed out."

Mike had recognized Dick; he understood immediately why the boy was there. "Was he alone?"

"Some older people—actually, just a lady—she said she was his mother—came looking for him before, but she left."

Mike bent over the body, and carefully raised one of Dick's eyelids. He checked the pulse, then placed his hand on Dick's forehead.

"Drunk?" the clerk asked.

Mike shook his head. "No. He just got out of the hospital, and I guess he must have over-exerted himself."

The clerk was visibly relieved. "What should we do, sir?"
"Let's put him in a room. We'll call a doctor in the morning, if he's not all right—but I think he will be. Is there anything empty?"

The clerk scurried to the desk and opened the large register. "Room 103 checked out today."
"Fine. Let's go."
"Sir-"
"Yes?"
"What'll I put in the register?"
Mike laughed. "John Jones."
"But—yes, sir."
"Come on, man, get a move on."
"Sorry, sir. Yes, sir." The clerk closed the register and hurriedly walked over to Mike and Dick. He stopped abruptly and stood helplessly as soon as he reached the body.
"Well? Come on, lend a hand." Mike was getting irritated.
"Yes, sir." He grabbed Dick's arm.
Mike shoved his hand away. "Not that way. You'll hurt him. Here. Take him by the ankles."
"Yes, sir." The clerk complied.
Together, the two men carried the unconscious Dick to Room 103 and deposited him on the bed.
The clerk nodded. "Good night, sir." And nearly ran out of the room.
Mike turned to the business at hand. With great care, he removed Dick's clothes. When the boy was undressed, Mike commented to himself: "Nice build for his age. Well, Vivi always did have good taste."
He put Dick under the blankets, turned out the light, and returned to his cabin.

He found Vivi asleep. Mike felt the room in darkness and quietly undressed. Then he gingerly got into bed beside Vivi.
She stirred. “Mike? That you?” She turned and snuggled against him. “Mike.”

He laughed. “You mean you can’t tell who I am until I get this close? Bad girl, bad girl.” He slapped her bare flesh.

“Owl!” Head snapped up and eyes opened wide. “Ow, you louse.”

“Honey!” Mock concern rang in his voice. “Did I hurt you? Aww. Let me make it better.”

He placed his warm hand on the offended flesh and rubbed gently. In a moment the hand moved, still gently, over other territory.

“I love you,” Vivi purred. “I love you.”

Mike’s lips answered for him. . . .

Later, they lay side by side, exhausted.

“What was the matter in the lobby, Mike?” she asked. “You didn’t tell me.”

Mike hesitated before answering. “It was Dick, Vivi.”

He felt her stiffen slightly; he put his arm around her shoulders and drew her against him. “Nothing serious, dear. Don’t worry. He came to see you, I guess, and the drive must have been too much for him. He passed out, that’s all. I put him in 103. He’ll be fine after a night’s sleep. There’s nothing to worry about,” he said again.

“It’s his father who worries me,” Vivi replied. “I took good care of the kid, Vivi. He’s all right. Wilkins will appreciate it.”


“What can he do to us?”

“He owns this land.” She shivered as she spoke.
“Is that what scares you?” Mike hugged her reassuringly. “Vivi, we can always get along. Always.”

“Oh, Mike, don’t you understand? I want this place. I want it very much.”

“I know. But—” He yawned hugely. “Honey, it’s late. There’s nothing we can do, anyhow, except wait and see what he does. Let’s go to sleep.”

“You go ahead, dear,” Vivi answered. “I’ll be right back.” She kissed him lightly on the forehead and moved out of bed.

Wearing her robe, she went toward the other room. She stopped in the doorway and waited in silence for several moments. When the sound of Mike’s breathing told her he was asleep, she went to the telephone.

“Room 208, please.”

It took several rings, but finally the phone was answered.

“This is Vivi Brady,” she said, voice low but clear. “Vivi Brady. Wake up and pay attention. What I have to say is important.” She waited a moment, and then she said, “Ready? Now listen.

“Remember our conversation this afternoon? You wanted some advice on how to recoup your possessions, remember? Well, here’s the advice—he’s in Room 103. Got it? One-oh-three. Good luck.”

Vivi hung up and went back to bed.

Marian Hunt stood inside the darkened bedroom where Dick Wilkins lay. She had told the clerk that she was a nurse, called by Vivi Brady; he had seemed only too anxious to open the door with his pass-key and let her in.

And so there she stood, knowing what she was going to do, knowing what she had to do—and more than a little nervous about the whole thing.

Because her actions were based on two desires, one
noble, the other mean. She had found herself still in love with Dick Wilkins—and she had found herself still wanting the financial security marriage to him could bring. There was the slight feeling that one motive tarnished the other—and the possibility of failure in either case was extremely unpleasant, if for no other reason than she would have earned both Dick's contempt and his disgust, as well as irrevocable loss of his love and his money.

Nonetheless, this was her one chance; she took it. Quietly, so slowly that the nylon made no noise as it slithered over her body, Marian undressed, draping her clothes, piece by piece, on a nearby chair.

Then, with great care, she slipped into bed beside Dick.

With knowing, gentle hands and willing, soft lips, it was not long before Marian had awakened Dick Wilkins; and it was not long before his drowsy surprise gave way to great desire.

"Darling, darling, darling. . . ."

"Oh, Marian!"

And soon after that, Dick's exhaustion had other than illness for cause.

"Marian, I don't understand," he said later.

"I love you, Dick. And I hoped you had grown up enough to understand this for what it really is, not something dirty. I wanted you to have me, I wanted us to have each other—and maybe that way make you see that I'm not a cheap tart."

"Oh, Marian, I do understand. That thing with Vivi—I ought to thank her. I would never have been ready for you—for this . . . ."

"Vivi didn't want to hurt you, not really."

"Oh, I know, I know. I ought to thank her, Marian. Because unless it had happened with her, I wouldn't have been able to realize how wonderful—how different—making love with you could be."
Marian smiled and kissed him lightly. "I love you," she said again.

"Marian," there was real surprise in Dick's voice, "I guess I love you, too."

At that instant, the phone rang. Dick reached out and answered it.

"Good morning."

"Vivi? Hello, Vivi! My God, what time is it?"

"Noon."

"What the hell happened?"

"Mike put you to bed."

"With Marian?" Dick's question was only half-joking. "No," Vivi laughed. "Marian can walk."

"Oh." He was at a loss for what to say next.

"I didn't call to bother you, Dick. I just wanted you to know that your parents have reported you to the police as a missing person. Your picture is spread over six newspapers."

"Guess I better call them right away. Oh, Vivi—" Remembering the original reason for having come to the ranch, he told her what his father planned on doing.

"But," he added, "I think when I tell him that—well, that it's over with you—" He sounded decidedly uncomfortable.

"Dick," Vivi said kindly, "it's all right. It was good, really, for both of us."

"Thanks, Vivi," he answered, relieved of his burden. "Anyway, Vivi, I'm pretty sure he won't bother you—after I tell him that Marian and I are going to get married."

Marian smacked a loud kiss on his cheek. "Dick!"

"Congratulations, Dick. Kiss Marian for me, while you're at it."

"I will, don't worry."

"That's it, then. Goodbye, Dick. Good luck—to both of you."
“Thanks, Vivi.”
He hung up and turned to Marian. “Guess I’ll call my folks.”
“Later,” she said, reaching for him.
Grinning, Dick reached back.

THE END
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BETRAYED by the man she adored, pert Vivi acquired a new philosophy. If men were slaves to passion, then Vivi would make herself their passion—and the men her slaves! Soon enough, old Harry Wilkins and his son, young Dick, both became prisoners of her fiery hair, her burning lips, her pale flesh... But neither understood the secret of her strange yearnings. Nor did the others. Not even Barry Gordon, screen-idol of a million women. He too became Vivi's lover—but had to pay the full penalty.

Then came the morning when Vivi awoke to find that the men she had betrayed had turned on her. She was helplessly trapped in the web of evil she herself had woven. Only selfless love, the genuine article, could save her from horrible retribution!

Well-known among sophisticated readers for her penetrating excursions into the emotions which motivate love, the author has achieved one of her greatest triumphs in this tense story. Exotic setting and fascinating plot combine to make a rewarding and fascinating book you'll finish at one sitting!