

Chapter 1

I slipped a dollar under the wicket and a sullen-lipped cashier asked me for a penny.

"You're making the change," I told her. She gave me the ticket and four pennies and I bounded up the stairs. The man on the door tried to mark my wrist with a blue stamp, but I dodged it. It was one of those dance halls where men come to pick up something, and women come to be picked up. I was there because I was bored. I looked around.

There were twice as many women as men. Most of the women looked pretty bad, those that were sitting around waiting, but there were a few fairly nice ones on the floor. I edged through the crowd past the rope barrier and watched the dancers. The band (three saxes, a trumpet, piano and drums) was much too loud. The ceiling was low and there was a second listen to the music through reverberation. I looked for the bar and found it, but it only served beer. I ordered one at the bar, and then sat at a table facing the dance floor.

The place was noisy, hot, smelled of sweat, and the beer wasn't cold. I was ready to leave. Then I saw the woman in the red tailored suit.

It wasn't just a red suit, it was a created red suit. The woman lived up to it. She was a tall woman with shoulder-length brown hair, parted in the center. She looked as out-of-place in that smoky atmosphere as I would have looked in a Salinas lettuce-pickers camp. She had a casual air, but she was interested in what was going on. I got up from the table and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Dance?" I jerked my head toward the floor.

"Oh, yes!" she said, and nodded her head several times like she thought it was the best suggestion ever made.

I took her elbow and guided her through the crowd to the floor. We began to dance. She was a terrible dancer, and as stiff and difficult to shove around as a reluctant St. Bernard.

"Why don't you relax?" I asked her.

"What?" She looked at me with big brown excited eyes, and there were bright red spots on her cheeks.

"Relax."

"I haven't danced in a long time and I'm afraid of making a mistake."

"Don't be afraid. I made one."

"I didn't notice it."

"That's because you haven't danced in a long time. Come on. Let's get us a beer."

All the tables were occupied in the bar section, but a couple of young punks were sitting at one with nothing in front of them. I gave them a hard look and they got up and left.

"Sit down, Miss--?"

"Alyce. Alyce Vitale."

"Sit down, Alyce, and I'll get us a couple of beers."

I elbowed my way to the bar, caught the bartender's eye, bought two bottles of beer, and picked up a paper cup for Alyce. Back at the table I poured the beer and sat down.

"A man tried to take your seat," she said, "but I told him it was reserved."

"Thanks." I drank my beer and took a better look at Alyce. Her eyes were intelligent, but vague. In repose, her face had a wistful tragic look, but when she smiled it transformed her into a radiant beauty. She looked interesting. I flashed a smile back at her, my charming, disarming smile.

"Here's to you, Alyce," I said. She drank out of her paper cup and made a face.

"It's bitter."

"That's the way it tastes at first. This isn't your first beer, is it?"

"I've had home-brew before, but it never tasted as bitter as this."

"Home-brew? That dates you."

"Well, it was a long time ago. Do you work here, Mr.--"

"No. I don't work here!" The question had surprised me. "I came up here to dance, just like you did."

"Oh." She was surprised, but not embarrassed. "I'm sorry, but I thought when you asked me to dance and all--"

"Listen, Alyce. You're a good-looking woman. And a lot of men up here will ask you to dance. Once anyway."

She didn't catch it at all, and I decided to take it easy with her. I don't like to waste good sarcasm. Besides, she was a new type to me. She must have been close to thirty, but she acted and talked as naive as a young girl.

"You don't have to drink that beer." I told her. "I'll get you a Coke if you want."

"I don't want anything, thanks. I'll smoke a cigarette."

I passed her my pack and we smoked for a minute or two.

"How did you happen to come up here?" I asked her.

"I was sitting in my apartment all alone, and just on impulse I felt like going out. Do you ever feel like that? Like you're not getting anything out of life?" Her voice was intense.

"No."

"This is the first time in my life I ever came to a public dance hall, but I just decided I had to have some fun, get out, do something. Haven't you ever felt like that?"

"No."

"That's why I'm here, anyway." She smiled. The smile did wonders for her face.

"Are you having fun?"

"Oh, yes!"

"In here?"

She nodded vigorously. I shook my head. This was San Francisco, with a million places to have fun. It didn't sound reasonable. I felt sorry for her if she had to come to a place like the Sampson Dance Palace to have fun.

"Come on," I said. "Let's get out of here. We'll go someplace else."

"All right."

She got her coat from the checkroom and I waited at the door. The cold night air was a relief after the stuffiness of the dance hall. I had parked on the street, and I regretted not taking a better car off the lot than the Ford I'd picked. I should have taken a Buick. It would have been more impressive.

Alyce climbed into the car without asking where I was taking her, and seemed to be without curiosity.

"Have you had dinner, Alyce?" It was after nine, but I hadn't eaten since five and was hungry again.

"I don't eat at night, or at noon either."

"You don't?"

"Just breakfast. I'm hungry all the time, but if I eat I put on weight, so I just go hungry."

"Break a rule and have dinner with me."

"If you insist, Mr....?"

"Haxby. I insist, and make it Russell. Not Russ, but Russell, and certainly not Mr. Haxby." I was on Market and had to make a right turn and a block circle because of the No Left Turn law. The Ford climbed the hill easily, and I parked in the alley behind Antonio's.

Antonio doesn't advertise; he doesn't have to. He serves good food, and people who eat there once

come back; that is if they can afford to come back. Antonio shook hands with me.

"Mr. Haxby! How the hell are you?"

"Hungry, but not too hungry. This is Miss Vitale."

He talked to Alyce in rapid Italian, and she shook her head.

"I don't understand Italian," she said. Antonio shrugged and led us to a table. It wasn't necessary to place an order. He'd take care of it. I spoke to Alyce.

"Aren't you Italian?"

"No. Of course not. What makes you think so?"

"Vitale is definitely an Italian name."

"Well, I am definitely not an Italian." She blushed.

It didn't make any difference to me. If she wanted to lie, the hell with it. There was a bottle of Chianti on the table. I took out my knife, flipped the blade out and opened the wine.

"Isn't it illegal to carry a knife with a blade that long?"

"I never read the laws." I shrugged and put the knife back in my pocket.

We had veal, cooked in olive oil and garlic sauce, with sliced, breaded, fried tomatoes, spumoni and coffee. Afterwards, I had a B&B. Alyce didn't want a drink. I signed the check and we left.

Neither of us had talked much during dinner. Alyce seemed happy enough just looking around at the people and concentrating on the violinist. The violinist was one of the features about Antonio's that I didn't like. There is nothing that sounds worse than one violin. Five, maybe even three, are all right but one is completely miserable.

In the car I suggested that we go to the Top of the Mark. It was a clear night and the view would be worth the trouble. Luckily, I found a place to park in the hotel lot. In the lobby we waited in line for the elevator. Every stranger who comes to San Francisco has to check the view from the Top of the Mark, and there were a lot of out-of-towners in the lobby. I can spot them instantly.

In time, we stood at the glass window overlooking the city.

"You can see where I work," Alyce said.

"Where?"

She pointed and explained. Miller's Garage. I knew where it was and could pick it out. The auto lot where I worked was hidden by a hill.

"What do you do, Alyce?"

"Cashier. This is the best job I've ever had. It's six days a week, ten to seven. But I make eighty-five after taxes, and that's good for a woman, even in San Francisco."

"Damned good."

We had a drink, Alyce drinking a Scotch and Soda, and me a stinger. She evidently didn't know anything else to order; I could tell by her hesitation. Anybody who knows something else will never drink Scotch anyway. It tastes like wood-smoke and weeds. I began to pump Alyce.

She had been born and reared in San Francisco. After graduation from high school she had stayed home with her parents till her father died, and then had been forced to work to support her mother. Her mother was now dead, and she shared an apartment with her cousin, Ruthie. Ruthie was in her early forties and a practical nurse, an occupation that kept her away from the apartment a great deal.

"This," I thought, "is going to be a very nice set-up."

I told her I worked for Tad Tate. She had heard of him. She began to chant:

Am I crazy?

You're right, you're right! Will I buy your car?

You're right, you're right!

"I hear his commercials all the time. Who writes them, anyway? I think they're awfully funny."

"He has an agency," I told her.

I didn't think the commercials were funny. They were rather pitiful. The idea of a radio commercial to keep repeating the same thing over and over, and the payoff is a long-range deal. When a person buys a used car he goes to a place he knows about, and if he's heard a name often enough, that's the place he will go. I didn't bother Alyce with my theory on radio advertising.

"Are you finished with that Scotch and Soda?"

She finished it.

"Do you want another?"

She shook her head. I helped her on with her coat, and we caught the elevator down.

"San Francisco," the elevator operator announced when we reached the lobby. Two tourists laughed. A man in overalls was standing by the Ford when we got outside.

"Is this your car?" he asked as I unlocked it.

"Yeah. What about it?"

"You aren't supposed to park here."

"All right. I'll move it."

"And don't park here again." He started to walk away. I opened the door for Alyce and told her to get in. I shut the door and caught up with the man in overalls. I signaled to him to come in between two cars.

"I've got something for you," I said. No one could see us between the two parked cars. I kned him in the crotch, and as he bent over I clasped my hands together and brought them down on the back of his neck. He groaned and chewed on the gravel. I got into the Ford and drove down the hill. Alyce hadn't seen anything.

"Did you give him a tip?"

"Yeah."

I cut left toward the Marina District and could sense Alyce squirming in her seat. I looked in her direction.

"Russell," she said, "I have to get home. I know it's early, but I didn't tell Ruthie I was going out, and I'm afraid she'll worry."

"Where's home?"

She gave me the address. Without saying anything, I made a U-turn and started climbing hills. She lived in a two-story duplex almost flush with the sidewalk, like so many San Francisco houses. Her apartment was the upstairs apartment. I cut off the engine and kissed her. The response was negative. Her lips were tightly compressed.

"Can you wait a minute?" she asked. "I'll run upstairs and let you know if it's all right to come up."

"Sure."

"I'll only be a minute." She got out of the car and in a few seconds light flooded the upstairs picture window. I lighted a cigarette. She was at the door beckoning for me to come in. I got out and locked the car.

This was going to be a cinch.

Chapter 2

I followed Alyce up the stairs. There was a musty odor about the apartment, the kind one finds in a zoo. I didn't like it.

"Why don't you open a window, Alyce? This place smells like hell."

We were in the living room, a room that edged slightly over the street with a large picture window.

"That smell comes from the cats," she said. "I'll introduce you." She left the room.

It was a good-sized living room. Plenty of books. With a perfunctory glance at a few titles I could see she was a ~~Book-of-the-Month-Club~~ subscriber. Several ceramic ashtrays and an odd-shaped vase to me Alyce was a dabbler in ceramics, or else had a friend that dabbled. No one would buy anything so poorly made as the examples in the room. On the wall was a good print of Van Gogh's drawbridge, but it was spoiled by the picture hanging next to it: a wolf in the snow, howling at the moon. There was a television set, medium cost, and a three-speed record player-radio. A good brand. I looked out the window. She had a view of the Golden Gate Bridge that must have added twenty-five dollars a month onto the rent of the apartment. You could see part of the bay and a few piers. It was a nice room all around if you disregarded the picture of the wolf, and the single-winged mid-Victorian armchair facing the TV set.

Alyce returned carrying a large gray-striped alley cat.

"This is Ferdie," she said. She left, returning a minute later with a yellow-striped alley cat. "This is Alvin."

"Alvin?"

She nodded, departed, and returned with the third cat, a mean-faced charcoal-gray alley cat. The cats were enormous and stalked restlessly about the room, purring and meowing.

"Is that all?" I asked.

"That's all the cats. I have a dog, Spike. But he's asleep."

The cats explained the smell. I figured she was used to it, but it bothered me. I didn't plan to stay much longer. This woman was too weird for me. I looked at the cats. The mean-looking gray one rubbed up against my leg and I kicked at him. He dodged and stalked with dignity to the other side of the room.

"He likes you!" Alyce said.

"Well, I don't like him. How about a drink?"

Alyce gathered up two of the cats and took them out of the room, leaving the gray one. I got in another kick at him but I missed. Alyce returned with a half-pint bottle of vodka, handed it to me, and took the remaining cat from the room. I took a healthy swig out of the bottle. Alyce returned. She was carrying a glass and a bottle of orange soda pop.

"I looked," she said, "but there weren't any ice cubes. Ruthie must have used them."

"Aren't you going to have a drink?"

She shook her head.

I mixed a stiff vodka and orange pop. It tasted terrible.

"I'd rather drink coffee than this concoction."

"There's some in the pot. All I have to do is heat it." She hurried out of the room. I looked through her records. They were all pop stuff, mostly vocals. I stacked four instrumentals I found on the player and turned it on. It was warm enough to play Wayne King when Alyce returned.

"The coffee'll be ready in a minute. Please, not too loud, Russell. Ruthie's asleep."

I turned the volume down some. I took Alyce in my arms and attempted to dance a bit in the open space between the coffee table and the wall. It was no good. She was too stiff. I sat down.

"Say, Alyce, all of those cats are male, aren't they?"

"Uh huh."

"How come they don't have a girlfriend?"

"I used to have a female, Henrietta, but she kept having kittens all the time, and I had such a hard time finding homes for them that I had to find a home for her. She's living with a retired schoolteacher now and getting along fine. I go and see her once in a while."

"I'll bet she's glad to see you too. But how come all these tomcats are home on a Saturday night?"

"I never let them out. I keep them in a cage in the kitchen when I'm not home. Do you want to see--?"

"No." I started to kiss her and she turned away swiftly.

"The coffee's ready by now."

I took another shot of straight vodka. It was a halfway decent drink without the orange pop. Alyce brought a tray into the room holding a coffee pot and two cups. I poured us both a cupful. For reheated coffee it was all right. I took my cup to the Victorian armchair and sat down. The smell was unmistakable. Someone had been sitting in that chair who reeked with sweat. And it was a male. Men have a certain smell to them, a strong sweaty smell that is noticed upon entering a YMCA, a barracks, or a man's room. It doesn't bother a man to smell it and he soon gets used to it, but it was odd to find it on a chair in a girl's apartment.

"Do you keep men in your apartment besides the animals?"

Alyce looked surprised.

"Men?"

"Yeah. Men."

"Why, no. Would you like some more coffee?" As she warmed mine up I heard a noise in the kitchen. Utensils shifted around. "That's Ruthie. We must have wakened her."

"You got the coffee pot out there?" It was a man's voice.

"Ruthie has a nice bass." I said it as casually as I could.

"That's just Stanley," Alyce said. "I have it, Stanley!" she called.

Stanley came into the room. He was in his fifties, if not more, with a thatch of gray tousled hair and stubble of gray beard. An ancient multicolored bathrobe covered his body, but left exposed a pair of skinny, wiry legs.

"Ruthie and I want a cup too." Petulantly. "You might have known that."

"You'll have to make some more then. We just had the last of it. Oh, Stanley, this is Mr. Haxby Russell, Mr. Sinkiewicz."

"Charmed," I said.

"Pleased to meet you, sir." He picked up the pot and tottered from the room. I could hear him in the kitchen running water from the tap.

"Who's he?" I asked. A natural question.

"Stanley? Oh, he's a friend of Ruthie's." Alyce was embarrassed. "I might as well tell you. I don't guess Ruthie would mind. You see, he's married, but his wife is an invalid. Ruthie worked for them, as a nurse, for a long time, and they got to be pretty good friends. Well, he goes with Ruthie now. That's about it."

"What about the wife?"

"She's an invalid. Paralyzed. But she has all the money and if Stanley were to divorce her, he wouldn't get a cent. So Ruthie and him... well, they're waiting, I guess."

"Doesn't look to me like they're waiting."

"He stays here sometimes." She blushed. "Then he gets up early and goes home. His wife doesn't know about Ruthie."

"Stanley has it made all the way around, doesn't he?"

"I don't like it and I know Ruthie doesn't, but..." She turned away. I could see she didn't want to talk about it. I got up from the chair and turned her around. Gently, I put my arms around her, moved her close. I kissed her, but it was no good. She held her lips together and held her body stiff. It was like kissing a piece of bronze. I released her, picked up my hat and stuck it on my head.

"Well, Alyce," I said, "I'll be seeing you around."

"You don't have to go yet, do you?"

"Yeah. Tomorrow's Sunday and I have to sleep late."

"How late?"

"Until I wake up."

"Why don't you come over tomorrow afternoon then. Stop by for a drink." She saw the look I gave the bottle of orange pop that was sitting on the coffee table. "I'll get some gin and vermouth for Martinis."

"What time?" Not that I particularly cared, because I didn't intend to be there.

"Two? Two-thirty? Will that be all right?"

"Sure," I said. "Two-thirty will be fine. Now let me try another one of those kisses."

She shut her eyes, stiffened, and clenched her fists. I kissed her, and though she obviously didn't like it, she made no move to stop me. It was strange. When I let her go she turned on the hall light, and started down the stairs.

"Goodnight, Alyce."

"Goodnight, Russell. And thank you for a wonderful evening. Two-thirty. Don't forget."

Downstairs, I shut the door to her apartment and climbed into the Ford. This Alyce was a new type. I couldn't figure what she was after or if she was after anything. The woman was good-looking but her personality was blah. Still, with a figure like she had there should certainly be something there. I might look in the next day, but then that was tomorrow and it would depend upon how I felt.

I drove crosstown to my apartment. It's a garage apartment behind an old house on Telegraph Hill. There is no view from my apartment except the backs of old houses all around me. And if you didn't know it was there you couldn't find it. The building was probably a servants' quarters at one time but it's fixed up now. The decorator's fees alone cost me a thousand bucks, but it was worth it. Just a living room, bedroom and kitchenette, but it was the kind of place I'd wanted all my life. And now I have it.

I took off my jacket and hung it in the wardrobe. I like to slide the door back on the wardrobe. Twenty suits. It made me glad I'm a used-car salesman and can afford to own twenty suits.

I wasn't sleepy so I fixed an onion and salami sandwich, a gin and quinine water, and sat down with my beat-up Kafka anthology. I reread "In The Penal Colony." This is the best short story ever written. Kafka was one writer who had a sense of humor.

After I finished the sandwich and drink I went to bed. Almost asleep, I reviewed the evening in my mind, and just before dropping off I set the alarm for one o'clock.

I fell asleep.

Chapter 3

The alarm went off and I looked stupidly at the clock for a moment trying to figure out why it was ringing on a Sunday. I remembered Alyce and shut it off. I showered and shaved. This was a concession, because I never shave on Sunday. In the kitchen I fixed a sardine omelet and a pot of coffee. I read the Sunday papers while I ate, cleared the table, and added the dishes to the pile in the sink.

I dressed carefully, selecting a red paisley tie to wear with my powder-blue gabardine suit. Blue look

good on me: it sets off my hair. I backed the Ford down the narrow driveway onto the street and drove to the lot and parked it. In the office, I picked out the keys for the lone Buick convertible we had on the lot, checked the gas and drove to Alyce's apartment. It was 2:15. I pushed the doorbell.

Alyce opened the door. She looked sharp in a black faille suit and a double choker of imitation pearls.

"Oh!" Alyce said.

"What's the matter, didn't you expect me?"

"It was the car. I looked out the window when the car stopped, and saw it was a Buick, so I didn't think it was you."

I laughed. We climbed the stairs, Alyce leading. She was something to watch from behind climbing stairs. In the living room I sat down.

"Perhaps I'd better explain. I told you I sold used cars--well the lot is full of them. I have my choice so I take any car I please."

"Don't you own your own car?"

"Why should I?"

"I guess that's right. I've got some Martinis mixed; would you like to have one now or would you rather wait for Ruthie?"

"Let's have one while we wait. Where's Ruthie?"

"Dressing."

Alyce poured us a cocktail and I sipped mine. It wasn't very good. Too much vermouth. She must have mixed them half and half. I drank it anyway. I looked at Alyce over my glass. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks were flushed. Excitement was very becoming to her. She looked even better to me now than she had the night before. I like a good-sized woman and Alyce is show-girl size.

"Alyce!" It was Ruthie calling. "Can you come in here a minute?"

Alyce put her glass down and got to her feet.

"That's Ruthie. Please excuse me. Pour yourself another Martini." She left the room.

I figured Ruthie was ready and wanted confirmation from Alyce before making an appearance. I looked around the room. There were two vases full of cut flowers that hadn't been there last night, and the room was well-straightened and dusted. If this was a two-bedroom apartment it must have rented for at least one and a quarter. That was steep rent for two girls to pay. The furniture was expensive, not imaginative, but respectable and solid. However, the place still smelled like cats.

Alyce and Ruthie came in. Ruthie was in her forties but her dyed red hair made her look older. Her mouth was full and generous and she looked like she was pouting with her upper lip. She wore thin

gold-rimmed glasses on a chain spring, the spool pinned to her violet dress. Plenty of fat jiggled on heavy frame and her puffy fingers were adorned with several cheap rings. I liked her immediately.

"So you're the Russell Haxby Alyce has been talking about all morning?"

"I hope so," I said, "but then that depends on what she said about me."

"You don't have to worry. Pour me one of those, Russell."

I poured a drink and handed it to her. She practically inhaled it, and held her glass for a refill. "I needed that. Sundays are miserable days."

Alyce sat in a straight chair, very erect, and fully conscious of her posture. I smiled. She smiled back with a very sweet smile.

"Alyce tells me you're a used-car salesman," Ruthie said.

"Every day except Sunday."

"I don't have a car, and neither does my boyfriend. So Alyce usually gets stuck on Sunday. We use hers."

"Everybody in California should have a car," I said.

"I don't mind letting you and Stanley use my car," Alyce said.

"I know. I know. It's just that it's inconvenient."

"You know I go to the cemetery every Sunday."

Ruthie smiled at me. Her mouth was very wide, the lips thicker. The smile made her look obscene.

"I know all about guys like you, Russell. You're the High-Priest of California. That isn't original with me. It was a caption in *Life* about the used-car salesmen of California. Did you see it?"

I shook my head. "I'm afraid not, but it makes a good caption."

"And it fits." She turned to Alyce. "Baby, go fill the shaker again, will you please? Stanley'll be here soon."

"And Alyce," I added, "One-fifth vermouth, four-fifths gin."

"I thought they were half and half..."

"No," I said. Alyce picked up the shaker and left the room. "All right, Ruthie, what kind of a car do you want?"

"You're a smart bastard."

"Not exactly."

Ruthie leaned forward, put a damp fat hand on mine and lowered her voice. "I don't know what Alyce told you about Stanley and me, and I care less, but he doesn't have any money. His wife sees to that. I had a bigger allowance than him when I was ten years old."

"He might try working."

"No." She said it seriously. "His wife and I wouldn't like that, and I know damn well he wouldn't. He's a proud little bugger. You met him?"

"Last night. Slightly."

"Here." She took a roll of bills from her beaded bag and handed it to me. I counted it. One hundred and even. "I want a car, and I want it to be Stanley's. He can afford a hundred dollar car by himself, but I want a better car than that. Let this make the difference between a lemon and a fairly decent automobile."

"That's easy." I pocketed the money.

"Fine then, Russell. Just sell Stanley a car and keep this under your hat."

"Of course."

Alyce returned with the shaker and we all had another round. About this time, Stanley showed. He unlocked the downstairs door with his key and started up the stairs. I raised my eyebrows in Alyce's direction and she blushed.

Stanley entered. He had shaved, and looked a little better, but his suit was rumpled, his shirt unclean. He smiled an old man's reluctant grimace, revealing some haphazardly broken teeth.

"Having a little party?" he commented dryly.

I poured and handed him a cocktail. He downed it, shuddered, and spoke sharply to Ruthie.

"Did you get the car keys?"

"Where are they, Alyce?" Ruthie asked.

"On the telephone table in the hall."

"We'd better get going," Stanley said. When Ruthie left the room I gave Stanley one of my cards.

"Ruthie tells me you're in the market for a used car, Mr. Sinkiewicz. Drop by next week, or give a call and meantime, I'll look around for you and get you something halfway decent."

"I can't afford no expensive cars."

"You leave that to me."

Ruthie returned wearing her coat, and they left. Alyce and I were alone but she didn't look happy.

"What's the matter, Alyce?"

"Oh, it's just the inconsideration of Ruthie and Stanley. They both know I go to the cemetery every Sunday, and because you're here, they go ahead and take my car figuring you will have to take me."

"I don't mind. It's a nice day."

"You don't have to take me."

"How would you get there if I didn't?"

"I don't know. Take a bus, I guess."

"Go on, get your coat." I was exasperated.

I put the top back on the Buick and Alyce told me the name of the cemetery. She took a scarf out of her coat pocket and tied it over her head. The wind was icy, but liking the feel of the sun on my face I left the top back.

"Who do you visit at the cemetery every Sunday?" I asked.

"Mother's grave. Fourteen months now since she passed away and I haven't missed a Sunday."

"Why do you go every week?"

"I respect my mother, that's why." She was surprised at the question. "And I love her very much."

"Don't you think it's a little pagan?"

"To respect one's mother?" She shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"Couldn't you respect her just as much without breaking up your Sunday every week?"

"I don't forget that easily. And as long as I'm living in San Francisco I intend to visit her grave every week." â€¢

That settled that. I turned on the radio, luckily catching the tail end of Beethoven's Ninth. Alyce closed her eyes to listen and I drove without speaking to the cemetery. Near the entrance we stopped, and Alyce bought flowers. I drove through the ornate entrance, followed Alyce's directions, and stopped at the place she indicated. We got out and I carried the flowers as far as her mother's grave, and placed them on the grass. While she meditated, threw away last week's flowers and drew water out of a spigot for the new bunch, I wandered around looking at headstones.

I was quite surprised to see the unadorned stone of Tom Mooney. I had forgotten him. Nearby, on another grave, there were fresh flowers. I removed them and put them on Mooney's headstone. The day wasn't a total loss. I rejoined Alyce.

I took her arm and we walked across the grass to the car. She was talkative, pointing out stones and fresh flowers; telling me of the people who came to visit on Sundays and what they had told her about

the different deaths.

"This is Little Jackie," she said. "See the fresh American Beauty roses? He was only three years old when the Lord took him away. His mother comes every day. She is slowly eating her heart out over her poor lost little boy."

She smiled at me. I wasn't certain, but it seemed that Alyce was happy about it. I wanted a drink.

We got in the car and I drove back to the city. The almost full shaker of Martinis sitting in her living room occupied my mind on the drive back.

Two blocks away from her apartment she clutched my arm.

"Stop here, please," she ordered. I pulled into the curb and stopped.

"Why here?"

"I'll walk the rest of the way." She got out, closed the door. "It was very kind of you to take me to the cemetery, Russell. I know it was distasteful to you, that's why I doubly appreciate it. You're a very kind man." She started to walk away, and I let her go; then, suddenly angry, I got out and caught up with her. I took her by the arm.

"What's the matter with you, Alyce? What's the story?"

"Nothing." She looked into my eyes. I cooled off.

"Did I hurt your feelings? Is that it?"

"No. I can tell you don't like me, Russell, so we might as well let it go at that."

"What makes you think I don't like you?"

"Why should you? I'm a very dull woman."

I started to say, "No, you aren't," and realized how stupid it would sound, so I patted her on the shoulder instead.

"Sundays are terrible days, Alyce. I'll drop by tomorrow night and we'll go out to dinner. How's that?"

"Not at the house. Meet me at the garage. Miller's. Do you know where it is?"

"All right." I nodded.

"You don't have to meet me if you don't want."

"I want to."

"Thank you, again." She turned and walked rapidly away. I stared at her retreating figure. An odd woman for me to be fooling with, but I was puzzled, and that was enough to keep me interested.

I wondered if she was really mysterious, or just plain stupid.

Chapter 4

When the alarm went off on Monday morning, I shut it off and looked out the window. Fog. For breakfast I poached a half-dozen eggs and toasted some English muffins. Afterwards I drove down the lot and parked the Buick. It was early. The colored flags and streamers hanging from the overhead wires were limp in the soft dampness of the air. There was no wind and the fog was so thick it was difficult to see from one end of the lot to the other. I crossed Van Ness and got a cup of coffee at the corner shop.

When I returned to the lot Tad Tate was there. Tad is a real salesman and a good guy to work with. He has a huge paunch and always wears a suit with a vest. Usually he has an unlit, well-chewed cigar in his mouth and a little black notebook in his hand. I like Tad. We understand each other.

"Well, Russell," he said, "we better get some soldiers from the Presidio down here for guard duty today. People will be stealing cars and we won't even know it."

"They always get a steal, don't they?"

"That's the idea. See if you can get rid of that 1938 LaSalle today, will you? I'm tired of looking at it."

"If you take the Cadillac price off it I will."

"Sell it for whatever you want. I'm sick of looking at it."

"Okay. Madeleine in yet?"

"She's in the office. I won't be back 'til around eleven. If you really need me--never mind. I'll be back at eleven." He squeezed himself and his paunch into his MG and roared through the gravel of the lot and into the fog. I went into the office. Madeleine was already banging it out on the typewriter. We have twelve different forms to fill in on every car sold. She pounds the stuff out day after day and knows the business inside and out. I had never given her a tumble, because it doesn't pay in the business. But I intended to get around to it one day. She is a handsome woman, and so healthy she practically busts out of her clothes. When I'm around her I just keep my mind on other things.

"Good morning," I said.

"I see you found your way through the fog."

"You never knew me to miss a day, did you?"

"Just what do you do with all your money, Russell?"

"I spend it. Where's Andy?"

"Isn't he out there?"

"I didn't see him."

"He checked in. He probably went out for coffee."

"Okay." I went outside.

Andy was our colored mechanic. He had been with Tad for fifteen years. I looked around the lot. I found him removing a spotlight from a Buick super.

"Andy," I said, "when you get some time, work on that old; Essex in the fourth row."

"Who's going to buy that?"

"I sold it yesterday."

"What kind of a job you want?"

"The best you can do with it. The engine's good, and with a little luck it'll last two or three years."

"I'll do what I can but it won't be much."

"And Andy, rub off the seventy-five dollar price and mark it two-fifty."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars?"

"That's what I said."

"Mr. Haxby, I sometimes think you ain't got a conscience."

He took the spotlight and headed for his workshop by the office. I walked to the driveway and watched the traffic pound up Van Ness. It was heavy. The fog slowed them down. Once in a while you could spot an idiot going full speed up the hill passing people on the right. Two colored soldiers in a maroon Dodge crept along the curb. They wanted to park but were hesitant because the curb was painted red.

"Just pull on in!" I shouted and waved to them. After the car was parked they got out and walked over to where I was standing.

"We just wanted to look around," one said.

"Sure."

"You got any Caddy's?" the other one asked.

"Sure. Where are you men stationed?"

"We're out at Camp Stoneman. Just got back from Japan."

I sold them a Cadillac. It was easy. They were driving a borrowed car, but they had enough money for a down payment, and that was all I was interested in. The way Tad works it, it is foolproof. If we get the one-third down payment, we turn the buyer over to the AAA Acme Finance Company. They take up the loan and we get our money right then. The Triple A has to worry about collecting the other two

thirds. But they do collect.

These two soldiers were the kind I like to latch onto. With plenty of money in their pockets and just back from overseas, they like the looks of all the cars. After being away from the United States for two or three years, the model that was new when they left still looks to them like a new car. In fifteen minutes I had made two hundred dollars. The returning colored soldiers almost always buy a Cadillac.

After I finished my part of the paperwork, I handed the stack of papers to Madeleine, left the office and cut across the lot to Thrifty's. There is a telephone in the office but I preferred to do my phoning elsewhere.

I called Miller's Garage and asked for Miss Vitale. I hardly recognized her voice when she answered the telephone. It was like a little girl's voice.

"Is that you, Alyce?"

"Who is this, please?"

"Russell. Russell Haxby."

"Oh! Russell! How nice of you to call me. I was just thinking about you."

"I just thought I'd call. Thought it best to confirm our date for tonight. You seemed a bit upset yesterday."

"I'm sorry. I can get off a little earlier than seven-thirty if you want me to."

"No, that's all right."

"All right." There was a period of silence. I broke it.

"Seven-thirty."

"I'll be waiting." Again we hesitated, then we both hung up the receivers at the same time. I thought about Alyce for the rest of the day.

I sold the LaSalle to a veteran that afternoon. He had his insurance dividend check for \$147.40. All he said was, "Even Stephen." He signed the papers, endorsed the check, and drove the LaSalle off the lot.

At 4:30 I checked out and went home. The fog was just as thick as it had been in the morning. If it hadn't been for the Cadillac sale it would have been a bad day for me. I drove home in a Ford Victoria that had a working radio, and backed up my driveway. It would be dark soon and I didn't like to back down the driveway at night. I fixed a gin and cherry brandy, then took a shower. I took my time dressing and had another drink before I left. I put a lightweight trenchcoat on over my tweed suit. It was exactly 7:30 when I parked in front of Miller's Garage. Alyce was waiting for me.

I honked the horn and she got into the car.

"Where do you want to eat?" I asked her.

"I don't eat. Remember?"

"In that case we'll go down to Fisherman's Wharf. You can watch me eat fried shrimp and French fried potatoes."

"You're killing me," she said. Alyce was in a fine mood and gave me an account of her day. Some of it was amusing, but most of it was boring. After we were seated in a wharf restaurant I changed the subject.

"Do you know that shrimp salad is not fattening?" I surprised her.

"Shrimp?"

"That's right. Try me."

"What about the salad dressing?"

"It's fattening, but the shrimp isn't. Just put lemon juice on it."

She had a shrimp salad while I polished off my dinner. We sat smoking, drinking coffee. It was a pleasure to look at her across the booth. I got into a talkative mood myself and told her about the morning's Cadillac sale. She was impressed.

"Do you mean, Russell, that you made two hundred dollars on that one sale?"

"That's right."

"What do you make a week then?"

"On an average, it runs about two-fifty to three hundred. I'll make more this week."

"That's a lot of money."

"It goes."

"What do you spend it all on?"

"I'm spending some of it on you."

We left, and although it was still early I took her to the Commodore to catch the combo that was playing. The piano was good. The dinner, my drink, and holding Alyce's hand put me in a good mood. I was slightly happy and smoked one cigarette after another.

"What are you thinking about, Russell?"

"You."

"What about me?"

"That's what I want to find out."

She shook her head and smiled sadly. "I hope you never do."

"I will. Don't worry."

The room was getting smoky and we went outside and walked along Geary. I pulled Alyce into storefront and kissed her. She tightened up, giving no response whatever.

"Why do you freeze up like that, Alyce?"

"I can't help it."

"You aren't afraid Of me, are you?"

"No. Of course not."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Then you're not a virgin." I made a statement.

"I was married for seven years. No. I'm no longer a virgin."

It must have been my fault. I was rushing her along too fast. There was no hurry. I could wait. I had a hunch she would be worth it. We walked back to the car. I started the engine, turned on the heater, and we sat and talked. She told me her husband had been dead for three years and that I was the first man she had gone out with since. I believed her.

"What do you do with your free time then? You must go out some."

"I do," she said. "I go to movies once in a while with my girlfriend. But I really don't have much time to myself. I work from ten till seven-thirty, and when I get home I have to take care of the animals and clean up the apartment. By that time it's time to go to bed. I get up at nine-thirty, and always just barely make it to work on time. That takes care of six days, doesn't it? Then on Sunday I go to the cemetery, and to a movie that evening."

It was a dull and horrible life she pictured.

"Do you like your work?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Do you stand or sit?"

"I stand, but I don't mind because I'm so busy."

"I see. Well, Alyce, maybe I can make life more interesting for you."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

I could see her face in the faint light from the street lamp.

She wasn't smiling. The lines from the wings of her nose to the corners of her mouth were deep and tragic.

"Mother used to tell me to go out all the time. But I couldn't really leave her when she was home. She was ill, and couldn't bear to be alone. And now, since she died, there hasn't been much meaning to my life."

"You're a young woman, Alyce. You shouldn't brood over things like that. There are a great many years ahead of you."

"I know it and I hate it. I don't feel very good, Russell. Will you take me home?"

"All right," I said. I drove toward her apartment and we didn't speak. She looked out the window at the fuzzy neon lighting that wavered through the fog. Again, two blocks away from her home, she asked me to stop.

"I'll walk the rest of the way," she said.

"What for?"

"It was nice of you to take me out, Russell, and I had a wonderful time. But I don't want to see you anymore."

"Why?"

"I think it would be best."

"I don't. And I intend to take you out again tomorrow night." She thought that over for a moment.

"Please don't!" She put her face in her hands and began to cry.

"What the hell are you crying for? I haven't done anything to you."

"It's what I've done to you." She continued to cry.

"You haven't done anything to me. You just don't feel good, that's all. Your stomach is probably indignant over the load of shrimp."

"No, that isn't it." She blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes with a postage-stamp handkerchief. She handed her mine.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," I said.

"All right then." She started to get out of the car.

"I'll drive you the rest of the way."

"No. I'll walk. Goodnight, Russell." I watched her walk down the hill.

She had a beautiful posture.

I sat there for a few minutes smoking a cigarette. I flipped the butt out the window, then drove to business district. I parked and went into a bar. I ordered a straight gin with a dash of bitters. Sipping I looked over the customers. The man next to me was my size. I put my drink down, raised my elbow level with my shoulder, and spun on my heel. My elbow caught him just below the eye. He raised beer bottle over his head and my fist caught him flush on the jaw. He dropped to the floor and lay still. I threw a half-dollar on the bar and left. No one looked in my direction as I closed the door.

I felt a little better but not enough. I drove home, and dug through my LP albums till I found the Romeo and Juliet Overture. There are three speakers rigged up around the walls of my living room and when I put the music on full volume it filled the room like the symphony orchestra was right there. I poured a glass full of gin and played the overture several times while I finished the drink. After this emotional bath I felt wonderful. I went to bed and slept soundly all night. Like a child.

Chapter 5

By nine a.m. the next morning the sun decided to burn its way through the clouds and let San Francisco take a look at it. I took my coat off, put my cufflinks in my pocket, and rolled up my sleeves. Business picked up.

Not that I sold any cars that morning, but people appeared on the lot and I talked and talked to them like to talk about anything to anybody when I feel good and I felt great with the sun on me and the ready listeners crowding the lot. By 11:30 I was in such a good mood that when I went into the office to check out for lunch, and saw Madeleine twitching her behind around, I asked her to have lunch with me. She jumped at the chance.

I took her to Kang's Eastern House. I lapped up some Chicken Chow Mein and Egg Foo Young while she ate almost half of her Chicken Fried Rice. Women don't eat much. Foolish, foolish. I believe a person should take advantage of anything that gives him pleasure. When you figure that this room we're living on is spinning around once a day every day, 365 spins a year, and with each day you get a day older, what the hell does an extra inch or two around the waistline mean? An extra inch or two. Period.

Madeleine was pretty sitting there across the table. She wore her bleached hair short and practical. The suit she had on was smart, and she was eating with her gloves on. I didn't remind her to take them off because I had an idea she had spilled ink on her hands or had changed a typewriter ribbon.

I smiled at her, a tolerant smile.

"Well, hello!" I said.

"Are you finally coming up for air?" She laughed.

"I was hungry." I lighted a cigarette. "We're going to have to do this again, Madge."

"I don't like to eat alone, either." She took one of my cigarettes and I tossed her the book of matches ~~was holding. She was ready. Definitely. I opened my mouth to ask her for a date that night and just a~~ suddenly thought of Alyce. I changed my mind. Madeleine would be around for a while. It would be best to continue on with Alyce. There was something there, some-thing intangible perhaps, but something interesting.

"If you're through counting the number of grains of rice on your plate, let's go back to work," I said.

We returned to the lot. That afternoon I settled down and sold used cars. A guy showed up in a crummy pair of overalls and paid \$1300 cash for a Chevy. Before I tossed the roll to Madeleine, she removed my commission. She shook her head in surprise at the bundle of cash.

I sold a jalopy worth twenty-five bucks for eighty to two high school kids, and knocked down twenty of it on Tad Tate. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

A man I'd been calling for a week showed up at 4:00 and I managed to convince him that a Pontiac convertible was the only car in the world for him. It was a good day. I checked out, driving home in my Studebaker Champion.

The apartment was in rough shape. Dust balls as big as my head rolled around the floor. The sink was full of dirty dishes. There were no clean towels. Every ashtray was full to overflowing. I picked up the telephone and called Mrs. Wren. She's been doing my cleaning for two years and does a good job. I don't like to have her come at a regular time, but just call her when I need her, and happen to notice how lousy everything looks. She said she'd be over the next day, so I put a twenty in an envelope, wrote her name on it, and weighted it with a bottle of ink on my desk.

I gathered my dirty laundry all over the apartment and piled it on the bed. I pulled the sheets loose and tied the four corners around the laundry. I called the Chinaman and he was knocking on the door in five minutes.

"Hello, Tommy," I said. "Can you get this stuff back by tomorrow morning?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Haxby."

"Fine. Put it on my bill."

"Sure thing, Mr. Haxby."

After all that slave labor I was hungry so I went into the kitchen. There were no clean plates. I opened a can of beans and dumped them into a pie tin, chopped a few wieners and shoved the loaded tin under the broiler. I made coffee and buttered some rye bread. The beans and wieners timed out to the coffee. I ate the mess and threw the tin in with the dirty dishes. Finding the creme de cacao, I filled a jelly glass half full, filled it the rest of the way with canned milk, and dumped in a half-dozen cherries. I killed this concoction listening to the news. Nothing was new. My eyes caught T.S. Eliot's *Collected Poems*.

I took the book out of the stacks and flipped through the pages to *Burnt Norton*. I put Bartok's *Miraculous Mandarin* ballet suite on the record player and read *Burnt Norton* aloud. This is a re

esoteric kick. The doom of doom in that long poem combined with the exhilarating effect of Bartok so exciting that it drains your blood right into your feet and makes your heart beat like a Chinese gong. I finished reading the poem and turned off the player I had to rest for a few minutes until the blood returned to my cheeks.

I showered and dressed, selecting a blue gabardine suit and a knitted yellow tie, and crumpled a yellow silk handkerchief into my breast pocket. It was a good effect. Before I left the apartment I had a brandy.

It was now after eight, so there was no use trying to pick Alyce up at Miller's Garage. I drove into the middle of town. The streetcars weren't running that week because of the strike so I parked in the middle of Market. The sidewalk was crowded. It had been a long time since I had drifted along with the window-shoppers on Market Street. I entered a bar. It was jammed with servicemen and barflies. Loud, noisy, and full of smoke. I shoved my way in between two people at the bar, and ordered a shot of straight gin. I had to pay for the drink before the bartender would release his hold on the glass. I liked the noise of the place. There was a jukebox playing a hillbilly number and wrestlers on the TV screen. A young soldier on my right was wearing the blue ribbon for Korean service. I bought him a drink, drank my shot of gin and left.

A few doors down I entered a liquor store and bought a fifth of gin and a fifth of vermouth. I spotted a strangely shaped bottle of peach liqueur and bought it too. I opened it and took a drink. It had a sweet sickening taste.

"Hey!" the man shouted, noticing me. "You can't drink in here! You want me to lose my license?" He was a small ferret of a man in his balding thirties.

"I can't?"

"It's the law. I didn't make it." He was smug.

I threw the bottle at him. Startled, he ducked, and the bottle broke on the concrete floor, flooding a three-foot square with yellow sticky goo.

"Oops," I said.

It was worth the eleven bucks the bottle cost to see the expression on his face.

I got into the car and drove to Alyce's apartment. There was no room in front to park, but I noticed the light was on in her upstairs window. At the same time I got a knotted feeling in the pit of my stomach. A premonition. I was used to getting them. My back got a chill in it. It was like getting a toenail caught in a wool blanket. I parked up the street and walked back to Alyce's apartment.

I pushed the bell and waited.

When Alyce opened the door there was fear in her eyes. Her eyes were large and brown anyway, but now they were wider and flecked with dancing gold spots. She tried to slam the door but I saw her intention and held it open with my hand. I stepped inside.

"You don't seem happy to see me," I said.

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