

Kate Wilhelm - The Man On The Persian Carpet

CAROLYN HARLEY AND Drake Symes had fallen in and out of love ever since kindergarten when he fought Billy Driscoll for hitting her and she declared her undying love for him. Two weeks later they had fallen out of love when she saw him playing with Melanie Bosc. The next day she had fought Billy herself.

When they were twelve they discovered sex together, and she said afterward, "Is that all? That's it?"

Drake, enraptured, exalted, ready to do battle with dragons or angels, had declared his undying love for her.

"I didn't like it," she said. "It's silly and doesn't feel good, and I'm bleeding. Maybe I'm going to die and go to hell now."

"We just need practice," he said desperately.

She shook her head. "I don't think so. Maybe I'll become a lesbian or a nun."

He didn't know what a lesbian was, and the following fall when he went to the public high school and she went to St. Agnes Girls' School, he thought that was where girls were taught how to be lesbians or nuns. She wouldn't let him touch her again until they were sixteen.

Now it was the summer following their graduations from high school and they were walking through her father's apple orchard.

Her father was an orthopedic surgeon in Middletown, New York, and he owned a forty-acre apple orchard. His father was a lineman for the telephone company. She was an only child; he had two sisters and a brother.

"I got the job," he said.

"And I have to go to France," she said, as morose as he was, but also excited by the prospect of going to Paris. "With Mother," she added, and he nodded in sympathy.

They walked in silence for a time, then she said, "Tell me about the job. You're going to work for a publisher?"

"Yeah. Old man Broccoli knows this guy who's a publisher, Oracle Publications, and he needs someone to read stuff that comes in. Broccoli recommended me. After the interview, the publisher gave me a load of books to study, so I'll know what he's up to. It's all crazy stuff, astrology, Nostradamus revealed, how to get in touch with the inner self.... Nutbooks."

"It sounds like fun," Carolyn said. "Can I see them?"

"Sure." He had taken the job because he could work his own hours all through college; if he didn't work he couldn't go to college. He had been accepted by NYU, and Carolyn would go to Radcliffe.

"And the summer we both graduate," he said then, getting back to the topic, "we go to Europe. Right? I'll save every cent I can, we'll be of age, and you'll have money by then from your grandmother. Deal?"

"Deal," she said.

She borrowed several of the books, then, a day or two before she left for her trip, she made his handprints. "For practice," she said. "Maybe I'll become a palmist."

He groaned. "What have I done?"

She got the wrong kind of ink, and for the rest of the summer he had black palms, with the ink fading away slowly. First the mounts emerged, like rounded hills rising from black water -- the mount of Apollo, mount of Jupiter, of Venus, Saturn -- leaving dark valleys until they faded also and only the lines remained deeply etched in black. It seemed appropriate to have his life- and heart-lines etched in black.

Eddie Norwich, the publisher of Oracle Publications, was a diminutive man in his mid-fifties, five feet two, a hundred ten pounds after a big meal, with a surprisingly deep voice that made him impressive over the telephone. Apparently he bought his clothes in the boys' department of a discount store: chinos, T-shirt with a motorcycle logo on the pocket, high-top court shoes. A green and brown plaid sport coat hung over the back of his chair, a blue necktie dripped from the side pocket of the coat onto the floor.

There were two other people in the offices, Becky Russo, thirty-something, a dimpled bottle-blond, who at five feet nine or ten towered over her employer; she was the production department. Clyde Dinwiddie, who appeared to be a hundred years old, bald, stooped, with protruding eyes and no eyebrows, was the bookkeeping department.

Drake would get to know them all well, but that day he was overwhelmed by books in every stage from inspiration to publication: Manuscripts, bound galleys, page proofs, copyedited manuscripts, unopened boxes and bulging envelopes, completed books with dust jackets.... Every flat surface was piled high in Eddie's inner office and the outer office that Becky and Clyde shared; there were heaps and stacks on the floor, and against one wall the boxes of manuscripts reached the ceiling.

"We got behind," Eddie said, scowling at the chaos about them. "Every nut out there thinks he's got a piece of the truth and wants to tell the world about it. But we do forty-eight books a year. Period. So ninety-nine percent of what comes through the door gets sent back -- if they provided return postage. If not, in the trash with it. But someone's got to check them out. Who knows when the next Castaneda will turn up? Becky will walk you through some of those manuscripts."

Becky frowned. "You know I got those galleys, and a new manuscript from Madame Frieda.... "

"Just the rudiments," Eddie said. "He's a smart kid. He'll catch on fast. I gotta call what's-his-name back...." He withdrew to his inner office and closed the door.

The first lesson Drake learned was that whatever Eddie didn't want to do, or didn't have time to do, he delegated to Becky, and before very long, to Drake.

Then he began to learn how to read the slushpile, the over-the-transom, unagented manuscripts, unasked for, unloved and unwanted. Written in crayon on brown paper bags -- out. Dim pencil on lined paper -- out. Dictated by Jesus -- out. Verse -- out. Yeti -- out....

While Carolyn was learning how to shop in Paris, how to order dinner in the finest restaurants, what to look for in the museums, he was learning about the new interpretation of the pyramids, the secret

meaning of the Book of Revelation, the hidden messages on the backs of ancient sea turtles, what Nostradamus really meant, how to bend the will of the world to do your bidding.... He understood now the myth of the Augean stable. No matter how fast he read, and he got better at it day by day, the stacks did not appear to be reduced.

THEN CAROLYN returned from her month-long vacation, and the next day he was standing at the door of the train long before the Middletown stop was called. Her father was at the clinic that day, her mother was out, while at his house his mother and one sister were both at home. "My house," Carolyn had said on the phone the night before. She met his train, and they held each other hard, not kissing, not in public, but straining toward each other.

"Let's beat it," he said huskily.

She drove; he didn't own a car since it would have been a hassle in New York City. He watched her profile as she drove and talked.

"I kept a diary of all the places I want to go back to with you. A boat ride on the Seine at night; the Eiffel Tower is all lighted up and looks like it's made out of gold.... "

He was thinking, Hurry! Hurry! Drive faster!

Her house was one of the biggest in Middletown, an old-fashioned two-story building with fluted columns, like a colonial mansion. The driveway was flanked by two mature blue spruce trees; other trees and shrubs screened the house from the street. She pulled into the driveway, hit the brake, and opened her door almost as fast as he opened his; arm in arm they raced to the house.

Inside, he grabbed her and they kissed, a long, deep kiss that left them trembling. When she drew back and took his hand, she turned toward the living room, and she gasped.

"Drake! Look!"

A naked man facing away from the door lay on the red Sarouk rug, one of his legs drawn up almost in a fetal position, the back of his head visible.

Carolyn took a step toward the naked man and Drake pulled her back. "He must be one of your dad's patients," he said. His voice was hoarse, raspy. "We'd better call nine one one."

"Is he dead? He looks dead!" she said in a whisper.

He tugged on her arm. "Where's the nearest phone?"

"We should see if he's dead."

"No. Don't go near him. He could be an escaped convict, or a dangerous lunatic. Come on, a telephone."

He pulled her to her father's study and dialed the emergency number. He was talking to the dispatcher when Carolyn went to the hall door and said, "I'll see if he's moved or anything. I won't go into the living room, just from the doorway."

He was holding on, the way the dispatcher told him to, when Carolyn screamed. "Jesus!" he cried and

dropped the phone, tore back through the hall to the living room. She was standing in the doorway, both hands pressed to her face, staring wide-eyed, wild-eyed at the place where the man had been. He was gone. When Drake touched her, she screamed again.

"He was getting up! He looked at me and was getting up. Then he disappeared! He looked at me and got up, and then he disappeared."

Bone-white down to her lips, cold to the touch, she kept repeating it until he took her by the shoulders and shook her, then held her until the police arrived.

No one believed them. Carolyn couldn't describe the man: old, fifty or older, brown hair. Her mother was livid and accused Drake of drugging Carolyn. The police pursued this theory half-heartedly, then suggested that Drake's brother had played a practical joke on them. Or perhaps one of Carolyn's friends had done it.

After the police left, Dr. Harley took Drake by the arm out to the front porch and said in white-lipped fury, "She understood what you were after, bringing her to an empty house, knowing her mother and father would not be home to protect her. She understood, all right, and did what she had to to protect herself, at what cost only time will tell. Stay out of her life or I'll have you charged with attempted rape!"

Drake could hardly tell her father that he and Carolyn had been lovers for more than two years.

It was all bad, but the worst part was how Carolyn looked and acted; she refused to enter the living room again, and sat in the den like a marble statue, upright and rigid on the edge of a chair, with sightless eyes. When Drake tried to touch her hand, she looked at him as if at a stranger, and recoiled.

She couldn't explain to herself or anyone else the terror she had felt when the naked man began to pull himself up to his feet, when he looked straight at her as if he recognized her, a look of triumph, of mastery, ownership. And then he vanished.

Over the next weeks her mother talked on and on about drugs, the power of a tiny bit of "something mind-altering," and its effects on the innocent. Her father nattered about nervous exhaustion, all that flying around, shopping, auto-hallucinations. A counselor droned about Freudian implications, even though she herself was not, she declared, definitely not a Freudian, but still.... Carolyn said little, and prayed for the start of college and escape from home.

She did not accept any calls from Drake, and returned none of his calls, refused to see him when he came around, and she could not explain this. When her mother said with satisfaction that she had finally gotten over a childhood crush, she did not refute it, or agree. But something had ended. At long last the summer ended and she was in college.

Madam Zelda's name was Wilma Thorpe, but who would let a Wilma Thorpe read a palm, she said that afternoon when Carolyn came around. It was a year after her first visit. Today Zelda sat gazing at Carolyn for a long time before she said, "We can talk about it. You tell me why you want me to become your teacher, and I'll tell you why you should let it drop. You first."

A tall, thin woman with frizzy carrot hair and green eyes, Zelda wore orange rouge and heavy lipstick the color of burgundy, too many rings, bracelets and necklaces, long swishy skirts and frilly blouses, and emerald velvet slippers with pointed toes. She could have been in her thirties, or sixty plus. Now, as she spoke, and in the awkward silence that followed, she began to pull off ring after ring, then the bracelets,

the necklaces.

They were seated at the table she used for her palmistry sessions, a sturdy card table with a dark red velvet cloth, two lamps, one with a beaded shade and dim light, the other a high-intensity halogen light that gave off a lot of heat. She had not turned it on.

Carolyn watched the pile of jewelry grow -- dragon's trove, she thought; she supposed all the stones were paste, but they looked as good as her mother's real gemstones.

"I think I've gone as far as I can by myself," she said. "I've read the books, all I could find, but that's not enough. I need help when I get confused, someone who will explain things in a way the books don't."

Zelda touched her hair. Carolyn watched, fascinated, fearing she would remove it the way she had removed the jewelry. Zelda laughed. "It's real," she said. "Last year you came with friends, as I recall. Do you believe in palmistry?"

Carolyn swallowed. "You remember that I came last year? Why?"

"You had a very interesting hand, and you denied much of what I told you. Now you're back. I find that interesting too. Do you believe in palmistry?"

Carolyn knew she should say yes, or what was the point, but she shook her head. "I don't know. Sometimes I do, then I don't."

"Good. That's how it should be now. You're still in college?"

"Yes. In July I'll be twenty-one, and I have one more year of school, but then what? I'm not qualified to get any kind of job. I don't know anything for sure. I can't think of anything I want to do with the rest of my life."

"You probably won't be able to support yourself with palmistry," Zelda said, leaning back in her chair, her face deeply shadowed. "Many people who welcome you now will turn away from you, shun you. You would be regarded as a curiosity at best, a freak or even a witch at worst. If you take it up seriously, you will devote years to mastering it, and you will never know if you have learned enough."

When she paused, Carolyn said, "And I might not even be capable of being more than just a dabbler."

Zelda came forward in her chair, smiling slightly. "Oh, you're capable. What did I tell you that was untrue?"

"You said I was leading a double life, that I would lead a double life in the future. That a terrible break would occur that would affect my heart, my head, my lifeline. But it already had happened; it wasn't something to come. And I didn't think I was leading a double life."

"And now?"

"You were right about the double life," Carolyn said in a low voice. "I'm just going through the motions, pretending I'm interested in school, pretending I'm in the rat race looking for a man, a good job, children, all the rest. I'm pretending all the time, and watching myself perform. And the other part was right too, just the timing was off."

Zelda stood up. "Excuse me a minute or two. I'll gather some hands for you to look over. We'll see."

When she returned with her face scrubbed clean, her frizzy hair tamed with a ribbon, she appeared closer to thirty than to sixty years old. She swept all the jewelry into a box, then opened a folder and took out a handprint, laid it down before Carolyn. "Testing," she said, turning on the halogen lamp. "Testing."

Shyly, hesitantly, feeling as uncomfortable as a sinner going into the confessional, Carolyn began reading the hand. When she ran out of things to say, Zelda brought out a second handprint, then a third, a fourth.

"You're tired," she said at last, interrupting Carolyn for the first time. "One more thing. We'll do your prints, and then talk a bit."

As if from a distance, watching two other people, Carolyn watched her roll ink onto a white tile, then, with the roller well coated, watched her apply the ink to Carolyn's hand. Zelda's touch was firm when she pressed Carolyn's hand onto the white paper and got a perfect print the first time. She made a thumb print, and did the other hand, and afterward led Carolyn to a bathroom sink and turned on the water, handed her soap. When they returned to her living room, she motioned toward a brocade-covered chair, and seated herself in one just like it with a low table between them.

"Let's talk about scheduling," she said.

July came in with thunderstorms and sultry interludes between the outbursts. Carolyn's mother was in a state, outdoors or indoors? There had to be a party; it wasn't every day you turned twenty-one, and inherited a fortune. Of course, there had to be a party, just for family and intimate friends, not a big adolescent brawl with a keg and too-loud music.

Carolyn tuned her out. She had to stay home long enough for the party, she had decided, but the following day she would go back to Boston, back to her own apartment, back to her studies with Zelda.

Swimming in the pool behind the big house where she had grown up, she felt like a hotel guest, a transient, perfectly well-behaved, polite, distant.

She had glanced over the guest list for the party, and stopped with a groan at the name of Stephen Yost. Her fault; she had pulled his name out of nowhere as an excuse to leave the day after Christmas. That was enough. Her mother had followed up, and now Stephen was invited to her birthday party, and he would assume that it was Carolyn's doing, that she was making a play for him. He was no more than an acquaintance, a friend of a friend of a friend, the way it went in college circles, Radcliffe women, Harvard men. Only he was not a student, but a tenured professor. Carolyn had no doubt that her mother knew that by now, knew who his parents were, what color socks he wore, what kind of cereal he preferred.

Drake's name was not on the list, nor did she bring it up. But she remembered with a pang the deal they had made, that they would go to Europe together as soon as they both graduated. She swam harder, at war with herself. It was as if scar tissue had formed over a wound that had never healed properly, a wound that lay quiescent, almost forgotten unless she picked at it, and then throbbed and surged back to life as it did now because she had let herself think of him, of that last day with him. She knew with certainty that she had to leave that wound alone, that it was accompanied by a fear that was incomprehensible and overwhelming; the scar tissue held both the wound and the terror safely encased.

But her body longed for him with an insistence like a low-grade fever that flared unpredictably. At those times, like now, she knew that if they met, if she chanced upon him, she would be lost.

Because her terror was irrational, causeless, she could not talk of it, could not confide in anyone; she would not know how to begin.

Thunder rumbled, still distant, but warning of another turbulent afternoon. She pulled herself from the swimming pool, wrapped a beach blanket around her, and reentered the house. The doorbell was ringing. She glanced down at herself, shrugged, and went to the door.

Stephen Yost stood there with a small gift-wrapped box in his hand. She had not been able to summon a picture of him in her mind when she saw his name on the list, she had forgotten how wide he was. A box of a man, she thought, with a big head that appeared curiously squared due to a bad haircut. Apparently he seldom got out in the sunlight; he was pale, with dark eyes. For a moment neither spoke. He looked at her bare feet, her dripping hair, and then he was inside pushing the door closed.

"I had to come early," he said. "I can't make it tomorrow, but I wanted to give you something. For your birthday. Thanks for asking me. I never dreamed you had even noticed me." He put the box on the side table and for another moment simply looked at her, and then he was pulling the beach blanket away from her shoulders, and she was backing up into the living room.

She offered no resistance, as if this were what she had planned, what she wanted to happen, watching herself yield to him without a word, listening to his fragmented speech. He spread the blanket on the red Sarouk rug and they coupled where the naked man had lain and risen two years earlier.

WHEN THE THUNDER rumbled, Drake was on his bicycle nearing the driveway flanked by the two massive spruce trees. This time he would go all the way to the house, and he would stay until she came out to tell him in person to get lost. Her father had told him, and her mother had told him to stop calling, but he had to hear it from Carolyn. She couldn't look at him and tell him to get lost, he kept telling himself, as he had been doing every day of the past week since he had been home. Every day he pedaled past her house, sometimes he even turned in at the driveway but never got more than a dozen yards before stopping, turning, leaving again. She knew where he was. If she had any feeling for him, any regrets, any hope of ever getting together again, she knew where to find him, he told himself bitterly those times when he turned and left. But not today.

He would make her say it to his face.

He saw the stranger enter and kept out of sight behind shrubs, pedaled around the side of the house and got off his bicycle to wait until she came out. She would sooner or later. Passing the French doors to the living room he glanced in and saw them, and the thunder that crashed was in his head. He stumbled back, away from the house blindly, groped for the handlebar of his bike and started walking home. He was weeping too hard to see to ride.

Two months later Carolyn and Stephen were married, and nine months later she bore their son.

## PART TWO

The offices of Oracle Publications were no larger than they had been fifteen years earlier when Drake first entered them, but they looked bigger since there were no longer stacks of manuscripts piled to the

ceiling. They no longer accepted unsolicited manuscripts, and that made the difference. Still cluttered, with too much going on in too small a space, like most New York offices, things were organized in a way that the three regulars understood and could cope with. Eddie Norwich had not been one of the regulars for the past four years; he had retired to Key West, where he had taken up scuba diving. His picture, a scrawny old man with a wide grin, was on the wall of his former office, now Drake's office.

That day in early June Drake was at his desk scanning a contract when Becky tapped on his door and entered.

For the first few years Becky had called him honey as often as not, but gradually she had dropped that, and now sometimes, especially in front of others, she even called him Mr. Symes. She took an interest in his diet, in his sleeping habits, the clothes he wore, the women he dated. She made no secret of wanting him married again and settled down with a good woman worthy of him.

"There's a woman to see you," she said. "Young and beautiful. She said to tell you Carolyn."

He did not knock over his chair when he leaped up, although Becky afterward claimed he did. With a smug expression she opened the door and moved aside, motioning to Carolyn to come on in. Then discreetly she left.

"You cut your hair," he said.

It had been long, bleached almost colorless every summer, then honey blond, now dark blond and short, a shiny cap framing her face. He had taken the few steps from his desk to within touching distance. She had not moved from the door. She was pale.

"You're married," he said.

"Divorced ten years ago. You're married?"

"Widower. She...overdose. Seven years ago." He swallowed hard, then said, "It's happened again. A cloud of pheromones, yours, mine, makes it hard to breathe."

Her purse dropped to the floor, then she was in his arms, and the cloud settled over them.

They went to his apartment. Subleased from Eddie Norwich, who had moved in when rent was cheap in the Village, it was large and airy, with a view of the Hudson River. And it was cluttered with manuscripts and books, galleys and illustrations....

They made frantic love, dozed, awoke, and made love again.

"We have so much to tell each other," she whispered.

He put his finger on her lips. "Later. Not here, not yet. You're more beautiful than you were before. How can that be?"

Later, in a neighborhood Greek restaurant, she said, "You first. You're a publisher? You own Oracle? Tell me about it."

"The usual story," he said. "Hard work, nose to the grindstone, twenty-hour days, luck, and marry the



boss's daughter." He said it lightly, but there was an undercurrent of bitterness in his voice. After Donna's death by an overdose Eddie had confided in Drake: he had known for years that his daughter was an addict; they had tried therapy, clinics, rehab, everything, and then had hoped that marrying a good man whom she loved would do what nothing else had accomplished. He had apologized for not telling Drake before the wedding.

Carolyn put her hand on his on the table. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I shouldn't have married her in the first place, but you were married, with a family, and she wanted it. It was over before it began. Your turn."

"I married a stranger," she said. "The day he came, a day before my birthday party, I was swimming and just threw a blanket around me to go answer the door. I had been thinking of you, and I was ovulating, and horny as hell. He said later that he never knew what happened, that he lost control, something he had never done before. I believe that. He's.... Well, he's not highly sexed, not like some people I know. I don't think it was rape exactly. I mean, I didn't put up a fight or resist or do anything else."

"That guy never knew what hit him," Drake said.

She smiled faintly. "I think that's right. Anyway, I got pregnant, and two months later we were married. He was a stranger. Then I had our son, Gary. He's a miracle, Drake. He's exceptionally bright, genius category. He's been accepted by Harvard already, and only fifteen. I said not this year. He has to wait until he's sixteen, at least."

She talked about her son, his precocity, his beauty, his decency, until Drake took her hand. "Enough. What about the father? You said divorced. You're still wearing a gold ring."

"Not his. I bought it myself. It's just a signal that I'm not looking, not available, something like that." Smiling, she took off the ring and put it in her purse.

The table was cleared, more coffee was brought, and she was remembering those terrible nine months. "You know the phrase twenty-four slash seven?" He nodded. "That was me with morning sickness. All day every day for nine months practically. By the time it was over Stephen had had it. So had I. You know, my parents always thought you were after me for the money someday."

Drake knew his disbelief showed. She smiled.

"Well, that's what they thought. But Stephen really was, and they never suspected. They had looked him up, and never even suspected that he had looked us up. He got the invitation from Mother for my birthday party and hightailed it to reference books, just couldn't believe an heiress was hot for his body. Anyway he quit the university and set himself up in a private research lab in Boston, computers or something, and I saw less and less of him. He couldn't stand being around when I was sick all the time, and then a baby, a small child getting in the way, making noise. It was too much for him. After five years I said enough. I haven't even seen him since the divorce, ten years now." She shrugged. "The story of my life, done."

"What's done is history," he said. "Prelude."

She nodded. "We've wasted an awful lot of time."

Days and nights blurred. She had to find an apartment for herself and Gary, who was in Middletown with his grandparents. The three of them were planning a tour, six weeks in Italy, Greece, France, while she located living space and got moved. "Gary's the first, maybe the only, thing I've ever done right, as far as they're concerned." In the fall Gary would take some classes at Columbia, and the following year he planned to enter Harvard.

"There's plenty of room in my place," Drake said when they talked about her plans. "For both of you."

She shook her head. "You and Gary have to get acquainted first."

He was annoyed at his own nervousness about that first meeting, and more annoyed at her amusement. He was afraid, he thought darkly, because if this didn't work out with him and her son, she would give one of them the boot, and it wouldn't be the kid. His worries were for nothing; Gary was a lanky fifteen-year-old, as curious about him as any boy his age would be with a new man in his mother's life. And to all appearances he was as eager to please Drake as Drake was to please him. They had gone to an Italian restaurant; Gary had eaten more than Drake and Carolyn combined, and judged it okay.

Then, with a quick look at Drake, he asked, "You know anything about mathematics?"

"Nope. You know anything about pyramidology?"

"Nope. Physics?"

"Nothing. The price of paper?"

They both laughed, and Carolyn gave Drake a smug I-told-you-so look.

Now Gary was on his way to Rome with his grandparents, and Carolyn sipped her wine and looked at her watch too often.

"His plane doesn't land until three in the morning our time," Drake reminded her. It was eleven o'clock.

"Sorry," she said. "You like him, don't you?"

"Very much."

"He thinks you're neat," she said.

Drake put his wine glass down and took her hand. They were in her apartment, with unopened cartons all around, not quite enough furniture yet. Over the next six weeks she would turn it into a home, but for now it was bleak and ugly.

Hesitantly she said, "You remember when you first got your job at Oracle, you lent me some books?" He nodded.

"I made your handprints. Remember?"

"Yep. You used India ink. It didn't come off until the skin wore out and new skin grew."

Her smile was rueful. "I know. I'm better at it now."

For a moment he didn't speak or even move, then he said, "What does that mean?"

"Something happened that day in Dad's house, something inexplicable, and it terrified me. People said this and they said that; I saw a counselor for a while, but nothing helped. You were associated with it somehow and I had to avoid you. Your reaction was normal: bewilderment, wonder, maybe some fear, nothing like what I was going through, and I couldn't explain it. You were able to put it aside as one of those things that can't be understood, can't be explained or examined, and has to be abandoned. I think we encounter things like that a lot, and we simply put them aside and even forget them to preserve our consensual reality."

He released her hand and picked up his wine glass. "I deal with nuts and their theories on a day-by-day basis," he said. "You know, aliens from the Dog Star colonizing Earth; out-of-body experiences; back from death; ectoplasmic manifestations; tea leaves; the Tao of personal salvation.... Those who aren't out-and-out crooks and charlatans believe in their personal interpretation of reality. They can't all be right. How do you pick and choose among them? What's to choose? And after you've chosen which one to believe, what do you have that the rest of humanity doesn't have?"

"Maybe they're all right but incomplete," she said slowly. "Maybe they're all trying to explain a tiny bit of a different reality that the rest of humanity is denying and forgetting. Maybe some of those nut theories are on a par with early theories that denied other generally accepted beliefs, like witches caused the Black Death, or night vapors caused malaria, or meteorites were thrown by pranksters, because everyone knew there weren't any stones in the sky."

Grinning, he said, "You win." He was thinking of one of his writers who made a good case that all those things might have been true at one time, that since the past was in a state of flux, malleable, we had no way of knowing what had been true before, what was true now. The plastic past.

"Getting back to my autobiography, part two," she said. "When I was at Radcliffe a few of us went to a palmist, and she told me some amazing things, enough so that I looked her up, read her books, read a lot of other books, and the next year I went back and became her student. I learned to read hands. I'm pretty good at it."

"You mean you do it for people?" he asked cautiously.

"Well, sure. Mostly I work with Zelda. She does two kinds of readings, a quick and easy once-over just looking at the hand itself, and an in-depth reading where she uses handprints. I often read the handprints for her. And for a few other palmists," she added, smiling at the look of disbelief he didn't hide quickly enough.

He rubbed his hand over his face, as if wiping off a spider web. "I don't care what it means if it got you over your fear, let us get together again."

"Let me bring it up to date," she said in a low voice. "Last winter I came across those handprints of yours. I'll show you in a little while. And I was back there again, panicked again. Seventeen years down the drain, the terror still there...I really thought I was losing my mind altogether."

She closed her eyes, remembering that evening. She had stood staring at his handprints, shaking, and with startling immediacy she had recalled something else Zelda said the first time she examined her hand. "You lead a double life, and will for many years to come. In your thirties you will find love again with a

man. Seize it, child. For five or six years there is great happiness in store for you."

"Then what?" Carolyn had asked.

"After that I can't tell. See the many lines radiating out after the break here? I don't know what that means."

Carolyn told Drake, then said, "Zelda said my hand revealed years of experiences that I hadn't had, but that would come because they had come. They were revealed in the minor hand, not yet manifest in the major hand. Your fingerprints don't change, but other lines do, when potential is realized, or something happens to change your life. A lot of things can affect the lines," she said. "And I completely forgot all of that until the night I picked up your handprints for the first time probably in seventeen years."

"They just happened to be lying around," he said skeptically.

"No. I'll show you. In at the table."

They went to the dinette table that separated the living room from the kitchen, and she opened an expanding file folder. Carefully she removed a glassine envelope, then shook out other objects. Polaroid pictures, a ring, a dried flower in its own envelope....

She picked up the ring and slipped it on. "It turned my finger green," she said, taking it off again.

"You saved all that stuff all those years?"

"As you see. I threw away the bugs."

They both laughed. Once when they had fallen out of love, he had given her a box of beetles and grubs.

"These are your prints," she said, taking several sheets of paper from the glassine envelope. "Remember, I had to do your hands more than once because I kept smearing them? These are the good ones." She picked up an ivory stylus and began to point to the lines as she explained the heart line, the head line, the life line....

"See the break? All three lines have it at the same time, a major break in your life when you were about twenty. There's the double line, a double life indicated, then the attachment again when you are in your thirties, just like mine. And the break about five years later. Then chaos, radiating lines, just like mine."

It meant nothing to him, and she knew it; his body language was eloquent, but she continued. She got her own hand prints and compared them. Although he had to admit that the lines were similar, for all he knew all hands had those same breaks and double lines and stars and hash marks....

"You're not really reading my hand," he said after a few minutes.

"Of course not. I know you too well. I'm simply showing you the similarities."

"And that explains anything? The fear you kept feeling? The reason we're together again?"

She began to gather up the handprints, to return them to the envelope. "When I saw that we were bound together, I stopped being so afraid, and I began to plot out the next few months. And here we are."

He was relieved to see the prints being put away, and accepted her too-facile conclusion without question, wanting to believe.

"But one more favor," she said. "I want to make prints of your hands now. Do you mind?"

"Ah ha!" he said. "We bargain. You make the prints and then we go to bed. Deal?"

Involuntarily she looked at her watch.

"You don't have to stay in bed," he said. "No tie-down job tonight."

"Idiot. Okay. Deal. But you do have to stay in bed, and don't wake me up in the morning when you leave. Is that a deal?"

It was.

Much later she sat at the table and studied his current handprints, and then closed her eyes and leaned back thinking of what she had not told him, sensing that he had heard quite enough for one evening. There was a third set of prints with that same break, that same eruption of lines into chaos. Gary's handprints. Normal, predictable lines, then chaos when he was about twenty, five years in the future.

Over the years she had read thousands of handprints; she had seen the breaks of illness, loss, death, accidents, sometimes followed by healing and happiness, often not, but always lines with meaning that could be understood even if poorly. She never had seen what she had come to call the fan of indeterminacy, that chaotic multi-branched cluster on her own hand and on those of the two people she loved.

The fear was back, pounding at her eyelids, thundering in her pulse.

### PART THREE

It had worked out, Drake sometimes thought in wonder. The wasted years were fading from memory, a bad dream to be put aside as quickly as possible, and what they had now was the life that had been meant for them from the first. Even the anticipated problems with Gary had evaporated and it was difficult to recall what they had done to form a friendship, then a close relationship that wasn't quite father/son, but near enough.

He put down a manuscript with a sigh, and Carolyn glanced up from her own work. Fitting, he thought; he read nut books, she read hands, but was one any screwier than the other? Over the years, to his amazement, he had not grown more and more cynical about his writers and their nutty theories, as he had seen happen with Eddie Norwich, but more sympathetic and fonder of them.

"Soul catchers," he said to Carolyn. She nodded, then turned back to her handprints.

All she demanded of the theorists, he mused, was their sincerity, their belief in their systems. And, surprisingly, Gary had taken that position also. "We're all doing the same thing," he had said once. "The astronomers, physicists, mathematicians, philosophers, palmists, tea-leaf readers, we're all looking for the answers to the same riddle, the meaning of existence. Some of us use math and physics, rigorous scientific theories and experiments; others use intuition and rituals, but the search is the same. We all

know there's more than meets the eye out there."

"Tell her dad that," Drake had said. They all laughed.

Her father had come to accept that divorce in her case was all right; after all, the man had robbed her of nearly two million dollars! A life of virtuous celibacy had been all right, penance for past sins of the flesh. Of course, remarriage for a Catholic was out of the question, and that was all right. Then Drake had come into her life again, had led her into a life of sin. Drake with his heretical books, pagan books, occultism, devil worship.

Watching her, sometimes he found himself afraid to close his eyes, afraid that in the moment it took to blink, when he opened his eyes she would not be there. The moments of panic had happened often at first, and now came over him with such infrequency that when one hit, it took him by surprise, and he had little defense. Deliberately then, he closed his eyes, counted to three, and opened them to watch her reach out and turn on her halogen lamp. He smiled to himself and picked up another manuscript.

The phone rang. She got up to listen to the incoming message; when she heard Gary's voice, she answered.

"Hi, honey," she said. "What's up?" It was ten-thirty, late for him to be calling.

"Mother, I took Stephen to the hospital this evening. He collapsed at the lab, and I took him. He...he wants to see you, as soon as you can get up here. Tomorrow."

Stroke, she thought. Heart attack. "How bad is he?"

"They're doing tests; there will be more in the morning. It's bad. They don't know what's wrong."

"Gary, what's the point? I'm sorry, but--"

"Mother! Please. He has to see you before.... He might die. It's that bad."

She heard the strain in his voice, the tension, and she thought: Oh, God, the five years are up.

THEY FLEW FROM LaGuardia to Logan and took a taxi to the hospital where Gary met them. He looked as if he had not slept in days, and he looked frightened. He was a handsome young man, as blond as Carolyn had been at twenty, with wide shoulders and a squared body inherited from his father.

"I'll wait," Drake said. He glanced at the lobby with potted plants and a constant stream of coming and going patients, visitors, nurses, doctors. "I'll find the coffee shop and wait there."

They had known that Gary was working with Stephen, that after years of regarding his son as a hindrance, suddenly Stephen had found a use for him. Gary had said with a shrug that it was well-known that mathematics prodigies peaked in their twenties or earlier, and Stephen was aware of that too. But he had gone to work with him, excited by whatever it was that Stephen was involved in. Drake watched Gary and Carolyn enter an elevator, then turned to find his way to the coffee shop.

They got off on the ninth floor and Gary led her through a maze of corridors to the Neurology unit, where he stopped near a water fountain. "Let's talk a minute," he said, glancing up and down the corridor, at the nurses, patients, visitors, all going about their business.

"He's in restraints," he said. "He's on heavy duty muscle relaxants, but when it starts to wear off he thrashes about uncontrollably. It's hard for him to speak, but he knows what he wants to say; he isn't deranged. He knows."

They walked again, past the nurses' station, up to a man reading a magazine in a small alcove. "This is my mother," Gary said to him. The man looked her over and nodded.

They went to a nearby door and entered. A male nurse rose from a chair, and Gary said, "My mother." The man looked her over the same way the other one had done, nodded, and left them with Stephen. Tubes, needles in both hands connected to intravenous solutions, electrodes on his head, a wide band over his forehead keeping his head in place, restraints on both arms.... His eyes were closed until Gary said his name. His eyelids fluttered, opened, closed, then opened again, but apparently he could not keep them focused, and he closed them once more.

"Caro--" On the monitor above his bed, the lines jumped erratically. "Carolyn. One-way trip. It's yours, my--"

It was excruciating to listen to him, try to piece together what he was uttering, broken words, broken phrases, nonsensical words. Straining to understand, she put her hand on his arm, felt the muscles twitching, spasming, and jerked back. Then a doctor entered the room and motioned her away from the bed.

"I'm sorry," he said briskly. "He needs to rest. Will you be in town? We'll get in touch if there's any change." He ushered her to the door as he spoke.

She pulled away from his hand on her arm and turned back toward the bed. Stephen's eyes were open again, wild eyes, shifting randomly. "I'm sorry, Stephen. I'll come back."

They had taken a few steps from the door when another man met her and Gary, and this time Gary introduced him. "Mother, this is Mr. Beekman. He's an associate of Stephen's."

"I won't intrude," Beekman said. "I wanted to extend my deepest sympathy at this time. I'm afraid the doctors have not made a diagnosis, or prognosis, but if there's any change, we will be in touch immediately. Dr. Yost felt a great need to see you, to tell you that you are his beneficiary in the event that he succumbs to this tragic occurrence. Our company is doing everything possible. If there is anything at all we can do to assist you, please don't hesitate to let us know. Gary has my personal number and he will be on hand during this emergency."

He bowed slightly, turned and joined the doctor at the door to Stephen's room.

"Who is that man? What's going on here?" Carolyn whispered as she and Gary walked back to the elevator.

"Later," he said. "Go check in and I'll join you at the hotel in an hour or two. I want to try to see the results of the MRI they did this morning."

In silence they rode the elevator down, then followed signs to the coffee shop, where Drake took one look at Carolyn, stood up and put his arm around her shoulders. Gary walked to the outer doors with them and hugged his mother, then hugged Drake. "Don't let on," he whispered in Drake's ear. "I put a

tape cassette in your pocket. Don't crush it." Aloud he said, "I'll come around as soon as I can."

Drake went out and bought a tape player and they listened to Stephen's ramblings: garbled, incomprehensible, turning to noise, stopping, starting again. When Carolyn reached out to replay it Drake put his hand on hers.

"Let's wait for Gary. Maybe he knows what it all means."

She paced the minisuite, feeling it change from rather handsome hotel rooms to a cage. Then Gary arrived.

He looked more haggard, more frightened than he had earlier, and clearly he was exhausted.

"Just coffee," he said when Drake asked if he wanted anything. He looked as if he had been riding a caffeine high for days. Drake called for another pot of coffee.

Carolyn sat in an armchair near Gary and leaned forward. "What is this all about? What is that tape all about? Who are those men at the hospital? What's wrong with Stephen?"

Gary closed his eyes a moment, then with an apparent effort sat up straighter. "You played the tape?" When she nodded, he said, "Let's play it again and I'll jot down the phrases and explain."

They played it and he made notes of the words that were understandable. The coffee arrived and they were all silent until the bellboy had left.

Gary did not pick up the notebook he had written in yet, but said, "Two years ago Stephen got in touch with me. You know we saw each other now and then for lunch or a quick dinner, never more than that. We met for dinner, and I thought it would be more of the same, a hurried meal, not much to say to each other, done. But he had a lot on his mind, and we spent hours talking. He knew about me, the paper Carmichael published giving me credit, all that. He wasn't after a long neglected son; he wanted my brain," he said in a matter-of-fact way.

"Everyone assumed that he was researching artificial intelligence, something to do with computers. He's encouraged people to believe that for years. That night he told me what he really had spent the past twenty-five years working on: the transference of digitized matter through spatial and temporal dimensions." He grinned a crooked grin. "Time travel," he said.

Drake made an explosive sound without words, and Gary nodded. "That was my reaction," he said.

Carolyn did not move or make any noise at all; she felt the clutch of fear spread through her like a paralytic drug.

"He took me to the lab and showed me the equipment, and showed me what he was doing with it. He drugged a mouse and confined it in a small mesh bag so it wouldn't escape when it got there. Wherever there was. The mouse disappeared. I was hooked," he said.

Drake stood up, walked to the window and gazed out, seeing little of the scene twelve stories down.

"You know how the generation of kids accepted space travel back in the fifties and sixties, just accepted that sure it would happen," Gary said. "Adults got all spooked and excited, but the kids didn't. They had



grown up with the idea of space travel -- movies, comic books, science fiction stories. It was just when in doubt, not that it would begin. My generation. is something like that with time travel. And if it wasn't time travel I saw that night, it was something magical. The mouse vanished. It went somewhere." He poured coffee. His hands were shaking.

"The problem was that he could send things somewhere, but they weren't coming back," he said after a moment. "We spent months reviewing every step of his work, changing a few things here and there. Making computer models. A year ago a mouse did come back. It took food and water, seemed perfectly all right, then had a massive seizure and died two hours later. A monkey lasted nearly twenty-four hours before it showed the same symptoms and died."

"He tried it on himself," Carolyn whispered. "Oh, my God!"

"He had to," Gary said. "He said he had to know when the damage occurred, the trip out, or coming back. He had to know if the coordinates worked. He had to know and the animals couldn't tell him."

Drake swung away from the window. "Christ! You knew what he was doing? You helped him? Why? Why now? Why not find the glitch and fix it first?"

"Yes. I knew and assisted him. Last week we had a long talk. Do you know anything about the GloBall Corporation?"

Drake shook his head. "I never even heard of it."

"That's how they want it," Gary said. He sounded more and more tired as he spoke. "After Stephen set up his lab, using your money," he said to Carolyn, "he got a backer for the first time. Money attracts more money, I guess. And over the years there have been others let in on it. They call themselves the GloBall Corporation. There are six of them, six powerful, wealthy men who have seen the future and liked what they saw. This is right up your alley, Drake. You see, they'll own the world. They've been obliterating their own history; you won't find a single one of them with a firm date and place attached to him, including Stephen. No assassin will go back to year x and rub out Mr. Beekman; he won't be where the record says he was. They will take over businesses, buy stocks in 1950, become billionaires tomorrow. There won't be any way to stop them or control them because they'll own the past and no one will know that."

"This is insane!" Carolyn cried. "Haven't they seen Stephen? He's dying! Whatever he's done, it's killing him! They know that! A secret cabal to take over the world? They must know that they'll be dead too if they try it! I don't believe any of this!"

"They'll send bright young people to do their bidding for now," Gary said tiredly. "They'll instruct them in exactly what they want done, make sure they have the means to do it, then bring them back and give them the best of care when they start dying. On to the next eager young person. Eventually they'll find out why they die. Offer enough money, people will do what you want. Lie to them, promise them the Moon, they'll believe anything.... And meanwhile work on the problem. Stephen and I believe he was all right until he was brought back. It's a one-way trip for now."

"They'll send people they trust back to various periods, let them get established, knowing they'll have to stay in the past, knowing they will be extremely wealthy, each one paving the way for the next. It's a tradeoff. They will get GloBall rolling."

Suddenly Carolyn jumped up. She looked about the room wildly, then went to the minibar, unlocked it, and yanked out a bottle. "I don't believe a word of this," she said, fumbling with the bottle to get it open. "It's insane! He's crazy and he's made you crazy."

Gary picked up his notebook. "I know what some of these things mean. 'Pay back.' He wrote his will a couple of years ago, named you as beneficiary. He never intended to rob you, but he couldn't help himself; he was under a compulsion he couldn't resist to carry on his research. You'll be a major shareholder in GloBall. 'Sea of blood.' The carpet in Grandfather's house. He found himself with his face pressed against it and thought it was blood at first."

Carolyn dropped the bottle still unopened, and wheeled around. "What are you talking about? I never told him or anyone else about that!" She looked at Drake wildly; he shook his head. He had never mentioned that day to anyone. She swayed and Drake caught her arm, steadied her. In her head she heard her own voice: "He was getting up! He looked at me and was getting up. Then he disappeared! He looked at me and got up, and then he disappeared." She would have fallen if Drake hadn't held her.

"That was him," she said hoarsely. "Oh, God, that was him. Twenty-two years ago!"

"Four days ago," Gary said.

DRAKE AND CAROLYN sat together on the couch holding drinks, and Gary moved about the room restlessly. "No booze. It would knock me out probably. Let me finish," he said. "Four days ago Stephen put in the coordinates. He thought the house would be empty, Grandfather at the clinic, you and Grandmother not yet home from France. He had the date wrong. You and Drake saw him. He found himself on the red carpet, dazed, but normal. When he got back to the cage at the lab he said it felt as if a bolt of lightning had gone through his head. He knew immediately that he had been hurt, just like the animals. We worked for two days straight trying to find out why. Then he said he wanted to get some air, and we left the building and sat on a bench. He said we had to stop them before he died, or there would be no stopping them at all.

"They have copies of all his data, his research notes, everything from the beginning in safe places scattered all over the country. With all that data, when he dies others can pick up where he left off. The only way to stop the machine is to prevent its starting, he said. He was crying."

Gary paused with his back to them, facing the window. "He isn't evil, and he was never after power. He had a compulsion to find out if he could do this. He got a glimpse of something so miraculous he couldn't resist following through, but then he saw what it would lead to. Never mind," he said brusquely, and started his restless roaming again.

"He said Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease was the nearest he knew to describe it, but it wasn't that. He had ruled out suicide, not here and now, but before his data meant anything, before he set up his own lab, while it was still the scribbling of a mad physicist. He said I had to help him, and I agreed."

"You could go back and destroy his data," Drake said harshly. "Burn his notes, even cripple him if you have to."

Gary sat down and shook his head. "You don't understand. He would just start over because he knew he could do this and he had to do it. And eventually it would lead to exactly where he is now. He called it assisted suicide," he said hoarsely. "And it has to happen someplace where we know a weapon will be available. I can't take anything with me, and he, as a young man, will not be easy to kill unless I use a

gun."

Drake could feel waves of ice from Carolyn's hand flowing into him, stilling him the way she was stilled, an ice sculpture next to him on the sofa. The old paradox: would the laws of the universe permit one to kill one's grandfather? He yanked his hand free and rubbed his face. "There's something else happening here, not what you believe. That isn't the only solution!"

"Do you want mathematical proof?" Gary said harshly.

Carolyn, seeing in her mind's eye Stephen rising, facing her, his expression of triumph, of mastery, said quietly, "Just tell us."

Gary's voice was monotone, his head lowered when he continued. "We won't have much time. There will be a power drain, and people at GloBall will know someone is using the equipment without authorization. If they think to cut the power, God only knows where I'll be, in what shape. So it has to be fast and sure." He looked up at Carolyn. "Grandfather's house. The spatial coordinates are already in place. No one's touched the equipment since.... That's why he made the test using that house, just to make certain he could get there, that long ago. There's a loaded gun in the study, Grandfather's clothes upstairs for me to use afterward. It's the only place and time that Stephen knows exactly where he was that long ago: Grandfather's house, two in the afternoon, the day before your twenty-first birthday." He glanced at her, away quickly. "He... he told me about that day, all of it."

Carolyn moaned. Drake took her ice hand again. "What about you?" he asked Gary. "You won't come back to this time, will you? You can't. It won't exist." His thoughts spun faster and faster. He would have to wait until after Stephen raped Carolyn, after his own conception. And he would exist full-grown and as a developing embryo, a developing fetus, a baby.... Drake shook his head hard, unable to accept it, even to grasp it. With a sense of finality, the thought came: he, Drake, would lose her again. Her parents would take her away, keep her and her illegitimate child far away. None of the other implications held any importance at the moment; he would lose her again, that was what mattered. He wanted to scream.

Gary was watching him fixedly, as if aware of the hellish thoughts racing through his mind. "That's right," Gary said. "One-way trip." He looked at Carolyn and said softly, "You have to do it, Mother. What he would have done if he hadn't collapsed too soon."

Carolyn moaned, shaking her head. "No. No! No! There's something else. Another way!"

"There isn't another way," Gary said. "He's dying. Tonight, tomorrow.... They're already considering scientists to take over where he left off. They'll wait until he's dead -- this is data, how long, what symptoms.... But when he's gone, I probably won't ever be in the lab alone again." He jumped up and walked jerkily to the window, leaned his forehead against it. "Later, anything I might do, they'll be able to undo. We sat on the bench because he couldn't walk farther. Then he said it's time, let's get it over with, and we started back in. He didn't make it to the lab. Beekman was there, and a couple of the others. He could talk. He told them he wanted to see you, Mother. He said he wants me to show you what your money bought, the lab, the building, grounds. They agreed. They aren't afraid of you, a fortuneteller. They promised him I could take you on a tour."

Carolyn shuddered and moaned, "No, no, no, no."

Inexorably Gary continued, "After this is over, after Stephen's dead, they'll undo the will. They can't have an outsider a major shareholder. And if they undo the will, they'll have to undo me, nullify me one way or

another. We're not part of the package, neither of us is."

Another rippling shudder passed through Carolyn.

"Not her," Drake said, holding her ice hand. "I'll go with you. Not her."

"You can't. They wouldn't let you in, but she can have her tour."

"Then what?" Drake demanded. "You stop the machine before it's even built, but then what? What happens here and now?"

"It will be like switching tracks," Gary said. "You're on track nine, there will be a blip, and you'll both be on track four, back on the day before her twenty-first birthday. I'll be there, too. The world will notice or not."

And every time they altered what had been, it would be like that, Drake understood; the world would feel a blip, or not, and memories would be expunged.... Events, births, deaths, happenings undone. He thought of all the nut-books he had read, edited, published, written by people who believed they had glimpsed a different reality, a bit of the truth of the universe, one not acknowledged, not verifiable by any objective means. Who could say they weren't already doing it, altering the past, a blip here, there, a scrap of memory retained here, there...?

Gary talked as he drove to the GloBall complex: Stephen had put in the spatial coordinates, he said, and he, Gary, had worked the previous night to arrive at the temporal coordinates. It had to be done at exactly six o'clock or the timing would be off.

Carolyn stopped listening, thinking instead of the mothers who had seen their sons sent off to Australia, and rejoiced because that was better than having them die in prison. Or watched their sons depart for America, rejoicing because that was better than starving in Europe. He would be out of her life. But alive. That was the important thing, he would be alive and safe. He said she would forget all this, as if it had not happened, and she did not believe him. Forget her child?

Gary parked at the curb outside the fenced GloBall complex. They got out of the car, and for a moment Drake looked at Carolyn, then he pulled her to him and held her hard, his eyes closed. She drew away and Gary embraced Drake. No one spoke. Drake had said he would wait in the car, and Gary had smiled his crooked smile. It wouldn't matter where he waited, Drake understood, or even if he waited. Watching them walk away, he thought of the handprints Carolyn had made, a double life, five years of happiness, chaos. His eyes blurred and he started to get back in the car, then turned and walked blindly instead. It would not matter where he was when it happened. If it happened, he told himself. If. If... if... if if if.... He stumbled over something he didn't see, caught his balance and kept walking.

CAROLYN WALKED numbly at Gary's side past security, through a lobby, offices, a lounge. It was all expensive, and very quiet. The day people had left; a few others were about, but they treated her and Gary with deference and kept out of the way. "Where we did the real work," Gary said finally, opening a door with a computer key. Banks of computers, desks, a pedestal with what could have been a stainless steel telephone booth on it. What had he called it? The cage. Tears felt like acid in her eyes.

"This is where he was always the happiest," Gary was saying, ignoring her tears. He started keying in something at a computer, talking, and she understood that others probably were listening.

He had told her exactly what she had to do: hold down one key until a red light turned green, then depress a second key until the light went out.

Talking, he stripped off his clothes and tossed them down. He had explained that: every bit of matter had to be digitized, no excess allowed.

"He wanted to show you everything himself. He hated that you thought he had robbed you for nothing." It was a minute before six. He stepped onto the pedestal and pressed a button; a door slid open, and he looked at her for a moment, then entered the cage and the door closed. She put her finger on the first key.

"Gary, open the door," a voice said. She jerked her hand from the key, startled. "You locked the door by mistake, Gary. Set off alarms like crazy. Open up."

Twenty-five seconds, twenty-four....

"Gary! This isn't funny. Open the damn door!"

Eighteen seconds, seventeen....

"Open the fucking door!"

The door handle was moving when she pressed the first key. The red light came on. The door swung open and several men crowded through the doorway.

"Get away from there! Back up!"

The light turned green and she pressed the second key.

One of the men aimed a gun at her and yelled something. She held the key down and bowed her head, then the world exploded.

Carolyn got out of the pool when the thunder crashed. For a moment it felt as if it was in her, all around her, but no, it was still distant. Another stormy afternoon was coming, she thought as she wrapped a beach blanket about herself and went back inside the house. The doorbell was ringing.

When Stephen Yost began to force her back into the living room she felt removed, at a great distance. She offered no resistance, but watched herself, watched him, listened to his incoherent words; she felt almost as if it had to happen this way, almost as if she had planned it.

When the thunder rumbled, Drake was on his bicycle entering the driveway.... He no longer even knew what they had quarreled about this time, only that it had to end. If she told him to his face that it was over, really over, he would leave her alone, he promised himself. She had to say it to his face, not her father, or her mother. He pedaled around the house. People were setting up tables, getting the garden ready for her party. As he drew near the French windows, he saw a man toss a blanket on the floor, saw him yank off Carolyn's bikini top and start to pull at the bottom strip of fabric. Beyond them a naked man appeared in the doorway holding a gun. He stepped back out of sight.

Drake banged on the glass door, tried to open it. The naked man returned and this time he looked at Drake and for a moment he looked panicked. He made a sound that didn't carry to Drake, but Carolyn

and her assailant whirled around and apparently became aware of him for the first time. They stared at the naked man, who looked young and very frightened. Drake banged on the door again, yelled, and the gun wavered. The man steadied it with both hands and took a step forward. Drake picked up his bicycle and swung it hard at the glass, and when the panes shattered he dove through.

Stephen pushed Carolyn aside when the naked man stepped into the room. "Put that gun down! Are you crazy!" The man took another step, holding the gun in both hands now. The French door shattered and glass flew into the room. Stephen dropped to the floor with blood spurting from his neck; a shard of glass in his throat tottered for a moment, fell, but he clutched at his throat, making inhuman sounds that were cut off abruptly. The man with the gun stopped moving when Stephen collapsed, then he disappeared.

Carolyn screamed again and again, until Drake took her by the shoulders and shook her, then held her hard against him. His arm and leg were bleeding profusely; his blood ran down her bare back.

Yard workers ran in, and someone called nine one one.

"You don't need to feel guilty," the investigating officer said. "It's enough that Yost was going to rape her. He must have been crazy, not stopping when you banged on the door. You didn't mean to kill the son of a bitch. It happened, that's all. You feeling okay?"

Dr. Harley, Carolyn's father, had stitched his arm and bandaged his leg; she was sedated, sleeping, and Drake felt like hell. He nodded. "Okay."

The Harleys insisted that he stay in the guest room that night. Dr. Harley gave him two sleeping pills and advised him to use them; he would be in a certain amount of pain, still in shock, might as well try to get some sleep. He called Drake son.

Holding the pills, Drake sat at his window, his arm throbbing, and he said softly to himself, "He did stop. He pushed her away. They both saw something that made him stop." But already he was starting to doubt, starting to rationalize it.

Down the hall from the guest room, in her own bed, Carolyn was fighting her way through layers of dope-induced fog, fighting a nightmare that involved a naked man with a gun. She had been to a palmist once, and now, strangely, Madam Zelda's voice was in her head: "All those lines on the minor hand, an old hand with many experiences that may show up eventually on the major hand, or perhaps not. But the body knows and remembers. Sometimes it can communicate what it knows, sometimes not, or just give a glimpse, a fleeting impression, like something not quite remembered."

The living room had become a sea of blood, she thought, and began to shake as if with a deep chill.

"A great loss here, pain and heartache, see the break in the life line, the heart line, and the head line." That was wrong, she thought, confused. She had been spared. Drake had saved her. There was no loss, no pain or heartache.

She began to weep, and could not have said why.

The End