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VICKIE

CHAPTER ONE

I'm an ordinary guy with an ordinary job in a no-place town. My name John is ordinary. I have no striking features that would attract women. I'm healthy and keep myself fit. I eat well. I don't have any bad habits. Women wouldn't drool over my body in a bathing suit. I'm of Scotch-Irish descent, six feet tall, brown hair, brown eyes and a red beard when I let it grow.

I spent time in the Navy and went to New Mexico State on the G.I. Bill, graduating in electrical engineering. After working in an electric motor plant (I mean gigantic electric motors and generators) for four years, I wound up as maintenance man at the King's Hotel in smalltown Arizona, waiting for the plant to drum up more business.

I thought my life was slanted down hill a little, nothing I couldn't fix with a little effort, but then I was hit with a bombshell.

Her name was Vickie. That's all I knew her by. She told me her name the same day I saw her get shot in the back – murdered in cold blood – gunned down in broad daylight.

I swam in the hotel's pool in the basement every morning at 5:30 before I'd go to work. That's where I first met her. She was swimming. I was staring at her. She climbed out of the pool and hesitated on the ladder, giving me a peculiar look. Yes, she had a nice figure, short blonde curly hair, and a slight overbite that made her cute, but that look she gave me pulled me in like a magnet – more than animal magnetism ... more than an invitation. It was like making a compact with me.

I had never married, and I was already thirty-two. I only dated three girls my whole life. It wasn't that I wasn't interested. It was that whenever I asked women out they usually would say "No." They could probably tell I was just ordinary. I didn't ask very often because of that.

Vickie had glanced at me just before she dove into the pool again. The water splashed and covered her body, folding over it, caressing it. She slid through the water, climbed out and up the ladder on the women's side and glanced at me again. It was as though she were a little girl who wanted me to play.

It only took this small encounter to hook me for life.

She was so graceful that I completely forgot I was supposed to be

swimming. Perhaps I thought I would be disturbing her or disturbing the picture I saw of her, so when she climbed out to go to the shower, turned, smiled, and went in, I said, "Oh!" and dove into the pool to swim. I only swam one lap because it was time to leave.

After my shower, I got dressed and went back to the pool. No one was there. The silence deadened my hopes of ever seeing her again. I headed for the cafeteria feeling very disappointed.

Entering the cafeteria, I stood in the buffet line to have my usual whole wheat pancakes with peanut butter and maple syrup. As I picked up my tray I noticed a shapely lady in front of me wearing a red dress with white polka dots. I couldn't look at the polka dots for two seconds before they started vibrating, so I concentrated on her hair. It was short and blonde and curly, a bit damp and had a faint odor of chlorine. I became very timid and anxious. It was the woman from the pool.

I guess I was staring too hard, for she turned around to look and said, "Oh, hey." Her crystal blue eyes looked into my soul. Her gaze was sharp as a razor.

"Hi," I responded.

"Hey, were you the life-guard? No, I guess not." She answered her own question. "You would still be there." She spoke softly as she looked me over in a flick of an eye.

People in front of her filed off to find their tables. The line shortened

quickly, and we arrived at the buffet table. She helped herself to toast and scrambled eggs with bacon bits. She said under her breath, "No grits!" She picked up a dish of sliced oranges and a glass of orange juice. She turned to me and said matter-of-factly, "You were watching me swim. I thought you were the life-guard."

I felt my face go red like a little boy who gets caught by his mother with a girly magazine.

"You were swimming so gracefully," I volunteered.

"Thank you," she responded.

I poured too much syrup on my pancakes and she chuckled, seeing that I was paying attention to her instead of my pancakes, the syrup running over the edge of my plate.

"I go swimming every morning before I go to work," I said, explaining why I wasn't the life-guard. "I don't know why," I said, picking up a glass of milk, "but the life-guard isn't there that early in the morning."

"I guess it will be you and me then. I plan to be there every morning, too." She picked up her tray off the rail and looked around for a table. There were quite a few to choose from. "If there's no life-guard, who turns on the lights?"

"I do. Did you just check into the King's?"

"Yes. Yesterday."

We both hesitated, looking around.

"Can I sit with you?" she asked.

"Sure," and I led her to the table I usually sat at.

When we got there, she said, "There's a jar of peanut butter!"

"Yeah," I responded. "It's mine. The cook sets it out for me every morning."

"You work here!" she said, taking the dishes off her tray and placing it on the adjoining table.

I left my dishes on my tray and sat down when she did.

"You're also from the South," she said. "I can tell." She sipped her orange juice.

"Is it my accent?" I asked perplexed, because I know I didn't have much of one. My mother grew up in California, even though her folks and my father's were Texans, so I didn't pick up a southern accent.

"No," she giggled, trying to muffle it with a piece of toast. "It's the peanut butter."

"Oh, you don't like peanut butter?" I asked, spreading it on my pancakes.

"Not on pancakes!" she exclaimed. She almost laughed but tried very hard not too. "I like peanut butter cookies, I think – no, not even that. I did like to put peanuts in my RC Cola when I was growing up, you know, so the peanuts would come out when you took a drink."

"I've only seen Royal Crown Cola in the South. I had a cousin out in South Carolina that drank that all the time."

I tried concentrating on my breakfast, but it was hard to do with such a beautiful girl sitting in front of me, nibbling her eggs, staring at me.

"Yes?" she said taking a small bite of toast. "I was born in South Carolina, but we moved a lot. My daddy is a Naval officer, retired now – became a Commander."

"I was in the Navy for four years. Took a tour of Vietnam – Tonkin Gulf on an aircraft carrier." I gulped my milk to wash down the pancakes and asked, "Where was your father stationed?"

"Italy, Greece, Turkey – all over the Mediterranean. Retired now and teaches at Annapolis."

"At the Academy?"

"Yes."

"My dad never left the states during the war. He stayed in Roswell working on airplanes. He worked on the Enola Gay. But my Granddaddy made it to North Africa during World War One. I know a handful of folks that went to the Mediterranean. So. Your folks live in Annapolis?"

"No. My dad just teaches there half the week. The other half, he's home with Mom in Richmond."

I kept staring at this radiantly beautiful girl in front of me, no matter how much it hurt my sensibilities. It was like staring into the sun. I hoped she didn't think me rude. Was she an angel or from some other world? I found my heart

racing and had to do some deep breathing to calm down. Why was she paying attention to ordinary me?

“Are you okay?” she asked, looking very concerned.

“Huh? Oh. I'm sorry. I have this heart condition.” I lied. I took another deep breath and asked. "May I ask why you came to Arizona?"

"My parents think me dead. Let me explain."

I raised my eyebrows, and she took a deep breath and let it out.

"I was in an auto accident," she said. "They left me at the hospital thinking I was dead. I had been unconscious, but I remember having to sneak out of the morgue."

This intrigued me. Here was this goddess unfolding a mystery.

"Let me back up a bit. I bought this white alabaster box in Cairo." She took a small box out of her purse. It was about three by three by six inches. "I love to carry it around with me and open it and smell it. It contains an exotic ointment.

“I found this cute little shop in an alley full of spices, herbs, clothes, scarves, kitchen utensils, smoking apparatus, knick knacks. You name it, it was there. I saw these alabaster boxes among displays of jewelry and semi-precious stones. I just love things made of stone. This white one really stuck out, so I bought it, not knowing what was inside. But as I was paying for it, the salesman told me that it was the actual box used by Mary Magdalene to anoint the Master's feet. He said it contained spikenard. I lifted it to my nose, and it was wonderfully perfumed. After

I left the little shop, I looked back and the man brought out another white box identical to the one I had purchased. I had to laugh. I couldn't believe I was so gullible. It was an obvious tourist trap.

“As I visited other shops, I heard some men arguing with the man who sold me the box. The man pointed to me. One of the other men started running toward me. I got scared and ran away. Anyway, to make a long story short, I flew back to Virginia and took a taxi home.

“While in the taxi, I had opened the box to take a whiff when I felt something hit me like a sledge hammer. The next thing I remember was picking up my purse off the street. I looked around and found my suitcase. It looked like someone had taken my alabaster box out, so I picked it up and put it back in my purse. I must have been in a daze. I saw the wreck of the taxi behind me. It was smashed. They were taking a woman out of it, but I didn't stay around. I walked down the street and hailed another taxi.”

She took more bites of egg and toast. She even swallowed gracefully.

"When I arrived home, my parents didn't even know me." She hummed the theme from "The Twilight Zone."

"I had let myself in with my own key, and the next thing I knew was that Zelda, our black maid, was chattering like a chipmunk. She went to get my parents, evidently because when I came back downstairs with a second suitcase – you see, I was off to college anyway – my mother had climbed halfway up the stairs, asking

me who I was and what I was doing with *my* things. When I asked her what she meant and that I was her daughter, Mother started crying hysterically.

“I went down to where my daddy stood at the bottom of the stairs to ask him what was wrong with Mother, and he started ushering me out the door, saying that their daughter had just died and they had just returned from the hospital where they had left the body. He said, ‘I don't know who you are or what you want or what kind of cruel joke you're playing, but I must ask you to leave!’

"Well, I got the shock of my life. It wasn't enough with my parents acting the way they did, but when I looked in the long mirror near the door as I always did when I left the house, it wasn't my face or my coat that I saw. I was grateful that the taxi had waited for me.

“I was so amazed that I found myself going back to the hospital. I introduced myself as my sister and asked to see my own body – I mean, I asked to see my sister. They wouldn't let me because they were ready to do a postmortem, but I persisted, and a disgruntled nurse escorted me down there."

I never knew a woman could talk so much as Vickie had in such a short amount of time. It was hard to finish my pancakes I was so intrigued.

"She took me to a chlorinated room," Vickie continued, "with huge stainless steel drawers where an attendant waited. She pulled the sheet off the face of a body that lay on a table. I had to muster all the courage I could to look. I was surprised. I didn't recognize myself at first. Then I got an idea. I took out a little mirror I

carried in my purse and looked at the face through the mirror. It was me all right. The attendant probably thought I was weird, but I'm used to that. I am a little weird.

"Well, I ran home and got my suitcases that my parents had put back into my room and headed for the airport."

"What about your parents?" I asked. "They let you just go in and get your suitcases?"

"Oh, they asked me all kinds of questions, like how did I know my way around? Can you imagine that! – after living there for the last ten years.

"Well, on the plane I figured it out, that it had something to do with this alabaster box. I remembered what the guy I bought it from in Cairo said about it, that it was the very same box used to anoint the feet of Christ. He said it was in preparation for his burial. I knew that wasn't true, but still – There's something to it."

"It sure smells perfumey," I said.

"As I said, it's spikenard."

"That was way back in Bible times."

"It's supposed to be that old."

I picked up the box. It wasn't as heavy as lead, but quite hefty for its size. It was ribbed all around with Greek columns. Whales on each corner supported the box with their tails. Water spouts pushed up each corner. The lid, rounded to fit

smoothly along the edges was carved with a cross and people taking Jesus down from it. It reminded me of a Medieval painting. After holding it for a time, it felt warm, as if radiating energy, the same kind of heat one feels after applying a salve for sore muscles. I sat it down.

Glancing around nervously, she shoved the box towards me.

"My woman's intuition tells me I can trust you with this," she said impulsively. "It's very expensive, but I think it's worth far more than money."

"You want me to put it in the hotel's vault for you? It will be safe there," I said anxiously.

"I don't have the time," she said. "And besides, it doesn't work that way."

She grabbed both my wrists as I started to put the last bite of pancakes in my mouth.

"You've got to promise me something," she said as if in a hurry. She halted and stared at a man walking into the cafeteria.

"Okay," I said, wanting to be friendly.

She looked back at me. "No! You've got to really promise!"

I could see she was deadly serious, so I said, "I promise" as earnestly as I could, not knowing what I was getting myself into, but I thought that if I was getting into her life, I was grateful.

"You look like the lifeguard type." She let go of my hands and stood. "I bet you played the protector role as a boy in your family. Am I not right?"

"Yeah, you're right," I said, looking up into her eyes.

"Well, I need your protection."

"I'm really not the body-guard type. I'm just a maintenance man," I said.

"Then maintain that box. All I want you to do is to carry it around with you until I see you again." She examined her watch. "I'm going to miss my bus to school. Listen. Just promise me you'll have this on you the next time we meet. There's someone following me. He probably wants the box and knows that I carry it with me. Promise me that."

"Okay, I promise. I'll give it back to you the next time we meet."

That wasn't going to be difficult because I could carry it around in my tool bag.

"I have to go." She grabbed her purse, started to leave, then looked back.

"Please don't open it unless you see me dead. Then be sure and open it. Close it right away. Then when you see someone who looks like me, open it again. This is the way it works. Got it?"

"Got it." I didn't, but I said so. What was I getting myself into?

I started opening the box to see what was inside which resulted in a screeching female voice in my ear: "You've got to follow my instruction! Or, or I could wind up dead! Promise me!"

She was so furious that I had to believe her and be serious about the whole thing, so I said, "I promise."

She fled from the room. I grabbed the box and ran after her. I caught her just before she left the lobby to go outside. I yelled, "What's your name?"

"Vickie," she yelled back as she pushed her way through the revolving door.

"John," I yelled, hoping she heard me as the door rotated with several sucking noises.

* * *

It was the same day I saw her next, around four in the afternoon. The King's has a French cafe' on the street with tables and chairs sitting out on the sidewalk with large umbrellas bending over them. I was taking my afternoon break, enjoying iced coffee mocha. I didn't see where she came from. All I heard was the clash of metal tables and chairs falling, glasses breaking, crashing to the cement. I looked up and saw Vickie running towards me, knocking down everything in her path. She had the look of total disbelief on her face. I rose out of my chair to get to her. A weird feeling overtook me. She was in trouble and I just didn't know what to do. She called out my name reaching out her left hand. "The box, John!" She collapsed onto my table. She lay there with her hand still reaching out. I stared at it. Was it for the box or for me? I hadn't realized she was left-handed. Then I noticed there was blood all over the back of her black jacket.

Both my jaw and my knees felt like water, and my hands trembled. I sat back down as my knees collapsed. I couldn't shut my mouth. It just hung open like an unhinged door. A crowd gathered around us like a blanket of flesh to hide the

dirty thing that had happened to us. I heard her voice inside my head. It said, "Open the box if you see me dead."

I looked down and grabbed my tool bag and set it on my lap. I brought the box out and set it on the table. At the same time a large fat hand came out of the crowd and reached for it. As soon as my hand lay on the box, the hand withdrew back into the crowd. I took the alabaster box and held it with wonder in my hands.

Leaning over the blossoming red on black figure of Vickie's body, I opened the box. The air filled with a pungent aromatic perfume. I closed the box and put it back into the bag, zipped it, and kept my hands on it.

Somewhere in the background of consciousness I heard someone call an ambulance. When it came, I found myself watching as from behind myself. The police came and dispersed the crowd. They talked to a taxi driver.

"Blood all over the backseat," were the words I caught. "Brought her here ... didn't know she was shot!" More words buzzed in my shocked ears.

The police talked to me. I answered their questions like a robot with all the feeling drained out of me. I told them how we met, what she told me about her parents, but I told them that they kicked her out, not that they didn't know who she was. I didn't tell them about the alabaster box nor about the hand that had tried to grab it. They left.

I sat at my table feeling numb and shaken. I watched them put Vickie's body into a black bag and cart her away. As I listened to the red shift in the siren of the

ambulance, the scream of it turning into a deeper frequency, depression set in. God must have known about her death because he covered the sun. The once cheery blue sky was covered now with dark gray clouds that cried tiny rain drops onto the table and the top of my head. I looked up and noticed that there was no umbrella over my table.

I sat there for a long time, forgetting my job and the rain, getting soaked, letting my tears add to the wet. All I could see or think of was Vickie's beautiful face. I imagined how she would have no family, no children. She would never know the love of a husband. Maybe, it could have been me – plain old me. Nothing ever happened to *me*! This wasn't *my* life! It couldn't be. Nothing like this should have ever happened. We should have fallen in love, gotten married and had lots of beautiful children that looked just like her.

After a while the rain stopped. A ray of light come out of the clouds and then another and another until a rainbow of every color crowned the city. I wasn't soaked as much as I thought, or I dried off quickly – just in time too, because I felt a presence. Her stare cut through the fog of my mind. I looked to my left. It was Vickie! No, not Vickie, just someone who looked like her. Her upper lip pooched out a bit showing she had a slight over-bite, just enough to make her look cute. She wore bright crimson lipstick. Vickie never wore any make-up that I could remember. This woman's blonde hair was longer, down to the shoulders, and wavy, not curly. Her eyes were melancholy deep pools of blue.

This baby was a doll. Everything she had on, from her black Peter Pan hat, black dress, and black pumps, had diamonds and rubies imbedded in them. She wore diamond ear-rings, a diamond necklace, and diamond bracelets over her black gloves. She looked weighted down and sad with all the responsibility of – of being rich, I mean being so rich you just can't have fun.

She caught me staring back at her and lowered her eyelids, exposing her silvery eye-shadow. A waiter came to her rescue, bringing her coffee and a sandwich made with ciabatta bread. She glanced back at me for an instant. I noticed that her eyes were bigger than Vickie's, sort of bulgy and round, but cute. As she turned her body around towards the park across the street, I noticed that she was slightly heavier and taller than Vickie.

Then a thought rang out in my mind, "looks like Vickie!" and I stared again. I remembered Vickie saying, " ... open it again when you see anyone who looks like me."

I unzipped the tool bag and put my hand inside and felt the alabaster box. Yes, it was still there. I touched it all around like a blind man trying to see a familiar face with his hands. I started to open it. Naw! I thought. Vickie's dead. Opening that box is just sentimental nonsense. Now that she's dead, what does it matter? She probably wanted me to do it just to remember her. I had enough memory already. But her voice rang out louder. "Open it again when you see anybody that looks like me. Got it?"

Anxiety washed over me. It wasn't my anxiety. I think I was feeling Vickie's anxiety as though it were mine. I wanted to open the box as if I were suffocating. I slowly brought out the box and set it on the table. I lifted the lid. The fragrance was Vickie herself. It brought back all her personality – her laugh, her smile, her look, the way she moved as though she could flick away all her troubles with her index finger.

The woman with Vickie's somewhat look-a-like face sat about five tables to my left. As I shifted position to face the street, my eye caught a movement. I turned my head to see that the woman had placed her head in her hands and was staring at me. She looked like someone who was waking up. She then gave out a cry and bolted towards my table.

"I've been shot!" she cried. She patted herself all over, taking a good look at her body.

I was stunned! Not again! I thought.

She lumbered over to my table and put both hands on the edge of it, looking at me and the alabaster box and panting heavily as though she were out of breath. She sat down opposite me and tossed her head back to get a strand of hair out of her face. It didn't go back. It was too long. I didn't think you could do that with longer hair. She had the same mannerisms as Vickie, I thought. After realizing she had longer hair, she put it neatly back in place with her lovely slender fingers, but the way she used them, it was evident that she wasn't used to having such long

fingers either.

She stared at me with a half-grin. She felt her back with her right hand. I hadn't noticed before, but earlier that morning Vickie had been left handed. Now she was right handed. If Vickie was really possessing a new body, there was still some of the other person's personality present. She laughed a little for relief.

"I'm all right. I guess I'm all right," she said, coming to a full smile. "Close your mouth. Your tongue will fall out."

I hadn't realized how stunned I was. I closed my mouth slowly, still staring at her.

I noticed that she had caused a small stir at the other tables. Some of the people laughed. They hadn't been there earlier. Those that had, like the waiter, whispered complaints to each other, saying that such a joke was in bad taste. The waiter had a disagreeable expression on his face as he moved all Vickie's things over to my table.

"I see," she said, "that you opened the box. That was – well, it took a lot of faith, I guess." She put her left elbow on the table and flicked her little finger.

"I heard your voice screaming in my head," I answered, folding my arms. "I had to ... to clear my conscience."

"Oh," she said as she stared at the dishes the waiter brought over to her. "I didn't really know I had such a strong personality – a strong *spirit*, you might say."

She reached over and closed the box, drew it to her side of the table, then

pushed it back to me. "On second thought," she said, "considering what happened today, you'd better keep it for me."

A strong breeze blew away the odor of the spikenard, but a slight hint of it remained on her person.

"They know I have it," I said bluntly.

"Who?" she said, sounding like a owl.

"Whoever's trying to get it," I answered anxiously. "We'd better put it somewhere safe."

"I need it close by," she said, lowering her voice, "for whenever something happens."

"Well, it's too clumsy to carry around," I said. Then, bewildered and concerned, I asked, "Vickie? Is that really you in there?"

"I know I must look a little different, but, yes, it's me. It's that little box. It catches the soul, I think. But I'm addicted to it like I'm addicted to life itself. It all became clear to me on the way down here on the plane. It's not easy to let go and let yourself die when you know you can live on ... with the help of a friend, of course." Saying that, she took my hand and squeezed it.

"Well," I said with a little apprehension, "what happens to the person whose body you stole?"

"Now wait a minute! I didn't steal anything! Ooooh, I don't know exactly what happens, but I do remember things a little differently on this subject. You

may think me a fool, but I seem to remember things from a different dimension, at least on this one thing. I believe that had the box been left unopened, the young lady that used to be me, I mean, the girl that used to live in this body, and the previous one, they already had an appointment with death. Now don't try to make me feel guilty about this ... a different body, a different face, drawing you into this, and having to live with the fact that someone wants me dead! It's too much for me. And I can't do this alone, and not without that box!"

"Okay, okay," I said, placing my other hand on her arm, "Calm down. I was only curious, nothing more. I know you must be going through a traumatic experience, and I still want to help." I noticed something on her face. "Your mascara is running."

"Oh gosh! I didn't even know I had any on," she said, rubbing her face with her hands. I gave her a napkin, but she was rummaging through this other girl's purse and found some tissue that was softer than the napkin. She wiped her face gently.

We sat for a long time, and then I got a call on my radio.

"John," called the voice.

I answered. "Yes. I'm just outside the cafe'."

"There's been a power outage in the B Wing on the second floor."

"I'll be right there."

I looked at Vickie a moment and said, "I'll escort you to go to your room." I

got up and moved around to her side of the table.

She went through the lady's purse to find a key. When she looked at it, it dawned upon her that it wasn't her key.

"Oh," she giggled, putting her hand up to her mouth. "This key belongs to the other girl."

"Of course," I said, slapping my face. "Your key, your purse ... they went to the morgue with your other body!"

"Goodness!" Vickie exclaimed. "I don't know who I am or where I live!"

She found a wallet in the purse and opened it. There were credit cards galore and an I.D. Card with almost Vickie's face on it. The name was Blanche Picard.

"Blanche Picard!" She writhed. "What kind of name is that?" She looked up at me and asked, "Oh please, don't call me Blanche!"

"Well, not unless somebody asks, anyway," I said.

"You're right, but I shan't get used to it!" She gave me a stern look.

"I'll call you Vickie." I shoved my chair away from the table.

She did the same and said, "Thank you."

"We'd better get going," I said as I rose. I walked around behind her and grabbed hold of her chair.

"Yes. Right," she said looking back at me.

She stood as I pulled her chair from under her. She put her arms around me.

"But may I have a hug first," she asked. "This is awfully dizzying, this

changing bodies and getting murdered and having to change again."

"Sure," I said, enjoying that hug for all it was worth.

We hugged for a long time, and she gave me an equally long kiss. She looked at me and giggled, picked up a napkin, and wiped the lipstick off my mouth.

"You can't go to work like that," she said, smiling her original Vickie smile that I had seen at breakfast. "Thank you. Now I'd better take this stuff off my face. I'm not used to wearing make-up."

I started trembling inside. This day was filled with too much emotion.

We looked at the key as we went back into the main lobby. It was room 201.

"What a coincidence," she said. "It's right across from my room...I mean, my old room. It was 202."

"A coincidence indeed!" I said as I put my arm through hers. "That's the corridor without power. Come on. I smell a fish."

"You mean something's fishy."

"Yes. That's exactly what I said. We'd better be careful."

* * *

I took out my flashlight from my tool bag. The elevator was slow, Vickie and I avoided looking at each other.

"Elevator shyness," she giggled.

Now *I* giggled. "Yes," I said, "it seems to happen to most people."

When the door opened, we were confronted with a black nothingness and silence in each direction. The light from the elevator gave us a small box of light that invaded the blackness. I shined the light up and down the corridor, sending the long cone of light in either direction. The hallway was empty.

"It's hard to tell which direction my room is – in the dark," Vickie announced as she curled her arm around mine. "I get turned around in the dark."

"I believe it's this way," I said, pointing with the flashlight beam. "Which room do you want? I have the master key."

"My *own* room, thank you!" she said in mock disgust.

We went to room 202. When we opened the door, we found it ransacked. Vickie said, "Oh, no!" slowly, and walked around looking at the mess, peering down at the floor, following the beam of light, while trying not to step on the dirt from potted plants, books, papers, and the upturned coffee table. Walking across the couch cushions was a stretch. She turned her head in an arc to every part of the room. I went to the window and opened the vertical blinds. All the drawers had been emptied and thrown to the floor. Chairs were tipped over. The couch was ripped apart. We walked into the bedroom. The mattress hung precressed over the bed springs. Dresser drawers were scattered everywhere.

"I'd better freshen up my *room* before I freshen up my *self*!" she said.

"And I'd better turn the lights on," I said. "That will help."

"Wait!" she said, grabbing my waist. "Look around. There may be someone

in here."

"Alright."

I put the flashlight on wide angle and looked into the bathroom. Suddenly, a husky fellow bolted through the door, knocking me down, and knocking the flashlight out of my hand. He turned and fired a shot! I could see the fire from the gun. Vickie screamed, and the front door slammed.

"Vickie!" I cried.

"I'm right here." Her voice trembled. "He missed me. I'm all right. I'll get the flashlight."

She scrambled across debris, picked up the flashlight and shined it right into my face. I turned away, exclaiming, "Hey!" The beam was powerful even on wide angle. (I wouldn't use any other but a halogen.)

"Oh, sorry." She pointed the beam at the ceiling. That gave us more light. The ceiling sparkled and spread the light over the room.

I had fallen onto a drawer and hurt my back. It felt as though I had been stabbed. Vickie helped me up using her other hand.

"I think I broke your drawer," I said, wincing at the pain. "You'd better come with me."

Vickie handed me the flashlight as though it were a torch. I pointed it toward the floor again so we could see where we were going. We stepped over boxes, drawers, and piles of clothes. The flashlight beam stopped on a bra. Vickie put her

hand over my eyes. Her nervous tension turned into a giggle.

"Okay, okay," I said. "I had sisters growing up. I'm used to it."

"Just keep your eyes on the door," she insisted.

After reaching the door I swept the corridor in both directions with the flashlight beam. It seemed to be empty – no one there.

"There's a little service closet down this way," I said, pointing the beam to the left. "We'll check in there."

We walked almost on tiptoes as quietly as we could with our heads slightly ducked as if expecting to get hit.

"To check for a man?" she said whispering.

"No," I whispered back. "To check on the main. That's where the switch-box is."

"Oh."

When we got to the service closet, I opened the door. My heart almost stopped, but there was no one in there. I shined the flashlight beam into each corner just to make sure. We stepped in and closed the door to be safe. Shining the light onto the switch-box, I could tell that the main switch had been opened. I closed it and the lights came back on. When Vickie opened the door, all the lights were on, and for a moment, it was like experiencing a different world.

I called it in on my radio. "Say, Val?"

"Yes, John," was the scratchy reply. "You got those lights on yet?"

"Yes. All I had to do was throw the main breaker switch." I took a breath and added, "We've had an intruder. Room 202 has been ransacked."

"Okay. I'll get that lock changed and send up the house detective."

I told Vickie that the hotel detective would probably want her to leave her room the way it was. She agreed to freshen up in Blanche's room, said it would be fun to check out the old girl's belongings.

CHAPTER TWO

When Detective Cain, a short square man with a square face, arrived, he asked for the young woman who had complained about her room. I said that she must have gone downstairs and watched as he combed the apartment for clues. He found correspondence from the University of Arizona and other mail addressed to the young woman he recognized as having been shot earlier in front of the hotel.

"Hey! What is this?" he demanded of me. "I got a call that a young lady complained that her room had been ransacked. Now I find this mail addressed to a *dead* woman! Who lives in this apartment anyway?"

I was about to answer when a police detective with black hair and square jaw, tall, wearing a dark overcoat and crowned with a fancy fedora, entered with a uniformed officer. The officer spotted a bullet hole in the wall. Digging a bullet out with his pocketknife, he handed it to his superior, saying. "A shot's been fired."

"Hmmm..." he said, rolling the bullet between his fingers. "Joe," he addressed the officer, "go downstairs and find out who lives in this apartment. It should be a young woman. See if she's still in the building."

He left and the detective turned back to Cain. "What do you know about this?"

"I just arrived," Cain said. He pointed to me. "This is the young lad that reported the crime."

The detective asked me, "Heard any shots? Seen anything? Did you hear anyone talking about hearing shots?"

"There was a man ..." I hesitated. "When we came in, it was dark. The lights were out. Someone fired a gun and ran out the door."

"How come the lights are on now?" The detective wrote in a little pad.

"I'm the house electrician and handyman. I turned them on and came back to the room."

While the police questioned me, Detective Cain found Vickie and asked if she had heard shots or seen anything peculiar. The door was open, so I could hear them talking. All of her answers were in the negative.

The officer came back and said the apartment belonged to a Carmen Smith. He also told the detective that I had been the one who called in the report.

The detective asked, "Why were you in this room in the first place?"

"Vickie needed my help," I said.

"Why, that's the girl who was shot," Cain called from across the hall. He came back in and turned to me. "Thought you didn't know anything *about* it!"

I gulped and started shaking. I didn't know what to say, but Vickie intervened. She stood between us and said, "There was this blackout."

"He told me about that," the detective said.

"Yes, and this kind gentleman offered to escort me to my door."

"Yes?" asked the detective, becoming very interested.

"Yes. When he opened the door, I stumbled upon this mess."

"Is that your apartment?" he pointed to Vickie's original apartment.

"No, but you see, I got mixed up in the dark and thought it was, and so I had him call you guys. But it wasn't my apartment. My apartment is across the hall." She pointed to Blanche Picard's apartment, whose body she now occupied.

"But you didn't see or hear anything earlier?" asked the detective.

"No, I've been out most of the day," she said truthfully.

Cain handed the letters in his hand to the detective. "I found these scattered on the floor. They are addressed to a Vickie Brighton. One of them from yesterday's mail." The hotel date-stamps all incoming mail.

The detective turned to me. "Why don't you tell us who lives in this apartment?"

"I guess I forgot to say," I said. "It's been a confusing day. I lost Vickie."

"Who is this Vickie?" he said fingering his chin, "What's her connection to Carmen Smith?" He studied the letters in his hand.

"I thought she was Vickie," I explained.

Vickie looked at me angrily. I got it that she didn't want me to mention her name, but the cat was out of the bag.

"Are you saying you thought this Vickie, who was shot downstairs earlier, and Carmen Smith were the same?" asked Cain.

"I thought they were," I said. "Maybe she signed in as a different person."

“Why is that?” asked the police detective.

“I wouldn't know,” I said, rubbing my forehead. I was getting a headache. “I only met her this morning at the swimming pool, and now – she's dead.”

“How do you know this is her room?” asked Cain.

“She told me at breakfast.” I glanced at Vickie's angry face. She pursed her lips and pouted. I was in a hole, lying to the police, but I didn't know how to get out. “Just small talk.”

“Okay,” said the detective. “Like they say in the movies, don't go out of town. You may be needed for further questioning. Let's have your names. You both live here?”

We gave them our names, and the police cordoned off the area with yellow tape. Vickie and I went into Blanche's apartment and closed the door.

Vickie got close to me and asked, “What am I going to do? I need to get my things. My school books and things I got yesterday are in there...and my personals.”

“I don't know, Vickie,” I said with my hands on my hips looking down at the carpet. “If anything turns up missing from your apartment, they're sure to suspect us.”

“Maybe they will ask the maids first. Who's going to clean it up?” she asked, grabbing my hands and pulling them to her heart.

I had a sudden idea.

"A maid!" I said explosively.

"A maid?" she echoed.

"Yes. I'll get you a maid's uniform. You can pretend to clean up the place. You can bring your things to me, change your clothes in the lockers downstairs, and then I'll bring them back to you. Is it a plan?"

"Well, that's a long way around it. Why don't I just pretend to clean up this room instead of traipsing all the way downstairs?"

She was kissing my hands as we talked.

"I – I guess you can. Well, let's give it a try," I suggested.

I wanted to get away. She was making me very nervous. She let go of my hands and grabbed me around the waist.

"We can't just barge in there and get my stuff?" she asked, her face up against mine.

"No." I felt defensive. "There must be a procedure you go through."

"Alright," she surrendered. "You go and get the uniform."

"Alright. Okay – mmm – I guess I'll see you later then."

I was growing quite warm and restless. And I'm sure my face was getting red. After all, I'd only known Vickie for one day.

"Okay," she said, not letting go.

"Bye," I said.

"Bye," she said.

She still didn't let go.

Vickie kissed me. I almost lost consciousness. All of a sudden, I knew all her measurements. I could feel them with my whole body. I found that my arms had been around her all this time without knowing it, and I stroked her back.

"Do you have to go?" she asked.

"Yes. Yes. I'm still on duty. I have to make my rounds – check things out. I'll come back with your uniform. I know what size now."

She giggled and released me with one last kiss.

As I went out the door, I noticed that the detective was just leaving with his uniformed crony and the house dick. As I walked down the corridor, they came along side and walked with me.

"She your girl?" the detective asked.

"Just met her this morning," I responded, feeling a bit skittish from his presence. Then I realized what I had just said. I meant Vickie. He meant Blanche.

He tapped his lips and asked, "Two girls in one day?"

I felt my face turn red again.

"... and one of them dead already." He shook his head.

I figured he was trying to tell me to wipe my lips. He tapped his lips again and then pointed to me. I hurriedly took out my handkerchief and wiped my lips. "Sorry," I said. I looked at it. There was a red smear of lipstick. I could feel the lipstick when my mother or sister kissed me, but not when Vickie did. I was

amazed at what was going on between us.

We neared the elevator, and I blurted out, "What are you going to do with her stuff?"

"Oh, we'll keep it until the investigation's over." He jerked his face toward me and squinted. "Hey! Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious. I have a personal investment in this. I fell in love with her, and now, she's gone." I tried looking as depressed as possible.

"Well, you sure do bounce back quick." He nodded toward the handkerchief. "Don't worry. We're contacting the family. Their return address is on these envelopes." He waved them in front of my face. "It all goes with the body when they claim it. Of course, if no one ever claims the stuff, it goes to the auction block. We have an auction every month, you know." He pushed the down button. "And if the body is unclaimed, it goes to the crematorium."

Cain said he would see us later and walked down the hall.

"I didn't know," I said, sticking my hands in my pocket and shrugging my shoulders.

The elevator opened. It was empty. We all three stepped in.

"So, you met both of them this morning?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, staring at the floor.

"Carmen Smith and Blanche Picard," he said wistfully. "One from the ransacked apartment – the other from across the hall. One got killed today – the

other replaced her."

He was so blunt, it hurt my feelings. I tried not to show it, but my lips tightened up.

"Well," I responded, not sounding very friendly. "I met both at the pool this morning. Vickie, I mean Carmen and I had breakfast together."

The elevator door opened. We stepped out onto the main lobby. He winked at me. "Fast worker. Say, what did you talk about?"

I stopped and said, "Oh, I don't know what it was. People spill out their life history to strangers. She talked about blowing up at her parents before she left home. She and her parents had a parting of the ways. Choice of schools I guess. They wanted her to stay on the east coast so they could keep an eye on her. Things like that."

"Okay," he said, and he left without saying as much as "have a good day." But of course, it was night.

* * *

It seems like I'm never off duty. There's always something to repair or a light that needs changing. I'm an electrical engineer, and I go around changing light bulbs. I always have to wash and unclog toilets. Sinks are always leaking or getting clogged. It's endless. Then I have to fix the industrial washing machines downstairs. They're always breaking down. I have to keep the pool up – clean it and put in the chemicals. I have to do everything around here. In other words, I got

sidetracked and forgot to get Vickie a maid's uniform. By the time I remembered, it was around midnight.

I showed up at Vickie's new apartment about 12:30 am and knocked on the door. She didn't answer. I figured she was asleep, but let myself in with my pass key and put the uniform on the couch. I wanted to see what a sleeping beauty really looked like, so I sneaked into her bedroom. I glanced at the bed. It hadn't been slept in. The apartment was dark. There was no noise. She wasn't there. I went over to her old apartment. Maybe she decided to just get her things without playing the maid. I turned the light on and called out her name, but no one answered. She wasn't there either.

Did it really happen? I asked myself. I trod off to my pad. That whole day seemed like a dream. Did I meet someone so angelically beautiful that was interested in me only to have her vanish away and go back to Heaven? What had I seen? Had a woman actually switched bodies by some magic that was in that alabaster box? I felt it in the bag I carried. It was too unreal to believe, but I had the box wrapped up in an old towel.

I was dead-dog tired and went back to my room to take a shower and crawl into bed. I didn't feel like eating. I planned to be out like a light, but when I turned on the lights, I was wide awake. My room had been ransacked too!

I put my tool bag on the floor behind the door. My room looked like Vickie's with all my drawers emptied, my bed upturned, sofa torn apart, pictures thrown

down from the walls. Even my dishwasher in the kitchenette was yanked out of the cabinet.

I heard a faint pulsing noise and looked around for the phone. It was coming from underneath a sofa cushion on the floor. I lifted up the cushion. It was my pale blue princess phone that came with the apartment. I picked it up and threw the cushion back onto the sofa. Putting the phone back together stopped the pulsating buzz designed to drive a person crazy. I set it back on the cabinet against the wall that used to contain my drawers.

The counter top was white with gold flakes running through it. The television on top of the counter hadn't been touched. I noticed a guy reflected off the television screen. It was me. I pondered why I should look attractive. To me, I was plain and all too familiar.

I forgot the telephone and reached for the radio on my belt by habit.

I pushed the side button. "Val? Are you still up? This is John." No reply. I pushed the button again. "Are you there?"

"John! Go ahead," he answered as though he was as fresh as ever, like nothing ever happened around here.

"You'd better get those detectives back."

"Yes? What happened?"

"Send them to my room." I glanced around as if I had just seen it. "It's been ransacked."

"What're you doing? Having a contest?" crackled the radio. "Sure, I'll call them back."

Two detectives showed up looking peeved when they saw it was me.

"Well, detectives." I shrugged my shoulders. "What can I say?"

The one I had talked to earlier said to me (in a tone that was strictly business), "This is Lieutenant Johnson. My name is Nixon. Now, we want to know what these guys are looking for. We think you know."

I didn't want to bring up something as unbelievable as an alabaster box that brought people back to life, so I said, "I don't know unless they were looking for an extra set of keys, but I keep them down in the office."

I knew they didn't believe me by the way they looked at each other. The shorter detective, blonde, chubby, wearing a tan rain coat jerked his chin towards his partner.

"Look," said Nixon. "You told your boss that the guys that tore up the room upstairs turned the lights off merely by flipping a switch. They already had a set of keys. They weren't looking for no keys. Now we have a feeling in our guts that you *know* what they're looking for. See? Now just tell us here and now, and we won't have to cart you off down town."

I had to think fast. I couldn't let them take the alabaster box. It was Vickie's only security.

Johnson, standing there with his hands in his pockets jerked his chin at me.

"You could have done this yourself."

"Well," I said, not knowing what else to say. I wasn't very good at lying. "I guess I'll show you. It's a museum piece, an antique that Vickie gave me for safe-keeping. That's what they're looking for. I've been carrying it around." I pointed to my tool bag in the corner behind the door.

As I stooped down to get it, Lieutenant Johnson asked, "Who's this Vickie?"

"She's the one that got shot earlier today," Nixon said.

"I see," Lieutenant Johnson said. "This Vickie was shot, her room was ransacked, and there was someone in there at the time that took a pot shot at you and this Blanche. There must have been a scuffle. Now the object turns up in your hands. And her name wasn't Carmen Smith, but Vickie. And she knew you. Could it be that you and she stole this object, or you stole it from her, and you're in cahoots with these other guys? Maybe you stole it from them? There are too many unanswered questions."

"She told me her name was Vickie," I said rising with the unwrapped alabaster box in my hands.

"Maybe her nickname, Joe?" Lieutenant Nixon asked, tapping out a cigarette from its pack.

"Yeah, could be." Johnson fingered the alabaster box. He tried to grab it, but I pulled it away.

"Now, son," said Johnson, "we'll have to take the box. It's evidence in this

case."

"The girl across the hall," I lied, "she's Vickie's cousin. Her name is Vickie too."

"Vickie Two?" asked the short lieutenant.

"I mean, they both bought it together...somewhere in the Middle East – Lebanon or Jordan? No, Egypt. They gave it to me for safe-keeping. Maybe I should give it back to her? Vickie, the first Vickie, the one that got shot? She told me that someone was trying to steal it and that I should keep it. Maybe..." I tried desperately to keep it, trying to think of some way while I talked, but I was interrupted.

Nixon put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Look, son. The box is evidence, and we have to take it. We'll give a receipt to the other Vickie."

Lieutenant Johnson said, "It will be safer in the hands of the police, especially if someone's trying to steal it, don't you think? We lock up things like this all the time."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said, holding the box as tightly as I could.

Johnson tried to take the box, and I pulled it back again. He got mad.

"Now, look here," Johnson said, taking out his handcuffs. "We don't want to take you downtown and book you, but we will for obstructing justice. You don't want to go down town, and we're all tired out from being up all day. We want to get some sleep. Hand over the box or it's the handcuffs."

"Okay," I said, "but please listen to me. I know you won't believe me because I've been lying to you. This box is the only thing that's keeping Vickie alive. She's got to have it or she'll die."

Nixon said, "Now, are we getting to the truth, or are we spreading this thing a little thin?"

"A little too thin, I'd say," Johnson agreed.

"What's the truth?" Nixon wanted to know.

"Carmen Smith had this box," Johnson observed, "from what I can extrapolate, and she's dead."

"No," I said, "she's not."

"What?" blurted out Johnson. "Don't tell me that. I saw the body."

"Carmen Smith and Blanche Picard are one and the same," I explained.

"Both of them are the same Vickie. She's dead also, or that is, her body rests in the ground in Virginia, but she changed into Carmen Smith, and now her soul resides in Blanche."

The two detectives looked at each other. I knew they were thinking I was losing it.

"It's the alabaster box that keeps her alive," I pleaded.

Nixon spoke to Johnson. "It looks like all three of these guys are mixed up in some international theft. You know who Blanche Picard is, don't you? She's Vicarde's girl, the one that owns that big mansion outside the city – nightclubs too.

Haven't been able to touch him – mob, you know."

I told them how I used the box when Vickie or Carmen died and how when I saw Blanche for the first time, I opened it up and Blanche turned into Vickie.

"You can check with the waiter," I said. "Dan Buchanan is his name. He will verify what I told you. He'll tell you the girl acted pretty funny after I opened the box."

"Yeah, yeah," said Nixon. "I can see your point of view, but there's another story I can see, and that's the one in which you're being played for a sucker. These girls stole this box and are trying to get you to help them, only, one of them got killed for it. Now, the other one is trying to get it for herself. Happens all the time in our racket. They haven't told you the truth. You're a fall guy."

"Okay," I said. "I can see your point, but I believe Vickie. I'm in love with her."

"Boy!" Johnson exclaimed. "Justice isn't the only one that's blind."

I thought of something.

"Hey!" I exclaimed. "Any of you got a search warrant or some kind of order from a judge?"

They looked at each other, and I knew they didn't have a thing.

"Then paws off. In the meantime, I'm giving the box back to Vickie or Blanche or whoever she is."

Nixon spoke up. "We don't usually get a court order for something like this,

especially for a murder case, and especially if we've been invited onto the premises."

"Well, this time I'm demanding one."

"Okay," said Johnson. "We'll be back, and maybe with a warrant for your arrest."

"One way or the other, we'll be seeing you and the box," Nixon told me.

They left, and I sat down on the couch wondering if I shouldn't leave the mess until morning. It wasn't too long after that I heard the buzz, buzz of my door bell. "Back so soon?" I asked before I opened the door. It was Vickie. She had a black eye and her nose was bleeding.

"I escaped!" she cried as she pushed her way in and seated herself on the sofa.

I got a cold wet towel and gave it to her. She wiped the blood off her face.

"They were holding me," she shuddered.

I put my arm around her to keep her warm.

"Who was holding you?" I asked.

"They must have been Egyptians. They looked like the people I saw back in Egypt when I bought the box. They were wearing red Turkish hats, you know, like the Shriners. They kept hitting me and hitting me, asking me where the alabaster box was."

It was odd to see her in a different dress. I had only thought of her in that

black dress all covered with diamonds. The red and white checkered dress had a wide white square collar that plunged low enough to show her bosom. Blood covered some of the white checks, bringing a sense of chaos into the picture. I took the towel and wiped the blood off her chest. I tried to comfort her by kissing her and embracing her, but when I touched her side, she cried out.

"I guess they broke a rib or two," she shuddered. "It's hard to breathe."

"I'm sorry!" I said, surprised. "I'll get you a blanket."

I stood and retrieved the blanket from my bed, shoving the mattress back on with my thigh. I placed it over her and said softly, "I'll call an ambulance."

"No," she moaned. "That's unnecessary. All the doctor will do is tape up my ribs. Why bother with all the expense and hassle? It will be faster if you can get some first-aid tape and do it."

I must have looked like I was concentrating pretty hard, for she said, "Don't you have a first-aid kit in the hotel somewhere?"

"I know where one is," I got up. "Don't let anyone in...oh, I have the key. Well, I'll give three knocks followed by two to let you know it's me."

She almost laughed. "Silly," she said. "Just go."

I left her, went to Val's office and came back with some tape. I helped her get her clothes off down to the skin. I was surprised at my lack of arousal. I guess I went into doctor mode when I saw all the bruises on her once beautiful body. I gritted my teeth. I wanted to hit those guys who beat her up. She sat on the edge of

the sofa as I wound the tape around her ribs. She complained that it was too tight, but I had to make sure I made it snug for her ribs to heal.

After we got her clothes back on, I asked, "What happened and how did you escape?"

"Well, you remember going to get the maid's uniform?"

"Yes," I said, kneeling down by the sofa, holding her hand.

"I heard someone knock on the door. I thought it was you, so I opened it. I almost screamed, but I think I must have swallowed my tongue or something. I just choked. It was the man from the little curio shop in Egypt. He was a big guy with a red Turkish hat and big mustache. The look in his face was pure evil, like he hated me. I saw him in the cafeteria yesterday morning. He's been following me.

"He ran after me in Cairo after I bought the box. I had no idea he was after the box, I thought he was after *me*. I ran to the first policeman I saw and told him there was a man chasing me. He told me, 'There is no man after you.' When I looked back, he was gone. All he did was to call me a taxi and told me to go back to my hotel.

"It was my last day there, and I wanted to pick up some little memento of all the sights I had seen. I went to all kinds of temples and museums, but there was something weird that happened when I went to a Coptic monastery. They wouldn't let me in, but I saw the outside of it. It was built into a huge cliff. I talked to one of the monks on the outside, or rather, he talked to me. He recommended that part of

the Cairo Museum that dealt with early Christian art. While at the museum, there was another kindly old gentleman that pointed out an alabaster box. He said it was the same that Mary Magdalene had used to anoint the feet of Christ. He then directed me to a little shop where I could pick up a copy of it for nothing. I thought maybe he was there to help the shop owner get business, but I went anyway. And when I bought the thing, I was followed. It does sound like they wanted the box, doesn't it?

"I didn't tell you before, but after I left Egypt, my hotel in Rome was ransacked, and when I got home, the same thing happened to my hotel room there. I don't think my first death was an accident. But right before the accident, I remember seeing the guy that abducted me tonight. He passed me in a car in Richmond. I was on my way home. He looked at me with such blackness – more than hatred – like he was death itself. The next thing I knew, I was walking away from the accident, holding on dearly to my purse – my bag, really. It had the alabaster box in it.

"I thought I could escape if I came out here to Arizona – that he couldn't follow me this far, but I saw him again at the airport when I first arrived. I knew he was after the box. Then I met you and took a desperate measure. I'm sorry I got you into this."

"I'm sorry," I said sympathetically, "that *you're* in this mess. The police told me that I was a patsy for you and the girl that got killed this afternoon. I think

you're the patsy. They set you up. They thought that once you got that box out of the country it would be easy to take it from you."

"Yes," she said with more spirit, "but now that I've got it, I plan to keep it!"

"You never told me how you managed to escape," I said with too much curiosity because I knew she was tired, and so was I, but I just wanted to stay awake with her.

"I was just stolen away. Just stolen like I was nothing at all, just a thing. They came into my apartment really fast, taped my mouth shut and tied me up and put me in a dirty towel cart or something and covered me up. They carried me away in a van and started beating on me, asking me where the box was. I'm sorry. I told them you had it. I guess that's why your room is in such a mess.

"Well, there was a lull in my interrogation. They were all in front of the van arguing in their own language. I couldn't tell what was happening, but I wasn't going to stay there and let them beat on me. I opened the back door with my hands still tied behind my back. It's the kind that swings out. And I jumped out when we came to a stop. I guess it was a stop light.

"You wouldn't believe the luck I had. I tried to run, but the pain was too great. A car came right up to me. The driver was calling my name – I mean Blanche's name. Another man got out of the car and helped me into the front seat. I think the driver was supposed to be my boyfriend or husband. He called me all kinds of sweet names and asked me all kinds of questions. He got on his car phone

and – it was a limo I was in, I think. Anyway, he got on his car phone and was calling people, giving them the description of the van and the license plates, telling them to go after them.

" 'I thought you had run away,' he said, and blamed himself for my demise, calling himself a fool and several other names. He kept on apologizing. He kept on driving. I started hitting him with my tied up hands. He was such a gook! * He finally got the message. He pulled over and took the tape off my mouth and untied my hands. I must have had some memory from Blanche because I called him Paul. He was going to take me to the hospital , but I got him to bring me back here to the King's. He's down there in the lobby right now waiting for me. I told him there was another man in my life, but that I would go back with him. He is very persuasive. I told him I had to go to your room and get a box of valuables I had left with you, but I think you'd better keep it for now. I don't trust this guy. He just sounds or feels like a gangster or something – right out of the movies. He's the kind that will follow you around like a little puppy, but will bite if he doesn't get his way. I'd better go with him. His name is Paul Vicarde' and he has this large mansion on the edge of town. He wants to take me to his house and protect me. I guess he's my husband, but we haven't been living together. Maybe we broke up. I mean Blanche."

"I know what you mean," I said. "Maybe you will be safer there."

* **gook**, a derogatory word describing someone of an inferior race (showing her prejudice)

"I just want to stay here and rest," she pleaded, almost out of breath.

"We could call the police and ask them for protection," I suggested.

"You would have to tell them why, about the alabaster box, I mean, and they wouldn't believe you."

"You're right," I said, not telling her that I already told the police, and they didn't believe me. I said instead, "You might have to tell this Mr. Vacarde' about the box."

"I don't want to," she said.

I was about to argue the point that someone needed to be with her to use the box, but the buzz, buzz, buzz of the door bell interrupted. I went to the door and peeked out the peep-hole. There were three stern-looking men in black suits at my door. Forgetting about Mr. Vacarde', I was thinking they were the police again. My mind was in a groove. I opened the door and let in three thugs. Two of them pulled guns out of their coats. I thought what a stupid thing to do. Maybe they were the men that wanted the alabaster box, but the middle man spoke up with a slight Italian accent.

"I come for my girl," he commanded, not loudly.

I waved my hand towards the sofa, saying, "Be careful. She 's badly bruised. She's got some broken ribs. I taped her up as good as I could."

He flicked his hands towards the other two men. They put away their guns and carried Vickie out the door.

Vickie cried out "John!" as she left. I knew what she meant. I was to take care of the alabaster box and use it whenever she needed me to. I nodded my head. *If* I ever needed to, and how was I to do that? I would have to follow her around somehow.

I don't know if I was just waking up or was it that I was half asleep that I just began to notice the cigar smoke beginning to choke me. He was holding a lit cigar in between his fingers on his right hand. He waved it at me. His black eyes were shadowed by bushy eyebrows. He had a large nose centered on top of a huge mustache. He looked like a caricature of Groucho Marx without the comedy.

"You work here?" he asked.

"Yes," I said timidly.

"She picks up anything or anybody that fancies her. She has this weakness. I'm willing to forgive and forget."

What was this guy? He watched too many movies.

"I just met her yesterday, " I said, trying to be polite. "After my girl got murdered."

"Oh – that girl. She was in the papers. Front page. I don't like publicity. I don't like stray dogs. I don't like loose ends. I'm a pretty tidy man." He took something out of his pants pocket, stuffed it into my shirt pocket and said, "Don't ever see her again," and he left, closing the door behind him.

I took out a hundred dollar bill from my shirt pocket. I looked at it. I looked

at the door. I felt a great weight upon my shoulders. It was more than apprehension or anxiety. I had been locked out of Vickie's life for good. If I tried to break that lock, I would be shot or ruined in some way. I wasn't the type of guy that could jump over the fence, fight off the bad guys, rescue my girl and get away with it. I had no connections.

I lay on the couch and hugged the blanket that had covered Vickie only moments ago. I fell into a dreamless sleep. In one day I had fallen in love and had been crushed by it. I didn't even know who or what I had fallen in love with. Whatever it was lay over me like a heavy slab.

CHAPTER THREE

Some inner alarm woke me up. I looked at the mess. I looked at my watch – four hours sleep and it was time to go to work. I changed clothes and ran down to the pool. There was only time to swim one length and take a shower. I went to the cafeteria and started eating my whole wheat pancakes, staring at the chair Vickie had sat in the day before. Everything I did reminded me of Vickie – the first Vickie. I could remember her smile that melted away my inferiority.

My reveries were shattered by a police detective that slammed a newspaper down on my table. He didn't say anything; he just looked exasperated. I guessed that he wanted me to read it.

Headlines read "Gang Style Slaying." Under that, in smaller but bold letters read, "Business man Paul Vicarde' and wife Blanche Picard gunned down by unknown assailants." The paragraph below read, "Paul Vicarde' and his wife Blanche Picard, who owned a string of downtown stores and restaurants, were gunned down by automatic weapon's fire early this morning between one and two p.m., near their plush mansion just outside of town on Baker's Street and 5th Avenue. It was apparent that Mrs. Picard had been badly beaten..."

I couldn't read anymore. Chills ran up my spine and over my face like tiny needles. I stared at the photo of the car that had been riddled with bullets. I felt as though someone had just pulled a plug somewhere and my soul was sinking down

through my chair and onto the floor. I felt all my blood drain from my face, following my soul. I started trembling.

"You her lover?" Nixon asked.

"I told you I only met her yesterday," I heard myself whisper.

Nixon sat down next to me.

"Why are you trembling?" he asked.

"Don't you have any feelings!" I gnashed at him. "I love her!" Now I had said it, and it shocked me.

"We have a search warrant. We're going to search your apartment, Blanche Picard's apartment, and Carmen Smith's apartment – *and*, we'll be taking you down town for questioning."

He rose from his seat.

I looked at him through an all consuming numbness. I didn't know how long I could take this slam! slam! slam! of death's door. I said to him, "You won't have to. Take me to the morgue and I'll give you everything you want except the killers. But I'll do anything within my power to get them too."

"Why the morgue?" he asked monotonously.

"You'll let me say goodbye to Vickie...er, I mean Blanche Picard, won't you?" I said sorrowfully.

"Okay...yeah. Come on. I'll drive you down there."

I called my boss on the radio – told him I was going downtown with the

police. I grabbed my tool bag and took it with me.

We joined Johnson at the door. He asked, "What's in the bag?"

I said, "My tools. I keep the alabaster box in here."

Nixon asked, "Can't you leave the tools here?"

"I guess so," I told him. "Just habit to carry them both ... since yesterday."

I put my pouch in the janitor's closet by the elevator, taking the bound alabaster box with me. I saw a Middle Eastern type fellow watching me. I told the detectives, but when they turned to look he wasn't there.

They took me to the morgue and let me see Blanche's body. When I took the alabaster box with me into the building, Johnson said it would be perfectly safe in the car, but I said, "Sorry, I don't trust it out of my sight."

Going through two metal swinging doors in a granite wall, we entered a room lined with large metal drawers. A man around my age with a melancholy expression, wearing a white coat, took us to a drawer and slid it open. He jerked the sheet off Vickie's face. It looked like a wax replica of the real thing. I was still in a daze, and I didn't really examine the particulars of her face. I already knew it was bruised.

I unwrapped the alabaster box and opened it.

Johnson asked, "What are you doing?"

"It's for her," I said. "Some people anoint the dead. I would like to do that." I looked at the two watch dogs sternly. "Can't I be alone with her just for a

moment?" They grumbled and backed off.

"Look, Vickie," I said with my heart stuck up into my throat. "I don't know if I can take this much more. I pray to God we won't have to keep doing this."

I touched the ointment and then Vickie's forehead. I thought perhaps I should do a little more than open the box because I wasn't there when she was killed.

Tears rolled down my cheeks and kissed Vickie's face. I wrapped up the box and said, "Okay, let's get out of here."

In the car, Nixon said, "Got it bad, huh?"

"Yes," I said. "Pretty bad."

I went into the station between the two detectives as if I were being arrested. I felt like maybe they were going to. I thought they would take a mugshot of me and finger prints, but that's not what they did. They just sat me down at a desk. Nixon sat behind it at his computer and Johnson went away to do something else. He asked me my name and address, telephone number and started typing. He also asked me to describe the box, who gave it to me, and a few other questions about its origin and what I was doing with it. Then the printer came alive. He took out a sheet of paper and handed it to me.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It's a receipt for the box," he said. "We're putting it under lock and key. It's evidence."

I signed it but asked, "Can I just sit here and hold it for a while? Vickie should show up sometime soon."

"What?"

"If this box works, Vickie should be showing up pretty soon. It's worked before." I pleaded with my eyes as much as I could.

"Explain."

"This box now contains the soul of a girl named Vickie. I open the box, she jumps in. I close the box, she's inside. I open the box again, she jumps out, but it's into somebody else's body. Buelah Smith and Blanche Picard were both the same girl, Vickie. She was in Buelah Smith, but I only knew her as Vickie. She dies, I open the box and close it. Blanche Picard comes along. I open the box. Vickie jumps out and goes into Blanche's body, only because they look alike. They always have to look alike. Now, Vickie is inside the box again. I got her at the morgue." Hopefully, I thought. "The next girl I see that looks like Vickie, I open the box. Vickie jumps out and into the girl's body. Voila! Vickie again! That's why I need to keep the box with me ... until I see a girl to put Vickie into again."

"You're crazy!"

He had such an incredulous look on his face. I could tell he didn't believe me. But then, he turned curious. "Why does she have to look like Vickie? "

"I suppose," I said, caressing the box, "she wants to look as much like her old self as possible."

"So, this Vickie is supposed to show up here? in this office?" he asked, leaning on his desk with his left elbow.

"No, she's right here inside this box," I said, dreadfully hoping I wasn't too late. Her body had been cold and long dead. I hoped she wasn't all gone by the time I got there. "I'm supposed to wait until I see someone else that looks like her. I guess there has to be some kind of compatibility ... then I'm supposed to open the box."

"Oh," he said. "That sounds to me like a bunch of hocus pocus. Then what?"

"She takes over that person's body. I guess it's like some sort of possession."

"That's stealing isn't it?" he asked, starting to chew on a toothpick. I guess he was nervous. Some people become nervous when they're curious. "I wonder if I could arrest her for body theft," he thought out loud.

"Not by what she told me. You see, she read this Tibetan book on things like this. What really happens is that the two souls meet on a spiritual plane that we can't see. The time frame which we see as super fast can be really slow to them. They have a long time in their time frame to talk things over. She then gets permission to enter into the other person's body while that other person goes off somewhere else." I knew I was going way off the beaten path, and instead of arresting me, I thought he might be inclined to put me into the loony bin.

"Hogwash!" he said. "Take this receipt and give me the the damn box." He rose and extended his hand. I didn't know what I was going to do. I stalled. He

walked around the desk as if to grab the box.

I glanced here and there, but I didn't have to wait long before I saw her. She may have been a secretary or another detective, I couldn't tell. She had a very business-like expression and deportment. She looked more like Buelah Smith than Blanche Picard, though she was slightly heavier and had black hair cropped short just below the ears – wavy, not straight. She had that slight over-bite with the upper lip slightly pointed. Her eyes were a piercing clear green encircled by brown.

"There she is," I pointed, to let the detective see her before the magic commenced.

"That's not your Vickie," said the detective, grabbing at the box. "Why, that's Denise...Denise Hopkins. She's the cutest secretary around here. Let me have that box."

As she came over, evidently to give Detective Nixon some papers, there was a struggle and the lid of the box fell to the floor. That old fragrance of frankincense and myrrh...spikenard...all the orient and middle east wrapped up in one...all the spices of India and Arabia...wafted across the room. Nixon picked up the lid, I gave him the rest of the box, and he put the lid on. He turned to Denise and smiled, looking a little embarrassed.

Denise dropped the papers on the desk, slumped, grabbed the desk to keep from falling, and sat down in Nixon's chair. Nixon swung around the desk and grabbed her shoulders.

"You all right?" he asked.

She looked at Nixon and then at me. "He doesn't look like a felon. He does look cute, though."

Detective Nixon exaggerated a frown.

"Getting jealous?" she said, looking back up at Nixon.

I sniffed the air. It was such a heavenly scent, I think I started dreaming of Vickie. I could see her dreamy, piercing eyes and her smile staring back at me from Denise's face. I could smell Vickie's skin next to mine. She came around and sat on my lap. Was I intoxicated? I felt faint, and then Denise Hopkins fell onto the floor. Denise started bawling like a little baby.

Detective Nixon ran around to the front of his desk and knelt beside her before I could blink or turn to see what had happened.

"Denise?" he asked in such a compassionate tone I couldn't imagine it came from a hardened cop. "What happened? Tell me you're all right."

I went down on the floor too, following Nixon's example.

"Vickie?" I asked, offering her my arm.

She quickly turned from Nixon and embraced me, crying on my shoulder. I wrapped my arms around her and tried to comfort her.

"Denise?" Nixon asked again, bewildered.

"It was horrible!" she cried. "Being all shot up! and dying again. I was lost. All I could see was darkness, and then, I smelled the spikenard. I went to it."

Vickie hit my back with her fist a couple of times, let go of me and grabbed my arms and sobbed, "What took you so long?"

"I...I" I stammered. "I didn't know you were dead until Nixon here brought me the morning paper."

She let go of me and grabbed him and gave him a teary-eyed kiss on the cheek and said, "Thank you. You saved my life."

He took hold of her by the arms and asked, "What's this dying again thing? What ... what do you mean?"

"You can have your damned box!" she cried. "I'm tired of being killed! I want my own body back! But it's buried in Virginia."

Vickie pulled away from the detective and put her back against the beige metal pole near the desk and slid to the floor. She folded her arms around her knees and put her head down. She sobbed another minute or two while Nixon sat there on his knees, wringing his hands. He was getting greatly upset, like he thought she was playing a mean trick on him.

When I gave Vickie my hand to help her up, Nixon blurted out, "Denise! What's all this about? Are you messed up with this guy too?"

Vickie stood up. Nixon followed her. She stood behind my back, embracing me. I put my arms around her arms.

She said, "I'm sorry. My name is Vickie Brighton. I've come here to go to college ... only ... only ... I'm in someone else's body, and my life is a mess."

Tears started streaming down her face again. I gave her my handkerchief.

"Come on Denise!" Nixon pleaded. "This joke has gone far enough!"

Vickie turned away from both of us and put her fingertips to her forehead and closed her eyes as if she had a headache. She probably did.

I was at a loss. I didn't have enough experience in girlfriends to know how to keep them.

She said to Nixon without looking at him, "Would you mind getting my coat and purse? I think I want to go home now."

"Okay," he said. "I know where you keep them. Stay here. I'll be right back." He looked at me and said, "Stay here," rather abruptly.

When he came back with a light tan coat and a black leather purse, she asked Nixon, "Do you know where I live?"

"You live at the King's ..." He interrupted himself, and the surprised expression on his face showed that a light had dawned within. "You all live at the King's." He raised his voice and added, "You all live at the King's and you've met together and planned this whole thing?"

Vickie looked directly at the detective and said, "I assure you that we did not! And furthermore, I am tired of this whole mess. And you can take this box," she said, taking the box from the desk and gave to Nixon, "and give it to those thugs and tell them to shove it ... and you know where! I'm getting tired of getting killed!"

"Okay," Nixon blurted out, his face set in stone. "Just who are these thugs as you call them? Do you know where they live or hang out?"

"No," Vickie said coldly. "I only know they are always at my front door. They follow me everywhere I go. They mess up my room. They mess up my life. They keep killing any body I get into ... like they know my every move ... " and she looked at me. "And you too."

"Denise," the detective said mistakenly.

"Vickie," she corrected him.

"Vickie then!" he said, quite upset. "Can you describe these men that kidnapped ... What the hell am I saying! Blanche Picard was kidnapped! What happened to Denise? You were Denise a moment ago." He sat on the edge of his desk as though he had run out of energy. He looked up at Vickie with sad puppy dog eyes. He repeated, "You were Denise a moment ago."

"Listen to me, you big blob. I'm Vickie. The box did it. Now I can give you a description of those men if you want them. Do you want them or not?"

"Okay!" he blurted out, confused and bewildered.

"Do you have an artist?" she asked. "And all these killings will stop."

"Yes." He got up and started walking away. "Let's go see Doug. He's the artist. He does it by computers now." He looked back at me with malice in his eyes. "You come along too!"

"Okay!" I threw back at him.

We went into another room within a glass enclosure. There were several computers on two long counters in the middle of the room.

Nixon introduced us to Doug Hammer. There was a brief barrage of words: "Hi Denise!" "I'm not Denise. I'm Vickie, now." "Oh, okay. Well!" Nixon gave the prompt and Vickie started describing the people that kidnapped her. Doug asked questions concerning the facial features of the first guy, then the second, and so on, as many as Vickie could remember. I watched as a hair-line was corrected, the eye brows and eyes became right, the nose and then the mouth fit, the ears ... faces appeared to match Vickie's memory. She would say, "Yes, that's him." And then another one would be identified. Doug put the faces online to check all the police and FBI files in the whole country.

"It will take a few minutes," he said as he leaned back in his soft office chair.

Faxed copies of several hoods came back out of the printer. Copies were made and sent out all over the city with orders to pick up the men.

Nixon took us back to his desk and asked us to repeat the story of the happenings of the last two days. We told him everything we had held back on previous encounters with him ... who Vickie was, what the alabaster box did, saving her by putting her into different people's bodies. Nixon kept asking, "Where is Denise?" It took us three hours to convince him that what we were telling him was true. Detective Johnson joined in with his listening ear. Nixon had to convince

him. When he told him that what we were saying was true, he said, "Now, you've joined *them*." Nixon said, "I saw it happen with my own eyes. We lost Denise."

They let us go after four hours of saying the same things over and over again. Nixon took us back to the hotel. We rode home in silence. We had had enough talking.

When we got there, Vickie wanted to go to her own room, but I convinced her that her own clothes wouldn't fit anymore. Nixon was still by our side. He knew where Denise's room was. That's why he tagged along. But I think he still wasn't quite convinced. I thought he was just following to see what would happen. Vickie wanted her own things, so Nixon gave her permission to go to her room and get them. We both helped carry them to Denise's room. I gave her a kiss, and she closed the door on both of us. I could see that it was hard on Nixon, the way his face turned to stone. It was funny kissing somebody else's lips, knowing that Vickie was the one on the inside looking out.

The next morning at five o'clock I was at the pool, and so was Vickie. She smiled, and said, "She had a bathing suit," and dived in rather clumsily. Denise wasn't the swimmer Vickie had been. Maybe it was getting used to the new body, or after changing bodies so often in so short a time something of Vickie was being lost. Maybe I just hadn't gotten to her with the alabaster box soon enough. I watched her in her black bathing suit swimming across to the other side. She was kind of plump.

At the moment she approached the other side, things started to happen very fast ... too fast for me to protect Vickie. I was knocked on the head from behind as I stood there, but I didn't go unconscious. I have a tough Celtic head. I swung around and grabbed my assailant as I shouted, "Run Vickie! Run!" He got me down onto the tile floor. He was the big guy I had seen before with the big nose and mustache. He kept asking me where the alabaster box was as he hit me in the face. Every time he asked me he would hit me in the face. I got to where I thought it was his fist that was asking me, "Where is the box!" I began seeing everything in red, but there was very little to see except the fist that kept asking me where the box was. I felt numb and everything was in slow motion. I heard gunshots and yelling, and the big guy was dragged off of me. I think I saw Detective Nixon.

I heard a big splash and someone yelling, "Denise!"

Someone lifted me up. I felt a sharp pain in my side. I didn't remember having been hit there. It later turned out that I had been shot by friendly fire.

I called out, "Bickie! Bickie!" My swollen lips hurt.

"Don't worry. We have an ambulance. Both of you are being transported. Denise has been shot as well," someone said.

* * *

The clack clacking of shoes against the tile floor echoed in my head. I don't remember anything else except waking up in a hospital bed. I must have passed out.

It was the emergency room. I looked around for Vickie. All I could see was white curtains and nurses who skirted around tables being moved here and there. I saw a few patients on other beds, but no Vickie.

I kept looking around, hoping I would gain some sight of her. I dozed while waiting for someone to tend to me. I imagined that some of the patients were thugs or policemen shot in the swimming pool. They would have to take care of them first. I could hear doctors and nurses talking in low tones as I slipped in and out of consciousness. I was carted off and brought back. I could swear that Vickie came over and kissed me on the forehead, but when I woke up, she wasn't there. I grabbed for her, but she wasn't there. It was like I grabbed for a ghost. Chills ran up and down my spine. I don't know today if she was a dream or if she really did visit me.

After I was all bandaged up, Detective Nixon came by and told me that Denise had been grazed on the left side of her forehead with a bullet, but she was all right. He said that he was sorry the alabaster box got shattered, but for evidence, they had to glue it back together.

I asked him, "Where is Bickie. I didn't see her. Is she alright?"

Detective Nixon looked at me for a long time and then said, "I don't know where your Vickie is. When we pulled Denise out of the pool and revived her, she was her old self again."

I didn't want to believe him. I wanted to see for myself. So after they

released me from the hospital, which could have been a day or two, I went up to Denise's apartment and knocked on her door. She opened the door slowly. She had a small bandage above her left eye.

"Yes?" she asked. "Listen, I'm very busy and I'm tired, so make it quick."

"Vickie?" I asked. "Vickie, it's me, John."

"Oh, it's you," she said demurely. "Joe said you would be around asking for her. Listen. I'm not the girl you're looking for. All I know is that I blacked out at the smell of that awful stuff you brought into Joe's office, and I woke up at the hospital with a splitting headache."

She tried to close the door, but I stuck my foot in it. I pleaded with her.

"Vickie, wait! What happened at the pool?"

"Hey, leave me alone!" she cried. "Or I'll call Joe. All I have to do is push one button on the phone and he's here."

"Vickie!" I cried. "The pool! Don't you remember? We were swimming together."

"Vickie's gone!" she said, pushing me out of her door and slamming it.

As I walked down to my apartment I ran into Detective Nixon. He grabbed me by the shoulder and said, "You will leave Denise alone. I have a court order. You see her one more time and you get thrown in jail. Understand?"

"I just wanted to see Vickie," I groaned.

"Vickie is gone. Get that through your head. I'm sorry young fella, but she's gone."

"I just wanted to see for myself," I said slowly, making my way down the hall.

"Vickie's gone. Case closed." He called back, "We got the guys that killed her, by the way."

"Thank you," I said, but I didn't turn around to look at him.

I dragged myself into my room, imagining laughing voices of the police and that Denise. I turned the light on. I looked at the mess I hadn't cleaned up yet. I told myself I'd do it tomorrow. I opened the refrigerator and downed a can of instant breakfast ... chocolate. I went to bed and didn't even bother to straighten the covers and sheets. I just took off my shoes, lay down, and went to sleep whispering, "Vickie ... Vickie ... Vickie ... "

In the middle of the night, I woke up sweating. I saw the lights on. I felt someone was in the room. I cried out, "Who's there?" Then I remembered that it was me who had left the lights on. The night moved slowly through the darkness. I became a bit chilled, so I pulled the blankets over me and went back to sleep. Just as I woke up to see the sun shining through the blinds, I could swear I was visited by Vickie's ghost. I could see her form in the light. She had come to me in the hospital and bent over and kissed my forehead. That memory came back to me vividly as if it happened all over again, and then I was back in my bedroom, and there she was, standing at the side of my bed. She was saying something to me. "Meet me in the park." I blinked, rubbed my eyes, and she was gone. All that was

left was the sun streaming through those blinds. I was sad, but I was given hope.

CONCLUSION

Maybe Vickie had bewitched someone else and found a different way to inhabit another body than just using the box. I was game for anything now. I couldn't move very fast, but as soon as I got dressed and splashed some water in my eyes and combed my hair, I went downstairs to meet Vickie. I was certain that she would meet me in the park across the street.

I didn't bother with breakfast, and I was definitely not going swimming in my condition. In fact, a whole month went by before I timidly stepped into the pool again.

Mall or park, call it what you will – I call it a park because of the grass and trees. It used to be a street with shops on both sides, but the city took out the street, planted trees and grass, and remodeled the shops to look like their old original selves of the 1880's. There is a pathway meandering through it with park benches placed here and there. The trees are a comfort in the summer-time when it's awfully hot.

Looking across from the King's Hotel is a large monument to the early settlers, and behind it is a round brick pavement where several simple fountains spray water up into the air. That is where the pathway through the mall starts. A park bench faces the monument with the fountain between. I eat my summer lunches there and watch the children play, getting all wet, and that's where I went

to wait for Vickie. I sat on that particular bench out of habit. I didn't consider that she might show up just anywhere in the park.

After a while, I got tired of sitting, so I got up and strolled into the park, looking at everyone to see if I might see Vickie. It was mostly the shop people going to work. I stayed until I got hungry and went to a vendor that had a small yellow cart with big red wooden wheels and a canopy on top. I bought an avocado sandwich with alfalfa sprouts and a cup of coffee, and went back to the bench.

By the time I finished my sandwich, there was a substantial crowd milling around. I looked at each girl that passed hoping it would be Vickie. After a while I thought every woman looked like Vickie. I would run up to her crying, "Vickie!" She would stare at me and walk away as though I were a nut case. I did this several times.

I didn't know I was being watched by a policeman, and after the fourth time I approached someone, he walked up to me patting the palm of his left hand with his club.

"I'm going to have to ask you to go back to the hotel," he said.

I looked at him. I looked at the club. He was a bit old for a policeman. He looked like he spent most of his time eating donuts and drinking coffee. His face was thickly skinned and covered with wrinkles with a large round nose pressing down onto a serious smile.

"Look, officer," I tried to explain. "My girlfriend said she would meet me

here."

"And you don't know what she looks like?" He asked as though he thought I was lying.

"No officer, I don't. Not really." I didn't know what else to say.

"I know who you're looking for, and her name's Denise, not Vickie. Now I was there at the pool yesterday. I've been watching you. You go back to the hotel and cool off. If you try bothering any more of these girls, well, I'll have to take you in and you'll probably wind up in the mental ward. Take control of yourself – or we will."

I marched back to the hotel and rested for most of the day. But I didn't let up. Vickie said that I was to meet her at the park, so every day I would walk over and just sit on one of the park benches. I wouldn't approach anyone. I watched the cop, and he watched me. Eventually, I just ate my lunch there instead of coming in the morning.

It was on a Sunday afternoon in the fall that I sat down on my usual park bench with my back to the sun. I opened my sack lunch and hesitated. The sun felt good on my back after being refrigerated by the cool morning air. I had taken to walking every morning instead of swimming at the pool. I was sitting there listening to the hum of the cars going by and people talking and birds chirping. It almost put me to sleep. Then I saw her. There was a mother and a father strolling their little baby. They passed right in front of me. It was the cutest little girl I had

ever seen – just smiling and looking up at the sky from her pink ruffled stroller. We looked at each other. She flapped her arms up and down, jiggling her whole body.

I couldn't get over the feeling of utter delight that swept over me. I had been mourning over Vickie for weeks – moaning is a better word. The smile of this little baby so full of life swept away all of my gloom. The clouds rolled away, and I wanted to laugh. And I did laugh – out loud. Those beautiful young parents looked at me as though I were laughing at their baby. Well, she was funny looking, but in a good way. They pulled around me and went up the winding path.

I turned around, and raising my voice a little, called out, "I wasn't laughing *at* her, but *because* of her. She's cute!"

The dad looked a little cross. The mother was half smiling and agreed with a nod of her head and looked down again at her little one. Then it hit me like a hammer! The baby looked like Vickie! The dad looked like a tall three hundred pound football player with black hair and tanned skin – probably Indian. For that reason I laughed louder to see those two together. The baby didn't look at all like him. I turned around and covered my mouth. He could really wallop me good. But I let it out anyway. So what if I were going crazy. The laughter felt really good for a change. I ate my lunch and floated on a cloud back to the hotel.

* * *

Four years passed. Vickie became a vague memory even though a pleasant

one. Yesterday something quite wonderful happened, and I thought I would write about it. As I have been in the habit of eating my lunch in the park every day, I was sitting there facing the monument, warming myself in the sun and biting down on a nice bologna sandwich on white bread with the crisp lettuce crunching between my teeth, tasting that scrumptious mayonnaise, when the cutest little girl ran up from behind me and climbed up on my lap, sat on her knees and faced me. She grabbed my shirt with both hands and smiled, showing her two large front teeth. The middle of her upper lip was a bit pointed and she had a slight over-bite. Her auburn hair flowed down over her shoulders in large curls. She wore a white cotton ruffly dress decorated with blue boats and whales spouting water. The top of her dress was all navy blue with a white anchor across it. She stared at me with that melting smile of hers. I asked if she was hungry. She just continued to stare and grin. I put my empty hand around her to steady her. She caught me with my mouth full when she said, "My name is Vickie. What's yours?" I almost choked!

I managed to get out, "My name is John."

"I know, silly," she grinned. "Will you be my daddy?"

How could I refuse? I would have complied in a second, barring social protocols.

At that instant, her mother arrived, running from the path behind. I almost choked again. It was the woman with the big hulk for a husband I had seen before.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. " Vickie, don't bother the man ... I'm sorry," she

said again. "She goes around asking every man if he's her daddy. You see, her daddy died in an accident three years ago."

"Do you recognize me?" I asked.

"I'm sorry ... no."

"Oh ... I saw you with your husband right here several years ago. You were strolling your little baby."

"That's the man, Mommy," little Vickie said, looking at her mother. Her right hand let go of my shirt, and she poked me in the nose with her little finger, saying, "This is the man that took my box. You know, Mommy, the ala ... the alabaster box, Mommy."

Then I knew. This *was* my Vickie. Somehow she had gotten herself reborn. I was stunned.

"She keeps drawing this man with a box," she said, shaking her head, taking a paper from her purse and showing it to me.

"Lady, have I got a story to tell you," I said.

"Do you mind? I mean," she hesitated, taking little Vickie up into her arms. She stared a moment. "She seems so attached to you. Could you tell me that story over dinner tonight? We live over there at the King's."

I stood up to be polite and shrugged my shoulders. "That's great," I said. "I live there too. I work there."

"Swell," she said. "See you there. I guess we'll meet you in the dining room

... say, about seven?"

"Thank you," I said. "Meet you there."

"Bye, bye," waved Vickie.

After we had a good dinner and laughed and enjoyed little Vickie's antics, I walked with them up to their room, carrying Vickie in my arms. I kissed the little one goodnight and said goodnight to my future wife – I knew she would be. The door closed. I looked at the number on the door. It was room 201, the same one Vickie had lived in.

THE END