

For a greedy little waif
he broke his doctor's oath



ABOUT DOCTOR FERREL

DAY KEENE



ORIGINAL GOLD MEDAL NOVEL — NOT A REPRINT ©

THE SCREAM

The scream came from behind him, from the direction of the lake. It was shrill and feminine, and magnified by the stillness of the night.

Dr. Ferrel turned. The scream came from behind the fringe of hibiscus bordering the water. As he watched the doctor could see in the bright moonlight a thrashing in the bushes. Their branches and blossoms whipped wildly, as if caught in a sudden wind.

The girl screamed again and there was hoarse male laughter.

Fists clenched, Ferrel strode quickly toward the bushes. He had nearly reached them when the girl, still screaming, burst from the bushes and ran unsteadily toward him.

She was wearing only a pair of sandals and she was terrified.

Three hulking men appeared behind her.

Other books by Day Keene
which you will enjoy:

TO KISS OR KILL
HOME IS THE SAILOR

About Doctor Ferrel

A Gold Medal Original

by

Day Keene



GOLD MEDAL BOOKS

FAWCETT PUBLICATIONS, INC., NEW YORK

Copyright 1952 by Day Keene

First Printing, August 1952

All Rights Reserved, Including the Right to
Reproduce This Book, or Portions Thereof.

All characters in this book are fictional
and any resemblance to persons living
or dead is purely coincidental.

Printed in the United States of America.

About Doctor Ferrel

Chapter One

THERE WERE TIMES when young Dr. Ferrel doubted not only his skill but also his God. This was one of the times. He'd performed two dozen Caesarean sections without losing either mother or child. Now Mary Hart was gone. Not for any lack of care on his part. Not from any complications. Her heart had simply stopped beating. That the child had lived would be small consolation to her soldier husband when he returned from the battlefields of Korea.

Miss Mason, the supervisor of surgical nurses, was waiting in the corridor when he emerged from the scrub room in his street clothes.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Ferrel."

"Yes. So am I," Ferrel said dully.

He walked down the dimly lighted corridor to the

side door of the hospital and through it to the parking lot.

The bougainvillea-shaded parking lot was dark, lighted only by moonlight. The night wind was soft and warm on his cheek, carrying with it the fragrance of night-blooming jasmine and orange blossoms.

Ferrel stood a moment with his hand on the door of his car, looking up at the lighted windows of the nursery. Then he looked long at the star-studded sky, as if seeking an answer.

Dr. Ferrel drove out of the parking lot under a compulsion to be in motion. There had been nothing in the Hart woman's chart to warn him this might happen. She'd had the best of prenatal care, starting within three months of conception. He'd run the usual tests. He'd made the usual examinations and analyses. As he recalled her case history, there wasn't an instance of heart failure on either side of the family. She had been twenty-three and in the best of health, her only physical defect a pelvic formation too small to permit a natural delivery.

Now she was dead. Dead—with the outraged bawl of the man-child she had carried still ringing through Ferrel's mind.

Ferrel lifted one of his hands from the wheel and flexed his fingers thoughtfully. It was a big hand with long, slightly spatulate fingers. It was a capable, sensitive hand, painstakingly trained. Dr. Ferrel laid his hand back on the wheel. Tonight it might as well have been a club.

He felt physically exhausted and mentally depressed. For all the vaunted progress, for all the alleged miracles, medicine and surgery were still only a scalpel's blade advanced from the abysmal ignorance compiled by the primitives and amplified by Galen, and the brutal, if practical, surgery of Paré.

Once the spark of life was gone, that was it.

He drove on slowly through the town. Except for the

street lamps, the only lights were in the business section. A night light in the bank and in both drugstores. Brighter lights in the police and railroad stations, in the deserted lobbies of the hotels, in the Alligator Diner, and in the Standard Corner. There were a few late pedestrians and nightworkers on the walks, but for the most part Palmetto City slept, its windows open to admit the stray breezes.

A young woman had died in a childbirth tonight. So? The town slept on.

Of a sudden, Ferrel didn't want to go home. Elaine would be awake and waiting for him. Amorous. The thought revolted him.

Although he was only thirty-eight, feminine flesh, in the carnal sense, no longer held much interest for him. He was *young* Dr. Ferrel in name only.

Ferrel's hands trembled on the wheel. Or was he merely fed up with Elaine? A man wasn't old at his age. At thirty-eight a man should be in his physical prime. And Elaine was still an attractive woman. True, she was a couple of years older than he was, but because of the care she'd taken of herself she usually looked five years younger. Perhaps he was working too hard. Perhaps it was Elaine's overwhelming possessiveness, her smothering solicitude, that had lessened his physical ardor.

Whatever it was, some night he was going to fail her. When he did, it would mean both the end and the beginning of a number of things. Elaine, in her own sweet way, could be a wildcat. She would swear there was some other woman.

Her green eyes flashing under her smartly coiffured red hair, Elaine would remind him of the years she'd taught school to support them while he completed his education. She would remember every little thing she'd done without, every minute sacrifice she'd made. She would remind him of the shabby rooms and apartments she'd

lived in while he'd lived off the fat of the land in the Army. (Actually, he had worked eighteen and twenty hours a day in front-line aid stations patching broken bodies.) More, Elaine wouldn't fail to make issue of the fact that in this Florida mecca for the aged, this gold mine of chronic diseases, he had chosen to specialize in obstetrics.

"And now you're tired of me. Now there's another woman," she'd say.

Ferrel patted his forehead with his breast-pocket handkerchief. It was hot, even driving. On impulse, he turned down the lake road. The lake road wasn't any cooler. Here the night was hot black velvet, and the road a white ribbon of crushed coquina winding through twin rows of artificial-looking royal palms.

He wondered why he had chosen obstetrics. Possibly because conception and birth were as close to the source of life as a curious man could come. He was present at creation with every child he delivered. He viewed the fresh, unsullied flesh before the thousand and one ills to which the body was heir began their slow work.

"And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain."

Ferrel lighted a cigarette. And Cain developed homicidal tendencies. And between conception and murder the world had been in a hell of a mess ever since.

He slipped off his coat and drove on, enjoying the night. On the right side of the road the lake stretched black and silver in the moonlight, mirroring the stars. There was an occasional phosphorescent swirl in the water when a snook or mullet leaped.

Halfway around the lake the animated neon sign of the Picken-Chicken beckoned him. Ferrel was warm and tired and thirsty. He drove into the drive-in and parked.

A slim young thing in shorts and a silk blouse walked up to the car to take his order. "Yes, sir?"

Dr. Ferrel debated briefly. He made it a fast rule not to drink while he was on call. But the night had died with Mary Hart. And besides, one can of beer wouldn't hurt him.

"I think I'll have a beer," he told the girl.

The girl eyed him with interest. "Yes, *sir*." She undulated her hips suggestively as she walked from the car to the service bar.

As Ferrel waited for his order, on the far side of the drive-in a hopped-up ten-year-old cream-colored convertible, with three whooping boys and a blonde girl in it, backed out of its space and roared away in a throb of power and a scrunching of crushed shell. The youthful driver handled the car as if he were more than slightly high.

Young fools, Ferrel thought. There was enough trouble in the world without asking for it.

He studied his face in the rear vision mirror. For professional reasons, he wished he looked his age. He didn't. His flesh was unlined. A lock of brown hair persisted in falling over his forehead. The chin above his bow tie was dimpled. His eyes were too big, too blue.

The carhop brought his beer. "I know who you are," she said, smiling. "You're Dr. Ferrel."

"That's right."

The girl showed even more of her teeth. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"No," Ferrel said. "I'm sorry. But I don't."

"You 'zamined me once," the carhop confided. "About a year and a half ago. When I thought I was that way. But I wasn't."

Ferrel sipped his beer. "Oh." He wished the girl would go away.

She pressed against the edge of the tray. "Know something, Doctor?"

"What?"

"A girl could go for you."

"Thank you," Ferrel said gravely.

He finished his beer, laid a half dollar on the tray, and waved away his change.

The girl smiled again. "Thanks. Thanks a lot, Doctor. It's a pleasure to wait on a gen'leman, after the kind we get in here."

"Not many tips, huh?"

The carhop flapped a limp wrist at him. "The local kids ain't got any money. And the old bucks who come down from the north tip you a nickel and then get sore because the carhop doesn't go with the san'wich."

Ferrel laughed.

The girl put the half dollar in the pocket of her shorts and removed the tray. Ferrel rested his arm on the window. The girl pressed her breasts against his arm, and the contact seemed to please her. "I like you. Don't think I'm fresh, but—you're cute."

Ferrel removed his arm, still smiling. "And you'd better be careful."

"Why?"

"If you aren't, your Freidman may come out positive next time."

The carhop's smile turned a little uncertain. "My Freidman?"

"Aschhiem-Zondek, if you prefer."

The girl's smile steadied and grew bold. "Oh." She touched her hair with her free hand. "Well, if you mean what I think you do," she wet her lips with her tongue, "with you, I wouldn't mind."

Ferrel backed out of the space. Cute, she said. That was a hell of a thing to call a doctor. When he reached the road he glanced in his rear-vision mirror. The girl was still standing where he'd left her, looking after his car.

He drove slowly around the lake. The can of beer had quenched his thirst, but failed to lift his feeling of depres-

sion or make him feel any cooler. He untied his bow tie and opened the top button of his shirt.

Life wasn't fair, in a good many instances. He didn't remember examining the girl. He didn't even remember her name. She was merely one in an endless stream of bare shoulders and anxious faces framed in red hair, yellow hair, brown hair, black hair, looking up at him from over the clean white sheet Miss Jones had adjusted.

Still, the chances were she was a healthy little animal with a normal pelvic formation. If ever she was impregnated, with or without benefit of clergy, she would give forth her developed seed with the same ease and non-chalance with which she had permitted it to be planted. The child to become a ward of the state. Another case record for the welfare files.

While Mary Hart had died.

Chapter Two

A CLICKING of metal against metal annoyed him. Dr. Ferrel looked down at his hands. They were shaking so badly that the expansion bracelet of his wrist watch was chattering against one of the spokes of the steering wheel.

Phillipe Park was just ahead. He pulled off the road and turned into the park. The ancient, moss-hung live oaks absorbed most of the moonlight and gave an illusion of coolness. Here, under the trees, there was a feeling of peace. Ferrel turned off the ignition of his car and sat looking at the water.

Was there something he had overlooked? Was there something he could have done to avoid what had happened? If so, he couldn't think of it. But he couldn't stop these torturing thoughts, either.

With everything to live for, loving and wanting the child she carried, Mary Hart had simply stopped breathing.

Ferrel pounded his fist on the wheel. There was no use telling himself such things happened to every doctor. It made a man feel so useless. For all the help he had been able to render Mary Hart, he might as well have been a prePliny medicine man shaking a gourd rattle and spitting in her face.

He got out of his car and walked along the shore of the lake. He had to start home shortly. By now Elaine would be getting impatient. Unless he went home, or phoned her and reported, her possessiveness would assert itself. She would embarrass him by phoning the hospital,

Miss Jones, and any of his patients whose names she could remember.

"Pardon me for disturbing you, but this is Mrs. Ferrel speaking. Is Dr. Ferrel there?" So sweetly.

Ferrel looked at the dial of his watch. It was one-fifteen in the morning.

He walked on through the moonlight, enjoying the give of the sand under his feet. The lake had originally been salt water, an upper arm of the bay; the bay, in turn, an arm of the Gulf of Mexico. The lake had been formed by building a dam across the lower tide flats, and allowing the natural drainage to fill the old basin with fresh water. It was still, for some reason unknown to him, affected by the tides. Ferrel picked up a clamshell from the sand and tried to skip it. It skipped once and sank. He tried again, with a scallop shell this time, and then lost interest.

If he was going to make his morning house calls clear-eyed, he had to get some sleep. Then there were the young Mrs. Hansen, Mrs. Davis, and Mrs. Windell, all due to be confined soon. He could expect labor at any time. All natural deliveries, thank God.

Meanwhile, there was Elaine.

Ferrel picked a sea oat and chewed on the straw. It wasn't because Elaine was older than he was that he felt the way he did about her. The small difference in their ages didn't matter. Elaine was a handsome woman. She was still as physically attractive as most women were at thirty. He knew, since, after all, he saw a dozen women's bodies every day. It was Elaine's insatiable appetite that had driven them apart. It was destroying them both.

Ferrel left the shore of the lake and cut back across the grass toward his car. He had to do something about Elaine. And soon.

The sweat on Ferrel's forehead turned cold. A wave of revulsion and self-pity swept him. He couldn't go on this

way. He wouldn't. Human flesh couldn't stand it. It would be different if he even liked her, but he didn't. Elaine's years of absolute possession and insatiable demands had finally taken their mental and physical toll. Not of Elaine. Of him. Elaine was an emotional leech, a bloody-mouthed vampire, literally sucking his strength from him. All his old love for her was gone. It had been gone for years. And ancient gratitude was a poor substitute for physical stimulus.

I abhor her, Dr. Ferrel thought. I wish to God she was dead.

The violence of his thought shocked Ferrel, but it wasn't as shocking as it had been at first. In fact, the thought was a fairly common one now.

He stopped under a Spanish moss-hung oak and lighted a cigarette. His tired mind searched all possible avenues of escape, as it had searched them a hundred times before only to realize with a sick sense of futility there were none. All were cul-de-sacs, their only exit the passage through which he had entered.

He sometimes thought that Elaine might take a lover. But she had too high a regard for the sanctity of marriage. She was neither immoral nor amoral. And she didn't want *any* man, she wanted him. Ferrel doubted if there had ever been any other man in her life. Divorce was equally out of the question. Elaine didn't want a divorce. She was satisfied with things the way they were. She loved him. She liked to keep his house. She enjoyed being a successful doctor's wife.

Ferrel tried to be fair. No one had a better right, he reasoned. Elaine had earned her position. If she talked of having gone without, of having sacrificed, she had. If it hadn't been for Elaine, the chances were there would be no Roger M. Ferrel, M.D. Elaine's desire for his success had been as strong and fierce as his own.

Ferrel pressed his hot forehead to the rough bark of

the oak tree. More, Elaine's heart was as large as her desires. No one carrying a burden had ever left her door without having been encouraged, comforted, and fed. The love Elaine would have expended on a child of their own had fed and clothed and mothered countless homeless waifs. She was an excellent housekeeper and a gracious hostess, she was the ideal doctor's wife. If only she'd find another outlet for her energy, she'd have less time to monopolize him. If only there were some way to curb her sexual desire before it destroyed them both . . .

The scream came from behind him, from the direction of the lake. It was shrill and feminine, and magnified by the stillness of the night.

"No!" the girl screamed. "Please. You're hurting me. Oh, won't someone help me?"

Ferrel turned from the tree, startled. The scream had come from behind the fringe of hibiscus bordering the water. As he watched there was a thrashing and an upheaval in the bushes. Their branches and blossoms whipped wildly, as if caught in a sudden wind.

A male voice panted something that Ferrel couldn't hear. The girl screamed again, and there was the sound of a slap. Male laughter followed.

His fists clenched, Ferrel stepped away from the tree. He took a half-dozen quick steps toward the bushes and had just passed an outdoor fireplace when the girl, still screaming, burst from the bushes and ran unsteadily in his direction.

In the moonlight filtering through the Spanish moss, Dr. Ferrel recognized her as the blonde girl he had seen with the three youths in the cream-colored convertible.

The driver of the convertible emerged from the bushes close behind the girl. His two companions, obviously intoxicated, staggered after him.

The screaming girl twisted and turned as she ran, throwing an occasional quick glance over her shoulder.

"Here," Dr. Ferrel called sharply. "Run this way!" Neither the girl nor the boys heard him.

The girl's breasts were heaving with her effort. Her breath was coming in great sobs. She ran swiftly, surely. But impelled by his desire, the pursuing youth was even faster. Thirty feet from where Ferrel was standing he caught up with the girl and threw her heavily to the ground.

His two companions sat down to watch and help.

The girl continued to scream. "Help, help, help! Oh, someone help me. Please," she pleaded.

Her struggles amused the watching youths. Laughter rolled them on the ground. They beat at the grass with their fists.

Ferrel stood still a moment, white with anger. The scene had an air of eerie unreality about it. One read about such things in the newspapers and in the crime magazines, but one never witnessed them.

He strode rapidly toward the tangle of bodies and thrashing limbs. "Get up!" he said sharply. "You damn young fools,"

The watching youths stopped laughing. One of them, as tall as Ferrel and outweighing him by twenty pounds, staggered to his feet.

"You stay out of this, mister," he said.

He took an uncertain step toward Ferrel, his big fists clenched. Ferrel had no desire to fight the youth, nor did he want to damage his hands. The lives of hundreds of babies still unborn were dependent on their skill.

"Stop right where you are," Ferrel warned him. He addressed the youth still on the ground, "And you. Leave that girl alone."

The youth got to his feet, his bulk towering over Ferrel. His flushed face was familiar. Then Ferrel recognized him. He was the star fullback on the high-school football team. His name was Udell and his father was

the president of the Palmetto City Savings and Loan Association.

The third youth joined the group. None of the boys was more than seventeen. Ferrel was still shocked at what he'd witnessed. "What in the name of God possessed you boys?" he began.

And that was as far as he got.

"Go to hell," young Udell growled. He was drunker than his companions. He wagged a finger in Ferrel's face. "I know who you are. You're that cute baby doctor all the girls are so crazy about. Dr. Ferrel." Udell glanced at the other two boys. "Come on. Let's teach the nosy bastard a lesson. Geez. Just when I was about—"

He swung a clenched fist at Ferrel's head. Only the fact that the big youth was drunk saved Ferrel from a broken jaw. As it was, the blow knocked him off his feet. He scrambled erect as the other two boys moved in from both sides.

I'm asleep, Ferrel thought. I'm only dreaming this.

He retreated a few steps. "Hold it right there, boys."

Instead, they rushed him like young bulls. A heavy fist found his groin. Another fist crashed into his cheek. Ferrel tasted blood in his mouth. He slapped back with his open hands, in an attempt to protect his fingers. It wasn't enough. A second flurry of blows sent him to the ground again. Instinctively Ferrel groped for a weapon, and his right hand closed around a burned-out grate bar from the outdoor fireplace.

The youths continued to crowd him. They were beyond reason.

"He wants a little for himself, the old goat." It was Udell again. "Let's make him." He reached for Ferrel with his powerful arms.

Outraged, Ferrel swung the iron bar. Udell stopped in his tracks and screamed. His knees sagged. His flesh seemed to dissolve and melt into the ground. Then, ex-

cept for the whimpering of the girl and the heavy breathing of Ferrel and the boys, the silence was complete.

One of the youths began to cry. "You've killed him, mister," he sobbed.

The youths stood uncertainly in the moonlight for a moment, then faded back into the bushes from which they had emerged. Ferrel made no attempt to stop them. There was a thrashing in the hibiscus as they raced for their car. The same throb of power that Ferrel had heard at the drive-in filled the park, then faded rapidly into the night.

Blood trickling from the corners of his mouth, Ferrel knelt beside the youth he'd struck. His fingers made a quick, professional examination. Young Udell was dead—as dead as Mary Hart. The heavy bar had crushed his skull.

Sweat blinded Ferrel. He wiped his face on his sleeve. Then he looked from the prone body of the dead youth to the girl.

She was still lying on her back and crying softly, attempting to cover herself with her hands.

The girl saw Ferrel looking at her and stopped crying. Her hands fell to her sides and her fingers clutched convulsively at the grass.

Ferrel judged her to be fifteen, a mature fifteen. Her face was attractive rather than pretty. Her lips were a sullen smear. Her eyes were opalescent. Her hair formed a golden pillow for her well-shaped head and there was a hibiscus bloom behind her ear.

Ferrel's eyes traveled down her body. It was too thin, undoubtedly a dietary deficiency, but still unbelievably voluptuous. Her small breasts were high and full and firm. Her stomach was concave. Her torso tapered to well-rounded buttocks. In the moonlight filtering through the Spanish moss, she was a stricken wood nymph.

Ferrel's mouth felt dry. His throat contracted. His

lungs had to labor to perform their function. His feeling that this whole thing was unreal persisted.

He forced himself to speak and his voice sounded unnaturally loud. "What's your name?" he asked.

The girl wet her smeared lips with her tongue.

"Maggie," she whispered and began to cry again.

Chapter Three

DR. FERREL got to his feet. "Maggie what?"

"Frazer," the girl sobbed.

The name was familiar. Ferrel placed it. "Your father runs a bait camp?"

"Yes, sir."

"Down on the point?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where are your clothes?"

Maggie sat up and leaned back on her hands. Sobs spaced her words. "Down on the beach," she said and started to get up.

"Stay where you are," Ferrel said. "I'll find them."

He went to get her clothes, feeling unreasoning anger toward himself. Toward the girl. Toward the boys. If he'd gone directly home from the hospital, as he should have, he wouldn't be involved in this. Now God only knew what would happen. A girl had been attacked. A boy was dead. And he had killed him.

On the beach he found a green dress, a pair of torn panties, and a bra, but he couldn't find the girl's slip.

He took the garments back to her. She was still sitting in the same position.

"This is all I could find," he told her, dropping them on the grass beside her.

She put the bra on first, then the torn panties, sobbing, "Hit's all I had on."

Pure cracker, Ferrel thought. That would explain the dietary deficiency. He'd fished from the Frazer camp

many times. The shack was a patchwork affair without screens or foundation. Besides her midday hot meal at school, the girl had undoubtedly been raised on grits and grunts and Coca-Cola, with an occasional unsavory mess of corn pone, collards, sowbelly, and lard cake.

"Did the other boys mistreat you, too?" Ferrel asked.

Maggie held the green dress in front of her. "Yes, sir. Down on the beach."

"Do you know their names?"

The girl began to cry again. "Yes, sir. One of them is Pete Koulous. His father owns the super-market on Fourth Street. The other is Marty something. I don't know his last name. But he's a senior, and he catches on the baseball team. He came here from Palatka, I think." She wiped her wet cheeks with the back of her hand.

Ferrel helped her to her feet. "I'm Dr. Ferrel."

Maggie pulled her dress on. "Yes, sir. I heard Tommy name you when you made him stop."

Ferrel's feeling of strain returned. He was embarrassed to think a child could arouse his emotions the way this one did. In cases of this kind involving girls as young as Maggie, there were frequently serious complications. She would have to be examined, but he shrank from the thought of touching her flesh. "How do you feel?" he asked her. "Are you able to walk to my car?"

Maggie caught at his arm to steady herself. "I don't feel so good." She proved it by being sick while Ferrel held her head.

Ferrel felt no remorse for what he'd been forced to do, or any pity for young Udell. All he had done was defend himself against unspeakable indignity and assault upon his person. The remaining hooligans ought to be imprisoned. Ferrel meant to see that they were. He gave Maggie his handkerchief when she had finished.

She wiped her lips with it. "What will they do to me, Dr. Ferrel? Will they send me to Ocala?"

"Ocala?" Ferrel was puzzled.

Her voice was small. "Where they send bad girls."

Ferrel was impatient with her. "Why should the law do anything to you? Did you want this to happen?"

The girl's eyes grew even wider than they had been. She moved her head from side to side. "No, sir."

"Had it ever happened before?"

She continued to move her head. "No, sir. A lot of boys have—" She began to cry again. "But I wouldn't let them."

Ferrel patted her slim shoulder. "Then you've nothing to worry about."

He walked her to his car. On the way she insisted on looking for her purse and found it, a cheap white plastic affair. Ferrel retied his tie and slipped into his coat. Then he helped the girl into the car and drove back the way he had come, the girl sitting very small and fragile-looking beside him, her hair stirring in the breeze.

The Picken-Chicken was still open. Ferrel stopped and phoned Elaine.

"I lost the Hart woman," he told her. He couldn't bring himself to mention young Udell. "And now there's some trouble concerning a girl who was attacked in Phillipe Park. So I'm afraid I'll be quite late."

Elaine's husky voice reached through space to embrace him. "Oh, darling. I'm so sorry. And I'm so glad you phoned. I was beginning to be worried. Is there anything I can do?"

Ferrel felt a warm rush of affection for her. Elaine meant what she said. It wasn't just words with her. Elaine was truly sorry. Elaine would gladly do anything she could for the Frazer girl. For any girl, for that matter.

"No. Nothing, Elaine," Ferrel said.

Elaine breathed into the phone. "I'll be waiting for you, darling."

Ferrel realized he was perspiring. He mopped his face

with his handkerchief and dialed Sheriff Hammel's office. When no one answered, he phoned Sheriff Hammel at his home and explained what had happened, in detail.

"Thanks for calling, Dr. Ferrel," Hammel said when he'd concluded. "You have the girl with you?"

"I have."

"Good," Sheriff Hammel said. "I'll meet you at my office in ten minutes. Meanwhile, I'll have some of the boys pick up young Koulous and this Marty, and send Dr. Flagle out after Udell's body. Goddamn. This was bound to happen sooner or later. I'll bet I've picked up young Udell at least fifteen times. For everything from speeding and disorderly conduct and malicious mischief to being a common drunk. And just because his old man owns half of Palmetto City he got away with claiming I was 'picking' on him. You saw him doing it to the girl, huh?"

"I did."

"And when you called him the three of them came at you?"

"That's right."

"They knocked you down twice and made them indecent suggestions you told me before you clubbed young Udell?"

"That is correct," Ferrel said. "But why the questions, Sheriff Hammel? Do you doubt my word?"

"Hell, no," Hammel assured him. "I'm just making certain you're in the clear, in case Old Man Udell tries to make trouble. And he probably will. A mess, eh, Dr. Ferrel?"

"A mess," Ferrel agreed with him soberly.

He used the washroom while he was inside the drive-in. The blow to his mouth had loosened one of his teeth, and his mouth was still bleeding. His left eye was swollen almost shut. Ferrel examined his hands. They were soiled with rust from the bar with which he'd killed Udell, but

otherwise undamaged. He washed his face and hands, and walked back to his car.

The carhop who had served him tossed her head as he passed her. "Hmm," she said maliciously. "My Freidman. At least I'm not jail bait."

Ferrel ignored her and got into his car. The white plastic purse evidently contained a compact and a lipstick. Maggie had powdered and rouged her tear-stained cheeks and reddened her lips. The effect was grotesque. Dressed, she was just a skinny high-school kid. Dr. Ferrel felt sorry for her. "Does your mother permit you to use make-up, child? At least, to that extent?"

Her smile was wan. "I haven't any mother. She died when I was just a kid."

"Oh," Ferrel said. "How old are you, Maggie?"

She attempted to fill her dress bodice by putting one hand back of her head and thrusting out her chest, undoubtedly in imitation of some movie actress. "Fifteen. But I'll be sixteen next month."

"I see," Ferrel said.

He drove on into Palmetto City. Despite his sustained anger, he felt a vague sympathy for Pete Koulous and Marty "something." The blonde child was cute. It was indecent what she did to a man. And even if the two boys managed to wriggle out of a criminal assault charge, they would still have to face charges of statutory rape and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. He hoped their brief spasm of enjoyment had been worth it.

The night was still black velvet studded with stars. Palmetto City still slept. The only change was the light in the sheriff's office and the cluster of grim-faced men standing on the sidewalk. The sheriff's office was on First Avenue, directly across from the police station. Sam Maxim, the night police lieutenant, was in the group.

As Dr. Ferrel swung in toward the curb, Maggie began to cry. "I'm frightened."

Ferrel patted her knee. "Don't be."

Lieutenant Maxim opened the door on the driver's side of the car and repeated Sheriff Hammel's summation. "A hell of a mess, eh, Doc?"

Dr. Ferrel didn't like people to call him "Doc." "So it would seem," he said coolly. He walked around the car and assisted the sobbing girl to the walk. A flash bulb popped in his face.

Jerry Keifer of the morning Sun Banner screwed another bulb in his flash gun. "Just one more, please, Dr. Ferrel." The photographer sucked in his breath. "God. What a story!" A second flash bulb popped. "And to think I damn near left the poker game on account of I was down to two bucks."

Dr. Ferrel couldn't remember ever having been so tired. He wanted to get his part in this thing finished and go home.

"Flagle's gone for the body," Sheriff Hammel said. He squeezed the girl's arm. A big, bald man with a prominent gold tooth, he had a smile that was genuine and friendly. "Hi, Maggie."

Maggie looked dwarfed to the point of being deformed in comparison with the tall men around her. "Hello, Mr. Hammel," she said tearfully.

Hammel guided her across the walk. "Now, now. There's nothing to be frightened about. Not now." He looked over his shoulder at Ferrel. "Did you examine her, Doctor?"

"Where?" Ferrel demanded testily. "Out in the park?" Even the thought of touching the girl's body upset him. "Besides, that's not in my province. That's Dr. Flagle's job."

Sheriff Hammel nodded, unperturbed. "Just so an examination is made. We'll probably need it at the trial." He looked at Lieutenant Maxim. "Is there a matron on duty, Sam?"

"Ella Fields," Maxim said. "I'll send her right over." He put on hand to his forehead, simulating a headache. "Thank God this happened out at the park and not inside the city limits."

"Why?" Jerry Keifer asked.

Lieutenant Maxim told him. "Old Man Udell is going to be hard to handle. He's got power."

Chapter Four

DR. FERREL followed Sheriff Hammel and Maggie into the first-floor office. It had originally been a store. Desks and file cabinets lined two sides of the room. A partitioned space in the rear served as Sheriff Hammel's private office. It held a glass-topped desk, a swivel chair and four straight-backed chairs, three filing cabinets, a detailed map of Palmetto County, and three battered brass cuspidors.

Sheriff Hammel led the girl to one of the chairs. "You set right there, honey." As an afterthought he asked, "She doesn't need to be hospitalized tonight, does she, Dr. Ferrel?"

Ferrel sat down in the chair beside the girl. "How do you feel, Maggie?"

Color crept into her cheeks. "All right—I guess." She continued to sob. "I—I won't have a baby, will I, Dr. Ferrel?"

Sheriff Hammel took a record card from one of the file drawers. "Don't worry about that, Magnolia. We'll take care of that angle."

"Magnolia?" Ferrel said.

Maggie smiled at him through tears. "That's my name, my real one. It's only Maggie for short."

"Oh," Ferrel said with a smile. "I see."

He liked the name. It suited the girl better than Maggie. In spite of her grotesque mask of make-up, her face was rather like a flower. Her skin had the same velvety texture as a magnolia petal. It was a shame, he

thought, that this had happened to her. It was sure to leave a mental scar.

Men crowded into the office, some of them in uniform, followed by the matron. Ferrel was glad to see her. A big woman with iron-gray hair, Ella Fields sat in the chair that Dr. Ferrel relinquished and pulled Magnolia's head down on her ample bosom. "Had a little trouble, eh, honey? Well, you just cry it out on Ella's shoulder." The policewoman looked around the office and said, "Men." The word was an epithet.

Dr. Flagle reported that young Udell's body was at the Palm Mortuary, then turned to Ferrel. "Instantly, eh, Dr. Ferrel?"

"Instantly," Ferrel concurred. He used a medical term.

Sheriff Hammel was writing at his desk. "Let's have that again, Dr. Ferrel. Not that there will be any trouble as far as you are concerned. I'll see to that." He smiled grimly.

"Thank you," Dr. Ferrel said soberly. He repeated the medical term.

Still more men, all of them connected with the law, most of them smoking, crowded into the office. Ferrel's head began to ache. His hands were shaking again. He wished he had a drink.

"Goddamn all young punks," Flagle swore.

"Watch your language, Mr. Coroner," Ella Fields said sharply.

Dr. Flagle tipped his hat to her. "I'm sorry, Ella. But this burns me. Thank God it didn't happen during the tourist season."

There was a chorus of agreement.

Maggie whispered in the matron's ear. The policewoman said "Of course," and led her through a door in the rear of the sheriff's office.

Flagle returned his attention to Ferrel. "That's quite an eye you have, Doctor."

Sheriff Hammel looked up from the notes he was making. "Dr. Ferrel got off lucky, at that. You should hear some of the suggestions the boys made."

Flagle was frankly curious. "Not that it's any of my business, Dr. Ferrel, but how come you were out in Phillipe Park at," Flagle looked at his watch, "two o'clock in the morning?"

Ferrel told him. "I'd just lost a patient. Jim Hart's wife. A Caesarean section. I saved the child, but the mother died. And I—well, I wanted to be alone for a few minutes."

The men in the office lowered their voices out of respect to Ferrel.

Flagle laid his hand on Ferrel's shoulder. "I know just how you felt, Doctor. But don't let it get you. You can't save them all. And you're doing a fine job."

There was a murmur of agreement from the officers in Hammel's office. It pleased Ferrel. It was good to be in the company of men. These men didn't want to pry into his thoughts or possess him or go to bed with him. They didn't think he was cute. They respected his skill as a physician and a surgeon.

Maggie and the matron returned from the sheriff's washroom. The matron had insisted that Maggie wash her face. The wet ends of her hair were dark and curly. Without make-up she looked pretty and wholesome and sweet.

As they resumed their chairs in the blue haze of cigar and cigarette smoke, a voice in the outer office said sharply, "All right. Clear a path there and let us through."

The men in the doorway stepped aside and flattened themselves against the wall. Two uniformed deputies walked through the cleared space, pushing a frightened youth before them. A faded blonde woman and a dark-complexioned, stocky man, looking hastily dressed, followed close behind the deputies.

"Well, we got the Koulous punk," one of the deputies reported to Sheriff Hammel. "He was in the john tossing his cookies when we got there. Marty's last name is Rudd. But it seems he's taken a powder. He lives with an aunt on Eighth Avenue South. The last she saw of him, he came home and changed his clothes and scrambled. Just before we got there."

"You put him on the air?"

"Right away, Sheriff," the second deputy said.

Dr. Ferrel looked at Pete Koulous. Clothed and sober, Koulous looked what he was, a big, frightened high-school boy. His face was fish-belly pale. He looked at Dr. Ferrel, then away.

Mrs. Koulous pushed her way through the crowd of men up to Hammel's desk. "Pete is a good boy, Sheriff Hammel. You have to believe me. He couldn't have done this awful thing the officers say he did." She seemed to be trying to convince herself. "Pete is a good boy."

Sheriff Hammel picked up the card he'd taken from the filing cabinet. "Of course, Mrs. Koulous. Pete was a good boy when I had him and young Udell in here as common drunks, three months ago. And when one of my men brought him in for driving seventy miles an hour through a twenty-five-mile zone, in a hopped-up ten-year-old car with defective brakes and an illegal muffler. And before that, when some of the kids up at the high school let a 'nasty old Cuban from Tampa' persuade them to smoke marijuana, and your boy and young Udell threw a week-end party in a closed cottage out on the beach and did four hundred dollars' worth of damage. A cottage that didn't belong to them."

The elder Koulous beat on Hammel's desk with a work-gnarled hand. "I told you. Goddamn it, I told you, May. If you had let me beat him like I wanted and put him to work in the store the first time he got into trouble, maybe we could have saved him from this." Koulous wept,

unashamed. "But no. It was just boyish exuberance. He mustn't be inhibited. Whatever the hell that is. He was in good company running around with young Udell. At all hours of the night. Now Tommy is dead. And our Pete is going to prison for attacking a fifteen-year-old girl and assaulting Dr. Ferrel. You call this being a good boy?"

Sheriff Hammel sucked at his dead cigar. "They're all good boys, John," he told Koulous. "According to their mothers. I wish you had beaten him."

The supermarket owner nodded. "I wish to God."

Pete Koulous milked the fingers of one hand with the fingers of the other. "I'm sorry, Dr. Ferrel. I was drunk. All of us were. I didn't mean to hit you. I didn't realize what I was doing."

The youth used the back of one hand to wipe his dripping nose. "It's all Maggie's fault, anyway."

Sheriff Hammel took the dead cigar from his mouth. "What about her?" he asked coldly.

Koulous sniveled and said, "It was Maggie who suggested going swimming without our clothes. She was willing. Down on the beach. She wanted to. Why should we get all the blame?"

Magnolia got to her feet, her eyes blazing. "That's a lie. A dirty lie! I never suggested going swimming. I wasn't willing. You and Tommy and Marty said you'd take me home after the baseball game." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "But you didn't. You put something in my Coke. At the Picken-Chicken. Then you drove me down to the lake, and you took off my clothes."

The matron pulled her back into her chair and pilloved the blonde girl's face on her breast. "Now, now, honey. Don't cry so."

Pete appealed to his one supporter. "Honest, Ma. It wasn't like that at all. We were all high, sure. But it was Maggie who wanted to do it. She took off her clothes herself."

"See?" Mrs. Koulous said. She patted her son's arm. A heavy silence filled the office.

Sheriff Hammel broke it. "How does that check with what you saw and heard, Dr. Ferrel?"

Ferrel said curtly, "It doesn't. I heard Magnolia scream before I saw her. From down on the shore of the lake."

"Do you recall her exact words, Dr. Ferrel?"

"Yes, I do." Ferrel put a cigarette in his mouth and accepted a light from Deputy Sheriff Thomas. "She screamed, 'No. Please. You're hurting me.' Then a male voice said something I couldn't distinguish. A scuffling in the bushes followed. I heard the sound of a slap, or a blow, then male laughter. A moment later the girl burst from the bushes and raced toward the tree under which I'd been standing."

"Still screaming?"

Dr. Ferrel nodded. "Still screaming. Udell was close behind her. And close behind him young Koulous and his companion, whose name I understand is Marty, were cheering Udell on with obscene suggestions. I called, 'Here,' to guide Miss Frazer toward me. But she didn't hear me. Then, about thirty feet from where I was standing young Udell caught up with her, threw her to the ground, and attacked her."

"Did Pete, here, attempt to help her?"

"No. He assisted Udell."

Pete Koulous wiped his wet cheeks with the back of his hand. "You gotta believe me. We were just pretending. Maggie wanted it. It was just a game."

"Some game," one of the deputies said.

Sheriff Hammel looked at the youth for a moment. "Did Magnolia attempt to fight off Udell, Dr. Ferrel?"

Ferrel nodded. "Obviously. She was screaming, 'Help, help, help. Oh, someone help me. Please.'"

"So you did."

"As swiftly as possible."

"Only to be told by young Koulous, 'Stay out of this, mister'?"

"That is correct."

Sheriff Hammel glanced at the notes he'd made for the district attorney's guidance. "When you continued attempting to defend Magnolia, the three boys rushed you, using vile language and making obscene suggestions. They gave you a black eye. They loosened your front tooth. They knocked you down twice. Then, in defense of your own life, you picked up a grate bar from an outdoor fireplace and struck young Udell. Is that substantially correct, Dr. Ferrel?"

"Yes, Sheriff," Ferrel said.

Sheriff Hammel looked at the Frazer girl. "Can you add anything to that, Maggie?" he asked gently.

The blonde girl lifted her head from Ella Field's ample bosom and ran her tongue across her lips. "No, sir. That's the way it happened. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to be bad. But they made me."

Young Koulous' sobs matched hers. "Don't believe her. She's lying."

The elder Koulous looked at his sniveling son for a long moment, then slapped him across the mouth. "I wish to God—" he said quietly, and pushed his way out of the office.

Sheriff Hammel dropped his dead cigar into one of the battered cuspidors. "That's all for tonight." In the harsh white glow of the unshaded overhead light he looked unutterably weary. "With the exception of telling Mr. Udell his son is dead."

Hammel nodded to the deputies standing beside young Koulous. "Walk him across the street and lock him up, boys. We'll take him down to the county seat in the morning."

Chapter Five

AFTER THE brightly lighted, smoke-filled office, the dark sidewalk held an illusion of coolness. Instead of going directly home, Ferrel stood with the group of men discussing what had happened.

I'm stalling again, Ferrel thought. I don't want to go home.

He wished, as he had wished a hundred times before, that he and Elaine had had children. Even one child. Then Elaine might have transferred her fierce affection to the child. One thing was certain: It would be the best-fed, best-clothed, most loved child in Palmetto City. But they had never come close, nor would they ever. They had long ago accepted the fact.

From time to time Ferrel glanced at the lighted window of the second-floor room in the police station where Dr. Flagle, with Ella Fields acting as his nurse, was making the examination that the law required.

Dr. Flagle had been factual in his profane summation. Most of the fictional data one read on the subject was so much hogwash. If a girl was big enough, she was old enough. Unless a girl was lacerated to a point where major or minor surgery was necessary, there was little the examining physician could tell except that she'd had relations with a man. Dr. Ferrel smiled wryly at the thought. If in this day of active, emancipated young womanhood the old Mosaic laws were rigidly enforced, many bewildered and innocent late young virgins, unable to display the Biblical "tokens of their virginity," would be

taken to the doors of their fathers' houses and stoned on the morning following their bridal night.

Jack Thomas, one of the deputies who had arrested and jailed young Koulous, was especially vehement. "Damn young punks nowadays," he said. "That's all they think about. You guys should do a tour with me and Gordon. You'd be surprised at the things we come on."

Dr. Ferrel listened, unimpressed. He doubted the modern generation was any worse than the preceding ones. The mattresses of every generation took a beating. And, as their own sex urge waned, each aging generation was certain the new one was going to the devil.

Rape was another matter. It chopped at the foundations of society.

Tom Cronkite, the beat policeman, said, "Well, it's a mess all of the way around. But the guy I'm sorry for is John Koulous."

The men on the walk agreed that the supermarket owner was deserving of sympathy. But his wife, May, was a fool. And they had no sympathy for the Udells. The Robert A. Udells had always thought they were a cut above the rest of Palmetto City.

Jack Thomas spat in the gutter. "Hell, all they did was get in on the ground floor. All they got is money. As I get it, her old man's father was a conductor on the old Orange Belt Railway. One of those 'a buck for me, a buck for the company' guys. Back in the days of wood-burning locomotives when you could buy good citrus land for ten dollars an acre. And everyone knows how Udell got his start."

"How?" Dr. Ferrel asked.

"Bootlegging," Thomas told him. "Back during prohibition. But I'll give the man credit for being smart enough to put what he made into land. He bought up hundreds of feet of Gulf frontage. Stuff nobody else wanted in those days. Before there was even a causeway

from the mainland. Sand, with nothing but sea oats and rattlesnakes on it. Gulf-to-bay stuff. And now he's getting three and four hundred dollars a front foot for land he bought in for taxes, or at the most fifty dollars a lot."

The men on the walk in front of the sheriff's office agreed Robert Udell was smart.

Ferrel realized his hands were trembling and put them in his pockets. Now young Udell was dead. He'd killed him. In defense of his own life. With a rusted grate bar from an outdoor fireplace. On land that Mrs. Udell, nee Grace Phillipe, had donated to the city in memory of her paternal grandfather.

Cronkite laid his hand on Ferrel's shoulder. "Nix now, Dr. Ferrel. Don't go blaming yourself. There was nothing else you could do."

"I've come close to killing him myself," Thomas said. He added a pinch of fine cut to the chew in his cheek. "You guys wouldn't believe the things that I've took off that punk."

It was the general consensus of opinion that Robert Udell would attempt to make trouble for Dr. Ferrel, but that nothing would come of it.

The light in the window of the second-floor room in the police station went out.

"How about Maggie's father?" one of the men on the walk asked. "How's he going to take this?"

Gordon Cray, Thomas' partner, shrugged. "That depends on whether he's drunk or sober. I'll bet me and Jack have brought Joe Frazer in at least fifty times. Drunk and disorderly. Drunk in residence. Causing a disturbance. Fighting." Cray pushed his stiff-brimmed hat back on his head. "It's got so Judge Faber has asked us to lay off. The Judge is tired of looking at him. And Faber doesn't want to send him away on account of Joe has so many kids. He's afraid the welfare people will raise hell."

A man learned a lot that he never learned in daylight, Ferrel thought, by standing in front of the sheriff's office at two-thirty in the morning. But he had to go home to Elaine. There was no good reason to stay.

"How many?" one of the men asked.

"I wouldn't know," Cray said. "A flock. All of 'em towheads like Maggie. Maybe that's why Joe drinks. I mean on account of having so many kids to feed. He's pretty good during the week, but on Saturday afternoon he starts in on beer while he waits for his boats to come in. Then he graduates to wine. And along about midnight he starts to pound on the kids or whatever water-front dame is keeping house for him at the time."

The knowledge made Ferrel feel ill. A pretty girl like Magnolia raised in such an atmosphere and surroundings had no chance to lead a normal adolescent life. What had happened to her was inevitable. It was miraculous that she had resisted.

Cronkite defended Frazer. "Anyway, Joe always has shrimp. And that's more than you can say for any of the other bait camps."

There was a sober murmur of agreement and a chorus of "That's right."

Dr. Ferrel's sensation of unreality returned. Fatigue beat in his ears like the booming of a great drum. The canopy of stars hung lower. Black was gray and white was cloudy. Magnolia's father was a low-living drunkard. He beat his children. He was a fornicator and a brawler. But he always had shrimp for bait when a man wanted to go fishing.

Across the street, Dr. Flagle came down the steps of the police station holding Maggie by the arm. He guided the blonde girl to his car, then crossed the street to the group of men in front of Sheriff Hammel's office.

"They did it to her, all right," he reported. Flagle addressed himself to Dr. Ferrel. "Pretty rough about it, too.

I suggested she allow herself to be hospitalized for an immediate correction on the chance they impregnated her. But like all crackers, she's afraid of hospitals. So I suppose all we can do is run a test on her if anything develops."

Dr. Ferrel really wasn't interested. "I suppose so," he agreed.

"A nice kid," Flagle said. "A little lady. I hope the jury gives those two young bastards life. I—"

He stopped as the two-way radio in Clay and Thomas' car began to squawk. Jack Thomas got into the police car and adjusted the volume control.

"Clearwater," he told the group on the walk.

Dr. Ferrel watched and listened, fascinated. What seemed mere squawking to him was perfectly intelligible to Thomas.

The deputy relayed the information. "A head-on out on Route Nineteen. Just the other side of Largo, at Five Corners. A southbound Ohio car and a fruit truck. With four citrus workers in it. Oh, oh. The trucker who phoned in says there's bodies all over the road." Thomas slid back of the wheel and opened the door for Clay. "Let's go."

Clay got in and slammed the door. The car leaped away from the curb. A half block away its siren began to wail as the car, ignoring the red light on Third Street, skidded expertly around the corner.

A second siren began to wail as an ambulance left the police garage. The men on the walk melted away. Dr. Flagle crossed the street again. When he was halfway across, Lieutenant Maxim came out on the steps of the police station and called, "Dr. Flagle."

"I heard it," Dr. Flagle said sharply. "It's a pity the goddamn tourists don't either learn how to drive or stay home. God! If I'd known what I was getting into, I'd never have run for office." He half turned and called over his shoulder, "Run Maggie home for me, will you, Ferrel?"

As a favor. She lives out on the point. Just beyond the ferry landing."

The girl got out of Flagle's car and stood meekly on the walk. Dr. Flagle got into his car, switched on the revolving red light, and followed the first police car around the corner of Third Street, turning on two wheels.

Lieutenant Maxim lighted a cigarette. "Doc should talk about driving. The damn fool's going to kill himself someday." Maxim turned and re-entered the station.

Ferrel looked at Magnolia. She looked smaller than he remembered her, and somehow more pathetic.

He felt an unreasoning anger toward the Ohio tourist who had been so stupid as to collide with a fruit truck. He didn't want to drive the girl home. He didn't want anything more to do with her. He crossed the dark street slowly. All he could think of to say was "Well. Here we are again."

"Yes," she answered. "Here we are again."

Ferrel's anger left him. He felt a rush of pity for her. Her cheeks were still bare of make-up, but she'd managed to redden her lips. Her mouth was too big for her face. Her lips looked like a quivering wound.

Feeling like an idiot, Ferrel asked, "Did Dr. Flagle treat you all right?"

Magnolia lowered her eyes modestly. "He's nice," she said finally. She added, as an afterthought, "So is Mrs. Fields."

The waning moon silvered the sidewalk and splashed on her bare legs. They were very mature and pretty legs for a fifteen-year-old girl.

Sixteen next month, Ferrel corrected himself.

Magnolia patted her damp hair in place. "I'll bet I look a mess."

Dr. Ferrel mentally cursed the tightening in his throat. "You look very nice. I like you much better without all that make-up."

Her smile was quick. "Oh. Thank you. I—I won't put any more on, then." She touched her lips. "Maybe I've got too much lipstick."

"A little," Dr. Ferrel said.

Magnolia took a piece of paper tissue from her purse and rubbed her lips. "Is that better?" She lifted her lips for his inspection.

"Very much so," Ferrel said.

He reached for his cigarettes and, realizing his fingers were trembling again, kept his hand in his coat pocket. He had more trouble with his breathing. Ferrel felt as if he were running through a dream, running up a steep, moonlit hill studded with thorn trees and scarlet hibiscus bushes.

I won't drive her home, he thought. I'll ask her if she's hungry. If she is, I'll buy her a meal in the Alligator Diner. Then I'll put her in a taxi and pay the driver in advance. He cleared his throat to speak.

Before he could, Magnolia laid a small hand gently on his arm. "I haven't thanked you, Dr. Ferrel. And I want to. Thank you for being so kind to me."

Ferrel would have preferred to have her slap him. The small white fingers on his sleeve burned through the cloth of his coat. "I'm certain you're welcome, child," he said gravely. "I—"

Lieutenant Maxim came out on the steps of the station again. "Telephone for you, Doc. It's Mrs. Ferrel on the phone."

Ferrel gripped Maggie's elbow and guided her across the street to his car.

"Tell Mrs. Ferrel that I just left," he told Maxim.

Chapter Six

“TELL MRS. FERREL that I just left.”

Dr. Ferrel rolled the words on his tongue as he eased his car away from the curb. A small smile twisted his lips. His minor rebellion pleased him. He hadn't felt so male, so in command of his life, in years. He straightened his tie. It wouldn't hurt Elaine to wait for him, possibly worry a little. He'd been too considerate of her feelings in the past.

The street lights of Palmetto thinned, then grew small behind the car. The waning moon perched on a nest formed by the fronds of a tall cabbage palm, then dropped into the maw of tomorrow.

As they passed the “Welcome to Palmetto City” sign, Magnolia laid her hand on Ferrel's arm. “It's kind of you to drive me home, Doctor.”

“I'm certain you're welcome,” Ferrel said.

The road to the old ferry landing was narrow and dark and wet with mist. Ancient oaks meeting over the road formed an even darker, dripping tunnel. Now dead cypress with eerie gray beards of bug-infested Spanish moss rose out of the slough on both sides of the road, looking stark and grotesque in the car lights.

Dr. Ferrel's sensation of unreality was magnified. Someone else was driving his car. There were two men in his body. This wasn't happening to the man he knew. It wasn't physically possible. Unless he was out on a call, or making an emergency delivery, this hour of morning found Roger M. Ferrel, M.D., in bed. With Elaine. At

this hour the man he knew was either tossing in troubled sleep or lying awake staring hot-eyed at the ceiling, his tired mind revolving like a trapped squirrel in a cage.

Ferrel drove slowly, savoring his brief freedom, acutely conscious of the girl beside him. His analytical mind tried to catalogue her and failed. Magnolia was neither a child nor a woman. She was neither naïve nor sophisticated. She was a combination of all four, a forced Eve feeling no need of sackcloth and ashes, more put upon than shamed.

"Hit's the next turn, Doctor," she told him.

"Yes. I know," Ferrel said.

Her fingers returned to his arm. Her voice was small. "Will I have a baby, Dr. Ferrel?"

Ferrel realized he was holding his breath and exhaled slowly. "I don't know," he said curtly. "But don't worry about it. If such a thing should develop, under the circumstances the situation can be corrected. Legally."

"Thank you," Magnolia said meekly.

For some reason Ferrel's face suddenly felt flushed. At the turnoff to the fishing camp he yanked the wheel savagely to the right without slackening his speed. The narrow, crushed oyster-shell road leading back through the mangrove looked level in the headlights. It wasn't. He braked to a jolting stop, then went on slowly.

Magnolia was apologetic. "Pa's been aimin' to fix them chuckholes for a long time now. But he ain't never quite come to it."

Ferrell took his anger out on her. "Say 'hasn't,' girl—not 'ain't.'"

"Yes, sir. Thank you," Magnolia said. "I'll try to remember that."

Ferrel had a feeling she would. He opened his mouth again and couldn't think of anything to say. His face felt even more flushed. He was acting like a pompous ass. Magnolia was nothing to him. He didn't care what kind

of English she used. Unless he was called as a witness at young Pete Koulous' trial, as he probably would be, once he let her out of the car he would never see Magnolia again. Unless he happened to pass her on the street, or she chanced to be at the bait camp on one of the rare occasions he found time to go fishing.

The thought made him sad. He slackened the speed of his car still more. He had reason to be grateful to Magnolia. The sight of her fresh young body and the animal magnetism emanating from it had stirred his sleeping desires. What he had taken as waning physical powers was merely a mental rebellion against Elaine's overpossessiveness and her insatiable appetite. Now with a fresh and pretty young girl like Magnolia—

Dr. Ferrel realized for the first time how much the sweet-sour odor of the tide flats smelled like a woman's flesh. The expansion bracelet of his watch chattered on the steel spokes of the wheel. He knew why his face felt flushed. Ferrel was disgusted with himself. He tried to put the thought from his mind. He was, Ferrel decided, as bad as the three young hooligans who had attacked Magnolia. All he had in his favor was adult control.

"I'm takin' shorthand and typing in high school," Magnolia confided. "And when I graduate I'm going to be a sec'etary, or maybe a receptionist to a doctor."

Ferrel said heartily, "That's fine. Just fine." He wished his sense of immediate need would leave him. He wished his hands would stop shaking.

Magnolia waved a small hand at the tide flat the car was passing. "I don't intend always to live down here with the fiddler crabs and an old drunk like father and the type of women he—" She fished for the word she wanted, and found it. "The type of women he carries on with. I'm going to be a lady."

Ferrel's voice was too hearty. It filled the car. "That's fine. Just fine," he repeated.

The blonde girl continued to dream aloud. "I'm going to have a nice house. And dishes that match. Not from the dime store, neither. And clean white sheets on the bed. And a bathtub. And pretty clothes. And wire screens on the windows, too."

Ferrel realized she was crying. "Now, now." He attempted to pat her shoulder, but Magnolia brushed his hand away.

"You don't understand," she said in a small, fierce voice. "You can't. You've always had all those things." She was sobbing openly now. "Besides, you're only a man and you don't realize what it means to have the other girls at school stare at you."

Dr. Ferrel was silent. There was nothing he could say. The road grew even narrower. The mangroves scraped both sides of the car. Then the car bumped across a crude bridge and the road opened into a clearing dotted with tall oak trees.

Here the smell of the tide flats was stronger. The camp was built on a narrow arm of the bay. A rickety wooden pier with two dozen rental boats tied to it led out into the water. A half-dozen more boats in various stages of decay, including the uncompleted hull of a thirty-two-foot cruiser, lay beached and rotting on the sand. They undoubtedly, Ferrel thought, were projects of Joe Frazer's that he had been "aimin' to fix" but had "never quite come to."

The *thump-thump-thump* of a gasoline-powered electric-light plant filled the clearing. The clearing smelled of decayed fish and filth and greasy cooking.

Ferrel stopped the car a hundred feet from the shack, in the center of the clearing, and turned off his headlights. Immediately a swarm of mosquitoes invaded the car.

The Frazer shack was as disorderly as the beach and as rickety as the pier. It had originally been a one-room wooden cabin. Crude additions of various materials had

been added at will. An unshaded bulb spilled light out the open door. Some of the windows had shutters, but the windows and doors were unscreened. Through the open window nearest the car, Ferrel could see a blowzy slattern frying side meat on an oilstove.

Magnolia said, tight-lipped, "That's Mrs. Prather. She's keeping house for Pa now. Her own man is up at Raiford. For cutting another fishing guide."

It made Dr. Ferrel feel slightly ill to think of a pretty girl of Magnolia's potentialities living in this environment. "Where do you sleep?" he asked.

She pointed to a dark window. "In that tin lean-to there. Along with the three biggest girls." She indicated a blocked-up homemade trailer on the far side of the shack. "The older boys sleep in the trailer. And the young'uns sleep with Pa and Mrs. Prather."

Ferrel stared, fascinated. He'd glanced at the Frazer shack perhaps a half-dozen times. But this was the first time he'd really seen it. "How many of you, in all?" he asked Magnolia.

She slapped at a mosquito. "Nine. Not counting Pa and Mrs. Prather." Her voice was bitter. "And there'll probably be another one come fall. Hit seems we get a new brother or sister with every new housekeeper."

Ferrel's feeling of nausea increased. There ought to be a law. In fact, there was. As he recalled it, it charged adultery and provided a prison term for open and notorious cohabitation. But Joe Frazer was exempt. He had too many children for Judge Faber to send him away. Judge Faber was afraid that Welfare would raise hell if it had to support the Frazer children. Besides, Joe Frazer always had shrimp, and that was more than could be said for any of the other bait camps.

As Ferrel watched, a thin man with light hair, gaunt to the point of emaciation, appeared in the open doorway of the shack. He stood there a moment, yawning and

scratching his body. Then, fastening the straps of his overalls as he walked, he disappeared in the direction of the water.

Magnolia began to cry. Her slim body quivered as if she were cold.

"Now what?" Dr. Ferrel asked her.

She said, sobbing, "You'd cry, too, if you were going to get the beating I am. Pa won't believe that I didn't want to be bad. He—he says all women are harlots."

Again there seemed to be nothing Ferrel could say.

For a moment the only sounds were the drone of the mosquitoes and the faint lap of the tide. Then a burst of profanity erupted from the direction of the pier.

Magnolia wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Pa forgot to tie his shrimp boat far enough out so the slack tide wouldn't partially beach it."

"How do you know?" Ferrel asked her.

Magnolia answered, "He always does."

There was a grunting and a heaving and a splashing in the dark. A flight of startled gulls rose from the mangroves fringing the channel and screamed across the water. More profanity, more grunting followed. A moment later a sluggish motor coughed, then caught. A screw began to churn water. Twin bright lights came on over the sorting tables. Frazer moved in their glare, checking his nets and gear. Satisfied, he backed the boat into deep water, tied it to the end of the pier, and throttled down the motor. The boat lights went out, but the motor continued to idle. There was a clumping of feet on the pier.

From the darkness Frazer called, "All right, you boys. Rise and shine. You, Lem. Johnny."

Magnolia's slim body continued to tremble. "Now he'll eat breakfast, if he's sober. If he isn't, he'll drink hit from a bottle. But either way, he and the boys will go shrimping. Hit's his boast he always has bait."

Dr. Ferrel put his arm around her shoulders. "Come on now. Stop it, Magnolia. You've no reason to be so frightened. What happened in the park wasn't your fault. I was witness to that. I'll talk to your father."

Magnolia shook her head, still frightened. "No. Please. Just let me out and you go on. Because when Pa's nasty drunk he doesn't care who he puts his tongue on." She looked at him through tear-filled eyes. "And I wouldn't want him to abuse you. Not after you've been so good to me." She stroked Ferrel's cheek in a friendly little-girl gesture.

Ferrel's flesh quivered under her touch. This was fantastic. Mad. I'm dreaming this, he thought. In a moment the phone would ring, or Elaine would roll over and reach out an exploratory hand to make certain he was still in bed with her.

The contraction returned to his throat. "I'm not afraid of your father, child."

Magnolia's eyes continued to shine. "No. I'll bet you aren't afraid of anyone."

Ferrel realized he was holding her closer than was necessary to comfort her. Still, he was reluctant to release her. He said thickly, "I'll explain things just as they happened."

Magnolia shook her head and a wisp of her hair brushed Ferrel's lips. He liked the feel and taste of it. "You're nice," she breathed. "You're awfully nice, Dr. Ferrel. But Pa won't believe you. No matter what you say, he'll put the blame on me."

"Why should he?"

The blonde girl began to cry. Her young breasts rose and fell with her sobs, brushing against Ferrel's chest, embarrassing him. "He'll call me names. He'll say I'm like my mother. He'll say I wanted to be bad. Otherwise I'd never have got into the car with Pete and Marty and Tommy when they offered to bring me home."

Ferrel protested, "But that's ridiculous." He realized his breathing was labored and hoped Magnolia hadn't noticed. "I heard you scream for help. I saw you try to escape from young Udell. Pete Koulous is facing a prison term for assaulting you. So is Marty Rudd, when they catch him."

Magnolia nodded. "I know." She looked past him, out the window at the gray of morning, then snuggled closer. "But you'd better go, Dr. Ferrel. Please. I wouldn't want Pa to dirty you with his tongue." She cupped his face in her small hands and kissed him. It was a sweet, little-girl kiss. "But thank you. Thank you so much, Dr. Ferrel. You're nice. You're good." She added shyly, "The kind of a man I wish I could marry."

Her nearness, the heat of her warm young body, ignited Ferrel's flesh. He wanted to touch her, fondle her. It was all he could do to keep from crushing her in his arms and pressing his face against hers. "Thank you," he said thickly. "That's quite a compliment."

Magnolia smiled. "I mean it. I like you. Lots."

She touched his cheek again and then fear wiped the smile from her face. Her lips parted in a silent scream.

Dr. Ferrel turned his head. Joe Frazer's blotched white face was inches from his own. Frazer's eyes were red-rimmed and ugly. His breath was sour and heavy with cheap wine.

"Goddamn little harlot," Frazer cursed his daughter without heat. "Hit ain't bad enough to lay around in the bushes with a grown man until after three o'clock in the mornin', but you gotta have him drive you home and love him up right in your own yard."

Magnolia screamed and pushed away from Ferrel.

"Now see here, Frazer," Ferrel said sharply.

The bait-camp owner's voice was thick. "Don't Frazer me." He yanked open the door of the car. "You should ought to be ashamed of yourself. Why don't you pick on

someone your own age? I've a mind to beat in your face with a gaff."

Frazer swung a hard, wet fist at Ferrel's head. He deflected the blow and Frazer's fist struck the side of the car. He howled in pain, then loosed a string of four-letter epithets.

"It serves you right," Ferrel said. He got out of the car and grasped the bib of the other man's overalls. "Now you listen to me, Frazer!"

Frazer tugged the bib of his overalls free. "A bastird. A goddamn Yankee bastird, tha's wha' you are. Kin tell by the way you talk. I been suspicious of Maggie for some time. Stayin' out all hours of night. Runnin' around with them rich young high-school fellows. To baseball and basketball games, she said. And now she's doin' it with men. I got a whore girl in my family."

"Pa. Please," Magnolia begged. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "You don't understand. We weren't bein' bad. He just brought me home. This is Dr. Ferrel."

Frazer staggered back a step. "I don' give a damn if he's the mayor of Palmetto City. I'll have the law on him for ruinin' you. But firs' I'm gonna beat in his face."

He rushed at Ferrel, swinging his fists wildly. Ferrel managed to knock him off his feet, but in falling Frazer caught at his legs and dragged him down with him.

"Watch him," Magnolia screamed. "Don't let him cut you, Dr. Ferrel."

Ignoring possible injury to his hands, Dr. Ferrel pounded his way out of the tangle of wiry arms and wet, overall-covered legs. On his feet again, he leaned panting against a fender of the car. "The man's crazy."

"He's drunk. Nasty drunk," Magnolia said between sobs. "I knew what would happen if he saw you."

Frazer got to his feet unsteadily. "Goddamn little harlot. Jus' like your mother. Do it with anyone." He brushed the calloused palms of his hands together as if washing

them of her. "All right. If thash the way you want it. I'll tell you jus' what I tol' her. Git out. Git out, hear me? You don' live here no more."

The blowzy-looking woman left the stove and filled the lighted doorway of the shack. "What's going on out there, Joe?"

Frazer told her. "I caught a guy doin' it to Maggie." He paused. "Well, jus' about. They were ahuggin' and akissin' and afeelin'. They probably done plenty before he brung her home."

The woman left the doorway to reappear a second later holding a double-barreled shotgun. "Don't dirty your hands on him. Run 'em both off with your gun, Joe. You got enough brats to feed now."

Frazer staggered toward her. The younger children in the shack awakened and began to wail. The first wisps of morning fog rolled in off the water. The stench of decaying fish and rotting vegetation seemed to intensify. The power plant continued to throb, *thump-thump-thump*, like the beating of a giant heart. Ferrel felt as if he were moving through a nightmare.

Frazer took the gun from the woman and turned. In the harsh light pouring through the doorway of the shack his face was a study in evil.

"Now git, whoever you are," he said. "And take Maggie with you. I might have known what she'd turn out to be. Her mother was one before her."

Dr. Ferrel looked at Magnolia. "Will he shoot?"

She slapped at a mosquito. "Yes."

"Then get into the car," Ferrel told her.

Chapter Seven

AT DAWN, Palmetto City's night lights were still burning. But Sheriff Hammel's office was dark. Dr. Ferrel had been afraid it would be.

As they passed the police station, Magnolia lifted her tear-stained face from the now sodden handkerchief that Ferrel had given her. "I won't have to sleep in the jail, will I, Dr. Ferrel?"

"No. Of course not," Ferrel assured her.

He drove slowly down First Avenue. It wouldn't be fair or decent to turn Magnolia over to Lieutenant Maxim. She'd done nothing to warrant spending a night in jail. She couldn't help it if her father was a foul-mouthed, evil-minded drunk. And he couldn't check her into a hotel. The child would be frightened to death. What she needed was a woman's care and sympathy. He'd take her home to Elaine. Of course. In his subconscious mind he'd known what he wanted to do from the start.

Dr. Ferrel glanced sideways at Magnolia as the car passed under the overhead light on Center Street. He was relieved and amused to find his only emotion toward her was fatherly sympathy. She wasn't even pretty. Her cheekbones were too high. Her nose was red from constant weeping. Her honey-colored hair needed combing. Her immature breasts failed woefully to fill the bodice of her cheap dress. She was, after all, a child. Fifteen, going on sixteen.

Ferrel laughed softly to himself. There was no fool like an old one. Her fancied physical attraction had merely

been an acute case of overwrought nerves. The loss of Mary Hart, plus physical fatigue, plus the mental shock and stimulation of being forced to kill young Udell, had acted as a brief aphrodisiac. He'd come across similar cases in the Army. It was just a reversal of the old gag that when a snag-toothed Fiji Islander began to look like Lana Turner it was time to transfer a man Stateside. All he needed was some rest. Now, all he felt for Magnolia Frazer was pity. He would ask Elaine to put her up for the night. In the morning, if Frazer still refused to listen to reason, Sheriff Hammel could make some permanent arrangement for her care.

"Where are you taking me?" Magnolia asked.

"Home," Dr. Ferrel told her. "You'll be Mrs. Ferrel's and my girl for the night. Rather, what's left of it."

Magnolia stopped crying and tried to arrange her hair. "Thank you." She tilted the rear-vision mirror so she could see her face in the dim light radiating from the dashboard. "I'll bet I look a mess."

Dr. Ferrel was truthful. "You could stand some attention."

Magnolia opened her purse. She took out her lipstick and dry rouge. Then, glancing sideways at Ferrel, she returned them to her purse and merely powdered her nose. "Is Mrs. Ferrel as nice as you are, Dr. Ferrel?"

"Nicer," Ferrel assured her.

Magnolia rode a few blocks in silence. Then she announced, "I'm not going to cry any more."

"That's good," Dr. Ferrel said.

"But I am sorry about the way Pa acted."

"Forget it."

"He had no call to act that way."

"No. He hadn't."

"We weren't doing anything bad."

"Of course not."

Magnolia wet her lips with her tongue. "He had no

call," she repeated. "It wasn't as if I'd ever given him reason to think such bad thoughts about me. I've always come straight home, before tonight. And I couldn't help what happened tonight. Could I, Dr. Ferrel?"

"No. Of course not," Ferrel said. He felt his heart thumping and wished she would drop the subject.

Magnolia continued. "And what he said about my mother wasn't true, either. She wasn't bad."

"No?"

"No. She just couldn't stand to live that way."

"What way?"

Magnolia made a gesture of distaste. "In all that dirt. And never having any pretty things."

"Oh. Where is she now?" Ferrel asked.

Magnolia answered, "I told you. She's dead. She was killed in an automobile accident. Just when she was going to send for me."

Ferrel really wasn't interested. His left eye was swollen almost shut. He could wiggle his tooth with his tongue. He had his peace to make with Elaine. Elaine was probably frantic by now. He glanced up the misty street. His was the only house in the block that was lighted. The porch light and the lights in the living room and in all three bedrooms were on. So were the lights in the kitchen, in the breezeway, and in the carport.

Magnolia sat closer to him. "Is that your house, Dr. Ferrel? The one that's lighted?"

"Yes," Ferrel said. "It is." He glanced sideways at the girl. Her eyes were shining again. "Oh, it's so pretty," she breathed. "And I'm so glad."

"Glad about what?" Ferrel asked her.

"That I'm going to sleep there," she told him. "I've never slept in such a nice house before."

"You mean that?"

"You saw where I live."

"Yes," Ferrel said. "I did."

He looked at his house and really saw it for the first time, through her eyes. It was a nice house. It had taken a lot of babies to build it. It was well planned, well built, of hollow tile. White with a red tile roof. With three bedrooms and two baths. Surrounded by an attractive lawn and flowering shrubs, it was one of the nicest small houses in Palmetto City. Oddly enough, he'd never thought much about it before. Up until tonight it had just been a place where he ate and slept. And argued with Elaine.

Magnolia laid her hand on his arm. "Do you and Mrs. Ferrel live in it all by yourselves?"

"All by ourselves."

"Who keeps it clean?"

"A girl who comes in every morning."

Magnolia's fingers tightened on his arm. "Oh. You have a maid."

Dr. Ferrel laughed. "That's right. And also a yardman."

He swung his car up the drive and drove in under the roof of the carport with a very real sense of relief. It was good to be home. As he braked the car, Elaine, wearing a filmy white negligee and matching scuffs, came out on the breezeway.

Her words picked at him like greedy fingers. "Oh, darling. I'm so glad you're home. I've been so worried. Lieutenant Maxim said you'd just left. Then you didn't come for so long. I've thought of a thousand things that could have happened to you. In fact, I was just about to—" Elaine realized he wasn't alone. One slim white hand rose to her rust-colored hair and brushed it back from her forehead. "Oh. And who is this?"

Ferrel helped Magnolia from the car. "This is Magnolia Frazer, sweetheart." Ferrel opened the screen door of the breezeway and stepped aside to allow Magnolia to precede him. "The girl I told you about over the phone. The one who had the trouble in Phillippe Park."

"Oh," Elaine said, still uncertain.

Ferrel continued. "I just came from trying to bring her home. But owing to a misunderstanding she isn't welcome there. So I've offered her the shelter of our home for the night."

Elaine's forced smile became real. Her green eyes took in Magnolia's cheap dress and shoes and tear-stained cheeks, and the touch of hardness in them turned to pity.

I might have known, Ferrel thought.

Elaine gathered Magnolia in her arms. "But of course, Roger. I'm so glad you did. Welcome. We're glad to have you, Magnolia."

Magnolia's smile was shy. "Thank you, Mrs. Ferrel. Dr. Ferrel has been very kind." She added, even more shyly, "And you are very pretty."

Elaine's face flushed with pleasure. "Why, thank you, child." She laughed. "I can see that you and I are going to get on famously." She hugged Magnolia. "We green-eyed gals have to stick together, eh?" Elaine wrinkled her nose at Ferrel as she lifted her face to be kissed and saw his swollen eye. "For God's sake, what happened to you, Roger?"

"They hit him when he defended me," Magnolia said. "He was awful brave."

Elaine kissed the bruised flesh. Her lips smelled faintly of vermouth. "Oh, you poor darling! What can I do for it?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," Ferrel said shortly. "There's nothing broken and the swelling will be gone by morning."

"Don't be silly," Elaine said. "At least let me put a cold towel on it. Or, better still, an ice bag."

Ferrel began a protest, and thought better of it. Protesting would be futile. One way or another, Elaine always had her way.

"But come in. Sit down, child," Elaine said. She walked

Magnolia into the combination living-dining room opening off the breezeway and went in search of the ice bag.

"Any phone calls?" Ferrel called after her.

"For a wonder, no," Elaine called from the bedroom. Returning with the ice bag, she took a tray of ice cubes from the refrigerator, put them in a towel, and crushed them with the handle of a carving knife.

"That's good," Ferrel said. He took off his coat and shoes and put on the silk dressing gown and slippers Elaine always had waiting for him.

Magnolia sat on the extreme edge of a big overstuffed chair, her small hands folded in her lap, looking around the room with shy interest.

Elaine filled the rubberized bag with crushed ice and adjusted it over Ferrel's eye. Then, sitting on the sofa, she pushed a bottle of vermouth out of sight with her foot and looked quizzically at Magnolia. "What's the matter, child?"

Magnolia shook her head. "Nothing. Nothing at all, Mrs. Ferrel."

"Then what are you looking for?"

"Nothing," Magnolia repeated. "I wasn't looking *for*, I was looking *at*. You know, admiring things. Everything is so pretty." She confided, "I've never been in such a nice house before. You see, my father runs a bait camp."

"Oh."

"We live right on the water. In a—" Magnolia was embarrassed. "Well, I guess you'd call it a shack. And we haven't any pretty things. Not even dishes that match."

"Oh," Elaine said. "I see." She helped herself to a cigarette and offered the cloisonné box to Magnolia.

Magnolia shook her head. "Thank you. I don't smoke." Her face lighted up in a smile. "But I'd like to hold the box, if I may."

Elaine smiled. "Of course. You like pretty things, don't you?"

Magnolia stroked the enameled surface of the box with her fingertips. "Very much. The art teacher at Palmetto High says I have an appreciation."

Roger lighted Elaine's cigarette. As he did, he dropped the ice bag. He stooped to pick it up, and the rush of blood to his head made his eye feel worse than if he hadn't applied the bag. But Elaine always knew best. He still had to tell her about young Udell. He wondered how she would take it. It made him sick every time he thought about it.

Elaine drew smoke into her lungs and exhaled slowly. "Now, why don't one of you tell me what this is all about?"

"Maxim didn't tell you?" Ferrel asked.

Elaine shook her head. "No."

Magnolia's voice was small. "Three boys mistreated me. In Phillipe Park."

"Mistreated you?" Elaine puzzled.

Magnolia bobbed her head. "Yes'm. They promised to drive me home after the baseball game with the team from Bradenton High. But they didn't." A tear trickled down her cheek. "And they put something in my Coke. At the Picken-Chicken. Then, instead of taking me home, they drove me out to the park. And they took off my clothes, and they hurt me."

"Oh, you poor darling," Elaine sympathized.

More tears wet Magnolia's cheeks. "I screamed. And I fought. And I ran. Right through the hibiscus bushes. But Tommy Udell ran after me and threw me down on the ground." Her words began to run together. "Then Dr. Ferrel was there and he said, 'Get up. You damn young fools!' And Tommy got angry about it, and he and Pete and Marty were going to beat up Dr. Ferrel and do bad things to him. And Dr. Ferrel hit Tommy with one of the grate bars from a fireplace. So hard that Tommy died." Great sobs shook her small body.

"But it wasn't my fault. Dr. Ferrel said so. Sheriff Hammel, even." Magnolia put her head on the arm of the chair and sobbed. "And Dr. Flagle, he's the coroner, says if I have a baby he can do something about it."

Elaine's cheeks were as wet with tears as Magnolia's. She crossed the room and, kneeling beside the chair, took Magnolia in her arms. "Oh, you poor child. This all really happened? She's not being hysterical?"

Ferrel lighted a cigarette. "No. She isn't being hysterical."

"You killed the boy, Roger? You? But what were you doing in Phillipe Park?"

Ferrel told her. "Losing the Hart woman hit me hard."

"I can imagine."

"I wanted to think, check back. See if it could possibly have been my fault, if there was something I had overlooked. So I drove out to the park instead of coming directly home. I was walking through the wood, trying to think."

"You killed a boy?" she repeated, unbelieving.

"The three young hooligans rushed me. I was only fighting back. But I struck too hard."

Magnolia sobbed, "They were going to make Dr. Ferrel be as bad as they had been. So he couldn't snitch on them."

Elaine's face filled with revulsion. "The beasts. The filthy little beasts." She turned toward her husband. "Oh, you poor darling. What an experience! What you must have gone through!"

Ferrel pushed his dead cigarette from one side of the ash tray to the other. "And probably will for some time."

"Why so?"

"The boy I struck was young Tommy Udell."

A loose lock of rust-colored hair fell in Elaine's eyes. She brushed at it with the back of one hand. "I suppose his father will try to put you in jail."

"Undoubtedly," Ferrel said.

Magnolia raised her wet face from Elaine's shoulder. Her voice was shrill. "It wasn't Dr. Ferrel's fault. Any more than it was mine." As her pent-up hysteria mounted, words tumbled out of her mouth almost incoherently. "Sheriff Hammel said so. And he's the law. He put Pete Koulous in jail. And when they find Marty Rudd they're going to lock him up, too. But my father wouldn't believe it. That it wasn't my fault, I mean. Because I got home so late he said that I was one and my mother was one before me. And when Dr. Ferrel drove me home he told me to get out, that I didn't live there any more. And I'd have had to sleep in the jail if Dr. Ferrel hadn't brought me here." Magnolia gasped and held her breath. Her face was contorted by the beginning of a scream.

Dr. Ferrel crossed the room quickly and slapped her. "Stop it, Magnolia. You're all right now. You hear me? You're all right now."

Magnolia's tensed muscles relaxed. She buried her face on Elaine's shoulder and sobbed. Elaine cried with her.

Ferrel eyed the sobbing girl with professional interest. "I should have realized this was pent up inside her. She's had a nasty experience and been very brave about it. See if you can quiet her, will you, Elaine? Bathe her, if you can, and get her into some night things. Then I'll give her a sedative and we'll put her to bed. Maybe in the morning things won't look quite so black to her."

"Of course." Elaine got to her feet and helped Magnolia to hers. "Come now, Magnolia. Don't cry like that. Please. Nothing is that bad."

Magnolia continued to sob. "I don't even have any place to live. I'd have had to sleep in the jail if Dr. Ferrel hadn't brought me home. I don't belong anywhere."

Elaine hugged her impulsively. "Oh, now, honey. That's not so." She wiped the tears from Magnolia's face with the sleeve of her negligee. "As long as we have a bed

and a room, you can stay right here with Dr. Ferrel and me." Elaine tilted Magnolia's chin. "Roger and I have always wanted a little girl, but God never gave us one. So maybe you can be our little girl."

Magnolia tried to smile. "Thank you, Mrs. Ferrel."

She allowed Elaine to lead her from the room, her trailing fingers touching, caressing the various objects she passed, the television set, an expensive lamp, a cut-glass vase.

When they had gone, Ferrel tossed the ice bag on the sofa and rescued Elaine's bottle of vermouth from under it. He drank from the neck of the bottle and found the wine hot and sickeningly sweet. He returned the bottle to its hiding place. Then he walked out into the kitchen and looked in the refrigerator.

He was suddenly ravenously hungry. He ate some of the cold chicken left from supper. Still hungry, he spread a slab of bread with peanut butter, added a thick slice of liverwurst, and topped it with mayonnaise. It tasted good. There was cold coffee in the pot. He poured himself a cup of it, and ate the sandwich and drank the coffee sitting at the kitchen table.

The kitchen was filled with the silence of early morning. The only sound was the drip of the condensation from the eaves and the slow whirl of the electric clock. Ferrel checked the clock with his watch. They agreed. It was twenty-eight minutes after five. It hardly seemed worth while to go to bed. His head would barely touch the pillow before the phone would begin to ring. Elaine called them his "pregnant husbands"; earnest, worried young men who had sweated through a long night, then phoned the doctor at dawn to say:

"May has been sick to her stomach all night. She threw up four times. Will that hurt the baby, Dr. Ferrel?"
. . . "Irene has begun to have cramps. Do you think I ought to take her to the hospital?" . . . "Can you make

an early-morning call, Doctor? Please?" . . . "What does it mean when the baby is restless? Is that a good sign or a bad one?"

Ferrel finished his sandwich and licked the last of the mayonnaise from his fingers.

He poured more cold coffee in his cup, his thoughts as confused as Magnolia's almost incoherent self-pity. The elder Udell would try to make trouble for him. His practice was bound to suffer. Udell was an influential man. A physician was supposed to save life, not take it. Dr. Ferrel almost sickened every time he thought of young Udell. Still, he didn't see what else he could have done.

Ferrel glanced up, but didn't rise as feet scuffed across the parquet floor of the living room. A moment later Elaine and Magnolia stood in the kitchen doorway. Magnolia was bathed. Elaine had combed and braided her hair, and it hung over her immature breasts in attractive honey-colored plaits. She was wearing one of Elaine's best nightgowns under a frothy negligee. Magnolia looked lost in them, like a little girl playing grownup.

"I'm going to put her to bed now, Roger," Elaine said, smiling. "I'll give her one of my sleeping pills. Besides, we're much calmer now, aren't we, Magnolia?"

Magnolia's smile was sweetly shy. "Yes, Mrs. Ferrel. I—I feel a lot better now. Just because you're both so good to me."

Elaine hugged her. "You're a sweet child. You're going to be our girl, now. Now say good night."

Magnolia walked shyly into the kitchen and up to the chair in which Ferrel was sitting. "Thank you again, Dr. Ferrell. Honest—I can't begin to thank you for what you've done for me."

She stood a moment facing Ferrel, smiling, her slim back to Elaine. Then she stooped suddenly and kissed his forehead. As she leaned forward, her too large nightgown fell away from her. Again he saw the small firm

breasts and the white stomach, flat and lovely, something for a man to dream of.

Elaine spoke from the doorway. "Now, come on, child. I'll tuck you into bed."

The shy smile still on her lips, Magnolia followed her out of the kitchen.

Ferrel sat where he was, his blood pounding in his temples. He sat for a long time. Then he turned out the kitchen light, locked the breezeway door, and walked into the bedroom he shared with Elaine.

Elaine was combing her hair. She watched him in the mirror of her dressing table.

"Tired, honey?"

"Dead tired," Roger admitted.

Elaine bunched her hair at the back of her head and tied it with a narrow black ribbon. Finished with her hair, she smeared cold cream on her face and wiped it off, the cream leaving a faint greasy sheen. "Know something, Roger?"

Ferrel forced his mind back to her. "What?"

Elaine turned from her mirror. "You're nice."

She loosened her negligee and hung it over a chair. Her body was full and sensuous and still young.

She sat on the edge of the bed. "In fact, I'm glad I'm married to you."

"Thank you," Ferrel said gravely.

Elaine turned out the light and lay back on the bed. It was as Ferrel had known it would be. Her breathing betrayed her eagerness. Her hand sought him in the dark.

"Darling," Elaine murmured. "Sweetheart."

Ferrel crushed her to him fiercely, almost savagely. Not for a long, long time had he needed Elaine so terribly. He was astonished at the urgency of his desire. And he was frightened because he knew its true source.

Chapter Eight

JULY WAS OUT to set a record. The sky was an inverted brass bowl. It hadn't rained in nine weeks. The dry palm fronds lay limp in the sun, or rustled like restless snakes in the little puffs of hot wind blowing fitfully up from the Everglades. Night brought no relief from the heat. The morning of the eleventh was as hot as the day before had been.

Dr. Ferrel hadn't slept well. First there had been an emergency delivery. Then when he had finally got to bed, there had been, as always now, the image of Magnolia sleeping peacefully in the next room, while he lay awake, aching, wanting, staring hot-eyed at the ceiling, fearful that Elaine would waken and find him thus.

He *had* to do something about Magnolia. And do it soon.

Ferrel stood by the side of his car eying a brown patch in the Hansen lawn. With the continued hot dry weather the chinch bugs had become active again.

Hansen had followed him outside. He cleared his throat. "About the bill now, Dr. Ferrel. I realize it's getting pretty big, but—"

"Forget it," Ferrel said. "Pay what you can, when you can."

Hansen was relieved. "Gee. Thanks. It's had us worried. But with a kid last year, and now a new one on the way—" Hansen left it at that.

Ferrel was in a bad mood. What he wanted to say was "I see, though, that you've managed to buy a new tele-

vision set." What he said as he got into his car was "Yes. I know how it is."

Hansen was glad to change the subject. "Say. I see in the morning Sun Banner they finished picking a jury late yesterday afternoon. Ten men and two women."

Ferrel sat in the hot sun wondering what had ever induced him to buy a convertible as a second car. And, having bought a convertible, why he didn't keep the top up. Or at least wear a hat. "Yes. So I see," he said.

"You going to have to testify?"

Dr. Ferrel glanced at his watch. Thank God he'd made his hospital round and this was his last house call. "I'm very much afraid I am. Sheriff Hammel drove out to the house this morning while we were having breakfast. It seems that Prosecutor Manson would like me to be at the county seat as near to eleven o'clock as I can make it."

Hansen leaned on the hot door of the car. "What you think they'll do to young Koulous?"

Ferrel shook his head. "I wouldn't attempt to guess. A jury is always unpredictable. Especially a mixed one."

"I hope they burn him," Hansen said.

Ferrel put on his sunglasses. "They may do just that." One lens of his glasses was blurred. He removed them and polished the blurred lens with his breast-pocket handkerchief. "Sheriff Hammel tells me the state has refused to waive the statutory penalty."

Hansen was emphatic about it. "Young Koulous has it coming. Three of 'em ganging up on a fifteen-year-old kid! And then him trying to save his neck by saying she was willing. That it was a game. The Frazer girl still staying with you and Mrs. Ferrel, Doctor?"

Ferrel put the sunglasses on again. "Yes, she is."

"You and Mrs. Ferrel are real people," Hansen said. "You deserve a lot of credit. I mean, for taking the girl in and treating her like your own daughter when her real father turned against her. How about Old Man Frazer?"

Has he finally decided which side of the fence he's on?"

Ferrel's smile was wry. "He's all for Maggie now. At least, he was the last time I talked with him. But, of course, that could be because of the civil suit for damages he's filed against the Udell and Koulous and Rudd families."

Hansen laughed and said, "I bet for plenty."

"I hear one hundred thousand dollars."

"And they haven't caught young Rudd as yet?"

"Not when I last talked to Sheriff Hammel." He nodded to Hansen and started the car.

Ferrel drove slowly through the heat toward his office. It was odd how the town was divided on the subject of Magnolia. The men, for the most part, defended her. Their wives were less charitable.

But not in front of Elaine. Ferrel smiled at the thought. Now Elaine had someone else on whom to lavish her affection. And lavish affection she did. Magnolia could do no wrong. Elaine had told off both her bridge club and the Friends of the Library Association for daring to insinuate that Magnolia might have been partially to blame for the assault on her person. Elaine had called them "a bunch of dirty-minded old busybodies," and ordered both groups out of her house.

At the time it had worried him. He'd feared a possible financial loss as a result, but it hadn't materialized. Perhaps because the members of Elaine's bridge club and the Friends of the Library were, for the most part, too old to need an obstetrician.

Robert Udell hadn't attempted to make trouble, either. He was a broken old man. Since the night his son had died he had suffered two heart attacks. In his mental and physical condition a third attack would probably kill him. He and Mrs. Udell hadn't been seen on the street since the afternoon of the coroner's inquest.

Ferrel looked at his right hand. "And Cain talked with

Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him."

Ferrel returned his hand to the wheel. No one had blamed him for killing young Udell. At least, no one to whom he had spoken. They realized he hadn't meant to take a life. As a whole, the freeholders of Palmetto City had been satisfied with the verdict of the coroner's inquest. More, it had been phrased to salve the Udell pride. "Death by misadventure" had been Dr. Flagle's official finding.

For once, there was a parking spot directly in front of his office. Dr. Ferrel parked his car and crossed the sidewalk to the open door. Miss Jones, crisp and cool-looking in her white nylon uniform, was talking to Mrs. Hayes, his receptionist.

A black-haired, plain-faced woman in her late thirties, Miss Jones reproved him with a quick glance. "What are you doing here?" She glanced at her watch. "You're supposed to be in Stillwater at eleven o'clock."

"Yes, I know," Ferrel said. "Mrs. Ferrel drove Magnolia over in the other car. I had intended to go with them. But I thought I'd better make my rounds and check in here before I left."

Miss Jones said, "That man," with the familiarity of long association. "Shoo. Get out of here. Be gone. All appointments for today have been canceled."

"Yes. I know," Ferrel answered. He scribbled a phone number on the top sheet of his prescription pad. "But I'm a little uneasy about Mrs. Carter. If you should need me, you can call this number. Sheriff Hammel gave it to me this morning." He tore the sheet from the pad and gave it to Miss Jones.

"I'd forgotten the Carter woman," Miss Jones admitted. "She went to the hospital yesterday afternoon, didn't she?"

Ferrel nodded. "A false alarm. She wanted to go home this morning, but I advised her to stay. It should be any time now."

He walked back to his private office, and washed his hands and combed his hair. He straightened his tie. He checked his pocket medicine kit. He looked at the Carter woman's chart. He drummed his fingers on his desk. He studied his several framed diplomas, realizing he was stalling, stalling as he had stalled the night two months before when he hadn't wanted to go home to Elaine—the night he'd met Magnolia.

He didn't want to go to Stillwater. He didn't want to testify against young Koulous. He didn't want to hear Magnolia's shame made the subject of a court debate. The damage had been done. Sending young Koulous to the electric chair or to prison wouldn't undo the violence to Magnolia or blot the horror of the experience from her mind. It would be better for all concerned if the matter could be forgotten.

It was hot in the office without the fans on, even hotter than it had been in the sun. Dr. Ferrel's collar felt too tight. He attempted to ease it with his finger and only succeeded in crumpling the collar. Sometimes he wished to God he'd been a plumber. But, thank God, he had been smart enough to insist that Dr. Flagle make the internal examination. At least he wouldn't have to testify about that.

Miss Jones, still crisp and seemingly unaffected by the heat, moved into his line of vision. "It's ten-forty-five, Dr. Ferrel. And Stillwater is an eighteen mile drive from here."

"Yes. Yes, I know," Ferrel said. He felt hounded, hemmed in by women.

Giving Miss Jones a straight look, he walked back through the office and out across the sidewalk to his car. The leather upholstery was hot. It burned his flesh

through the trousers of his lightweight summer suit. He considered putting up the top of the car and remembered the reason he hadn't done so before was that the automatic mechanism was out of order, and with either Elaine of Magnolia using the other car almost constantly now, he didn't dare risk putting the convertible in the shop for fear of finding himself without any car.

Women.

In search of a nonexistent cool breeze, he pulled away from the curb too fast and almost collided with a truck. He drove swiftly on through town. The road to Stillwater was narrow. It funneled, a ribbon of heat, between wilted-looking orange and grapefruit groves. Ferrel was five miles out of town, still driving too fast, when a siren sounded and a police car drove up beside him.

"Pull over there," Deputy Jack Thomas ordered. Then Thomas saw who it was and grinned. "Oh. It's you. I didn't recognize the car. Got a late start, eh, Dr. Ferrel? O.K. We'll drive on ahead of you and shoo the yokels out of your way."

The police car swung in ahead of him, scattering traffic with its siren. Dr. Ferrel followed it into Stillwater, driving even faster than he had been, much faster than he cared to drive, squinting his eyes against the sun because in his haste to get away from Miss Jones he had forgotten to put on his sunglasses.

Thomas parked in a no-parking zone in front of the courthouse and waved Ferrel in beside him. His teeth white in his sun-bronzed face, Deputy Cray snapped his chewing gum. "Going to nail young Koulous in the chair, huh, Doctor?"

"I hope not," Ferrel said.

He stood a moment on the hot walk, looking at the red brick building. The case of the Commonwealth against Peter Koulous was well under way. An overflow crowd of spectators, the majority of them women, milled around

the doorway of the courthouse, or sat on the square of grass in the meager shade of royal palm trees that had been planted before the Spanish-American War. Most of them had brought picnic lunches. Hawkers moved through the crowd selling soft drinks and ice-cream pops to screaming children playing hide-and-seek in the bushes, while their mothers gossiped, with one ear tuned to the loud-speaker that the district attorney's office had thoughtfully placed in an open second-floor window.

Dr. Ferrel felt nauseated. The women were making a holiday of it. They weren't concerned with the legal aspect. All they were interested in were the sordid details.

Sheriff's Deputies Thomas and Cray cleared a path for him. As Ferrel passed one of the groups of women, he heard a thin girl whisper, "Who's that?"

The woman standing beside her was pleased to display her knowledge. "That's Dr. Ferrel," she said shrilly. "The one who killed young Udell. You know. The baby doctor over in Palmetto City. The one who brought Eleanor's Michael."

The thin girl sucked at her lower lip. "He's real handsome," she whispered. "He could bring me a baby, if you know what I mean."

Ferrel glanced up to see if Thomas and Cray had overheard her. They hadn't. He walked on, conscious that other women had recognized him now.

A county deputy was guarding the front door. He passed Thomas and Cray and Dr. Ferrel. The long hall on the first floor was empty and, after the heat of the sun, comparatively cool. Along the hall huge ceiling fans revolved lazily.

As the three men started up the stairs to the second floor Thomas said, "We could use a new courthouse."

"Yeah," Cray agreed with him.

There were no fans on the second floor. Standing in front of the big double door leading into the courtroom a

sweating court attendant was mopping his florid face with a soiled handkerchief.

"Goddamn inconsiderate young punk," he said to Thomas. "Why couldn't he have done her wrong in the winter?"

Chapter Nine

JACK THOMAS laughed and stepped aside to allow Dr. Ferrel to precede him into the courtroom. Judge Engle had been considerate but firm. In addition to the usual leather seats he'd had folding chairs placed in every available space. But once the seats and the chairs had been filled, the public had been barred from the building.

There was a scrape of chairs, a craning of necks, and an excited buzz of conversation as the spectators in the courtroom recognized Dr. Ferrel. Bill Haymen, red-faced and sweating in his blue coat with the word "Crier" embroidered on one sleeve, was swearing in a witness. Judge Engle said something to him. Haymen laid his Bible on the rail, ducked back to his seat under the bench, and struck the block twice with his gavel.

Judge Engle cleared his throat and said, "I want everyone's attention, please." He waited for the courtroom to quiet, then continued. "This is a case of importance. It is right and proper that there should be a large public attendance. But with so many people present it will be impossible for anyone to hear anything unless a strict silence is maintained. The tipstaves will see to that."

Judge Engle returned his attention to the papers on his desk. Bill Haymen laid down the gavel and picked up the Bible. A deep silence followed. A bailiff led Dr. Ferrel to the seat that had been reserved for him. He looked around for Elaine and Magnolia. They were on the far side of the courtroom, just behind the table at which State's Attorney Manson was seated. Elaine smiled. Mag-

nolia held up her hand and cupped her fingers at him.

Ferrel's smile was tight, as he returned the gesture. Two months of proper food and care and decent clothes had made a new girl of Magnolia. Her honey-colored hair shimmered in the sunshine streaming in the open windows of the courtroom. Her parted lips were naturally red. Her flushed cheeks looked as soft as the petals of the blossom for which she'd been named. Her young breasts no longer looked immature, not in the simple but expensive white linen dress that had been one of Elaine's extensive purchases. As he watched they seemed to thrust forward eagerly against the garment that contained them.

Ferrel looked away quickly. He had to stop telling himself he must do something about Magnolia, and do it. He had to get her out of his house. Perhaps, if Joe Frazer was willing, a good girls' school was the answer. Flesh could endure only so much torment. Will power could be only so strong. And a dozen times a day, in her childish innocence, Magnolia set him on fire. The shorts she wore were too short and too tight. The necklines of her dresses were too low. And she insisted on sitting in his lap, while Elaine beamed approval. "That's right. You're our little girl now, Magnolia." He couldn't stand much more.

Ferrel wiped the palms of his hands on his thighs.

The man sitting next to him formed the word with his lips. "Hot."

Dr. Ferrel nodded mutely, looking at his wife. Yes, Elaine was still attractive. But she was, after all, nearly forty. Her rust-colored hair was thinning. Her years of constant, if not heavy, drinking had given her face a slightly bloated, hard look. She used make-up well, but she used too much of it. Dr. Ferrel lowered his eyes to Elaine's ample bosom. His flesh crawled as he thought of her body and his own vehemence surprised him. I hate her, he thought. He hated all stupid people. And Elaine

was a fool. If she weren't, she would be suspicious of his renewed ardor. Elaine had had no cause for complaint these last two months.

Ferrel transferred his attention to the witness on the stand. The lad was one of the attendants at the Standard Filling Station in Palmetto City. Ferrel surmised that the state was placing the three youths in the car with Magnolia on the night she had been assaulted—for the benefit of the jury.

Ferrel studied the faces in the jury box. He was glad they weren't trying him. The jurors' faces were too smug. Their lips were too thin. They were too filled with a sense of their own importance. Still, why shouldn't they feel important? The sovereign state of Florida had empowered them to play god. At five dollars a day, plus mileage.

Dr. Ferrel's eyes moved on to the defense table. The elder Koulous had spared no expense in the matter of counsel. Ferrel recognized a former district judge and a state senator at the table. Both men were clever lawyers. Ferrel doubted, however, if they could pry young Koulous out of this jam.

Ferrel avoided looking at the youth in the prisoner's box and studied the faces of his parents. John Koulous looked about the same as he had the night he'd seen him in Sheriff Hammel's office, but Mrs. Koulous had aged ten years in two months. Her face was lined, and her lower lip trembled constantly. Koulous sat with one arm around her, his chin jutting defiantly. Now that the first shock to his pride was over, he would fight to the end for his own. That was as it should be.

Joe Frazer was sitting in an aisle seat, uncomfortably clean and sober. From time to time he smiled snag-toothed encouragement at Magnolia. But for the most part he sat cracking his knuckles. The bait-camp proprietor looked bored. He looked as if he wished he were out shrimping, or biting the cap off a bottle of beer. Frazer

saw Dr. Ferrel looking at him. He grinned and raised a hand in friendly greeting.

We're pals now, Ferrel thought.

Even Magnolia was forgiven. From Frazer's point of view, if she had to be assaulted, she had shown rare consideration for him by choosing her violators from two of the wealthiest families in town. Girls were attacked every night in the week by postal clerks and shoe clerks, by bricklayers and truck drivers, and never got a dime. But if young Koulous was convicted the success of Frazer's civil suit was practically assured.

Mr. Manson finished questioning the filling-station attendant. The defense, it seemed, had no questions. As the youth left the stand the crier called, "Molly Freeman."

There was a brief stir in the courtroom. A black-haired girl walked through the gate and laid her hand on the Bible Bill Haymen offered her. He asked, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you, God?"

The black-haired girl nodded. "I do."

Mr. Manson waited until she was seated. Then he asked, "What is your occupation, Miss Freeman?"

The black-haired girl said, "I'm a carhop at the Picken-Chicken. The one out on the lake road."

"That's the Lake Phillipe Road?"

"Yes, sir."

The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me, God. Dr. Ferrel closed his eyes and mentally reviewed the testimony he would be called upon to give. He wanted to be scrupulously fair.

He'd heard Magnolia scream. That had been down on the shore of the lake. He'd heard the sound of a blow or a slap. He'd heard a male voice say something he couldn't distinguish. Male laughter had followed. He'd seen a

thrashing in the hibiscus bushes. A moment later Magnolia had burst out of the bushes with young Udell in close pursuit. Young Koulous and the still missing Marty Rudd had been close behind Udell. Both boys had been intoxicated. Magnolia had run in his direction, screaming for help. Udell had caught up with her and thrown her to the ground. Both young Koulous and Rudd had been very much amused by her struggles. Magnolia had continued to scream. Then he had intervened.

The heat in the second-floor courtroom was intense. It made thinking difficult. Dr. Ferrel went back over the scene. It seemed to him there was something he was omitting. He'd heard Magnolia scream. The sound of a blow and male laughter had followed. Then Magnolia had burst out of the bushes, wearing only a pair of red sandals and a scarlet hibiscus bloom behind one ear. Dr. Ferrel's perspiration-drenched face flushed at the memory. His body was tense. He looked up at young Koulous.

The youth's tan was gone. Pete no longer even looked big. He just looked frightened. There were deep circles under his eyes. He pulled at the fingers of his left hand constantly.

Dr. Ferrel realized his own breathing was labored. I hope they burn the young punk, he thought.

His sudden anger shocked him. Then he realized what it was. It had nothing to do with the trial. It had nothing to do with whether Magnolia had been a good girl or a bad girl when she had got into the car with the three youths. It had nothing to do with young Udell. It had to do with what had happened on the other side of the bushes.

He was jealous of young Koulous. Young Koulous had known Magnolia. Young Koulous had been intimate with her.

While all he'd had of her was torment.

Chapter Ten

THE CROWD in the courthouse square had grown. The grass was littered with greasy papers, remnants of home-made sandwiches, and empty soft-drink bottles. The children screamed even louder than they had in the morning. Their shrill voices made Ferrel's head ache.

As he escorted Elaine and Magnolia up the stone steps of the courthouse one of a group of women gathered on the walk said, "The little tramp. I'll bet she screamed for help."

Elaine tightened her fingers on Magnolia's arm. "Steady now, baby."

Magnolia's smile was sad, but sweet and forgiving. "I don't pay them no mind." She glanced quickly at Ferrel. "I mean, I pay no attention to them."

John Koulous was waiting in the lower hall, just inside the door. He said, "I wonder if I could speak to you, Dr. Ferrel."

Ferrel said, "Of course."

"We'll go on up," Elaine said. She and Magnolia walked up the stairs.

"We'd better get out of the doorway," Ferrel said. He moved down the hall and stood under the ceiling fan. It was a mildly cool spot. I wish I could stay here all day, Ferrel thought.

Koulous had difficulty speaking. "What are they going to do to my boy, Doctor?"

Ferrel felt sorry for the man. "I don't know, Mr. Koulous. That's entirely up to the jury," he said gently.

"You saw him do it to the girl?"

"No, I didn't." Ferrel lighted a cigarette. "But he admitted it in so many words in Sheriff Hammel's office."

He offered the package of cigarettes to Koulous. The supermarket owner shook his head. "Yeah. I know. But Pete said she was willing. He still says so. He says it was just a game. I mean, her running away from Udell."

"Do you believe that?"

Koulous wiped his face and the back of his neck with a perspiration-soiled handkerchief. "I don't know what to believe. Pete has been wild, sure. He hung around with young Udell. He drove too fast. He thought it was smart to get drunk. But he ain't never lied to me before."

Dr. Ferrel was disappointed in the man. "He's lying to you this time."

Koulous caught at Ferrel's arm. "But it's going to kill his mother, Doctor. If the jury—" Koulous couldn't say it. "Well, you know what I mean."

Ferrel shook the man's hand off his arm. "He should have thought of that before he ruined a young girl's life." Ferrel walked back to the foot of the stairs.

Koulous stayed under the fan. Only his eyes moved as he said, "She doesn't look ruined to me. She looks as if she's enjoying all this. Very much."

Ferrel suddenly felt unutterably weary. The stairs were steep and long. The courtroom was a fiery furnace. Still more chairs had been added to the narrow space in the aisle. His progress to his own seat was a series of: "I beg your pardon. Pardon me. May I get through here?"

Elaine smiled at him. Magnolia cupped her fingers.

Mr. Manson got up from the commonwealth table and forced his way through the crowd to where Ferrel was sitting. "I'm sorry, Dr. Ferrel," he apologized. "I know you're a busy man. I'd hoped to get to you before the noon recess." Mr. Manson looked at the long list of witnesses he'd written on the back of the bill of indictment.

"But I can promise you that you will be the second witness when court reconvenes."

"Thank you," Ferrel said. "I left a number with my nurse. One that Sheriff Hammel gave me."

"Yes." Manson smiled. "I know. I have my bailiff standing by the phone in the clerk's office."

"Thank you," Ferrel repeated.

Manson returned to the commonwealth table, stopping en route to exchange a few words with the counsel for the defense. Whatever Mr. Manson said amused them.

Doctors and lawyers, Ferrel thought. They might violently disagree, but professionally they were thicker than thieves. So a patient died, or a client went to the chair. If the operation or the defense had been a technical success, they were automatically absolved, and spent hours telling each other how good they were at the next meeting of the Bar or Medical Association.

The sun rose higher in the sky. A tipstaff pulled down the shades, cutting off what little breeze there was. Mrs. Koulous' lips continued to tremble. Joe Frazer stumbled to his seat, not as neat as he had been, trailing an aroma of wine. Dr. Ferrel was glad to see the door of the judge's chamber opening. He stood up with the others until Bill Haymen had mouthed the formalities and Judge Engle was seated. Then two tipstaves and Sheriff Hammel brought in the prisoner, and the case of the State of Florida versus Peter Koulous, Judge Abner Engle presiding, got under way again.

"Joseph Frazer," the crier called.

A fatuous smile on his face, Frazer swore to tell the truth and sat in the witness chair. Mr. Manson established the facts that he was the father of one Magnolia Frazer, a minor girl-child, and that on May tenth last, one Roger Ferrel, M.D., had driven her home at three-forty-five in the morning, said minor girl-child being in a very disheveled and hysterical condition.

"You welcomed her home, Mr. Frazer?" Manson asked. Frazer blinked his pale eyes at the prosecutor. "No," he admitted. "I didn't. I told both her and Dr. Ferrel to get out."

Frazer wondered momentarily what Mr. Manson was driving at. Then he realized what he was doing. Manson was beating the defense to the punch. It was common knowledge in Palmetto City that the bait-camp proprietor had ordered both him and Magnolia off the property at the point of a shotgun.

"Why?" Manson asked.

Frazer eased his collar with his finger. "Because I didn't recognize Dr. Ferrel. And I thought she'd been bad with some man."

"But you know better now?"

The defense objected to the question as an attempt to lead the witness. Judge Engle sustained the objection. Mr. Manson rephrased the question.

"Why did you think your daughter might have been bad, Mr. Frazer?"

Frazer tried to find something to do with his hands. He finally allowed them to dangle between his knees. "Because Maggie's so purty," he said. "Because the boys were all the time pestering her. Even some of the men who fish out of my bait camp. They've offered her presents, even money—as much as fifty dollars—if she would go in the bushes with them."

"I see," Manson said. "Did your daughter ever accept any of these presents?"

"No, sir."

"Did she ever take any of the money that was offered her?"

"No, sir."

"Did she ever go in the bushes with any of these boys or men?"

Frazer shook his head so emphatically it seemed almost

impossible for his thin neck to support it. "No, sir. Maggie is a good girl. She wants to better herself. She says she ain't going to live in a bait camp all her life. She wants to be a secretary, or maybe answer the phone for a dentist or a doctor. That's why she's taking typing and shorthand at the high school."

Mr. Manson nodded his approval. "I see. How many children have you, Mr. Frazer?"

"Nine. Counting Maggie." Frazer corrected himself. "I mean Magnolia."

"That's quite a few children to support, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"How do you manage to dress Magnolia so she won't be ashamed in school? How do you manage to pay her bus fare and lunches? And give her pocket money?"

Frazer admitted, "I can't. Not always. That's why Magnolia works in the dime store—afternoons after school, and all day Saturday. At Christmas, even, and when they have a rush. You know—whenever they can use her."

Manson looked at the jury. "I see. In other words, your minor daughter is so beautiful and attractive that grown men have offered her money to be immoral with them. They've offered her as much as fifty dollars. But rather than sully the beautiful body that God gave her, in the free hours other girls her age spend swimming, playing tennis, and engaging in extracurricular school activities, your daughter Magnolia Frazer prefers to stand behind the hot counter of a ten-cent store five afternoons a week, all day Saturday, and during the holiday season. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you ever known your daughter to be bad, Mr. Frazer? I mean, in a moral sense."

"No, sir."

"Does she ever go out nights?"

"Yes, sir. That is, every once in a while."

"Where does she go?"

"Well, once in a while to a movie. Or to the plays at the high school. Or when there's a football or basketball or baseball game. You know. Like when teams come down from Tarpon Springs, or over from Plant City to play Palmetto High."

"What time does she return from these excursions?"

"Always on the last bus. That's eleven-fifteen down our way." Frazer scowled at the youth in the prisoner's box. "That is, she always did up until that night."

Manson nodded. "I see. And it was the extreme lateness of the hour and your paternal solicitude for her well-being that so disturbed you when, at the request of the Palmetto City coroner, Dr. Flagle, Dr. Ferrel drove her home on the night of May tenth after a vicious and felonious assault upon her person?"

Frazer swallowed. "Yes, sir."

Manson looked at the defense table. "Your witness, Counselor."

The state senator was already on his feet. He walked to the witness chair. "Is it true, Mr. Frazer, that, alleging great bodily and mental harm to the person of your minor daughter, you have filed a civil suit for one hundred thousand dollars against the families Udell, Koulous, and Rudd?"

"I object," Manson shouted.

"Objection sustained," Judge Engle ruled. "The court stenographer will strike counsel's remark from the record."

The defense counsel gave Manson a ugly look. "That will be all. No questions."

Joe Frazer shuffled back to his seat, very well pleased with Joe Frazer.

Bill Haymen consulted the list Mr. Manson had given him. "Dr. Roger Ferrel."

Sworn in, Ferrel sat waiting for the prosecutor to finish

sorting some papers on his table. He was acutely conscious of the eyes watching him and wished he looked older. He wondered how many women were whispering, "He's cute," and other such nonsense to their neighbors.

Mr. Manson finished with his papers. "You are Dr. Roger M. Ferrel?"

"I am," Ferrel said.

"A qualified physician in active practice in Palmetto City?"

"Yes, sir."

"In what branch of medicine do you specialize, Dr. Ferrel?"

"I specialize in obstetrics."

"And on the night of May tenth last, at approximately two o'clock in the morning, you were in Phillipe Park, on the outskirts of Palmetto City?"

"Yes, I was."

"Might I ask what you were doing in such an isolated section at that time of morning, Dr. Ferrel?"

Ferrel gripped the arms of his chair. Thinking of Mary Hart still hurt. He said, "I'd just lost a patient. A Caesarean section. I'd saved the child, but lost the mother. And I wanted to be alone. To think."

Mr. Manson allowed the silence to deepen, then broke it by asking quietly, "Think about what, Dr. Ferrel?"

Ferrel was impatient with him. "About the patient I'd just lost. Think back. Check every aspect of the case. From the first examination to the moment the Hart woman expired. Make certain I hadn't made some mistake."

"I see," Manson said. "How long have you been in active practice, Dr. Ferrel?"

"Approximately ten years."

"And even after ten years of active practice, losing a patient still bothers you?"

Ferrel was even more impatient with Manson. "Of

course. A doctor's obligation to society is to save lives."

"Of course," Manson said softly. He smiled and dropped the subject. "Now to return to the night of May tenth, at approximately two o'clock in the morning in Phillipe Park. Do you see anyone in this courtroom, Dr. Ferrel, whom you saw in the park that night?"

Dr. Ferrel looked at Magnolia, then at the prisoner's box. "Yes, I do. Two people. Miss Magnolia Frazer and Pete Koulous."

"Did you first see them in the park?"

"No. I first glimpsed them at the Picken-Chicken while I was having a cold drink. They were in a yellow convertible that roared away from the other side of the drive-in and disappeared in the direction of Phillipe Park."

"What did you think, Dr. Ferrel?"

"I thought the driver was drunk."

"I object," one of the defense counsels said.

"Objection sustained," Judge Engle ruled. "The stenographer will strike the witness's unsupported surmise from the record."

Manson smiled. "Now tell me this, Dr. Ferrel. When did you next see either of the two persons in the courtroom whom you have identified as having been in Phillipe Park?"

"About twenty minutes later, I'd say."

"Did you hear or see them first?"

"I heard them."

"What did you hear?"

"I heard a girl screaming."

"Do you remember her exact words?"

"She screamed, 'No, Please. You're hurting me. Oh, won't someone help me?'"

Mr. Manson scowled at young Koulous. Most of the jury scowled at him. Manson looked back at Ferrel. "Would you say the girl was being playful? Or was she in pain, Dr. Ferrel?"

Ferrel mopped his perspiring cheeks with his handkerchief. "I would say she was in pain."

"The pain of a young girl being forced, sexually? Against her will?"

Dr. Ferrel returned his handkerchief to his pocket. "That could well be."

Both defense lawyers jumped to their feet to object, changed their minds, and held a whispered consultation.

Mr. Manson rested his hands on the arm of the witness chair. "What else did you hear, Dr. Ferrel?"

"I heard a male voice say something I couldn't distinguish. The girl screamed again, and I heard flesh being struck or slapped."

"Then what?"

"Then a male voice laughed."

"I see. A girl cried for help after being struck or slapped." Manson looked at the white-faced prisoner.

"Then a man laughed. Go on, Dr. Ferrel. Then what?"

"Then the hibiscus bushes screening the shore of the lake parted and Miss Frazer, still screaming, emerged from the bushes and ran in the direction of the tree under which I was standing."

"How was she dressed, Dr. Ferrel?"

"She wasn't dressed. She was wearing nothing but a pair of red shoes. Sandals, I believe they're called."

"Was she being pursued?"

"Yes, sir. Closely."

"By whom?"

"By young Udell, the prisoner in the box, and a third boy, whose name I'm told is Marty Rudd."

"What happened then, Dr. Ferrel?"

"I called, 'Here,' to guide the girl toward me. But in her panic she didn't hear me. At approximately the same time Udell caught her by the shoulders, threw her to the ground, and took her forcibly."

Thinking of it made Ferrel sick. His flesh crawled. He

looked at Magnolia. The entire jury looked at her. The blonde girl was sobbing on Elaine's shoulder.

Manson's voice sounded like two dry palm fronds being rubbed together. "By 'he took her forcibly,' Dr. Ferrel, do you mean he forced her to have sexual relations with him? An act known to the law as rape and defined as 'the illicit carnal knowledge of a woman without her consent'?"

Ferrel mopped at his face again. "That is correct."

"You were witness to this?"

"I was."

"Did Miss Frazer attempt to fight off her attacker?"

"Strenuously. She fought and kicked and continued to scream."

Manson looked at the prisoner. "Where was Pete Koulous while this was happening, Dr. Ferrel?"

"He was squatting on his haunches, laughing."

"Did he attempt to assist Miss Frazer?"

"On the contrary. While Rudd attempted to hold one of her feet, young Koulous held Miss Frazer's arms."

Joe Frazer got up from his chair. "You dirty young son-of-a-bitch!" He started for the prisoner's box, unfolding a big clasp knife.

"Restrain that man," Judge Engle said sharply.

Two husky tipstaves fought their way through the crowd of screaming women. One of them seized Frazer by the arms. The other took his knife away from him.

"It was a game," young Koulous said, weeping. "I tell you, it was a game. We were just playing."

"A game," Frazer panted. "I'll fix you so you won't play any more games like that."

He started for young Koulous again, dragging the tipstaves with him. Mrs. Koulous fainted. "Remove that man," Judge Engle ordered. "I recognize Mr. Frazer's right to natural indignation, but a court of law is no place to display uncontrolled emotion."

The two tipstaves hustled Frazer from the courtroom. The defense moved for a mistrial. Judge Engle denied the motion. Mrs. Koulous was revived. When order and quiet had been restored, Judge Engle nodded to Manson. "You may continue with the witness, Mr. Prosecutor."

Manson walked to the far end of the jury box, turned slowly, and asked his next question from there. "Do you recall just what Miss Frazer screamed after Udell had knocked her to the ground, Dr. Ferrel?"

"Yes," Ferrel said. "I do. She screamed, 'Help, help, help. Oh, someone help me. Please.'"

"Did you attempt to help her, Dr. Ferrel?"

"Immediately."

"How?"

"I made my presence known and ordered young Udell to get up."

"What happened then?"

"The boy in the prisoner's box stopped laughing and got to his feet. His voice was thick, as if he'd been drinking. 'You stay out of this, mister,' he warned me."

"And then?"

"He advanced on me with his fists clenched. I ordered him to stop. Instead, he and Udell and the third boy rushed me."

"They struck you?"

"Many times. They knocked me to the ground. They blacked my eye. And they loosened one of my front teeth." As he recalled the scene, Dr. Ferrel's dormant anger and revulsion flared hot again. "Meanwhile making obscene remarks, among them the vile suggestion that they force me to violate Miss Frazer so I couldn't tell on them."

Some woman in the courtroom called, "For shame!", and others murmured angrily.

The crier banged the block with his gavel. Mr. Manson leaned on the rail of the jury box. His voice was confidential. "I won't embarrass Dr. Ferrel by forcing him to

tell what happened next. Dr. Ferrel isn't a man of violence. He is a healer, a saver of lives, a bringer of babies into the world. But in defense of his life, his high principles, and Miss Frazer's honor, he was forced to strike back. He was forced to fight three young hoodlums, each of whom outweighed him by twenty pounds. In the exchange of blows, Thomas Udell was killed. Dying beside the nude body that he," Manson pointed an accusing finger at the prisoner's box, "and young Peter Koulous had just criminally violated."

A defense attorney sprang to his feet. "I object."

Judge Engle failed to hear him.

Manson studied the weeping prisoner for a long time. Then he walked back to the witness chair. "What happened then, Dr. Ferrel?"

Ferrel realized he still had his handkerchief in his hand. He used it to wipe his palms and returned it to his pocket. "The two remaining boys ran away. Miss Frazer was still lying on the ground. I asked her where her clothes were. She said they were down on the beach, and I got them for her. While she dressed I asked if the other two boys had also attacked her."

Mr. Manson leaned on the arm of the witness chair. "What did she tell you, Dr. Ferrel?"

"She said, 'Yes, sir. Down on the beach.'"

Mr. Manson stood erect. "Thank you. That will be all, Dr. Ferrel." He looked at the defense table. Both defense counsels shook their heads.

Bill Haymen struck the block with his gavel. "Miss Magnolia Frazer."

Mr. Manson walked to the rail. "Are you all right, Miss Frazer? Are you composed enough to take the stand?"

Magnolia wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. Her shoulders squared. Her young breasts thrust forward against the bodice of her dress. Her smile was brave. "I'm sorry I cried. I didn't mean to, Mr. Prosecutor." Mag-

nolia cast a venomous glance at young Koulous. "It was just—remembering. I—I'm all right now."

Elaine patted her hand. "Good girl."

Mr. Manson opened the gate for Magnolia, then turned to speak with a court attendant who was trying to get his attention.

". . . so help you, God?" Bill Haymen concluded.

One small white hand on the Bible, Magnolia swore, "So help me, God."

Mr. Manson spoke to the bench. "May I ask the Court to excuse me a moment?" He walked through the gate and up the aisle to where Dr. Ferrel was sitting, and said quietly, "Your office just phoned, Dr. Ferrel. It seems a Mrs. Carter is having a difficult time."

"Thank you," Ferrel said. "I expected that."

Mr. Manson returned behind the rail. Dr. Ferrel made his way out of the courtroom as unobtrusively as possible. It wasn't difficult. All attention was centered on Magnolia. Ferrel turned in the big double door of the room and looked back. Magnolia looked very sweet and brave and lovely in the simple white linen dress. In answer to Mr. Manson's question she gave her name and age.

"My name is Magnolia Frazer. I'm sixteen years old."

It was after seven o'clock when the second of the Carter twins put in his delayed appearance. Dr. Ferrel did what remained to be done, then walked out into the hall. Sheriff Hammel was sitting on the bench beside the proud new father.

"Twins, the nurse tells me," Carter said, grinning. "A boy and a girl."

"That's right," Dr. Ferrel said.

"And Nelly's O.K.?"

"She's fine."

"Can I see her?"

Dr. Ferrel smiled. "In a few minutes. The nurse will

come out and get you." He walked down the air-conditioned corridor with Hammel. "Well?"

"I knew you'd want to know," Hammel said. "So when I saw your car still in the parking lot, I came up."

Ferrel realized he was still wearing his mask. He loosened it and let it hang on his chest. "Yes?"

Hammel burnished his gold tooth with his tongue. "The jury gave it to young Koulous, but good. The defense did their best to trip up Maggie. To back up Pete's story about her being willing and it just being a game, they tried to make her admit that she'd had relations with other boys before that night. They even put three young punks on the stand who claimed they'd been intimate with her at a beach party. But Manson cut them down, one, two, three. Two of their fathers work for Old Man Udell. The father of the third boy owes the Palmetto Savings and Loan Association eight thousand dollars. And Manson forced the boy to admit that Udell had offered to cancel the note if he would testify as he did."

"So Udell came into it, after all?"

"So it would seem."

Ferrel wished Sheriff Hammel would finish what he had to say and leave. He wanted to scrub up and go home. "What do you mean, the jury gave it to young Koulous, but good?"

"The big one," Sheriff Hammel said. "What it says in the book. Guilty as charged, with no recommendation for mercy. The defense is appealing, of course. Engle gave them thirty days to file a brief. Not that it will do any good. It was your testimony that really nailed him in the chair."

"Oh," Dr. Ferrel said. He fought a queasy stomach. His feeling of unreality, of moving through a nightmare, returned. A boy's life was a heavy price to pay for a few moments with a woman. "Oh," he repeated. "But what are you doing at the hospital?"

"I paced the ambulance," Hammel told him.

"The ambulance?" Dr. Ferrel queried.

Sheriff Hammel nodded. "Yeah. With Mrs. Koulous in it. Not that it did any good. It seems she's had a bad ticker for some time. And what do you think was the last thing she told me?"

"I'm certain I wouldn't know."

Sheriff Hammel took off his hat. "She said, 'You have to believe me. That awful girl is lying. Pete is a good boy, Sheriff Hammel.'"

Chapter Eleven

THERE WAS A sour taste in Ferrel's mouth when he awoke. Somewhere out on the lawn a covey of early-rising quail was greeting the dawn with cheerful inquiry. Ferrel lighted a cigarette, being careful not to awaken Elaine.

September was always his worst month. By then the heat had been too intense too long. He felt enervated, drawn. Each year he hoped to get away and never did. There were always babies due, or complications he didn't dare entrust to other doctors. Especially the doctors who treated obstetrics as a side line and had a correspondingly high mortality rate.

One September he and Elaine had got as far as Asheville and the stimulating coolness of the North Carolina mountains. But only for a few days. Then a telegram had recalled him. The wife of the owner of the Bijou had been having a change-of-life baby. And what a birth that had been!

Ferrel lay in a pool of sweat, watching dawn paint the window sill of the bedroom and listening to Elaine snore. Elaine was sleeping well these nights. She should.

Dr. Ferrel looked at his wife without moving his head. A truant lock of rust-colored hair had fallen over her mouth. It fluttered like a pennant each time she exhaled. He refused to look at her body. He knew what her body looked like, from every angle.

Ferrel returned his attention to the dawn. It was filtered through pale-green leaves. He must remember to

tell the yardman to cut back the yellow allamanda. The vine and its huge trumpet-shaped blossoms almost covered the window. Small wonder the attic fan failed to cool the rooms. The vine was delicate but lush. Almost as delicate and as lush as Magnolia.

It had taken tremendous will power, but he'd put Magnolia out of his mind. He merely refused to think of her that way. She was, after all, a child and under his protection. He'd be a foster father to her, nothing more. Anything else was unthinkable.

He smiled as he thought of Magnolia. The art teacher at the high school had been right in her appraisal. Magnolia had an "appreciation." She liked pretty things. She liked to wear good clothes. She liked to drive a car. She liked to have a maid pick up after her. Each day was a new joy and an experience. She fitted into the picture of gracious living as if she had been born to it. Not that she gushed when you did things for her. Elaine made a man feel like a fool, by her overappreciation. Magnolia was a born lady. She accepted what you did for her as her just due.

"Thank you," she'd say with a smile, and let it go at that.

More, she didn't fuss over a man, or jump to get his paper or his cigarettes. She figured an adult male was old enough to wait on himself.

Ferrel snuffed his cigarette. A shame she had such a heel of a father. Joe Frazer was drinking heavily again, undoubtedly on money advanced by the firm of opportunists handling his civil suit for damages.

Ferrel swung his feet to the floor. Udell was still out to make trouble for him, if possible. Udell's latest attempt had been to start a whispering campaign about the continued presence of Magnolia in the Ferrel home. Roger Ferrel had heard several versions. One was that he and Elaine were separating because of Magnolia. The other

was that Magnolia was blackmailing him and Elaine into supporting her in a lavish manner because they were afraid she'd tell the truth, that on the night he'd killed young Udell he had been soddenly drunk.

On one can of beer, Ferrel thought.

As he stood up cautiously, Elaine stopped snoring and opened one eye. "What do you want for breakfast, sweetheart?"

The thought of food almost nauseated Ferrel. "Anything," he said shortly.

"I'll think of something," she said smiling. Elaine sat up and scratched herself. "Something nice." She added, "Your clean shorts and undershirt and socks are on top of the bathroom hamper, darling. I laid them out for you last night."

It was an effort for Ferrel to be civil. "Thanks." He padded into the bathroom and closed the door to get away from her. If only Elaine would stop smothering him with her cloying possessiveness!

He was a registered physician. He'd been an officer in the Army of the United States. His practice earned him a minimum of eighteen thousand dollars a year. He was thirty-eight years old. He would be thirty-nine in two months. Still, if he permitted it, Elaine would wipe and powder him, as if he were a six-month-old infant.

Ferrel's sour mood continued as he showered. The cold water came out lukewarm and slightly brackish-smelling. It was time Palmetto City got a new water supply. It was time Palmetto City did a lot of things. The former sleepy fishing village had grown into a city. But its cautious city fathers, afraid of raising the taxes, were still thinking and planning back in the "Message to Garcia" days. If they weren't careful, they would wake some morning to find the troops gone from the waterfront and the war with Spain over.

Showered, Ferrel allowed the water to remain on his

body, hoping the evaporation would cool him. He was out of brushless shaving cream and had to use an old nub of a soap stick and a molted brush he found on the top shelf of the medicine cabinet. Then his razor pulled. This was going to be one of *those* days. He could tell it.

His mind wandered, and the razor cut into his flesh. Swearing under his breath, he stanchd the flow of blood with the washrag and used his other hand to paw through the littered medicine cabinet in search of a styptic pencil.

It was a hell of a medicine cabinet for a doctor's home. There was a jar of cream shampoo, a bottle of color rinse, a tarnished spoon, a broken glass ear dropper, some eye-wash, a wad of dirty cotton, some skin cream, a can of foot powder, innumerable empty medicine bottles, a syringe tip, and a small bottle of potassium permanganate. But no styptic pencil.

Roger Ferrel slammed the cabinet door in disgust. As he did, the door opening into the bathroom from Magnolia's room opened. Magnolia had apparently just got out of bed. She had on only a kimono, which swung wide as she opened the door.

"Oh. I beg your pardon," she gasped. "I—I thought it was your room door that I heard."

Embarrassed, smiling shyly and trying to cover herself with one hand, Magnolia closed the door she'd opened. The cut on his chin forgotten, Ferrel rested his forehead on the medicine-cabinet mirror. The glass felt comparatively cool. Will power. Not think of Magnolia that way. That was a lot of hogwash. Who was he kidding? Certainly not himself. And surely Elaine would soon begin to wonder.

Ferrel raised his head from the mirror. He couldn't go on this way. He had to get Magnolia out of his house before something tragic happened. The blood dripped off his chin unchecked. It trickled through the hair on his chest and fingered out across his abdomen. It looked like

a human hand. It seemed, to Ferrel, symbolic of Eve's curious hand, the fingers pointed down, reaching back through the ages:

"And the woman said unto the serpent, we may eat of the fruit of the tree of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die."

And the serpent had answered in so many words, "Go ahead, kid. Take a chance."

"Almost ready, dear?" Elaine called. "Addie is making your toast."

"Almost," Ferrel called.

He wiped the blood from his abdomen and chest, and stoppered the cut with a small triangle of tissue. He would suggest that Elaine and Magnolia go to the mountains for a month. He would suggest it at breakfast. That would be at least a partial solution. It would give him time to think. He didn't want to send the child back to her father's house. He couldn't. It wouldn't be fair; not after giving her a taste of how sweet life could be. Anyway, he doubted very much if Elaine would permit him to send her back. Elaine had grown very fond of Magnolia. And whom Elaine was fond of, she managed to possess entirely.

Addie had set the breakfast table in the breezeway, but no breeze was stirring. Even out here it was hot. The bowl of strawberries and thick cream at Ferrel's place had a slightly curdled look.

Elaine, her bare feet in scuffs and wearing a too frothy wrapper, held up her face to be kissed. "Morning, darling. Cut yourself, didn't you?"

Roger touched the scrap of paper plastered on his chin. "Not badly." He kissed Elaine, wishing she would comb her hair and use make-up before breakfast. With her hair pulled back in a horsetail, and without lipstick

or powder, she had a slightly wanton look. As if she had spent a hard night—and enjoyed it very much.

Ferrel took his place at the table. Presently, Magnolia, slim and lovely in a simple cotton dress, every shining hair in place, came out on the breezeway.

“Good morning.”

Elaine hugged her. “Good morning, darling. My, aren’t we pretty this morning.”

“Thank you.” Magnolia smiled. She seated herself at the table. “Good morning, Dr. Ferrel.”

“Good morning, Magnolia.”

His mouth was dry. His throat was tight. It was an effort to drink his coffee. When he had, he wished he hadn’t. It made him even warmer than he had been before.

Elaine blew up at the lock of hair that persisted in falling over her eyes. “Whew. Hot, isn’t it?”

Ferrel seized the opportunity. “It certainly is. You know what I was thinking, honey?” He avoided looking at Magnolia. “While I shaved.”

Elaine buttered his toast. “What, darling?”

“Why don’t you and Magnolia take one of the cars and drive up to Asheville, or Gatlinburg, or somewhere in the mountains for a month? There’s no need of your staying in this heat.”

The heat had bothered Elaine since she’d put on weight. “That’s an idea,” she said enthusiastically. She smiled at Magnolia. “The Doctor’s a thoughtful cuss, isn’t he?”

Magnolia wasn’t so enthusiastic. “Very. Also, awfully nice.”

Elaine patted her hand. “And you’re a sweet child.”

As he attempted to eat his strawberries Ferrel could almost see the wheels revolving in Elaine’s mind. If she accepted his offer to send them to the mountains for a month it would give her an excuse to go on another

shopping spree, to buy the pretty things she loved, for Magnolia and herself.

Elaine spooned a strawberry into her mouth. "Hmm. You know, the more I think about the idea, the better I like it." She brushed at the hair in her eyes with the back of her hand. "Don't get me wrong. I love Florida. I wouldn't live anywhere else. But September is one month too many." She added in a concerned voice, "But how about you, sweetheart? How would you get along without us?"

Roger had that figured. "Addie can get my breakfasts, just as she always does. I always eat out at noon. And at night I can eat in a hotel."

Elaine winked at Magnolia. "Hear that? He has it all planned. I'll bet he's trying to get rid of us. I'll bet he has some other woman on the string."

It seemed to Ferrel that Magnolia's smile was a trifle forced. "It does look that way."

Ferrel laughed, too heartily. His voice was louder than necessary. "Don't be silly. I might even be able to get up for a week end or two."

Elaine said, "Of course. You could fly up, sweetheart."

And so it was decided, at least tentatively. Elaine and Magnolia would spend a month in the mountains. But they would need a few days in which to shop, perhaps a week.

Ferrel drove through the lifeless, heat-filled streets to the first of his morning house calls, feeling weak with relief. Every problem had a solution, if a man could think of it. By the time Elaine and Magnolia returned from their vacation, he would have thought of something more permanent. Perhaps a school other than the one he had suggested, and Magnolia had tearfully rejected.

"But I don't want to go away," she'd sobbed. "I want to stay with you and Mrs. Ferrel."

Perhaps then, when the shock of her experience was

over, she would have changed her mind. The morning wore on toward noon. Ferrel prescribed and advised and treated automatically, using only part of his mind.

It was Kiwanis day. Ferrel ate too much for lunch, as usual. He was pleased to learn from Mrs. Hayes that his afternoon schedule was light. "I guess it's too hot to have babies," she told him.

Miss Jones was practical. "It's never too hot to have babies."

It wasn't quite two o'clock, and his first appointment was at two-thirty. He sat gratefully in his chair in his air-conditioned office and read the morning paper he hadn't had time to read. The only matter of local interest concerned young Koulous. After two months of delay, the Circuit Court of Appeals had finally agreed to review his case. Ferrel hoped they would reverse the finding of the lower court. As fond as he was of Magnolia, he thought Pete Koulous' sentence had been too severe. The case had already cost two lives. Flesh was weak, as he well knew. But with Magnolia's physical presence removed, he would undoubtedly return to normal. Ferrel shuddered. And what was normalcy? Normalcy was despising Elaine, forcing himself to fulfill her needs, wishing to God he could be rid of her. He sighed. He must find a way out of this trap.

The interoffice annunciator on his desk buzzed. "A Miss Frazer to see you," Mrs. Hayes informed him. "She has no appointment, but I told her I thought we could squeeze her in."

Ferrel got to his feet as Magnolia entered the office. Now what? Possibly Elaine had made up her mind just where she wanted to go and wanted him to wire for reservations. Or perhaps she'd run out of money. "Come in, child," he greeted Magnolia.

Magnolia sat primly on the edge of the green leather chair beside his desk. It was the first time she'd been in

his office. She looked around shyly, seemingly pleased with what she saw.

Dr. Ferrel resumed his chair and snuffed the cigarette he'd been smoking. "What now, Magnolia? Mrs. Ferrel run out of money, or something?"

The blonde girl shook her head. "No." She seemed embarrassed, uncertain of how to proceed. "It isn't about Mrs. Ferrel."

"What, then?" Ferrel asked her.

Magnolia took a deep breath. "Me."

Ferrel reached for another cigarette, his fingers shaking so badly he had difficulty extracting the cigarette from its package. "Just what do you mean, Magnolia?"

Magnolia blushed. "Well, when I had the trouble—" "Yes?"

"And Dr. Flagle examined me—"

"Yes—?" The constriction returned to Ferrel's throat.

Magnolia looked down at the hands in her lap. "Well, Dr. Flagle said I—I should have a more thorough examination later. And—well, I never did. And if Mrs. Ferrel and I are going away for a month, I thought, well—" She stopped talking, unable to go on.

Some man's voice, a voice Ferrel didn't recognize, asked, "There's been no interruption of your period?"

"No, sir," Magnolia said. "But—well, Dr. Flagle said sometimes there are complications. And I'd like to know if—if everything is all right."

Ferrel got stiffly to his feet. "Miss Jones."

Miss Jones opened the office door. "Yes, Dr. Ferrel?"

The same voice that Ferrel didn't recognize said, "Miss Frazer is to have a complete physical. You will prepare the patient, Miss Jones."

"Yes, Dr. Ferrel," Miss Jones said crisply. "If you will step this way, Miss Frazer."

Sweat streamed down Ferrel's face. He damned himself for a fool. He should have sent Magnolia to another

doctor. This physical contact was just what he had been trying to avoid. But it had all happened so suddenly. He realized, belatedly, that to have sent Magnolia away would have been a confession of weakness.

He was still standing by his desk when Miss Jones opened the door of the examining room. Her voice was professionally crisp.

"The patient is ready, Dr. Ferrel."

Chapter Twelve

THE GARDENIA and nightblooming jasmine, which grew in profusion on both sides of the breezeway, filled the dining room with their sweet cloying perfume. Dr. Ferrel ate mechanically. He was back in the same old rut. His sensation of moving blindly through a nightmare studded with thorn trees had never been so strong. Each way he turned, he was torn.

"I'm becoming neurotic," he thought.

As Addie removed the plates and served the coffee, Elaine paused in her bright résumé of the day's shopping to ask, "Why so quiet tonight, Sweetheart?"

"Just thinking," Ferrel said.

He wondered if Magnolia and Elaine had discussed the visit to his office. He decided they hadn't. At least, they hadn't mentioned it during dinner.

From time to time Ferrel glanced across the table at the child. Each shining hair was in place. Her eager young breasts thrust forward against her white T shirt. There was a freshly scrubbed, virginal look about her. Since the night he had commented on her make-up she had refused to use lipstick or rouge. Twice during the meal their feet touched under the table, and the lump in Ferrel's throat grew larger as he envisioned her young legs inches from his own. She ate, seldom raising her eyes from her plate, speaking only when spoken to. Ferrel forced an interest in what Elaine was saying.

It would seem she had decided that she and Magnolia would go to the Dogwood Blossom Lodge in North

Carolina. It was built high on a mountain just outside of Brevard, not far from the Pisgah Forest. Elaine had bought new sport clothes for herself and Magnolia, warm ones; sweaters, slacks, and jackets. Elaine had also talked to Mrs. Irwin. Mrs. Irwin had spent three weeks at the lodge and had recommended it highly. It was expensive, but worth it.

Elaine was enthusiastic. The accommodations and food were superb. There were group activities every day and every night; hiking, riding, golf, hay rides, dancing, parties. Even during the last weeks of August, when the Irwins had been there, the days were comfortably cool. The nights were downright cold. At night there was always a fire in the huge stone fireplace in the lobby. And every night the guests gathered round the fireplace to enjoy well-prepared drinks and popcorn and talk and sing and dance to the music of a four-piece orchestra from Hendersonville. And some nights there were square dances.

It sounded terrible to Ferrel.

Elaine patted Magnolia's hand. "We're going to have a great time, aren't we, honey?"

Magnolia said dutifully, "Yes'm."

She didn't sound too enthusiastic. Ferrel doubted that she was. Magnolia was pure cracker. She liked the heat. The hotter it got, the better.

Elaine continued, "There's a landing field at Hendersonville. I checked." She smiled across the table at him. "It's only two hours or so by plane. And you can fly up every week end."

Dr. Ferrel forced a smile. "Every week end that I can."

He was glad when the meal was over. The day had been a strain. The sight and feel and remembered fragrance of Magnolia's young body followed him to his arm chair. Why couldn't the child have gone to some other physician? Why bother to be examined, anyway? Her

experience in Phillipe Park was four mouths old. There was absolutely nothing wrong with her. She was a perfectly healthy young female.

Ferrel forced his mind to drop the subject. It was good to be home, to be wearing slippers instead of shoes, to be wearing a robe instead of a coat. Now that Jackson had trimmed back the allamanda and the other vines, the attic fan was doing more good. Ferrel read the editorial and the sports page in the evening paper. He considered, but not seriously, going down to the ball park and watching the local team play Havana. Palmetto City had a good team this year. But every time he went to a ball game and the score was tied with three men on bases and two out, the loud-speaker was certain to squawk:

"Is Dr. Ferrel in the ball park? Will Dr. Ferrel please come to the box office?"

It was much easier on his nerves to listen to the broadcast. Ferrel checked the radio page. So many of the better programs had shifted over to TV, and television reception was still spotty in Palmetto City. It had hardly paid to buy a set. Not that it mattered much to him. Television would be the same as radio. He'd no sooner become interested in some program than the phone would ring, and an anxious voice would say, "Can you come right over, Dr. Ferrel, please?"

Ferrel checked several programs with his pen. Groucho Marx was still in the same spot. Marx was one of his favorites. No matter how hot or tired he was, he could always get a laugh out of Groucho.

"Getting set for a big evening?" Elaine asked.

Ferrel looked up to see Elaine, changed into another dress, standing in front of his chair. "Now what? Where are you going?" he asked her.

Elaine stopped to kiss him. "It's Wednesday night, stupid. Remember? University Women's Club."

"Oh," Ferrel said.

Laughing, Elaine told Magnolia, "Don't ever marry a doctor, child. Their minds are always a million miles away." She glanced at her watch. "You have to remind them of the darnedest things. And I don't mean club meetings."

Magnolia laughed with her, politely.

Elaine stooped and kissed Ferrel again. "I won't be late, sweetheart. If you get thirsty, there's plenty of root beer and Coke and orange juice in the refrigerator. There's coffee in the pot on the back burner. And I had Addie make up some sandwiches before she left."

"Thank you," Ferrel said.

Elaine patted Magnolia's shoulder. "Take care of him for me, honey." Elaine laughed. "And if I'm not back by eleven, and someone isn't having a baby, tell him to go to bed."

"Yes, Mrs. Ferrel," Magnolia said.

"Elaine," the older woman corrected.

"Elaine," Magnolia repeated.

Ferrel watched his wife step into the breezeway. Elaine looked very smart in white. She was still an attractive woman. She stood out in any gathering. Small drops of sweat beaded her forehead. He wished she'd picked some other night to leave him alone with Magnolia.

He listened as she started her car down the drive. Elaine drove as she did everything else—well. He listened until the throb of the car motor faded in the distance and the whir of the sprinklers became audible again.

Ker-wish, ker-wish, ker-wish. Ferrel felt his head rolling, imperceptibly, with the sound. Around and around and around.

The room seemed much warmer with Elaine gone. The cloying scent of the jasmine was sickening. Ferrel lowered his paper a trifle and looked over the top of it at Magnolia. The lamplight reflecting from her honey-colored hair, she was sitting on the sofa glancing at the

pages of one of Elaine's movie magazines. As usual around the house, she was wearing shorts. As always, they were too tight. As she sat with both bare feet on the sofa, resting the magazine against her raised knees, it looked as if all she was wearing below the waist was a white strap between her legs.

Ferrel noted a sharp increase in the beat of his pulse. He was disgusted with himself. Perhaps he'd better go to the ball game after all.

Magnolia saw him looking at her and smiled over her magazine. "We're all alone."

"Yes," Ferrel said shortly. "We are." The constriction returned to his throat. It was an effort to talk. He returned his attention to his newspaper, but the blurred words ran together like so many spirochetes on a slide being viewed through an improperly adjusted lens. He loosened his tie, then unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. "Hot, isn't it?"

"I'm comfortable," Magnolia said.

Ferrel liked her for that. Elaine would have agreed with him. Whatever he said was right. If he said that night was day, Elaine agreed with him. He fished for a topic of conversation. "You and Elaine ought to have a good time at this Dogwood Blossom Lodge."

"Yes. We should," Magnolia said.

Ferrel was pleased with his perception. He had been right. Magnolia wasn't enthusiastic about going to the mountains. "Have you ever been to the mountains?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "No. I've never been out of Palmetto."

The constriction in Ferrel's throat increased. He wished Magnolia would put her feet on the floor. He cleared his throat with an effort. "Well, you ought to enjoy it, then."

"Yes, sir," Magnolia said.

Ferrel realized his hands were shaking so badly that

the motion of the paper was visible. He folded the paper and put it on the floor beside his chair. Magnolia resumed her study of the movie magazine. Slumped in his chair, Ferrel studied her openly for a long time, in torment. The only sounds were the rasp of his own heavy breathing and the *ker-wish, ker-wish* of the sprinklers..

"Yes. It is hot," Ferrel said finally. He wondered if the remark sounded as stupid to Magnolia as it did to him. He got up from his chair, embarrassed. "I think I'll have a glass of something cool."

Elaine would have jumped to her feet and gone to get it for him. Magnolia barely glanced up from her magazine. "You do that," she said gravely. "It might pleasure you."

Ferrel smiled as he walked to the kitchen. Magnolia was filled with surprises, most of them pleasant. For days she would use nothing but the most correct English. Then out would come a Cracker idiom like "It might pleasure you."

He opened the door of the refrigerator and looked at the root beer and Coca-Cola with distaste. Ferrel doubted they would quench his thirst. He knew they wouldn't dispel the taste in his mouth. On impulse, he took a tray of ice cubes out of the freezer compartment. Then, reaching into an upper cabinet in the kitchen, he took down an unopened bottle of rum. If the phone rang, he'd let it ring. He wouldn't, he couldn't make any calls tonight. His presence would be more dangerous to a patient than his absence. His hands were shaking as badly as they had the night after Mary Hart had died.

He was opening the bottle of rum when Magnolia padded into the kitchen. "I'll have a Coke," she said. "If you don't mind."

"Of course not," Ferrel said.

Magnolia's hip brushed his as she passed him on her way to the refrigerator. The physical contact increased

Ferrel's torment. It was an effort to breathe. A drop of sweat got into his mouth. It was all he could do to keep from crushing her in his arms. He put three ice cubes in a highball glass, and the neck of the bottle rapped sharply against the glass as he covered the ice with rum.

Magnolia opened a bottle of Coke and sipped it, facing him. Her small nose crinkled in a cute grimace. "You're having a real drink, aren't you?"

"Why, yes," Ferrel said. "I am." He took a big drink. The rum was still warm, but it tasted good. It was also, he told himself, serving a medicinal purpose. The heat induced by the rum would act as a counterirritant. "Would you care for some in your Coke?"

Magnolia shook her head. "No, thank you."

Ferrel wished she hadn't come into the kitchen. He wished she wouldn't stand so close. Her white cotton T shirt was as tight as her shorts. More, there was nothing under it. Her breasts were perfectly outlined.

Magnolia smiled uncertainly. Then her smile faded.

"Now what?" Ferrel asked her.

She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "I'm glad we're alone," she said. "I—I want to talk to you, Dr. Ferrel. That's one of the reasons I came to your office this afternoon. Then I couldn't say anything because your nurse was there all the time."

"Talk about what?" Ferrel asked her.

She said, simply, "Us."

"Us?"

"Yes," Magnolia answered. "Do you know what they're saying in town? They're saying that the reason you're letting me stay is because you and I—" She paused, embarrassed. "Well, that you and Mrs. Ferrel are going to separate because of us."

"I've heard the story," Ferrel said. "But you know it's ridiculous."

"Of course." Magnolia smiled. Her smile faded again.

"But—well, you've been so kind to me, Dr. Ferrel, I—I don't want to do anything to hurt you. So—"

"So—what?"

Magnolia set her Coke bottle on the breakfast bar and rested her small hands on his chest. "So—maybe I better go back to Pa's."

Ferrel looked down at her hands. "You want to?"

She shook her head. "No." She moved even closer. "I—I—"

The physical contact, the nearness of her body, the brush of her breasts across Ferrel's chest was physical pain. "You what?" he asked harshly.

Tears glistened in Magnolia's eyes. "I don't ever want to go away from you. I don't even want to go to the mountains. I—I'll die if I can't be with you. Always."

Magnolia's fingers toyed with the hair on his chest. Ferrel caught at her wrist. "Stop it. You don't know what you're saying, Magnolia."

"I do. I love you."

"You can't."

"Why can't I?"

"Because you're mistaking natural gratitude for an entirely different emotion."

Magnolia moved her head from side to side, slowly. "No." She slid her arm over his shoulder and pressed her lips to his in a lingering kiss. It wasn't a little-girl kiss. There were fire and fever in it. There was promise. She was Eve laughing at Adam. She was Lilith before Eve. Her breathing was as labored as his. "Does that taste like gratitude?"

Ferrel pushed her away from him, so hard her slim back struck the porcelain door of the refrigerator. "You don't know what you're saying," he growled. He picked up his glass and the rum bottle from the breakfast bar. "And don't ever do that again. I won't be responsible if you do."

Slow tears trickling down her cheeks, Magnolia stood with her palms pressed flat against the refrigerator door. Carrying the glass and bottle, Ferrel walked to the bedroom he shared with Elaine and slammed the door behind him.

Sweat stood out on his forehead in great drops. It ran down his sides under his sodden shirt and robe. It had been close, too close. His knees weak, he sat on the edge of the bed, his flesh still tingling from the memory of Magnolia's lips, her fingers. In another moment he would have taken her, like young Koulous and Udell and Rudd had taken her.

Ferrel's robe clung to him. His shirt choked him. He ripped them off and threw them on the floor, and was still too warm. With the bedroom door closed, the attic fan ceased to suck in the night air. Ferrel felt as if he were suffocating. He stripped and sat back on the bed, sucking on one of the ice cubes. The ice failed to cool him. He put the cube back in the glass and poured more rum on top of it.

The second glass of rum quieted him, but made him even warmer. Ferrel set the glass on the floor and lay back on the bed, studying his body. An old man at thirty-eight. That part of his life was over. He was finished with that sort of thing. Feminine flesh, in a carnal sense, held little interest for him. Ferrel rubbed sweat into the hair on his chest. That was a laugh, a big one. And the laugh was on him. He'd only been fed up with Elaine, tired of being treated like a slightly subnormal child. And Magnolia had given him back his manhood.

Ferrel finished the rum in his glass and lay back again, the room beginning to take on a rosy glow.

"Does that taste like gratitude?"

The answer to that was "No." In her own innocent way, Magnolia wanted him as badly as he wanted her. She was in her room now, crying. He could hear her.

Crying softly to herself. Ferrel lay breathing heavily, listening to the sounds in the room beyond the adjoining bathroom. To his stimulated senses, every sound was magnified.

Now Magnolia was laying something on the glass top of the dresser. That was the clothes-closet door. Now she was opening one of the drawers in her dresser. Could she be packing to go away tonight? The thought made Ferrel sit up. If Magnolia did go away, if she went back to her father's, what would he say to Elaine? How would he explain her departure?

The poor kid. He must stop her. He threw on his robe and went swiftly out into the hall and to the door of her room. He listened for a moment. He could hear nothing now. Had she already slipped out?

He opened the door and stepped in. Magnolia stood silently in the middle of the room. The light from a dressing-table lamp came from behind her. He could not see her expression. She had on nothing but a sheer night-gown.

Chapter Thirteen

THE RUM blurred Ferrel's eyes. It was an effort for him to breathe. As if from a great distance, a male voice he recognized as his own said, "You're very lovely, Magnolia."

Magnolia raised one hand to her throat. She used his first name for the first time. "Thank you—Roger."

Ferrel made one last attempt to do what he knew was right. "I shouldn't have come in here, Magnolia."

"Why?"

"This is wrong."

"Is it wrong to fall in love?" She closed the gap between them and stroked Ferrel's cheek with her fingers.

"You're sweet." He pulled her to him roughly and covered her hair, her face, her bare shoulders, her lips with kisses.

Magnolia returned his kisses fiercely. Her taut body was a curved bow of desire. Her voice was small. "I knew, the first night. When you drove me home. That I loved you, I mean."

Ferrel kissed her eyes. "I think I knew it, too. And I've been fighting it ever since."

Magnolia pressed even closer to him. "Then out in the kitchen tonight, I had to let you know. I—I don't want to go to the mountains. I don't want to go anywhere away from you."

"Maybe you won't have to," Ferrel said.

"Are you glad I let you know?"

"I'm glad."

"You are? You really are?"

"I am."

Ferrel's immediate need returned. To hell with right and wrong. A man had a right to live. He'd never really lived. When he hadn't been studying, he'd been working. When he hadn't been working, he'd been in the Army. When he hadn't been in the Army, Elaine had possessed him.

Ferrel pressed his lips against Magnolia's until he could taste blood in his mouth.

"I love you, Roger," she murmured.

Ferrel picked her up and carried her over to the bed. She was light in his arms. Her body felt warm and soft and good. She even smelled sweet.

Magnolia pressed her face to his chest. "You do love me, really love me, don't you, Roger?"

"Very much," Ferrel assured her.

His foot caught on a scatter rug. He staggered and almost fell. I must be drunk, he thought. He lowered Magnolia gently to the bed as if she were something precious. As he did, her gown slipped down over one shoulder. He kissed the soft smooth skin tenderly, without passion. It tasted as sweet as it smelled.

Magnolia gasped. "I like that."

He sat on the bed beside her, running his fingers through her hair, fondling the lobes of her ears, her cheeks, her throat. A voice that sounded like his asked, "You're certain, now?"

"I'm certain." Magnolia smiled.

Ferrel wished he weren't so drunk. The last drink had hit him hard. Her white flesh showed where the gown gaped. Ferrel caressed it with a trembling hand. Magnolia's flesh was hot. She quivered as he touched her and came eagerly into his arms. Her tongue was a live flame as they kissed.

"Darling," she whispered. "Darling."

Ferrel wished she would use some other term of endearment. Elaine called him darling. . . .

The walls of the room expanded. Time ceased to exist. They were alone in space. Ferrel's sensation of unreality had never been so strong. He wasn't a party to this. He couldn't be. Roger M. Ferrel, M.D., wouldn't do such a thing. He had the same feeling that he'd had in Phillipe Park, that he was running up a steep hill, studded with strange thorn trees on which red hibiscus blossomed; running, panting through the dark. His need became a roaring fire threatening to consume him. The nightgown infuriated him. He tore at it.

"No," Magnolia protested. "What if Elaine came home?"

"Forget Elaine," Ferrel shouted.

"I can't," Magnolia said.

"Why not?"

"She happens to be your wife."

"So what?"

"So this is wrong."

Ferrel felt weak with frustration. The room was a red haze. Sweat blinded him. Magnolia's face, inches from his, was a blur. He begged, "For God's sake, make up your mind. You said you were sure."

He attempted to take Magnolia in his arms again. She wriggled away and stood beside the bed. "I am sure," Magnolia breathed. Her small breasts rose and fell with her emotion. "But this is wrong." Her eyes filled with tears. "I mean, this way."

"That isn't what you said before."

A small sob shook Magnolia's body. "It's what I meant. I love you. I'll never love anyone but you." She ran her hands through her hair and pressed hair and palms together at the back of her head. "I guess I just didn't stop to think. But this would be just as bad as Phillipe Park."

The sour taste returned to Ferrel's mouth. He wiped

the sweat from his eyes with his free hand. "Then, how?"

Magnolia wet her lips with her tongue. A new light came into her eyes. "That's up to you, Roger."

Ferrel tried to control his breathing. "What do you mean, it's up to me?"

"Just that." One of the fluffy negligees that Elaine had bought her was lying on a chair. Magnolia put it on and fastened the belt of it securely. "I'm sorry. But this is the biggest and nicest thing that ever happened to me. I mean, falling in love with you. I want it to be beautiful. I want it to be for keeps. And this way, all it would be is cheap."

Ferrel's head began to ache. He pressed the palms of his hands to his temples. "You're talking like a fool. How can it be for keeps?"

Magnolia repeated, "That's up to you." She sat on the edge of the bed. "I love you, Roger. I've loved you since the night you drove me home and Pa acted so awful. But you wouldn't want me to be bad, would you? You wouldn't want me to be what Pa called me?"

Ferrel was not in any mood to discuss the moral angle. He felt cheated. "To hell with whether it's right or wrong." He leaned back against a pillow and stared at the ceiling.

Magnolia trailed her finger through the hair on his chest. "Don't say that, please."

"Why not?"

Magnolia's eyes filled with tears. "Because I want to be a good girl. For you." Magnolia added earnestly, "And I wouldn't be a good girl if. . . . Of course, I want to be with you. I'm all shivery right now. I feel like I'm on fire every time you come into a room where I am. But—well, we aren't married."

The sour taste in Ferrel's mouth turned bitter. I should have gone to the ball game, he thought. He felt like a callow high-school boy, in the back seat of a parked

car with an unwilling date. He said, "And we aren't very likely to be. It so happens I have a wife."

Magnolia bobbed her head. "I know. And I love Mrs. Ferrel very much. It's just that I love you more. And if—well, if you and Mrs. Ferrel should ever separate or be divorced, I'd want to be married to you."

Ferrel felt for a cigarette. "Don't plan on it."

"Why not?"

She trailed her hand across his chest again.

Ferrel brushed her hand off his chest. "Because Elaine would never divorce me."

Her voice was barely audible. "But you want me? You want me right? Like it should be?"

"You know I do."

Magnolia wet her lips with the tip of a pink tongue. "Well, then—" Her eyes met Ferrel's. They were as green and as deep as the sea. The silence between them lengthened and grew sticky.

Ferrel caught at her wrist. "Then—what?"

Magnolia winced in pain. "You're hurting me."

Ferrel released her wrist and slapped her. "Answer me. What did you start to say?"

Tears brightened Magnolia's eyes. "You had no call for to hit me. All I was going to say was that a man as smart as you are should be able to think of something."

"And if I can't?"

"Then maybe I better go away."

"No," Ferrel said. Still breathing hard, he closed his eyes. The unspoken thought had been his, not Magnolia's. Magnolia was sweet. She was good. Magnolia was willing to go away. Still, the problem remained unchanged. Elaine would never give him a divorce. "You want to go away?"

Magnolia kissed his closed eyes. "Feeling like I do about you? I couldn't ever treat you like Elaine does."

"How does Elaine treat me?"

Magnolia's voice filled with scorn. "She treats you like you were a fool. Instead of just bidin' her time, she makes you call home and report every time you're five minutes late. And the way she waits on you is sickenin'. Not that I wouldn't wait on you in some things. But even in the short time I've lived here, I can see how she sort of swarms all over you."

Ferrel opened his eyes. That much was true.

Magnolia massaged his aching temples with her fingers. "She doesn't treat you like you were a man. She treats you like you were a baby." As she bent over Ferrel, the neck of her negligee gaped. Even her breasts seemed indignant. "Then there's another thing."

"What?"

"Where are your babies?"

The words grated in Ferrel's ears.

"A man like you who's brought all sorts of babies into the world. And nary a one to call your own." Magnolia's small chin jutted.

Ferrel closed his eyes again. He had hoped to have children, but Elaine, for all her sexual appetite, had never given him any. The fault was hers, he knew. They had gone into the matter thoroughly during the first years of their marriage.

Magnolia cried softly. "Now you're mad at me."

"No. I'm not mad."

"You hit me."

"I'm sorry."

"Maybe I better go back to the bait camp."

Ferrel swung his feet to the floor and sat on the edge of the bed. "No. I'll think of something."

Her eyes searched his. "Soon?"

"I hope so. For both our sakes."

"You promise?"

"I promise." Ferrel kissed Magnolia, gently and walked through the bath to his room. He'd never felt so physical-

ly and emotionally drained. "Think of something." That was a laugh. Elaine would never give him a divorce. If he and Magnolia ran away, Elaine would follow them. Elaine would still possess him when he was an old man sitting on one of Palmetto City's green benches, listening to his arteries harden.

In his room, he paced the floor. So he'd made an ass of himself, and Magnolia had told him off. She had been sweet about it. She'd had more self-control than he. Magnolia wanted him as badly as he wanted her. But she wanted it to be right.

Ferrel's physical torment returned. He'd never wanted any woman the way he wanted Magnolia. He *had* to have her. He meant to. Knowing Magnolia would be a new and wonderful experience. She had said that falling in love with him was the biggest and nicest thing that had ever happened to her. But she wanted it to be right. She didn't want it to be cheap. Ferrel studied his feet as he paced. They seemed to be moving without conscious volition, caught on an endless treadmill.

The ice in his glass had melted. Ferrel poured the water into a vase on the table and refilled the glass with rum. As he sipped at it, he was suddenly aware of the clothes he had scattered all over the floor. Elaine would know at a glance that something had happened to upset him.

He found and lighted a cigarette. Then he put his soiled clothing in the bathroom hamper. He hung up his pants. He aligned the toes of his shoes neatly with the edge of the bed. Then he suddenly remembered the sprinklers. They were still going, and had been for hours.

He found a fresh robe hanging in the closet. He put it on and walked into the bathroom to look at himself in the mirror. There was no lipstick on his face. Magnolia didn't use lipstick. Because he didn't approve of it on her. He didn't even look emotionally overwrought. All he looked was a little high.

Magnolia heard him in the bathroom and opened her door. She bit at her lower lip as she looked at him. Her eyes were sullen.

"What now?" Ferrel asked her.

She said, "I'm sorry."

"About what?"

Her lips parted. Her breasts rose and fell with her breathing. "That I didn't let you," she whispered. She came into his arms. "But now it's too late. Elaine may come home any moment. Please. *Please* think of something."

Ferrel tried to hold her, but she slipped away. The door of her room closed softly. He walked back to his own room and was mildly surprised to find his glass empty. He poured more rum in the glass and carried it and the bottle out to the kitchen.

His pulse pounding in his temples, Ferrel turned and looked down the hall at the faint sliver of light showing under Magnolia's door. Magnolia was sorry. She wished she'd let him. If Elaine weren't due home any minute—

Still carrying his glass and bottle, Ferrel followed his feet through the breezeway and the carport to turn off the sprinklers, then changed his mind when he was outside.

The *ker-wish, ker-wish* of the sprinklers intrigued him. It was relatively cool on the lawn. He could at least get high and dream. Elaine wouldn't object to that. Elaine urged him to drink more than he did. She claimed it would relax him, that alcohol acted as a safety valve.

He put the glass and bottle on the broad arm of a wooden lawn chair and sat looking at the wall of night that hemmed him in. He hadn't meant this to happen. He'd done his best to keep it from happening. But now that it had, so be it.

Elaine would have to be reasonable. Elaine would have to give him up. He'd make any settlement she asked in

return for his freedom. He'd talk to Elaine in the morning. He'd tell her—what? That he was in love with Magnolia? Ferrel winced at the thought. There was no telling what Elaine might do. One thing was certain: Elaine's first act would be to order Magnolia out of the house. Perhaps it would be best not to be too hasty. Elaine didn't want a settlement. She wanted him. But then, so did Magnolia.

"Does that taste like gratitude?"

Ferrel's heart beat wildly. Perhaps Elaine would be late. . . . He was considering returning to the house when headlights swept up the drive, pinning him momentarily against the night. Elaine parked just short of the carport and walked back to where he was sitting.

"So here you are, darling. Out here where it's cool. How smart." She picked the bottle from the arm of the chair. "And a little tipsy. Good. I wish you'd do it often-er. You're too sober, too intense."

Ferrel's lips felt numb. "I'm not sober now."

Elaine laughed and sat in his lap. "So I see." She ran her fingers through his hair. "Our child in bed?"

"I guess so," Ferrel said.

Elaine discovered all he had on was a robe. She ran her hand across his body. "How nice and cool you feel." She turned her back to him. "Zip me down a way, will you, darling? This damn dress is too tight for this weather."

Ferrel zipped her dress halfway down.

"Ah." Elaine settled back, contentedly, on his lap. "That's better." She drank from the bottle.

Elaine's perfume, her nearness, excited Ferrel. He hated her for it. He hated himself for allowing her to excite him. He stroked her white throat with his strong fingers.

Elaine caught his hand. "Not so hard, darling," she laughed. "You'd think you wanted to choke me. Oh,

darling. If you only knew how much I love you. I'm like some half-dead thing when I'm away from you. I don't know whether I want to go to the mountains or not." She pressed his hand to her yielding flesh. "Please. Let's go inside."

Ferrel considered the matter with alcoholic gravity. Why not? Until he had thought of something, it wouldn't do any good to have it out with Elaine. All it would mean was a scene. He stood up with her in his arms. "O.K. Hang on."

Elaine slipped an arm over his shoulder. "You crazy darling. You can't carry me. I'm too heavy."

Ferrel was drunkenly perverse. Magnolia wouldn't tell him what he could or couldn't do. Magnolia would let him do what he wanted. "You're not so heavy," he said.

He staggered across the lawn, got half-way to the house, and tripped over the hose in the dark.

"I told you," Elaine laughed.

They fell heavily on the wet grass. Elaine's skirt slipped up her thighs. The contact of their bodies excited her. She stopped laughing and sucked in her breath. She covered his mouth with hers. Her body thrust upward in fever. "Please, darling. Please."

The desire that had been mounting in him all evening could no longer be restrained. His eagerness matched Elaine's.

The night was a snug black blanket insulating them from the world. There was no sound but their breathing and the *ker-wish, ker-wish* of the sprinklers.

Each time it came full swing, the nearest sprinkler reached them. The water was warm, like tears. Ferrel's feeling of eerie unreality, of moving through a nightmare, returned. It was as if someone were crying over them.

Chapter Fourteen

THE DAY was long and hot. Shortly before six it rained. It rained hard for half an hour. By dark, it was dry and hot again. Steam rose from the sodden lawn and dripping shrubbery in little wisps of vapor. Even breathing was an effort. Hoping it might be cooler there, Addie had set the table in the breezeway.

As she brought hot biscuits she complained, "You ain't eatin', Dr. Ferrel. Fo' shame. You ain' et enough to make a meal fo' a hummin'bird."

Ferrel apologized. "I'm sorry, Addie."

As he spoke, he glanced across the table at Elaine. Elaine knew. At least she was suspicious. Something had happened while he had been at the office. There was no doubt about it. It showed in the down-turned corners of her mouth, in the hurt look in her eyes. Supper, even Addie's beaten biscuits and fried chicken on yellow rice, was a tasteless, dreary affair.

Ferrel's feeling of unreality had changed to one of breathless motion. He felt as if he were being rushed through space.

He thought, For God's sake, why doesn't Elaine say something? If she knows, why doesn't she bring it out into the open?

Ferrel sipped his coffee, looking at Magnolia. Each shining golden hair in place, wearing a white off-the-shoulder blouse, her tanned midriff gleaming in the lamplight, she ate with her eyes demurely on her plate, speaking only when she was spoken to.

Ferrel wondered what would happen if he said, casually, "Look. I don't love you any more, Elaine. I haven't loved you for some time. Last night, on the lawn, it was really Magnolia. I love her. I want to marry her." As he lifted his coffee to his lips, a drop of sweat left his armpit and zigzagged down his side. Perhaps if this thing was brought out into the open there could be some other solution than the one he had thought about all day. Other triangles had been dissolved without tragedy. But not triangles in which one angle was as strong-willed and possessive as Elaine. Elaine would never willingly release him from his marriage vows. He could almost hear her say:

"We swore, 'Until death do us part.' "

Ferrel groped for his cigarettes and found the package. It was empty. He started to get up. Before he could, Elaine pushed back her chair. "I'll get a package for you, darling."

Ferrel looked at Magnolia. She shrugged.

Elaine returned with the cigarettes. She lighted one and handed it to Ferrel. Either her hand shook slightly or Ferrel imagined it did. "Hard day, darling?" she asked him.

Ferrel accepted the cigarette. "Thanks. No. Not too bad. The usual."

He wondered if Elaine and Magnolia had had a scene. There was a slight puffiness around Magnolia's eyes that could have come from crying. She and Elaine hadn't spoken to each other since they had sat down at the table.

Addie removed the supper plates.

"No dessert for me, Addie," Ferrel told her. "But I will have more coffee."

"Yes, sir, Dr. Ferrel," Addie said. She, too, was feeling the strain. "I'm proud there's somethin' you like 'bout my cookin'."

Dessert was a sticky affair, mostly whipped cream. Fer-

rel was glad he'd refused it. Magnolia ate hers with enthusiasm. Ferrel was amused until he noticed that Elaine wasn't touching hers. Elaine knew something.

When she had finished her dessert, Magnolia excused herself and went into the house. Ferrel continued to sit at the table in the breezeway, smoking, drinking coffee, watching darkness blanket the yard, feeling Elaine's eyes on his face all the while.

He waited for her to speak. Elaine, obviously, was waiting too; waiting for him to give her an opening. Ferrel gave her the credit due her. Whatever else she was, Elaine was smart. Even if she knew all there was to know, he doubted she would order Magnolia out of the house. For several reasons. One, it would bring matters to a head before she'd had time to work on him. Elaine was afraid of losing him, afraid he might walk out with Magnolia. Two, Elaine's red hair was deep-rooted. If possible, she wouldn't give the town gossips the satisfaction of knowing they were right.

Magnolia came to the breezeway door, standing with the living-room light behind her. "I think I'll go to the Bijou," she said. "It's Gordon MacRae and Doris Day. Would either of you care to go?"

"No," Elaine said shortly.

Ferrel put his hand in his pants pocket. "How about money, Magnolia?"

"Thank you," she said. "But I have plenty. I still have two dollars and eighty cents left from last week's allowance."

"That's nice," Elaine said evenly. "But if I were you, dear, before I went out I'd put on a slip. When you stand in the light like that I can see right through you."

"Oh," Magnolia gasped. "I'm sorry. I guess I just don't think of such things all the time." She left the doorway.

Ferrel continued to smoke in silence, waiting for the explosion that was almost certain to follow.

The spring on the living-room door whined. The door slammed. A moment later Ferrel heard the tap of Magnolia's high heels on the hard-surfaced drive. Without rising from her chair, Elaine glanced into the house to make sure that Addie was busy with the dishes.

"I—hear Joe Frazer came to your office this morning."

"Where'd you hear that?" Ferrel asked.

A lock of rust-colored hair had fallen into Elaine's eyes. She brushed at it with the back of one hand. "Where does anyone hear anything in Palmetto City? Several old bags made it their business to tell me, so casually. I'd heard it three times by two o'clock."

"Oh," Ferrel said.

Elaine lighted a cigarette. She was making a determined effort to control them, but the trembling of her hands was plainly visible in the match flare. "What did he want, sweetheart?"

"Money," Ferrel admitted.

"How much?"

"He wasn't particular. Whatever I had on me. I happened to have fifty-eight dollars."

"You gave it to him?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"He was drunk. I was afraid he might make a scene if I didn't. And my waiting room was filled with patients."

"Why did he come to you?"

"He said his lawyers wouldn't advance him any more. You know, the firm that's suing the Udell, Koulous, and Rudd families."

"Yes. I know," Elaine said. "Even so, why you?"

Ferrel sipped cold coffee. "He said any friend of Magnolia's was a friend of his. And I was the first one he thought of, when he got out of jail this morning."

"Out of jail?"

"That's what he said."

"Did he say anything else?"

Ferrel evaded the question. "Oh, this and that. He boasted that the police didn't dare send him away, no matter how drunk or disorderly he got, for fear the county would have to support his children. But for the most part, he was incoherent. You know how drunks are."

"Yes," Elaine said. "I know. I've been that way a few times myself." She wanted to believe him. "But the only reason you gave him money was because you were afraid he might make a nasty scene?"

"Of course."

"There's no truth to the rumor that's going around?"

"Which one is that?"

It was difficult for Elaine to say it. "Well, that your feeling for Magnolia isn't exactly paternal."

Ferrel wanted to say, "It isn't. I love her. I want to marry Magnolia." For some reason, he couldn't. Instead, he parried with: "Don't be absurd. Magnolia's just a child."

Elaine shook her head. "No. She's a woman. In some ways I think she's older than I am. And she's very much in love with you darling. At least, she's very much in love with what you represent."

"What I represent?"

"That's right. Security. Respectability. A nice home. Pretty clothes. A maid to pick up after her. A record player and a car. A charge account at Allied Stores. Things she's never known or had before. I'm in love with you for those reasons, too." Elaine reached across the table and laid her hand on Ferrel's. Her fingers felt hot and feverish. "But I was also in love with Roger Ferrel when he didn't have any of those things. When all I had was you."

Ferrel was embarrassed. Here we go again, he thought. This was Elaine's cue to tell how much she'd done for him, enumerate the sacrifices she'd made.

Elaine surprised him. Her nails bit into the back of his hand and Ferrel realized she was crying softly to herself. "Maybe I haven't been the best wife that I might have been. But I've tried. I've tried to adjust my hours to yours. I've tried to save you the little annoying things, to conserve your strength. When I drink it's because I'm lonely while you're out on calls. Lonely because you're not with me. I meant what I said last night out on the lawn. I'm like some half-dead thing when I'm away from you. You've always been all that matters. I don't give a damn about the money you've made. I'd love you just as much if you were a day laborer instead of one of the leading doctors in Palmetto City. Nothing matters. Nothing, Roger. Not as long as I have you."

Ferrel wished he could feel some emotion for her. He didn't. Not even pity. All he felt was a cold resentment because she stood between him and Magnolia.

Elaine continued, "I don't know. I can't say for sure. It would be a difficult thing for any woman to do. But I do believe if I thought Magnolia would be good for you I could step aside and let her have you. But she wouldn't be good for you, Roger. All she has is youth. She isn't the girl I thought she was. She's cheap. She's shallow and conniving. She'd make your life a hell. And while it's an awful thing to say, I'm not so certain now but what young Peter Koulous wasn't unjustly convicted, that Magnolia wasn't at least in part to blame."

It was all Ferrel could do to keep from hitting her. He forced himself to ask calmly, "That's pretty strong, isn't it, Elaine?"

"I believe I'm right," Elaine said. "Will you answer one question truthfully, Roger?"

"What?"

"Is there anything between you and Magnolia? Has it gone beyond infatuation on her part?"

Ferrel was truthful. "No."

Elaine wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. There was a lift to her voice. "I believe you. And I'm glad. You'll never know how glad. But I want that girl out of our house, Roger. Before something terrible does happen." Elaine stopped Ferrel's protest. "Oh, I don't mean send her back to the filth and squalor of her father's. I told you the money angle doesn't matter. I'll go without new clothes for the next five years to get her out of my house. Let's send her away to some girls' school. The farther from Pametto City, the better."

Ferrel tried to be casual. "Well, it's something to think about."

"Think about, hell," Elaine said. "I want her out of here by the end of the week. Meanwhile, I'm going to lock our door every night. Then maybe I won't have the feeling she's crawling in bed with us."

Ferrel wanted to pound on the table. He wanted to shout, "No, goddamn it. Magnolia isn't leaving. If anyone leaves, it will be you. We're washed up, Elaine, you and I. I hate the sight of you. I hate the sound of your voice. Even last night rightfully belonged to Magnolia."

But how did a man tell his wife that? A woman to whom he owed much of his success. A woman with whom he had lived for sixteen years. Ferrel was relieved when the phone rang.

"I'll answer it," he said.

The voice was feminine, but he failed to recognize it. "I'm speaking to Dr. Ferrel?"

"You are."

"Could you make a house call, Doctor? I—I'm afraid it's a miscarriage."

"The patient is hemorrhaging?"

"Badly."

Ferrel reached for the pad on the phone table. "What is the address?"

The girl said, "A thousand and one Robinson Road.

It's back of the Academy, Doctor. On the Lake Phillippe Road."

"I know where it is," Ferrel said. "And the name?"

"It's Jones," the girl said. "Thad Jones."

Ferrel gave her a few simple instructions on what to do until he arrived and hung up. He was putting on his coat and reaching for his bag when Elaine came into the living room. "Now what?" she asked.

Ferrel told her. "Another miscarriage. Out on Robinson Road. That's the second one this week. Must be the heat."

"Must be," Elaine agreed. She kissed him, "I love you, darling."

Ferrel forced himself to return the kiss. Even after fried chicken and yellow rice Elaine's lips tasted like vermouth.

"Say it," Elaine insisted.

"I love you," Ferrel lied. "Meanwhile, a girl is bleeding to death."

Elaine's smile was bright. "She'll be all right when you get there. I'll be waiting for you, darling."

In his car, Ferrel scrubbed his lips with his handkerchief. It seemed almost impossible that affection which had once been so warm could grow so cold. He didn't feel anything for Elaine. He didn't give a damn about her, one way or another. The sooner he thought of some way to dissolve the triangle, the better. So he was indebted to Elaine. So? He should have told her in the breezeway. He should have told her they were through, that he loved and intended to marry Magnolia. He'd done as much for Elaine as she'd done for him.

Ferrel's indignation mounted. Send Magnolia away, would she? Question him like a schoolboy? He mimicked Elaine's throaty voice:

"Is there anything between you and Magnolia? Has it gone beyond infatuation on her part?"

Ferrel flushed at the memory of Magnolia standing there in the center of her bedroom. His mouth filled with the remembered sweetness of her flesh. No. He hadn't been intimate with her. But it wasn't his fault that it hadn't gone further than it had. It was Magnolia's inherent decency. She wanted their love to be beautiful. She wanted it to be right. And Elaine had called her cheap. Elaine said she was shallow and conniving.

Aware that he was driving too fast, much too fast, Ferrel slowed his car to the legal thirty-five miles an hour. In the 900 block on Robinson he began to scan the bold numbers stenciled on the mailboxes: 959 . . . 963 . . . 967 . . . There it was—1001—on the far side of the intersection. And someone was waiting on the curb for him. A girl in a white blouse.

Ferrel pulled up beside the box and parked. Before he could switch off the ignition the door on the curb side opened and the waiting girl got into the car.

Magnolia wrinkled her nose at him in the cute grimace he liked as she seated herself beside him. "Well, hello."

"Hello," Ferrel said. His smile was uncertain. "How did you get here?"

Magnolia smoothed her skirt. "I took a cab."

"And the phone call?"

She snuggled close to him. "I had a girl friend of mine make it."

Ferrel looked at the number stenciled on the mailbox. "Then there's no Mrs. Jones at this house?"

Magnolia cupped his face in her hands and kissed him. "I really wouldn't know. Won't Maggie Frazer do?"

Ferrel crushed her in his arms. The words were a moan in his throat. "Yes," he admitted. "She will."

Chapter Fifteen

THEY KISSED for a long time. Then Magnolia pushed him away. "No. Not here, Roger," she gasped. "Someone might come out of the house. Drive out somewhere and park. I want to talk to you." She pulled down the elastic of her disordered midriff blouse. "And remember, I said talk."

"I heard you," Ferrel said. He drove on slowly, the bracelet of his watch chattering against the steel spokes of the wheel. It was an effort for him to breathe normally. His mouth felt hot and dry. His flesh felt as if it were on fire. His voice was almost a snarl. "But I can't take much more of this."

Magnolia's eyes were cat green in the dim light emanating from the dashboard. "Maybe you won't have to."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You'll see," Magnolia promised.

Ferrel passed the intersection where Robinson Road became the Lake Phillippe Road. The blocks of houses dropped behind. The lake road wasn't any cooler than the town had been. Here, the night was hot black velvet, and the road a white ribbon of crushed coquina winding through twin rows of artificial-looking royal palms. On the right side of the road the lake stretched black and silver in the moonlight, mirroring the stars. There was an occasional phosphorescent swirl in the water as a snook or a mullet leaped. The sweet-sour smell of the tide flats was primitive and clean.

Ferrel wished he'd chosen some other road. Driving

the Lake Phillipe Road at night with Magnolia beside him was like reliving an old nightmare. It was like watching a homemade movie of himself being cranked backward in an old-fashioned hand projector, with the night insects squashed wetly against the windshield providing the streaks in the film.

Nothing had changed since the night he'd first met Magnolia. He was hot. He was tired. He was thirsty. The animated neon sign of the Picken-Chicken beckoned him. "Would you like a cold drink?" he asked Magnolia.

She said, "Yes, I would, but we'd better not stop here. There's too much talk about us now."

Ferrel drove past the Picken-Chicken and on around the lake. Phillipe Park was just ahead. It offered the only secluded turnoff for miles. Ferrel drove off the road and into the park. Nothing had changed here, either. The ancient moss-hung live oak absorbed most of the moonlight and gave an illusion of coolness. Here, under the trees, there was a feeling of peace. Ferrel turned off the ignition and sat looking at Magnolia.

"Well, this should be secluded enough."

Magnolia picked up his hand from the seat. She laid it in her lap and played with his fingers. "*I had* to talk to you, Roger. That's why I pretended I was going to a movie. Then I had a girl I used to work with in the dime store call you. What happened after I left tonight?"

"What do you mean, what happened?"

"Just that. I want to know."

"Why?"

"I have to know."

Ferrel's smile turned wry. "Well, Elaine started with your father's visit to my office. She knew all about it. Knew I'd loaned him money."

"Loaned," Magnolia said scornfully.

"Then she asked if there was any truth to the rumor going around town."

"What did you tell her?"

"What could I tell her?" Ferrel patted at the perspiration beading on his forehead. "I started to tell her the truth. Then, for some reason, I couldn't."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I suppose I didn't want to hurt her."

"She'll have to be hurt sometime."

"Yes. I know."

"Did Elaine say anything else?"

"Yes, she said you were very much in love with me and wanted to know how far things had gone between us." Ferrel inhaled deeply and held his breath a moment. "I was able to be truthful there. I told her there was nothing between us."

"There would have been if I had let you."

"I know."

"Not that I didn't want you. I did, awful. And I meant what I said."

Ferrel forced her to repeat it. "What was that?"

Magnolia sucked in her breath. "That I was sorry I hadn't let you. I didn't sleep all night. I just laid there. Pretendin' like you were in bed with me, holdin' me in your arms, makin' love."

"You're sweet."

Magnolia stroked the fingers she was holding. "Did Elaine say anything about me? I mean, personal-like?"

Ferrel considered his answer. The time had come for a showdown. Whatever he did he would have to do within the next few hours, before the situation got completely out of hand. He decided to be truthful with Magnolia.

"Yes, she did."

Magnolia's small breasts thrust against her white blouse as she sat erect. "What did she say?"

"She said she loved me so much that if she thought you'd be good for me, she'd step aside."

"That's not about me."

Ferrel patted his face with his handkerchief. "I'm coming to that."

"What did she say?"

"She said you wouldn't be good for me. She said you'd make my life a hell. She said you aren't the sort of girl she thought you were. She called you cheap and shallow and conniving. She said she wouldn't be a bit surprised if Pete Koulous had been unjustly convicted, if you weren't at least partly to blame."

Magnolia stopped stroking Ferrel's fingers and pressed his perspiring palm against the bare flesh of her midriff. "Do you think that? Do you think that, Roger?"

"Of course not."

"The old red-haired devil." Magnolia pressed her hands to her head, ran them back over her hair and pressed palms and hair together at the back of her head. "She's jealous of me. She hates me. She's going to send me away."

Ferrel put his right arm around her shoulder and his left hand where his right hand had been. "Easy now, honey."

"How can I be easy when she's going to send me away from you?"

"You haven't gone yet, have you?"

Magnolia said fiercely, "No. And you haven't thought of any way so we can be together." Her voice pounded at him. "Have you?"

"No."

"Then I guess I better go away."

Ferrel recognized the hoarse breathing in his ears as his own. "No." He tightened his arm around Magnolia's shoulders.

Magnolia removed his arm. "Don't hold me so close."

"Why not? Last night you said you were sorry that—"

"I was. But now I want to think. We have to think. And I can't think when you do that. It makes me all shivery."

Ferrel looked at her for a long moment. "You and Elaine quarreled this afternoon?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a quarrel."

"What, then? When I came home you looked as if you'd been crying."

"I was."

"What happened?"

"Well, you know old Mrs. Crane? Her son has the big shoe store on Center Street."

"Her daughter-in-law is one of my patients."

"Well, just after lunch she came by. She *said* on business concerning the Friends of the Library Association. But what she really came to talk about was Pa's going to your office. She made it sound awful nasty. Like we'd been bad, and you was paying Pa on account of it."

Ferrel put his arm over her shoulders. "I see."

"And when she left, Elaine took out her spite on me. Not sayin' anything, understand. Just starin' at me. Like the big ol' gals at the high school used to look." Magnolia's breasts rose and fell with her emotion. "Like I was nothin' but a dirty little cracker tramp." She wiped her wet eyes on the back of her hand. "And I ain't cryin' now because she abused me. I'm used to that. It's just that I'm so mad."

Ferrel stroked her hair. "Then what?"

"Then, later on, when I thought Elaine was gone out—"

"Yes?"

"All I was doing was trying to see how I looked in the rings and earrings and beads that she'd left on top of her dresser. And I looked in the glass, and there Elaine was behind me. Mad as all git-out. Scowling at me."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'You'd like to wear my wedding ring and diamond, too, wouldn't you, dear?' You know, *nasty* sweet. With a fish knife between her teeth."

Ferrel's arm tightened around her. "Then what?"

"Then, still nasty sweet, she said, 'And you'd like to crawl between my sheets. With Roger. For all I know, you have.' Despisin' me. Like I was poor white trash. Like she talked to me when I was standing in the breeze-way door and she said she could see through me." Magnolia's small jaw jutted. "And I didn't put no slip on to spite her."

Ferrel's voice hurt his throat. "Oh. Then what happened?"

"Then she said she was very much afraid she was going to have to do somethin' about me. And I knew what she meant. And I went to my room and cried all afternoon."

Ferrel's hand stroked her bare arm. Magnolia's flesh felt like satin. "Oh," he breathed hoarsely. "And what did you mean—when I met you there at the mailbox and I told you I couldn't stand this much longer and you said maybe I wouldn't have to?"

Magnolia kissed him for answer. "You're agoin' to do it, ain't you?"

Ferrel's fingers continued to crawl. "You mean think of some way we can be together?"

"Yes."

"Of course."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Soon?"

"I hope so. I've been thinking ever since last night."

"Some way we can git to keep the house and all the pretty things in it?"

"Perhaps."

Magnolia thrust herself forward and made small animal sounds in her throat as he caressed her. "You promise?"

"I promise."

"You won't let her send me away?"

"No."

Magnolia threw back her head so she could see Ferrel's face. Her green eyes narrowed to slits. "Roger?"

"Yes?"

"Would it help you to think if you knew I belonged to you? If I proved to you I love you?"

"How?"

"You know how I mean."

Ferrel's feeling of breathless motion returned. "For God's sake, Magnolia," he protested. "Please. Don't torture me any more."

Magnolia opened the car door on her side and got out. "Let's walk into the woods a little way," she said. Ferrel caught her before she had walked five paces and pulled her back into the car.

The roar of creation filled Ferrel's ears. He felt as if new worlds were being born. There was the motion of the sea, the smell of fresh-made mud, the first amoeba being washed up out of the slime. He felt as Adam must have felt the first time he knew Eve. There was no right. There was no wrong. Time as yet didn't exist. He and Magnolia were alone in space, all the known universe compressed into exquisite pain and flame and ecstasy.

Then she was pushing at him frantically with her small hands. "Get up. Quick," she pleaded. "Get up. Someone's at the car."

A moment later a revolving red light swept Ferrel's face. A smaller, steady white light that blinded him followed. A man's voice said harshly, "All right, you. Come on out of there."

Magnolia, her face white with fear, pawed at her disordered skirt and blouse. Ferrel fought back to reality slowly, reluctantly. "Who are you? What do you want?" he asked.

"This your car?" the man asked.

Then Ferrel recognized the voice. It was Deputy Sheriff

Gordon Cray. Cray recognized him as they stepped out of the car. "Geez," the deputy muttered.

The red light stopped revolving and laid down a path between the two cars. Jack Thomas walked down the path. "Well, what do you know?" Thomas said. "So the talk going around is true, huh?" Thomas took off his stiff-brimmed uniform hat and wiped the leather sweatband.

"What you got to say for yourself, Doc?"

Ferrel said thickly, "I was just—"

"Yeah." Cray stopped him. "We mean outside of that. Geez. You know as well as I do, Doc, the kid's only fifteen."

"Sixteen," Maggie said, sniveling.

"You keep out of this, Maggie," Thomas said. "Is this another case like that Koulous-Udell-Rudd affair?"

Magnolia began to sob. "No. I wanted him to."

"He didn't force you, huh?"

"No. I told you I wanted him to. Why don't you mind your own business? Why don't you leave us alone?"

Thomas looked back at Ferrel. "I asked you a question, Doc. Why don't you say something?"

Ferrel leaned against the fender of the car, his palms pressed flat against the metal. "What can I say?"

"Yeah. I see what you mean," Thomas said. He looked at his partner. "So?"

"I'll be damned if I know," Cray said. "If we take 'em in and book 'em for what they were doing, there's going to be a stink, a big one. And it ain't going to do you no good, Doc."

Ferrel tried to speak and couldn't. His mouth felt as if it were filled with sawdust.

"You leave us alone," Maggie wailed. "If you arrest us, I'll lie. I—I'll say we were just sitting here and you tried to get money out of Dr. Ferrel; that you tried to git me to do it with you."

"Shut up, Maggie," Jack Thomas said sharply. "Some

night I'm going to get a bellyful of the whole goddamn Frazer family. And when I do, I won't be responsible for what happens."

Cray suggested, "Suppose we talk it over with the Sheriff, Jack. Could be he'd want us to give Ferrel a break. Doc's been doing some good work in town. I know for a fact. My own sister could have died if he hadn't been on the job."

"It's an idea," Thomas said. As officer in charge, he made the decision. "O.K. Pull yourself together and get back in your car, Ferrel. You too, Maggie. We're going to forget this, for now. We aren't even going to talk to the Sheriff. But we'll remember, see? And if we catch you at anything like this again, Doc, you're going over the road."

Ferrel got in his car and tried to start it. He couldn't. He knew he couldn't drive it even if he did get it started. Reaction had set in. His entire body was shaking. He'd lost all control of his reflexes.

"I'll drive," Magnolia said. "Move over."

Ferrel got out and walked around the car. The red police spotlight following her, Magnolia made a tight U turn and drove back the way they had come.

Ferrel rode gripping the sill of the car door with both hands. Now the nightmare was beginning again, in proper sequence this time. He was back to the feeling of breathless motion, of being rushed through space toward an inevitable conclusion.

He finally realized Magnolia was crying. "Don't cry. Please," he said.

Magnolia sobbed, "I can't help it." Her lips compressed. She glanced sideways at him "This—this won't change anything, will it? I mean, about Elaine?"

"I don't know," Ferrel said.

He felt small and somehow soiled. He also felt cheated. He was in a class now with the boy he had killed. He

could almost hear young Udell's voice in the rush of air passing the car windows:

"Geez. Just when I was about—"

Ferrel gripped Magnolia's arm. "Pull over on the shoulder of the road."

"You mean right here?"

"Right here."

Magnolia wet her lips with her tongue. Her green eyes were thoughtful, and she glanced in the rear-view mirror.

"But the officers—"

Ferrel felt indescribably weary. He was nine hundred years old and finished with the follies of this world. "I'm not thinking what you're thinking," he said. "I don't believe I could."

"Then what?"

"I think I'm going to be sick," he told her.

Chapter Sixteen

FERREL glanced at the thermometer he'd just taken from young Mrs. Nixon's mouth, slipped it back in its case, and clipped the case in his pocket.

"She's all right, Doctor?" Nixon asked.

"She's fine," Dr. Ferrel assured him. He returned the sterile package of wooden depressors and his stethoscope to his bag. "I thought I warned you folks that morning nausea was something you could expect."

"I like to died," Betty Nixon said. "I was that sick. There ought to be some other arrangement. You know, lay an egg or something."

Ferrel laughed, as he had laughed a thousand times at similar suggestions by pregnant young wives. "It's an idea, Mrs. Nixon." He wrote two innocuous prescriptions to bolster the couple's morale. Then, picking up his bag, he walked out to his car and drove slowly toward the hospital to make his morning rounds.

Elaine's ultimatum was final. "Out. That girl gets out of my house by tomorrow morning. And I don't care where she goes."

That had been at breakfast. With Magnolia crying in her room and Elaine, her rust-colored horsetail bobbing, cold cream still smeared on her face, laying down the law.

"'One thousand and one Robinson Road. A miscarriage. The patient is hemorrhaging, Doctor.' I'll bet she did. It so happens that I called every Jones in the phone book. And there's no family named Jones on Robinson

Road. You had it planned between you. You met Magnolia. And you stayed with her. I could tell by the look on your face when you came home. You stayed with her. You hear me?"

Ferrel could still hear her. More, if Elaine felt the way she did this morning, on suspicion, just wait until she learned what really happened. Deputies Thomas and Cray might or might not report the incident to Sheriff Hammel. Dr. Ferrel rather doubted they would. He was a respected, responsible member of the community. He belonged to all the clubs that mattered. He knew all the big men in town. All of them, except Udell, liked him. Sheriff Hammel was his friend. So was Flagle. Despite their show of moral indignation, it wouldn't have been politic for Thomas and Cray to arrest him on a charge that they might have difficulty proving. It was his word against theirs.

A drop of sweat ran off his nose and splattered on the wheel. Ferrel wondered if he would ever stop perspiring. He wiped his face and ran his handkerchief under the collar of his shirt. One thing was certain. He wouldn't give up Magnolia. Now he had gone this far, he would go all the way. He would think of something. What? A divorce was out of the question. Elaine had made that plain. She'd told him in so many words:

"And if you're thinking of shelving me for that little blonde tramp, don't. I'll never give you a divorce. I'll never agree to a separation. And if you leave town with her, I'll find you. And I'll raise more hell than either of you ever saw."

So? What else was there to think of? He *had* to have Magnolia. He meant to, regardless of the cost.

A block from the hospital some child had left a tricycle on the sidewalk. Ferrel stopped his car and set the tricycle on the grass. Someone might trip over it and get hurt. Back in his car he drove slowly up the sun-baked street.

Though he doubted if Deputy Sheriffs Thomas and Cray would report the incident to Sheriff Hammel, their wives were another matter. Both men would tell their wives.

"Say, who do you think we caught in the park with that blonde Frazer kid?"

Their wives would tell their best friends. Their best friends would tell somebody else. And sometime during the telling, some smug, very-well-pleased-with-herself friend would remember to tell Elaine.

Supper should be quite an affair.

Perhaps Elaine and Magnolia would fight over him, pull each other's hair. Ferrel was wryly amused by the prospect. The life and love affairs of Roger M. Ferrel, M.D. In Technicolor. With sound effects.

His hospital round completed, Ferrel stopped at the floor supervisor's desk to check the charts of those of his patients who didn't have private nurses. Ferrel scribbled notes on several of the charts for the nurses' guidance, then rode the self-operated elevator to the first floor.

Just outside the door to the parking lot, her cap on the back of her head, her gray hair awry, a soiled mask dangling on the bib of her apron, Miss Mason was standing in the shade of a big purple bougainvillea bush "sneaking" a cigarette.

Ferrel said, "Good morning," and started for his car.

The supervisor called after him, "Could I say something, Dr. Ferrel?"

Ferrel walked back to where she was standing. He liked Miss Mason. More, he respected her professional ability. "Certainly."

Miss Mason blew smoke through her nose. "Cut it out. You're working too hard. Take a vacation before you kill yourself. If you'll pardon my Ybor City Spanish, you look like something Ponce de León dragged in." She stopped his protest with a waved cigarette. "I know. You feel a certain responsibility to your patients. I wouldn't

like you as much as I do if you didn't. But lots of women had babies long before you were a doctor."

"That's true," Dr. Ferrel admitted. "But you don't exactly look like you've been having cocktails at the inn. Been busy up in surgery?"

"God," Miss Mason said. She mopped her face with her mask. "I think every surgeon in town must be buying a new yacht." She held one hand at her hip. "We've been up to here in alleged gallstones and uninflamed vermiform appendices for two weeks."

Ferrel laughed. "Thanks for the interest, Miss Mason. It may be I can take a short vacation before long."

"You do that," Miss Mason said.

As he slid in back of the wheel of his car, Ferrel studied his face in the rear-vision mirror. Miss Mason was right. He did look like hell. His face was gray and drawn. There were deep new lines in it. He didn't look cute any more. He looked his age. But it had nothing to do with his profession.

Ferrel's mouth felt parched. His eyes burned. He had trouble starting his car. He pressed the accelerator to the floor. Still the motor failed to turn over. The starter didn't even click. Then he realized he'd failed to turn on the ignition. He switched it on and drove slowly out of the hospital parking lot.

The sun rose in the sky, and the morning grew even hotter. The thought of making the rest of his house calls suddenly depressed Ferrel. He was too tired to practice, too upset by his own problems to pretend an interest in the natural consequences of pregnancy as related by young, worried mothers-to-be. They hadn't been worried about heartburn or fainting or morning nausea while they had been getting pregnant.

He'd never been so tired. It was an effort to depress the gas pedal. He looked in the rear-view mirror again. His eyes looked like burned holes in a white sheet. Damn

Thomas and Cray. Ferrel attempted to wet his lips with an equally dry tongue. Why had Thomas and Cray had to appear on the scene just when they did? Why couldn't they have waited a few minutes?

Magnolia had cried herself to sleep. He'd paced the floor in torment, listening to Elaine in the guest room. Listening to vermouth gurgle out of a bottle and into Elaine, wondering just when Elaine was going to erupt. He was still in torment. He would be until— Ferrel was frank with himself. Until he and Magnolia had consummated their love was one way of saying it. Until they'd finished what they'd started was another.

Palmetto City dozed in the sun. There was little traffic on the street. Except for the welcome cooler weather, Ferrel was always sorry when summer was over. The Hotel and Motel Association and the local Chamber of Commerce wouldn't agree with him, but when Palmetto City wasn't crowded with tourists it was a pleasant place to live. You didn't have to stand in line when you went to a restaurant or a movie. You could drive out to the beach without getting caught in a traffic jam.

Ferrel looked down at the steering wheel. The bracelet of his watch was chattering against it as he drove aimlessly, headed nowhere. I'm stalling again, he thought. I've got to think.

Sweat beaded on his cheeks. "Think" was a nice way to put it. Like saying "expectorate" for "spit." There was only one solution. He'd known that from the start. From the night in Magnolia's room when he had promised to think.

He realized he was on First Avenue, in the heart of the city. Sheriff Hammel was standing in front of his office. The big man waved cordially. Ferrel returned the greeting, wondering if Sheriff Hammel would be so cordial if Hammel knew what he was thinking.

The word haunted him.

Ferrel wondered if it showed in his face. Was that what Miss Mason had seen? Even Miss Jones was looking at him quizzically these days. The old, easy, familiarity was gone. It was "Yes, Dr. Ferrel. No, Dr. Ferrel. If you think best, Dr. Ferrel."

Ferrel drove on, breathing through his mouth. And to hell with Miss Jones, too. He was almost thirty-nine years old. He would never be any younger. He had a right to live his life as he thought best. If Miss Jones didn't like whatever it was that displeased her, she could quit her job. He could always get another office nurse.

He drove a little faster. He could think from now on, but there was only one solution. The corners of Ferrel's mouth turned down. Magnolia was right. Elaine was a red-haired devil. Only a devil would have acted as Elaine had acted this morning, without proof. He had a right to come and go as he pleased, without being questioned, shouted at. Elaine was smothering him. She treated him as if he were a baby instead of a man. Even this morning, half drunk and angry as she'd been, she had put clean socks and underwear on the hamper in the bathroom. As if he didn't have sense enough to pick them out.

Ferrel's eyes narrowed as he mentally reviewed Elaine's medical history. Except for an occasional upset stomach, hangovers, and two mild heart attacks, Elaine was in fair physical condition. Instead of burning her out, her excesses seemed to have preserved her. She had only two weaknesses, vermouth and sleeping pills. Ferrel's pulse beat a little faster. All of Elaine's friends knew of her addiction to sleeping pills. She couldn't sleep a wink without them, Elaine said. And alcohol and barbiturates made a bad combination. Accidents due to overdosages were common. One read of them every day.

Ferrel's tortured mind raced on. Unfortunate as the incident in Phillipe Park had been, it would serve a good purpose. Once it became generally known, it would focus

attention upon himself and Magnolia. Unfavorable attention. The gossips would smirk and nod. They had been right all along. He had taken Magnolia into his home for just one purpose. He and she had been immoral from the start. According to the gossips. If anything should happen to Elaine, the old biddies would be satisfied that she had had reason to take her own life.

If anything should happen to Elaine. The thought coiled and uncoiled in a dark corner of Ferrel's mind. Palmetto City would hold him morally responsible. That was certain. But the powers that were, the ones that really mattered, would hold him legally guiltless.

No suspicion would attach itself to him. He was a healer, a saver of lives. Mr. Manson had said so in court. If necessary, if he lost too much of his practice after he and Magnolia were married, they could move to another town. A physician of his known skill and experience could make a good living anywhere. He could move to Miami and go into general practice. Magnolia would like that. Magnolia would like the color and excitement of Miami. He didn't have to spend the balance of his life delivering other men's babies. Magnolia would give him babies of his own.

Ferrel's physical torment increased. The leather upholstery of the convertible burned through the seat of his thin summer trousers. He felt as if he were sitting on a griddle. As he moved with the green light on Ninth Street Ferrel mopped his face, looking up at the brazen sky. He wished the sun were descending instead of ascending. Night was a long time away. He wished he'd used the other car. He wished he had a tall cold drink. A stiff one. He wished to God he was a plumber instead of an obstetrician. He wished babies hadn't been invented.

There was a parking space across from his office. He got out of his car and crossed the street blindly, almost knocking an old man down.

Ferrel caught at the man to steady him. "I beg your pardon," he said.

The old man merely looked at him and Ferrel realized it was Mr. Udell, aged almost beyond recognition. It was the first time Dr. Ferrel had seen him on the street since before Pete Koulous' trial. Ferrel tried to think of something to say. He couldn't. There seemed nothing he could say. Nothing that could combat the hate and loathing and malevolence in the other man's eyes.

Mr. Udell walked on. Ferrel continued across the street, pressing the fingers of both hands to his aching temples. None of this was his fault. If Mary Hart hadn't died, he wouldn't have gone to Phillipe Park. If he hadn't gone to Phillipe Park, he would never have known there was such a person as Magnolia Frazer.

His office, as usual, was filled with bright-eyed young mothers-to-be. Dr. Ferrel included them all in one curt "Good morning," and closed the door of his private office behind him.

Even his desk looked strange. He sat a long time with his palms pressed to his feverish forehead. He couldn't go on this way. He wouldn't go on this way. Nor would he allow Elaine to send Magnolia away.

Magnolia's love would make everything right. Magnolia was good. She was fine. She was decent. Their love was the biggest and nicest thing that had ever happened to either of them. Magnolia hadn't wanted its consummation to be cheap! She'd wanted it to be beautiful. She wanted to give him babies, too.

The madness of last night filled the office. Ferrel's hoarse breathing increased in tempo as he relived it. Magnolia had wanted it to be beautiful. Still, to prove she loved him, Magnolia had given herself to him. She'd been all fire and passion and love. It hadn't been her fault that they had been interrupted.

Mrs. Hayes's voice on the interoffice annunciator was

politely reproving. "You have quite a few appointments this morning, Dr. Ferrel. Are you ready to see the first patient?"

A lone drop of perspiration zigzagged down Ferrel's face and dripped from his chin to splatter faintly on the glass top of his desk, like a tired raindrop. The words came in a husky whisper.

"In just a moment," he told her. "I'm—thinking."

Chapter Seventeen

AT TEN O'CLOCK, then again at noon, Dr. Ferrel attempted to phone Magnolia. To ask how she felt. To tell her not to worry. To assure her that everything was going to be all right. Both times Elaine answered the phone and tried, hysterically, to continue the tirade she'd begun over the breakfast table.

Now, at three o'clock, his lunch sour in his stomach, Ferrel still felt slightly breathless. The calm, he knew, was only temporary. It was like sitting in the eye of a hurricane, waiting for the wind to blow again, not quite certain from which quarter it was going to come.

He wished he hadn't tried to eat. He wished it was three-thirty. He wished he was with Magnolia. In Miami. In Atlanta. In California. Anywhere out of Palmetto City. He had to force himself to listen to what the girl in the chair beside his desk was saying.

"But how will I know?" the girl asked.

"You mean, when it's time?"

"Yes."

Ferrel toyed with the slide of his automatic pencil. "Do you know the exact date of conception?"

"I—think so," the girl said, blushing. "Approximately."

Ferrel liked her. Because she was still modest enough to blush. Because she was sweet and young, like Magnolia. He said, "It isn't a hard and fast rule, but if you add two hundred and seventy-three days to the approximate date of conception, the chances are your baby—" He looked up as the door of his inner office opened.

"Dr. Ferrel." Mrs. Hayes sounded agitated.

"Yes?" Ferrel asked, annoyed. He greatly disliked being interrupted when he was talking to a new patient for the first time. First impressions were always important. They often told him more than the patient's past case history.

"Yes, Mrs. Hayes?"

"It's Mrs. Ferrel," his receptionist told him.

"What about her?"

"She's just had another heart attack, in the lobby of the Bijou. Mr. Corwin just phoned. He said she's clutching at her heart, and her lips are turning blue."

Ferrel stood up and apologized to his patient. "Excuse me. I'm sorry, but—"

The girl rose from the green leather chair. "Of course."

Ferrel checked his pocket medicine kit to make sure there was a sterile needle and digitalein in it. "Mrs. Hayes—"

"Yes, Dr. Ferrel?"

"Make another appointment as early as you can for Mrs.—" Ferrel couldn't remember the patient's name.

"Gleason," the girl said.

"For Mrs. Gleason." Ferrel patted the girl's arm. "And don't worry, Mrs. Gleason. Nothing's going to happen immediately."

"I know." The girl smiled. "At least not for—some months."

Ferrel strode through the waiting room and across the street to his car. Standing in the sun for hours hadn't cooled the leather upholstery. Elaine, always Elaine. If this was a trick of Elaine's, a bid for sympathy— Ferrel shrugged as he depressed the gas pedal. It didn't matter. After tonight he would be free of Elaine. Tonight would end the entire affair. After tonight there would be only himself and Magnolia to consider.

A plump little man with a potbelly, Tom Corwin, the manager of the Bijou, was waiting in the street in front

of the theatre. He waved Ferrel into the no-parking zone. "She just keeled right over, Roger," he told Ferrel. Corwin was apologetic. "I thought at first Elaine had been drinking too much. I could smell alcohol on her breath and she was talking incoherently."

"About what?"

"I couldn't get it. Something about that Frazer girl coming to see the picture last night. But then, when Elaine began to catch at her heart and her lips started to turn blue—" The manager left it at that and crossed the walk.

Ferrel hurried after him through the air-conditioned foyer into the ladies' lounge. Elaine was lying on a divan and a pretty attendant was applying cold compresses to her forehead. There was no doubt about the genuineness of the attack. Elaine was in a serious condition. This was the worst attack she'd had. Elaine saw him and tried to smile.

Ferrel was professionally crisp. "Just take it easy, now. Everything will be all right in a moment."

Despite the pain, Elaine kept smiling. Ferrel filled the sterile needle and used it. Elaine's relief was almost instantaneous. Color came back to her face. The pinched look left it. The blue receded from her lips.

The attendant used one of the cold towels to wipe her own forehead. "You scared me half to death, lady."

"Oh," Elaine whispered. "Thank God you're here, Roger." She brushed at the lock of rust-colored hair in her eyes. "That was a bad one."

"A bad one," Ferrel agreed. He disposed of the used ampoule.

Tom Corwin repeated what the attendant had said. "Don't ever do that again, Elaine. You frightened me half to death."

"I frightened myself," Elaine admitted. She tried to sit up.

Ferrel put a professional hand on her shoulder. "No. Rest."

"She'll be all right now?" Corwin asked.

"She'll be fine," Ferrel said. "But she'll have to rest for a few days." He glanced at his watch. "Call my office, will you, Tom? Tell Mrs. Hayes to cancel the rest of my appointments and squeeze them in sometime tomorrow."

"You bet," Corwin said. With the familiarity of an old friend he shook a finger at Elaine. "The answer to your question is no. I didn't see Magnolia last night. But you stop thinking about other people and think of yourself for a change. And lay off that stuff in the tall bottles. You hear me, Elaine?"

Elaine looked at Ferrel, then away. "I hear you." She ran her fingers through her red hair, mussing it still more. It gave her a strangely attractive, wanton look.

"How are you going to get her home?" Corwin asked.

"I'll carry her out to my car," Ferrel said. He picked Elaine up from the divan. Her breath reeked of vermouth. Despite the pain and the shock of the attack, she was still far from sober. "Thanks. Thanks a lot, Tom."

"Don't mention it," Corwin said.

The theatre man opened the door. Ignoring the stares of the curious matineegoers, Ferrel carried his wife down one of the long red runners that led through the foyer to the walk.

As they passed the ticket office, Elaine tightened her arm around Ferrel's neck and pressed her smeared lips to his shirt front.

Elaine began to cry. "Please. Don't put me out of your life, Roger. I—I'm sorry about this morning. I didn't mean to lose my head. But you mean so much to me."

Ferrel considered asking Elaine, for the last time, if she would agree to a divorce, and knew the question would be futile. It would only cause more emotional upset.

"Please," he said stiffly. "People are watching us."

He lowered Elaine onto the leather seat of the convertible. Then, walking around the car, he slipped in back of the wheel and eased the car into the westbound traffic.

Elaine brushed at the lock of rust-colored hair, then wiped her eyes with it. "You're awfully angry with me, aren't you, darling?"

Ferrel realized he'd been holding his breath. He exhaled slowly, relieved. Elaine obviously didn't know. She was still merely hurt and suspicious. For once the local gossips had slipped up. As yet no one had told Elaine that Deputies Thomas and Cray had surprised him and Magnolia.

Elaine fought an attack of nervous hiccups. "You are angry, aren't you?"

"No," Ferrel said. He wasn't. He felt strangely cool and detached.

It was almost as if Elaine was already dead, and he was riding with her memory.

Chapter Eighteen

MAGNOLIA opened the breezeway door. "What's the matter with her?"

"She's had a heart attack," Ferrel said.

Behind Magnolia's honey-colored hair, Addie's brown face was round and worried. "I knew it, Mis' Ferrel. I knew." The maid pleated the hem of her apron. "I knew when you leave this afternoon, I shouldn't let you go out."

Elaine stroked Ferrel's face with her fingertips. "I'm all right now." Her eyes searched his. "Aren't I, Roger?"

"You're fine. You'll be fine now," he assured her.

With Addie leading the way down the hall, Ferrel carried Elaine to their bedroom and lowered her to the bed. "Now, off with those clothes and into a nightgown. And don't get out of that bed until I tell you so."

Elaine's eyes continued to search his. "Whatever you say, Roger." She attempted to unzip her dress and realized she was too weak. "Help me, Addie," she whimpered. "Don't let that girl touch me."

"No, ma'am, Mis' Ferrel," Addie said. She unzipped Elaine's dress and helped her out of it. Then she unhooked Elaine's garters and peeled off her stockings. "You jest lay still, Mis' Ferrel."

Ferrel walked back to the car for his bag. Magnolia was sprawled on the couch in the living room. Her eyes sullen, she asked, "How sick is she?"

Ferrel evaded the question. "It was a serious attack."

"She wasn't just puttin' on?"

"No."

He returned to the bedroom with his bag and took out a small brown bottle of white pills. "I want you to take one of these every hour for the next four hours." He set the bottle on the bed table. "But no more, understand?"

He felt Elaine's pulse. She was still having trouble with her breathing. She would be weak for some time, but her pulse was regular again.

Elaine looked at the bottle. "Yes, Roger. Whatever you say. What is it?"

Ferrel got a glass of water from the bathroom and put it on the bed table. "The same thing I gave you before. Digitalis. A heart stimulant. That is, I gave you digitalein before because it can be administered subcutaneously. But—" He stopped talking and looked at her. All Elaine had been wearing under her dress was a transparent slip. Her body was still beautiful. Her breasts were large. Her hips were white and lush. Her stomach was still concave. The nylon slip gave her flesh a rosy glow. She was very much alive. He looked away. "Remember, now. One pill every hour for four hours."

"I'll try to remember," Elaine said. She pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. "But where will you be, Roger?"

"Here. And in the next room. What are we having for supper, Addie?"

Addie's eyes were as sullen as Magnolia's. "Col' sliced ham, cut thick. An' col' German potato salad, made with bacon the way you like it. Mis' Ferrel made it for you before she went uptown."

"Good," Ferrel said. "But you'd better fix something else for Mrs. Ferrel. I'd suggest a light broth and toast. And perhaps some cold sliced chicken, if there's any left from last night."

"Yes, sir, Dr. Ferrel," Addie said. She got a nightgown from the dresser drawer and looked at Ferrel pointedly.

"Don't go. Please," Elaine begged.

Dr. Ferrel's assuring pat was professional. "I'll be right in the next room."

"Yes. I know," she said sadly.

Ferrel closed the door behind him and walked down the hall to the living room. Magnolia came eagerly into his arms. "I been so worried. And I missed you so."

Ferrel held her close. "I've missed you. I tried to call you twice. And both times Elaine answered the phone."

"I know," Magnolia whispered. The question was a sound in his mouth. "And it's goin' to be all right? I mean, for us?"

A lump formed in Ferrel's throat. "Yes."

"You've thought of some way we kin be together?"

"Yes."

"For always? You and me?"

"Yes."

"Mebbe live right here in this pretty house?"

"Yes."

Magnolia rocked back and forth in his arms. "I love you, love you, love you."

"I love you," Ferrel whispered. His need had never been so great.

He was running again, up the steep hill studded with thorn trees. Thorn trees, whose crimson blossoms fruited pain. He made an attempt to control his breathing. "How did you make out today? I mean, with her?"

"Well, she doesn't know about last night. I mean—well, you know what I mean. Anyways, for sure. She's only suspicious. But all my clothes are packed."

"Why?"

Magnolia's eyes filled with tears. "She tol' me I had to git out. Elaine tol' me if I was still here when she got back from town she'd put me out."

"We'll see about that," Ferrel said.

Magnolia clung to him, her flexing fingers digging into

his back. "I knew you would. That's why I stayed. After last night, we—well, now we belong to each other."

Ferrel kissed her wet eyes, thinking, *The sweetness, the innocence of the child. Now we belong to each other.*

They broke apart as Addie came out of the bedroom. Her plump face was sullen. She avoided looking at him when she spoke. "You want to eat early or late, Dr. Ferrel?"

"Any time," Ferrel said. "I'm home from the office for the day."

Addie walked on into the kitchen and took out her disapproval on the pots and pans. Addie, Ferrel thought, would make a good witness at the coroner's inquest.

"Yes, sir," she would tell Flagle. "I seen 'em ahuggin' an' akissin' when they think no one's alookin'. Specially these las' few days. No wonder Mis' Ferrel doan wan' live no more. She purely loved that man."

"You're sure?" Magnolia whispered. "I mean, about us, about Elaine."

"I'm positive," Ferrel said.

Magnolia's lips brushed his cheek. "I knew."

"You knew what?"

"That you'd think of something," she whispered.

"You want hot coffee or iced tea?" Addie asked from the kitchen.

"Hot coffee," Ferrel told her, and went out to turn on the sprinklers.

Tonight must be exactly like all other nights. He must do nothing out of the ordinary, omit nothing he usually did.

Death was so common. It was such a simple thing. Once the spark of life was gone, that was it. Ferrel mentally checked his bag. A hypo of morphine would do it. With an empty bottle of sleeping pills on the bed table, for Flagle to pounce on. If there was no autopsy, nothing could be proved. And Dr. Flagle detested autopsies. It

was a standard joke in local medical circles that unless there was an eye witness or the deceased showed definite signs of having been shot or hacked with an ax, every body that Flagle examined in his legal capacity as coroner was pronounced suicide. Seemingly, Flagle knew only two verdicts—death by misadventure, and suicide while of unsound mind.

Ferrel crossed the lawn slowly. Surely a physician with his scientific knowledge should be able to think of some clever way to extinguish an unwanted life without getting caught.

Or could he?

Ferrel mopped at his wet face. If only he could stop perspiring!

Physicians were a unique class. They dealt in life and death daily. They were trusted members of the community in which they lived. Still, he wasn't entirely above suspicion. If he had friends in Palmetto City, he also had enemies. Chief among them was Robert A. Udell. Ferrel returned his sodden handkerchief to his pocket. Udell, still grieving over his scapegrace son, would spend any amount of money, would consider nothing too much trouble, if he could discredit Ferrel.

Dr. Ferrel tried to remember what he'd come outside for and finally remembered. The sprinklers—he'd come out to turn them on. The *ker-wish, ker-wish* as they revolved was a pleasant, soothing sound. Until he realized he was the only freeholder in the block who was sprinkling his lawn. Sprinkling wasn't necessary since it had rained the night before. Ferrel turned off the sprinklers, hoping no one had seen them. He must be more mentally perturbed than he realized. He would have to be careful. So careful.

He wiped his face again and sat in one of the lawn chairs. But not for long. The mosquitoes had returned with the damp weather. When the paper boy pedaled

down the street, Ferrel retrieved the evening paper from the bush into which the boy had thrown it and retreated to the screened breezeway.

There was nothing of importance in the paper. At least, nothing of importance to him. The one thing that mattered was Magnolia. Maybe he wouldn't move away. Maybe he wouldn't move to Miami. His practice was here. To hell with Palmetto City. He'd stay right here and make it accept Magnolia. Once Palmetto City knew her for what she really was, it would love her as much as he did. It wasn't her fault that she'd been born in a bait camp or that her father was a foul-mouthed licentious drunk.

Ferrel tried to concentrate on a headline and it blurred. All he could see was Magnolia with her dirndl skirt up around her waist, wearing her white blouse as a necklace.

"Supper," Addie said flatly, "is ready."

The ham and the salad were good, but Ferrel's coffee was cold. He complained and Addie poured him a second cup that was colder than the first. The salad was as warm as the coffee was cold. Ferrel was wryly amused. Addie didn't approve of him tonight. Nor did she approve of Magnolia. And that was all right, too.

He ate looking at Magnolia, fascinated by her blonde young beauty. Four months of eating the sort of food she should, of wearing the right kind of clothes, of living in an entirely different stratum of society, had brought out her latent charms. She was no longer merely attractive. She was a beautiful girl.

Magnolia wrinkled her nose at him. "Like what you're looking at?"

"Very much," Ferrel assured her.

Supper over, Addie snatched the dishes off the table and got Elaine's tray from her room. It was usually after seven by the time she left. Tonight she had the kitchen cleaned and was ready to leave by six-forty-five. Sitting in

the breezeway, Ferrel heard her say good night to Elaine.

"I hope you feel bettah in the mornin', honey," Addie told her. "I be heah bright and early. An' do you want me fo' anythin' t'night, you jist call my numbah an' I come arunnin'."

It was Friday, her night to be paid, but the maid ignored Dr. Ferrel completely as she walked through the breezeway.

"Don't you want your money, Addie?" Ferrel asked her.

Addie turned in the carport to face him. "I get it t'morrow. From Mis' Ferrel." Addie's ample body shook with indignation. "An' excusin' I say it, but effen I was you, Dr. Ferrel, I'd march myse'f right in there an' tell Mis' Ferrel I sorry I bin actin' sich a fool. Fo' shame!"

Addie walked out of the carport and down the drive.

At seven o'clock, he turned on the radio and listened to the news and a musical program that followed, without hearing either program. He was stalling. Ferrel knew it. His mind thought in terse little snatches, trying to avoid the snake coiling and uncoiling in its darkest corner. And failing. It was time. And past. He'd promised Magnolia to think. He'd thought. It was time to do what he intended to do. The actual act shouldn't be difficult. Merely the insertion of a needle into flesh, an act he'd performed ten thousand times. It was the waiting that would be difficult.

Flagle, the pompous ass, would ask, "Just one more thing. How come you didn't realize what had happened before you did, Dr. Ferrel?"

He would say, "Why, I was sleeping in the guest room. Elaine and I had quarreled over Magnolia. We were no longer living as man and wife."

Ferrel's tired mind paused to pant. Or perhaps it might be better to say he was sleeping with Magnolia. The thought excited him.

Either way, Dr. Flagle would think, *You skunk.*

So would Sheriff Hammel. So would this fellow physicians. So would all of Palmetto City. But he would get away with it. No one would even suspect him. Unless there was an autopsy. And there'd be no reason for one. It would be obvious to everyone that Elaine had taken her own life. There was a wild wind blowing in his ear.

He got his bag from the living room and extracted a syringe, a sterile hypodermic needle, and an ampoule of morphine in solution.

He fitted the needle to the syringe. He filled the syringe from the ampoule. He depressed the plunger to make certain there were no air bubbles in the needle. Then he wrapped the needle in sterile cotton and stood up.

Magnolia had been watching from the doorway. She came to him and pressed herself against him.

"You aren't afraid?" she whispered.

"No," Ferrel said. "I'm not afraid."

He walked into the living room carrying the syringe, trying not to hear the howl of the wind. It was in his mind. There was nothing to giving a hypodermic injection. Elaine trusted him. He would tell her he thought she'd better get some sleep. He would find a vein. He would put the needle into the vein. He would depress the plunger. And Elaine would sleep. For a long time.

Forever.

The word was like a blow. He felt the flesh of his stomach wince.

Forever.

That was how long he and Elaine had promised to love, honor, and cherish each other. In plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health. As long as they both should live. Not any two people. Them; he and Elaine.

Ferrel took two more slow steps toward the bedroom and realized his knees were sagging. The wind died away slowly, leaving only silence and a vacuum.

He took another step. The air in the room was still and hot. His body was drenched with sweat. The hand holding the syringe was slippery with it.

In the silence Magnolia whispered, "What's the matter?"

The sweat on Ferrel's forehead rolled down onto his face and chin and dripped, unnoticed, onto the hand holding the syringe. He was on his way to take a life. He was going to kill Elaine—for her. So they could be together. So their love could be beautiful. And because he hesitated, Magnolia asked, "What's the matter?"

Ferrel forced himself into action and was startled to the point of screaming when a bell rang. He stood breathing heavily, peering into the night. Someone was on the porch. Someone was standing in the dark, watching him across the lighted living room with a lethal syringe in his hand. The bell rang again. And again.

Elaine called from the bedroom. "The phone's ringing, darling." Her voice sounded as if she'd been crying. "May I get up now, please?" She sighed. "Or will you answer it?"

It was an effort for Ferrel to speak. "I'll—answer it." He laid the syringe on a bookshelf and picked up the phone. "Dr. Ferrel speaking." As Ferrel listened, he felt with his free hand for his handkerchief and patted at his face with it. "I see," he said finally. "Yes. I'll come right over, Doctor."

He cradled the phone and turned to face Magnolia. She'd switched on the bright lamp near the phone table. Her eyes were round, unblinking, seemingly lidless. Her high cheekbones reflected the light. Her head was thrust forward in an attitude of listening. "Now what?" she asked.

"It was the hospital," Ferrel told her. His throat was sore. His voice felt rusty. "A patient has been in labor for thirty-six hours." Ferrel ran his fingers through his

hair to dry them. They came away even wetter. "Her doctor says it looks as if a Caesarean section is indicated."

"So?"

"He wants me to perform it."

From the bedroom Elaine called softly, "You're going, Roger?"

"But of course," Ferrel said. "It's my job."

Elaine's voice was stronger now. It reached out and caressed him. "I'll be waiting for you, darling."

Magnolia looked at the syringe on the bookshelf. Her unblinking green eyes were thoughtful. She put her arms around Ferrel's neck and pressed her lips to his. She talked with her lips against his mouth. "Do it now. Before you go."

"No," Ferrel gasped. "I can't."

He caught her wrists and removed her arms from his neck. He put on his coat. He picked up his bag. He opened the screen door. He walked through the sodden heat across the lawn to his car. As he laid his bag on the seat he looked back over his shoulder.

Magnolia had opened the screen door. She was standing in the doorway with the bright light behind her, stripping her of her clothes, revealing her lithe young body in minute detail.

Chapter Nineteen

MISS MASON was waiting in the corridor when Dr. Ferrel emerged from the scrub room in his street clothes. As he came out she put her hand on his arm.

"Nice work, Dr. Ferrel."

Ferrel felt better than he had in months. "Thanks." He lighted a cigarette and was pleased to note that his hands were steady. The cigarette really tasted like tobacco. He inhaled deeply into his lungs. "We put it over on the old boy with the sickle that time. Twins."

Miss Mason said, "Maybe I'm wrong about that vacation. I don't know how Palmetto City would get along without you."

Ferrel patted the hand on his arm. "That goes double, Miss Mason. It's just that we make a good team."

The supervisor's plain face flushed with pleasure. "Thank you, Dr. Ferrel. You're grand. Good night."

"Good night." Ferrel walked on down the corridor to the elevator. "Grand." Well, that was far better than being called "cute."

The bougainvillea-bordered parking lot was an inch deep with water, and now it was raining again. It was as if the Gulf had been inverted and was pouring down on the earth. With one exception. There was no salt in the water. It felt cool and clean. Roger Ferrel allowed it to soak him. He liked the feel of it in his hair. He licked at the rain on his lips. It tasted good.

The seat of the convertible had an inch of water in it. Ferrel brushed it out with a cupped hand, thinking he

must remember to have the automatic top-raising mechanism fixed. It was silly to drive a car without a top, especially in Florida. When the seat was as dry as he could brush it with his hand, he sat a moment looking at the lighted windows of the nursery. It had been close. But both boys and their young mother had made it. All three were doing fine. A smile lightened Ferrel's face. It seemed incredible that the red, squawling bundles of humanity he had just delivered would grow up to be men, with all of grown men's appetites and desires.

He drive through the rain slowly. He was tired. He was wet. But he felt good. He was glad the phone had rung. He must have been out of his mind to think he could do such a thing. Even without the ringing phone he doubted that he could have gone through with it. At the last moment his subconscious would have balked. A man was the product of his years of training and experience.

Ferrel lifted one of his wet hands from the wheel and studied it thoughtfully. It was a big hand with long, slightly spatulate fingers. It was a capable, sensitive hand painstakingly trained. It was good to know it was still clean.

He drove on slowly through town. Except for the rain-misted street lamps on the corners, the only lights were in the business section. First Street ran curb-deep in water. The green benches were deserted. There were no pedestrians on the wet walks. Grateful for the cooling rain, Palmetto City slept.

So its population had increased by two. So?

Ferrel increased his speed. He was eager to get home. Nothing had changed. He was still in love with Magnolia. Magnolia was a fever in his blood that he doubted anything would ever cure. Roger Ferrel accepted the fact. So he would live with a fever. A lot of other men did. There was one solution other than the one he'd planned. He

would send Magnolia away in the morning. Far away. She could pick any school she wished to attend. But the mad plans he and she had made were just that—mad. Mature, responsible men of his age didn't marry sixteen-year-old children even if they were maritally unencumbered. And he wasn't.

He felt suddenly appalled. He felt small and cheap. He must have been out of his mind. Elaine didn't deserve to be treated as he had treated her. In his first years of general practice, man after man had sat at his desk complaining that their marriages were going on the rocks because their wives were sexually cold, had begged him for a nonexistent magic potion that would increase their wives' desires. He'd never had that complaint. And if Elaine's demands were greater than most women's, it was because they were commensurate with her capacity to love. It was difficult for Elaine to hate anyone. Even during these last few days, last night and tonight especially, trapped in what must be an intolerable situation for a woman of her temperament, Elaine had made only one outburst. She hadn't attempted to force matters; she'd left it up to him.

Ferrel looked back down the years and realized it had always been that way. Elaine had counseled him in the little matters, but had left the big decisions up to him. Tonight, knowing Magnolia was with him, possibly in his arms, all Elaine had said was:

"I'll be waiting for you, darling."

Ferrel continued to think back down the years. Elaine had never once complained or once reminded him of the sacrifices she'd made. His resentment had been in his mind, because he was so deeply indebted to her. If Elaine smothered him with attention it was because she loved him, because he was her personal god.

Ferrel gripped the steering wheel hard, driving swiftly and expertly through the blinding rain. If Elaine had

treated him like a baby, he was one. In everything but his profession. When a man couldn't tell the difference between a phone and a doorbell, someone had to look after him.

The scene with Magnolia would be difficult. Magnolia was a sweet child—in love. He hadn't been fair to her, either. He'd led Magnolia to expect great things of their future together. But she had no future with him, nor he with her. Married men of nearly thirty-nine were past the days when they expected sustained ecstasy of life. Despite the cool of the night and the wet, Ferrel's face grew warm. It was going to be difficult to give up Magnolia.

Dr. Ferrel slowed his car as he crossed Third Avenue. Both Sheriff Hammel's office and the police station were in the next block. And now that he'd come to his senses, all he needed to complicate his life further was to be arrested for driving fifty-five miles an hour in a twenty-five-mile zone because he wasn't going to have a sixteen-year-old girl for his wife.

The thought amused Ferrel. He laughed, and the laughter dispelled the turmoil within him. Elaine was right about that, too. He was too sober, too intense. He took life too seriously. He would laugh more in the future. He'd make a point of taking Elaine somewhere two or three nights a week. They'd go to the Bath Club and get a little tight and dance. To a baseball game or a movie. Out to the dog track. So some patient needed him. The registry could always locate him if he was needed.

There was the usual bright light over the booking desk in the police station. Sheriff Hammel's office was also lighted. Dr. Ferrel glanced at the wet dial of his watch—one o'clock in the morning. Doctors and policemen. Both were out in all sorts of weather. It was expected of them. A trickle of rain ran down Ferrel's back. In the morning he'd get the damn top fixed.

Past Second avenue, he resumed his speed. When he got home the first thing he would do would be to take a hot bath and put on some dry things. He might even have a highball. Then he would get Elaine and Magnolia together in the living room and he would say:

"Look. Two of us are mature adults. You're old enough to be in love, Magnolia. Now, let's talk this out. I love both of you. But I'm married to Elaine and twenty-odd years older than you are, Magnolia. I don't want an affair with you. I know you don't want an affair with me. You yourself told me you wanted it to be beautiful. And my marrying you is out of the question."

Just like that.

Sweat mixed with the rain on Ferrel's forehead. He slowed the speed of his car. He would say what he had to say. Then what would happen?

Magnolia was only sixteen. But she wasn't really a child. She was a woman when she looked at Elaine. Elaine had everything she wanted. Money, position, a home. Magnolia had hoped to lady it over the local girls who had stared at her.

Ferrel wiped the moisture from his face. He would say what he had to say. Then Magnolia would blow the whistle.

There was really no telling what Magnolia would say or do. But, regardless, Ferrel was determined to stick to his decision.

Ferrel gripped the steering wheel until his knuckles were white in the rain. His mind raced on up the thorn-tree-studded hill still faster, but not in fear of what Elaine might say or do. In growing horror. How had Magnolia known what he had intended to do? He hadn't told her. All he had said was that he had thought of something.

The fury of the storm increased. Great solid sheets of silver rain slanting in from the Gulf forced Ferrel to

slacken the speed of his car still more. A jagged streak of lightning illuminated the sky. The wet street faded. All Ferrel could see was the white body of a girl racing down the hill toward him. A blonde girl with a scarlet hibiscus bloom back of one ear.

Of course. He'd forgotten the blossom—an almost deliberate lapse of memory, he thought now.

"I like pretty things," she'd told him. "The art teacher at Palmetto High says I have an appreciation."

Then the girl was gone with the lightning. But Ferrel knew. Elaine had been right all along. Magnolia had never been in love with him. Her sighing and her kisses, her exposed body were merely the bait she had used. To hook a middle-aged fish who had everything she wanted. Magnolia was Joe Frazer's daughter and like her father, she always had bait. She'd known from the start there could be only one solution.

The rain was suddenly cold on Ferrel's body. His years of saving lives had saved him. He hadn't been able to kill Elaine. But there was nothing to stop Magnolia. And he'd left her alone with Elaine.

With a lethal syringe on the bookshelf.

Chapter Twenty

THE COLD SPREAD to Ferrel's lips. He clenched his teeth to stop them from chattering. His feeling of new-found peace was gone. He was back riding the same old nightmare, this time down a shallow ribbon of water bordered by storm-lashed palm trees. Ferrel glanced at the wet dial of the speedometer. Sixty, eighty miles an hour. Silver wings as wide as the street extended from both front fenders of his car. As he passed the corner of Tenth Avenue he caught a glimpse of haloed headlights and blue and white painted metal gleaming wetly in the rain.

He slackened his speed for Bayshore Drive, slued into the drive on two wheels, pushing a skirt of water before him like a hydroplane rounding a marker, then pushed the accelerator to the floor boards to straighten out his car. Somewhere in the storm-filled night behind him a police siren began to wail.

Ferrel kept his foot pressed to the floor boards, for ten blocks, fifteen, twenty, damning the feeble efforts of the almost useless windshield wiper. Then he was on his own street, damning all fools who parked their cars in front of their houses, instead of pulling into their drives or carports.

There was a slight dip and jog in the narrow street at the intersection of Par Avenue. Ferrel hit the dip too fast and his speeding car, failing to make the jog, hurtled over the curb on the far side of Par Avenue and smashed sideways into a tree. The impact threw Ferrel clear of the wreckage and onto a rain-sodden lawn. He felt a sharp

stab of pain in his left arm. Then he was on his feet and running. Two houses from his own he took to the lawn again and ran, sobbing for breath, toward his still-lighted living-room door.

After the pound and the splash of the rain, the house seemed unnaturally still. Ferrel tramped soddenly across the carpet to the bookshelf on which he had left the syringe. It was gone. He stood a moment, panting, then walked down the hall to Elaine's bedroom, his shoes leaving wet tracks behind him.

Both the ceiling and the bed lamps were lighted. Elaine was standing in the narrow space on the far side of the bed with her back to the wall. Her red hair was disordered. Her sheer nightgown was ripped to the waist. She stood with the back of her left hand pressed to her forehead. In her other hand she was holding a pair of scissors.

Each shining blonde hair in place, her green eyes slitted slightly, Magnolia held the syringe in her right hand and stood with her knees pressed to the bed. Amused. Reaching out with the syringe from time to time, to see Elaine cringe against the wall. Without turning her head she asked, "Is that you, Roger?"

"Yes," Ferrel said.

Magnolia continued to watch Elaine. "You told her to stay in bed, but she didn't. We both waited and waited and waited. Then about an hour ago, she got up and come out in t'other room."

"Oh."

"At first I didn't pay her no mind. I just set and looked at a picture magazine while she abused me for still being in her house after she tol' me to git out."

"Oh."

Magnolia moved her right hand. "Then she saw this. She wanted to know what it was. And she'd made me so mad, I tol' her."

"Oh," Ferrel repeated.

Elaine's lower lip quivered as she looked across the room at her husband. The hand she had been pressing to her forehead fell to her side. She began to cry without sound.

Magnolia's lips twisted in scorn. "I didn't go to tell her. But I did. And she got so scared she cut me." There was a smear of blood on her left cheek.

"I see." Ferrel walked over to the bed and held out his hand. "I'll take the syringe now, Magnolia."

She gave it to him. "She'd a got out in the wet and mebbe run to one of the neighbors and spoiled everything if I hadn't stopped her." Magnolia's small breasts rose and fell. "Go on. Give it to her. Now. Afore the phone rings again."

Ferrel tried to meet Elaine's eyes and couldn't. He looked at the syringe. "Just one thing, Magnolia."

"Yes?"

"How did you know what was in this?"

She began, "Why, I—" Magnolia spoke the two words and stopped. She wet her lips with her tongue. Then, her green eyes thoughtful, she sucked at the tip of one pink thumb.

Elaine's quivering lips formed the question before the words came out as a sound. "You couldn't, could you, Roger?"

Ferrel met her eyes. "No. I thought I could. But I couldn't."

He walked into the bathroom and emptied the syringe in the basin. It was difficult working with one hand but, from long years of habit, he managed to take it apart. When it was empty he rinsed it with hot water, then looked, automatically, for a sterilizer. He compromised by laying syringe and needle on the flat top of the water tank. Then he returned to the bedroom.

Magnolia was still sucking her thumb. Elaine was sit-

ting on the far side of the bed, still crying soundlessly. She said, "You've hurt your arm."

"It's broken," Ferrel told her. "I piled the car into a palm up the street. Where that jog is. I was hurrying to get back here."

Elaine lifted her head. Her wet eyes searched his face. "To me, or to Magnolia?"

Here the pound of the rain and the roar of the storm was a patting and a whispering outside the closed casement windows. "To you."

Magnolia took her thumb from her mouth. "Now wait. Just a minute. What about me?"

"I don't know," Ferrel admitted. "I must have been out of my mind. I thought I loved you. But I don't. I couldn't love you. I don't even like you."

"I'll tell Elaine."

"How can you? You've already told her. She knows. There was only one solution. You knew that from the start. That's what you wanted me to think of. And I did."

The corners of Magnolia's mouth turned down. "Now you tell me. Now you act like this. I thought we were going to be married."

"My marrying you is out of the question."

"Then why did you come into my room the night Elaine was gone?"

"What night was this?" Elaine asked.

Ferrel had run as far as he could. He couldn't run any more. He was too weary. Both his flesh and his spirit were lacerated. He put an end to the nightmare. "Have I ever lied to you, Elaine?"

"No."

"I won't lie now," Ferrel said. "It began the night I brought her home. I won't say I didn't fight against it. I did. That's why I suggested you both go to the mountains. Then last night I had Magnolia. For the first time." Roger Ferrel shuddered. "Out in Phillippe Park." Ferrel stood,

breathing through his mouth. "It wasn't love. I know that now. But I don't know what it was."

Magnolia's small breasts rose and fell with her emotion, real or simulated. "It was love," she insisted. She caught Ferrel's good hand and pressed it to her face. "Please."

"Please what?"

"Please fill another needle and do it to her." The blonde girl sucked in her breath. "Then we can be together all the time. Like you said. All the time. You promised."

Ferrel felt slightly ill. He pulled his hand away and wiped it on the wet tail of his coat. Then he laughed softly. "I'm sorry, Magnolia. But as Mrs. Ferrel said in the breezeway the other night, when you stand in that light I can see right through you."

"Oh. Now Elaine is Mrs. Ferrel."

"And she's going to stay Mrs. Ferrel."

"You don't like me any more."

"I doubt if I ever did."

It was so plain, so obvious. Now, Ferrel wondered how he could have been so blind. Magnolia had reeled him in like a mackerel following a trolled .017 Reflecto Spoon. At the end of an invisible leader. Not too fast. Not too slow. Teasing, knowing he would strike at the bait. Ferrel was grimly amused.

Tears formed in Magnolia's eyes. Tears of rage and frustration. She stood a moment, undecided. Then, with her eyes full on Ferrel, she lifted her hands to the neck of her dress and tore it away from her bosom.

"Look at me," she said.

"I'm looking."

"I'm pretty?"

"You're very pretty."

"I make you feel young? You know how I mean."

Ferrel was truthful. "Yes. You'd make any man feel that way. It's something that comes in the package, I

suppose, to make certain of the perpetuation of the species."

Magnolia's green eyes narrowed to slits. "Then finish what you started last night. Do what you promised to do."

Ferrel felt in his pockets for his cigarettes. The package he found was sodden. He squeezed it into a ball and dropped it on the floor. "All I promised you was that I'd think of something. And I have." He took the lighted cigarette Elaine offered him. "Thank you, Elaine." Ferrel turned back to Magnolia. "In fact, I've thought of a lot of things. And, most important, I've thought of the red hibiscus blossom you had back of your ear when you ran out of the bushes the night you claimed young Udell and Rudd and Pete Koulous forced you."

"They did," Magnolia cried.

Ferrel shook his head. "No. It was just as Pete testified at his trial. 'It was a game. I tell you, it was a game. We were just playing.'"

"You're positive of that, Roger?" Elaine took a negligee from the closet and shrugged into it.

"I am."

"How do you know?"

"It's only common sense. No girl being forced by three teen-aged boys would stop to pick a flower and put it back of her ear. She wouldn't have the time or the inclination."

"No. It isn't likely."

"The chances are she'd been in the bushes with boys so many times that just being loved was old hat. So she made a game of it."

Magnolia sat on the bed and buried her face in her hands. "I didn't. That ain't the way it happened. I always been a good girl."

Elaine, as always, was practical. "You'd better fix your dress, honey," she said. "It didn't work."

Ferrel sucked smoke into his lungs and let it trickle

out with his words. "I don't see how I could have been so stupid. One of the first things she asked me was if the law would send her to Ocala."

"Ocala?"

"The school for delinquent girls."

"Oh."

"I asked her if she'd wanted it to happen. And she was smart enough to say she hadn't, that it had never happened before. That put all the blame on the boys. It put young Koulous where he is."

Magnolia tore at her dress in a fit of anger. "I don't give a good goddamn what happens to anyone else but me."

"So you've proved," Elaine said quietly. She ran a comb through her hair, then gathered it into the familiar rust-colored horsetail. "God knows, I shouldn't. Not after what you tried to do to me. But I feel sorry for you, Maggie."

"Don't bother."

Dr. Ferrel's arm pained him. He'd been under a mental and physical strain too long. His throat was sore. His head ached. He laid his cigarette in an ash tray and attempted to massage away the headache with the fingertips of his good hand. "Then, when I brought her here, Magnolia was smart enough to realize what she did to me."

"She's a very pretty girl," Elaine admitted.

"You had everything she wanted."

"And here we are," Elaine said.

"And here we are," Roger agreed.

Elaine started to leave the room.

"Where you going?" Magnolia asked.

Elaine told her. "To phone for someone to come and set the Doctor's arm."

That was Elaine, Ferrel thought. He'd planned to kill her and she was worried about him. He stopped her. "No. Please. My arm can wait. Let's talk this out first." He

picked his cigarette from the ash tray. "I can't bring young Udell to life. There's nothing I can do about Mrs. Koulous. But I can see that Pete gets a new trial and that the warrant for young Rudd is withdrawn."

Magnolia ran her palms back over her head and pressed her honey-colored hair between them. "No. You can't tell on me. You don't dast. I won't let you tell on me. They'll put me away for lyin'. I'll tell on you if you do. I'll tell Sheriff Hammel we did it lots of times. I'll tell him you were going to kill Elaine."

"Even so," Ferrel said.

He started nervously when the doorbell rang.

Elaine fastened her negligee at the waist. "I'll see who it is," she said.

As Magnolia watched her leave the room, the green in her eyes deepened. Smiling, she lay back on the bed and arched her half-exposed body. "Don't be a fool, Roger," she whispered. "You want me. You know you do. You're only sorry for Elaine."

Ferrel walked to the side of the bed and studied with almost clinical interest the vibrant young body that was to have carried babies for him. Not because Magnolia loved him. Because she was tired of being poor white trash. Because she was ashamed of having the other high-school girls stare at her. Because he could give her all the things she wanted.

Magnolia held up her arms. "Please. Don't let them send me away. You want me. You love me. You know you do."

Ferrel's cigarette burned his fingers. He dropped it in the ash tray and rubbed his fingers together. Want Magnolia? Yes. Any man would want Magnolia. Her beauty was an orchid growing in slime, in primeval mud. The snake in the Garden of Eden had been a woman, and Magnolia was her daughter. The thought of her, the remembered softness and fragrance of her body would

haunt many nights still to come. But love her? No. He loved Elaine. He knew that now.

Magnolia's eyes and voice continued to caress him. "Please."

Ferrel felt a wave of sympathy for Magnolia. Magnolia wasn't really bad. She was merely a product of the environment in which she had been raised. A foolish adolescent. A vagrant little tramp, trying to better her lot with the only commodity she had to offer in exchange. And now, a very frightened sixteen-year-old girl. Magnolia wasn't bad. She was sick. He was a physician, but he couldn't help Magnolia. Her sickness was in her mind.

Ferrel touched her shoulder. "I'm sorry. Believe me, Magnolia. I'm sorry." He helped the blonde girl from the bed, wincing with pain from his broken arm, and stood her on her feet. Then he pulled the ruined dress up over her shoulders.

Magnolia's forced smile turned uncertain. Her lips began to quiver. The light left her eyes. She sat back on the bed and sobbed.

Ferrel turned as Elaine re-entered the bedroom.

"It's Sheriff Hammel and two of his deputies," she said. "They want to know if you're drunk or crazy. The deputies say you raced by them so fast they couldn't even keep your taillights in sight. Then when they found your smashed car they called the Sheriff."

"Oh," Ferrel said. He looked at the crying girl on the bed. "She means what she said. She'll talk. She'll tell everything just as it was and undoubtedly add some."

Elaine rested her hands on his chest. They felt strong, familiar, good. "So?" Tears filled her eyes and brimmed over. "We've weathered a lot of things together, you and I. And I'm not entirely blameless in this. I can see that, now. Somewhere along the line, in some way, I've failed you. But if you'll give me another chance I'll try to be a better wife."

Ferrel covered her hands with his good one. "Don't talk like that. You've never failed me. I'm the one who failed you."

There was a lift to Elaine's body, a light in her eyes that had been missing from them for years. "But when the chips were down, I was the one you thought of. You risked your life, you smashed your car, you broke your arm, coming home—to me."

"Yes," Ferrel said. "I did."

Elaine brushed her lips against his. "That's love, silly. We'll work out everything else, somehow."

Magnolia raised her head. "I'll talk. I'll dirty your name in Palmetto City so folks'll spit on you."

"I suppose you will," Ferrel said.

His arm around Elaine's waist, drawing strength from her strength, he walked slowly down the hall. The next few days and weeks, possibly months and years, would be far from pleasant. Magnolia would talk. She had to talk. He meant to see that she did. The resulting scandal might wreck his practice. He might even have to leave Palmetto City. But wherever he went, whatever happened, Elaine would be with him.

"I love you, Elaine," he said softly.

"I love you, Roger," she whispered.

Sheriff Hammel rose as they entered the living room. His slicker glistened with rain. He ran his hand over his head and his wet bald spot. "What the hell, Dr. Ferrel?" he asked. "You gone crazy or something?"

Hammel's gold front tooth gleamed wetly as he talked. Ferrel watched it, fascinated.

Thomas took off his stiff-brimmed uniform hat and water drained from it onto the carpet. "The Sheriff ast you a question. You out of your mind or something, Dr. Ferrel?"

"No," Ferrel answered. "I have just regained my sanity."

He turned to Elaine and smiled happily. Her face glowing, Elaine returned his smile.

THE END

The Gold Medal seal on this book means it has never been published as a book before. To select an original book that you have not read before, look for the Gold Medal seal.

FAMOUS GOLD MEDAL NOVELS

We'll be glad to send any of these exciting books direct to you by mail.

Simply follow the directions at the end of this list.

141. **HILL GIRL** *Charles Williams*
Angelina was born to trouble—and most of it was men. A novel of primitive passions by a brilliant new writer.
163. **BIG CITY GIRL** *Charles Williams*
Joy didn't belong in the back country. She was too bold and too brassy. Besides her husband was in jail and she was manhungry.
176. **CROCKETT'S WOMAN** *Eric Hatch*
He was from the wrong side of the tracks. She was the idle rich. Their love was torture and ecstasy. By the author of *My Man Godfrey*.
178. **CABIN ROAD** *John Faulkner*
A slice of the lusty passionate back country life that made *Tobacco Road* a classic. John Faulkner's best book.
183. . . . **AND BE MY LOVE** *Ledru Baker, Jr.*
They tried all pleasures and they knew all pain. Here is one of the most frankly told love stories to appear on our list.
189. **CASSIDY'S GIRL** *David Goodis*
Mildred Cassidy was a lusty woman who knew what she wanted—and how she wanted it. A salty, elemental novel of the waterfront.
197. **THE LADY AND THE CHEETAH** *John Flagg*
When the most beautiful woman in Europe offered Rafferty a job, he figured he was in luck. He was in luck, but none of it was good.
202. **THE UNPOSSESSED** *William H. Fielding*
Her every word, her every gesture promised delight. Yet she fought like a hellcat any man who touched her.
209. **FOOLS WALK IN** *Bruno Fischer*
She was running for her life when Knight picked her up on the highway and gave her a lift. He didn't know what she was then . . . and later he didn't care.
211. **13 FRENCH STREET** *Gil Brewer*
Alex came to visit his friend, who was mysteriously ill. He could not know that the sickness was in the soul of a woman—his friend's wife.

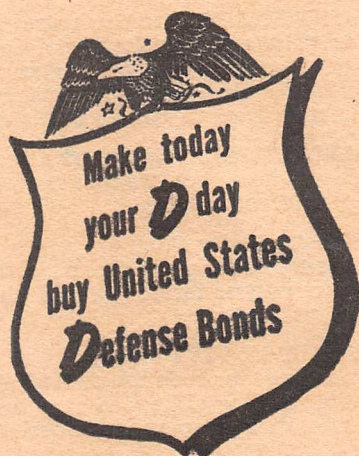
213. **THE GOLDEN WOMAN** *Eric Hatch*
In proud, exotic Haiti, Walter Moore fell in love with a woman who was a part of the land's passionate nature, whose body awoke to the beat of the voodoo drums. By the author of *Crockett's Woman*.
215. **CONQUEST** *Homer Hatten*
Clay Farrar came out of Missouri seeking a peace he was not to find. Hard men with guns changed his plans. And beautiful Toni O'Neill. The story of the man who tamed Texas, by the author of *Westport Landing*.
218. **HERE IS MY BODY** *Booth Mooney*
Renie helped her man climb to success. The rungs of the ladder she used were made of the bodies of her lovers—men who thought they had conquered her.
219. **THE SHELTERING NIGHT** *Steve Fisher*
Ronnie was a saint by day, a sinner by night. A perpetual temptation to every man, a soul-searing torment to herself. By the author of *Destination Tokyo*.
221. **THE FORBIDDEN ROOM** *Jaclen Steele*
All her life, she had lived in fear and fascination of the room. At last she was to learn its depraved secrets. A novel of haunting terror.
222. **SPRING FIRE** *Vin Packer*
A novel of love between two beautiful women. Honest, provocative, it deals with a theme too important to keep from the light.
224. **TEARS ARE FOR ANGELS** *Paul Connolly*
What happens when a man finds his wife in another's arms in his own bedroom? Harry London knew, and this is his story. By the author of *Get Out of Town*.
226. **OF TENDER SIN** *David Goodis*
A boy's love for his sister torments his adult life, causing him to seek in strange places childhood's haunting love.
228. **APPOINTMENT IN PARIS** *Fay Adams*
She was very young, very American, very innocent. Paris, city of light—and shadow—took her by the hand for the dangerous journey into love.
232. **WOMAN SOLDIER** *Arnold Rodin*
Fierce, passionate Darya—by day the avenging angel of her mountain home, by night half-devil, half-woman of the earth.

234. **THE SHARP EDGE** *Richard Himmel*
From the bright lights of fame, they fled into the dangerous bypaths of love, and found they could run from everything except themselves.
238. **UNCLE GOOD'S GIRLS** *John Faulkner*
Join Uncle Good and his girls on a hell-raising election day in the *Cabin Road* country. Another American classic from the pen of John Faulkner.
240. **THE DAMNED** *John D. MacDonald*
"I wish I had written this book," says Mickey Spillane. Read it and you'll see why.
241. **SAVAGE INTERLUDE** *Dan Cushman*
Greed for gold and a golden girl lured Crawford through the steaming jungle, but always blocking his path was the deadly Hammer. You'll remember these dangerous men from the pages of *Naked Ebony*.
246. **THE SCARLET VENUS** *Chalmers Green*
Tennessee was her name. To love her was to hate her and to hate her was to die.
247. **CRY AT DUSK** *Lester Dent*
Johnny tried to run away from all the evil in his past, but a relentless terror pursued him like a soaring bird of prey.
250. **DARK INTRUDER** *Vin Packer*
Father and daughter rode roughshod, thinking alike, talking alike, feeling alike; too arrogant to hear the whispers. Another tempestuous novel by the author of *Spring Fire*.
252. **SATAN TAKES THE HELM** *Calvin Clements*
The young captain wanted the ship. The aged owner's beautiful wife wanted the captain. They loved and schemed and hated. Here, by a new writer, is one of the great sea stories of today.
254. **ABOUT DOCTOR FERREL** *Day Keene*
He was a successful Florida doctor, respected in the community, but he broke his doctor's oath when he fell in love with an adolescent wanton.

In case your local dealer cannot supply you, send 25 cents for each copy desired, plus 5 cents per book for handling and mailing, to

GOLD MEDAL BOOKS

Fawcett Place, Greenwich, Conn.



DOCTOR FERREL

Elaine, my dear—

You sleep in the next room even as I write this letter, this futile letter. If only I could tell you without the hurt... Maggie is just down the hall—Maggie, the wif, the beautiful wif whose nearness makes me tremble. You were so kind to her, Elaine, so much the good doctor's wife, to take in this lovely, ragged child, sick with violation. Now we have repaid you, this child and I, by falling in love. No fool like an old fool, you say? I've told that to myself a hundred times, Elaine, but when I see her, when I touch her, when...

The man in the half-lit room looked up at the sound of the door. He could just see the gleam of golden hair in the darkness.

"Darling," the apparition said, "I couldn't sleep for thinking. Roger, honey, you're a doctor. How really, really bad is Elaine's heart?"

