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VICKIE

CHAPTER ONE

I consider myself an ordinary guy. My name John is ordinary. I have no striking features that would attract girls. I'm healthy and keep myself fit. I eat good. I don't have any bad habits. Girls wouldn't drool over my body when wearing a bathing suit. I'm of Scotch-Irish descent, six feet tall, brown hair, brown eyes (and a red beard when I let it grow).

I spent time in the Navy and went to New Mexico State on the G.I. Bill,

graduating in electrical engineering. After working in an electric motor plant (I mean gigantic electric motors and generators) for four more years, I wound up as maintenance man at the King's Hotel in "Big City," Arizona waiting for the plant to get some more business.

I'm an ordinary guy with an ordinary job in a no-place town. I thought my life was slanted down-hill a little, nothing I couldn't fix with a little effort, but then, I was hit with an A-bomb.

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

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

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

Vickie had glanced at me just before she dove into the pool again. The water splashed and covered her body, folding over it, caressing it. She slid through the water and climbed out onto the other side, climbed up the ladder on the women's

side, glanced at me again. It was as though she were a little girl who wanted me to play. It only took this small encounter to hook me for life.

She walked over to the women's shower, turned, smiled, and went in.

She was so graceful that I completely forgot I was supposed to be swimming, or perhaps I thought I would be disturbing her or disturbing the picture I saw of her, so when she climbed out to go to the shower, I said, "Oh!" and dove into the pool to swim. I only swam one lap because it was time to go.

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

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

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

"Hi," I responded.

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

flick of an eye.

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

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

"You were swimming so gracefully," I volunteered.

"Thank you," she responded.

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

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

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

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

"Yes. Yesterday."

We both hesitated, looking around.

"Can I sit with you," she asked.

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

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

We sat our trays down.

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

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

I left my dishes on my tray and sat down.

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

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

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

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

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

"You've had some Southern exposure then. I had a cousin out in South Carolina that did that."

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

"Yes?" she said taking a nibble at her toast. "I was born in South Carolina, but we moved a lot. My daddy is a Naval officer, retired now...became a Commander first."

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

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

"At the Academy?"

"Yes."

"My dad never left the states during the war. He stayed in Roswell working on airplanes. He worked on the 'Anola Gay'. But my Granddaddy made it to North Africa during World War One. One of each of our folks was in the Mediterranean...So, your folks live in Annapolis?"

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

I kept staring at this most radiantly beautiful girl in front of me, no matter how much it hurt my sensibilities. It was like staring into the sun. (And I was hoping she didn't think me rude). Was she an angel...or from some other world? I found my heart racing and had to do some deep breathing to calm down. What was she doing with ordinary me?

"May I ask why you came to Arizona?" I asked on my last deep breath.

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

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

"I was in an auto accident," she started. "They left me at the hospital thinking I was dead. I know I had been unconscious, and I remember taking a taxi to somewhere, but I don't remember the hospital at all.

"I bought this alabaster box in Cairo," and she took this three by three by eight box out of her purse. "I love to carry it around with me and open it and smell it. It contains an exotic ointment. Well, I remember being in the taxi when it got hit, and having opened the box to take a whiff when I felt a sledge hammer hit me. The next thing I remember was putting the box back in my purse and looking at the taxi driver. I remember now. It was a different driver! Yes, that's it. I was in the accident and then I was in a different taxi. I must have wandered from the accident scene and gotten into a different taxi."

She took more bites of egg and toast.

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

"I had let myself in with my own key, and the next thing I knew was that Zelda, the maid, was chattering like a chipmunk. She went to get my parents, evidently, because when I came back down stairs with my suitcases I had packed earlier...you see, I was off to college anyway... my mother had climbed half way up the stairs asking me who I was and what I was doing with my things. When I said I was their daughter, Mother started crying hysterically. I went down to where my daddy was standing at the bottom of the stairs to ask him what was wrong with Mother, and he started ushering me out the door, saying that their daughter

had just died and that they had just returned from the hospital where they had left the body. He said `I don't know who you are or what you want or what kind of cruel joke you're playing, but I must ask you to leave!'

"Well, I got the shock of my life, as if my parents acting the way they did wasn't enough, when I looked in the long mirror as I past out the door. It wasn't my face or my coat that I saw. I was grateful that the taxi had waited for me. I was so amazed that I found myself going back to the hospital. I introduced myself as my sister and asked to see my own body...I mean, I asked them to see my sister. They wouldn't let me because she was already down in the morgue, but I persisted, and a disgruntled nurse escorted me down there."

I never knew a girl could talk so much in so short a time.

"She took me to a chlorinated room with huge stainless steel drawers where an attendant waited on me. He pulled one of the drawers open, and I had to muster all the courage I could get to look at my body. I was surprised. I didn't recognized myself at first, then I got an idea. I took out a little mirror I carry in my purse and looked at the face through the mirror. It was me alright. The attendant thought I was weird, but I'm used to that. I am a little weird.

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

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

"Oh, they called the police and asked me all kinds of questions, like how did I know my way around. Can you imagine that!...after living there all those years.

"Well, on the plane, I figured it out, that it had to do something with this alabaster box. The guy I bought it from in Cairo said that there was a legend attached to it, that it was the very same box used in anointing the feet of Christ by a young lady in preparation for his burial."

"It sure smells perfumery," I said.

"It's spikanard."

"That was way back in Bible times."

"It's supposed to be that old."

I looked at the box. It was ribbed all around with either whales or dolphins on each corner, supporting the box with their tails. Their water spouts pushed up each corner. The lid was ribbed just enough to round it out. On the top was carved the cross with people taking Jesus down from it. It reminded me of a Medieval painting.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, she shoved the box towards me.

"I have the feeling I can trust you with this," she said impulsively. "It's very expensive, but I think its worth is far more than money."

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

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

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

"You've got to promise me something," she said in a hurry.

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

"No! You've got to really promise!"

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

"You look like the life-guard type," she added, knowing she didn't have the time. "I bet you played the protector role as a boy in your family. Am I not right?"

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

"Well, I need your protection."

"I'm really not the body-guard type. I'm just a maintenance man," I said, trying to get out of this.

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

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

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

"I have to go." She grabbed her purse, started to go, but then looked back. "Please don't open it unless you see me dead. Then be sure and open it. Then when you see someone who looks like me, open it again. This is the way it works. Got it?"

"Got it.(I hope.)"

What was I getting myself into?

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

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

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

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

"John," I yelled, hoping she heard me as the door closed.

* * *

It was the same day I saw her next, around four in the afternoon. The King's has a French cafe' on the street with tables and chairs sitting out on the sidewalk. I was taking my afternoon break enjoying some coffee mocha. I didn't see where she came from. All I heard was the clash of metal tables and chairs falling, glasses breaking, crashing to the cement. I looked up and saw Vickie running towards me through the sidewalk cafe' knocking everything down in front of her. She had the look of total disbelief that something would happen to her. I rose up out of my chair to get to her. A weird feeling took over me. She was in trouble and I just didn't know what to do. She called out my name reaching out her left hand. "The

box, John," she said as she collapsed at my feet. Her hand was still stretched out. There was blood all over the back of her jacket. She had been shot in the back.

Both my jaw and my knees felt like water, and my hands trembled. I sat back down as my knees collapsed. I couldn't shut my mouth. It just hung open like an unhinged door. A crowd gathered around us like a blanket of flesh to hide the dirty thing that had happened to us. I heard her voice inside my head. It said, "Open the box if you see me dead."

I looked back up to the table. I grabbed for my tool bag to get the box the same time a hand came out of the crowd. As soon as my hand was on the bag, that big fat hand withdrew back into the crowd. I took the alabaster box out of the bag and held it with wonder in my hands.

Still leaning over the red on black clothed figure of Vickie's body, I opened the box. The air was filled with a pungent aromatic perfume. I closed the box and put it back into the bag. I kept my hand on the bag.

I watched as the ambulance came. The police came and dispersed the crowd. There was a taxi driver they talked to.

"Blood all over the back of the seat," were the words I caught. "Brought her here...didn't know she was shot!" Then more words buzzed in my shocked ears.

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

I sat at my table feeling numb and shaken. I watched them put Vickie's body into a body bag and cart her away. As I heard the red shift in the siren of the ambulance, the scream of it getting deeper in the red, depression set in. God must have known about her death because he covered the sun. The once cheery blue sky was covered with dark gray puffy clouds. And it started crying tiny rain drops onto the table and onto the top of my head.

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

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

This baby was a doll. Everything she had on from her black Peter Pan hat,

black dress, black pumps had diamonds and rubies in them. She wore diamond ear-rings, diamond necklace, and diamond bracelets over her black gloves. She looked weighted down and sad with all the responsibility of it...of being rich...I mean of being so rich you just can't have fun.

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

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

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

Some kind of anxiety took over my feelings. It wasn't my anxiety. I think I was feeling Vickie's anxiety as though it were mine. I was anxious to open the box then as if I were going to suffocate, so I slowly brought out the box and set it on

the table. I slowly took the lid off. The fragrance was Vickie herself. It brought back all her personality...her laugh, her smile, her look, the way she moved as though she could flick away all her troubles with her index finger.

The girl with Vickie's look-a-like face sat about five tables to my left, as I was faced towards the street and the park across. As my eye caught the movement, I quickly turned my head to face her. I looked. The girl had put her head in her hands. She then gave out a cry and bolted towards my table.

"I've been shot!" she cried.

I was stunned! Not again! I thought.

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

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

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

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

at her.

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

"I see," she said, "that you opened the box. That was...well it took a lot of faith, I guess."

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

"Oh," she said as the waiter brought over her things, rearranging the table for her. "I didn't really know that I had such a strong personality...a strong spirit, you might say."

She reached over and closed the box. She drew it to her side of the table and then pushed it back to me. "On second thought," she said, "considering what happened today, you'd better keep it for me."

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

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

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

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

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

happens."

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

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

At saying that, she took my hand and squeezed it.

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

"Now wait a minute! I didn't steal anything! Ooooh, I don't know exactly what happens, but I do remember things a little differently on this subject. You may think me a fool, but I think I can remember the future, at least on this one thing. I believe that had the box been left unopened, that the young lady that used to be me...I mean, the girl that used to live in this body, and the previous one already had an appointment with death.

"Now don't try to make me feel guilty about this...a different body, a different face...drawing you into this, and having to live with the fact that someone wants me dead! It's too much for me to live with. And I can't live with it alone, and not without that box!"

"Okay, okay," I said, placing my other hand on her arm, "Calm down. I was only curious...nothing more. I know you must be going through a traumatic

experience, and I still want to help...

Your mascara is running."

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

We sat for a long time, and then I got a call on my radio. There was a power outage in one of the wings. I told my boss I would be right there.

"You may want to go to your room and freshen up a bit," I said getting up and moving around to her side of the table. She rummaged around in the ladie's purse to find her key, but came up with the wrong one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're right, but I shan't get used to it!"

"I'll call you Vickie."

"Thank you."

"We'd better get going."

"Yes, alright."

She got up as I pulled her chair for her, and she turned to me and put her arms around me.

"But may I have a hug first," she asked. "This is awfully dizzying, this changing bodies and getting murdered and having to change again."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A coincidence indeed!" I said. "That's the corridor without power. Come on. I smell fish."

"You mean something's fishy."

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

I took out my flashlight from my tool bag and went up the elevator looking

embarrassed at each other. The elevator was a bit slow.

"Elevator shyness," she said.

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

When the door opened, we were confronted with a black wall and silence. I shined my flashlight out into the blackness. A round spot of light peered back at us from the wall opposite. I shined the light up and down the corridor, sending the long cone of light in ether direction.

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

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

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

We went to room 202. When we opened the door, we found it ransacked. Vickie said, "Oh, no!" slowly, and walked around slowly looking at the mess, peering down at the floor, following the beam of the light. She turned her neck in an arc to look over at the rest of the room. I went over to the window and opened the vertical blinds. We had to step over the things strewn over the floor. Her drawers had been emptied and thrown on the floor. Chairs had been thrown over. Her couch was ripped apart...pillows on the floor. In her bedroom, her bed was torn apart. The mattress hung precressed over the bed springs. Her dresser drawers were everywhere.

"I'd better freshen up my room before I freshen up myself!"

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

"Wait!" she said, grabbing my waist. "Look around. There may be a man in here."

"Alright."

So I put the flashlight on wide angle and looked into the bathroom.

Suddenly, a husky fellow bolted through the door, knocking me down, knocking the flashlight out of my hand and firing a shot! I could see the fire from the gun and Vickie screamed.

"Vickie!" I cried.

"I'm right here," she said with a trembling voice. "He missed me. I'm all right. I'll get the flashlight."

She picked up the flashlight and shined it right in my face. I turned away, saying, "Hay!" The beam was powerful even at wide angle. (I wouldn't use any other but the best.)

"Oh, sorry," she said, pointing the beam at the ceiling. That gave us more light. The ceiling sparkled and spread the light over the room. I got up holding to Vickie's other hand. I had fallen onto a drawer and hurt my back as though I had pulled a muscle.

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

Vickie handed me the flashlight as though it were a torch. I shined it down onto the floor again so we could see where we were going. We stepped over boxes and drawers and piles of clothes. The flashlight beam spotted a bra, and Vickie put

her hand in front of the light and giggled.

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

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

After reaching the door we looked down the corridor in both directions with the flashlight beam. The corridor seemed to be empty...no one there.

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

We walked down there almost on tip-toes and with our heads slightly ducked as if expecting to get hit or as if we needed to sneak (but we did want to be quiet).

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

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

"Oh."

When we got to the service closet, I opened the door and our hearts leaped, but there was no man in there, only, it was darker than in the corridor. I shined the flashlight beam into each corner just to make sure, anyway. We went in and closed the door just to be safe. Shining the light onto the switch-box, I could tell that the main switch had been opened. I closed it and the lights came back on. Vickie opened the door, and we saw that all the lights had come back on.

I called it in on my radio.

"Say, Val?"

"Yes, John. You got those lights back on?"

"Yes...but Val, it looks like we've had an intruder. All that had happened was

that the main for this corridor was switched off."

"Okay. I'll get that lock changed."

"Oh, and Val?"

"Yes."

"One of the customer's rooms has been ransacked. You ought to call the police and have it checked out."

"Okay. Will do."

I told Vickie that the police would probably want her to leave her room the way it was, and she agreed to go freshen up in that Blanche's room. She said that it would be fun to check out the belongings of Blanche Vicard anyway.

CHAPTER TWO

When the police arrived, they looked me up and asked where the young woman was who complained about her room. I simply said that she must have gone downstairs and that I didn't know where she went. I watched as they combed the apartment for clues. One of the detectives found correspondence from the University of Arizona and other mail addressed to the young woman whom he recognized as having been shot earlier in front of the hotel.

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

I started to answer when a uniformed officer that was there spotted a bullet hole in the wall, dug out the bullet and handed it to the detective, saying, "A shot's been fired."

"Hey. What is this? Hmmm..." he said, handling the bullet between his fingers. "Joe, go page the young woman. See if she's still in the building."

He left and the detective turned back to me and asked, "What do you know about this? Heard any shots? Seen anything? Did you hear anyone talking about hearing shots?"

"N...no," I stuttered.

I managed to move out of the door and across the hall, but there was another detective questioning Vickie, asking her if she had heard any shots or seen anything peculiar. All her answers were in the negative. Then that policeman came

back and said that there was no one else living in that apartment but a Beulah Smith. He then told the detective that I had been the one who called in the report about the apartment, and both detectives were on me.

"Why, that's the girl that's been shot," the taller one said. He then turned to me. "So you're the one that called it in. Thought you didn't know anything about it!"

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

"A black out?" he asked.

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

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

"Yes, and when he opened the door, and I saw the mess..."

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

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

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

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

He turned to me and said, "Then why didn't you tell us that wasn't her apartment?"

"I guess I forgot," I said, trying to cover up about the alabaster box. "After all, you needed to see it anyway."

"Yes," he said fingering his chin, "we would have during our investigation of

Beulah Smith. But now, you've gotten yourself into it. Like they say in the movies, don't go out of town. You may be needed for further questioning. Both of you. Let's have your names. You both live here?"

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

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

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

"Maybe they would ask the maids first. Who's going to clean it up?" she asked, grabbing my hands and pulling them to her chest.

I got a sudden idea.

"A maid!" I said explosively.

"A maid?" she echoed.

"Yes. I'll go and get you a maid's uniform. You can put your hair up and wear one of those funny caps they wear, and then you can go in there and pretend to clean up the place. You can get your things and leave. Bring your things to me, change your clothes in the lockers downstairs, and then I'll bring them back up to you. Is it a plan?"

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

She was kissing my hands as she talked.

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

I wanted to get away. She was making me very nervous. She let go of my hands and grabbed my whole body.

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

"No," I said defensively. "There must be a procedure you go through."

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

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

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

"Okay," she said, not letting go.

"Bye," I said.

"Bye," she said.

Now I didn't want to leave, and she didn't want to let go.

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

"Do you have to go?" she asked.

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

She giggled and let me go with one last kiss.

As I went out the door, I noticed that one of the detectives was just leaving. As I walked down the corridor, he came along side and started walking with me.

"She your girl?" he asked me.

"Just met her this morning," I responded, feeling a bit skittery from his presence.

He tapped his lips and said, "That's fast work."

I hurriedly took out my handkerchief and wiped my lips. "Sorry," I said. I looked at it. There was a red smear of lipstick. I was out of it. I could feel the lipstick when my mother kissed me, but not when Vickie did. I was amazed at what was going on between us.

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

"Oh, we'll keep it until the investigation's over. We're contacting the family, of course. We found their address in her daily planner. Of course, in a thing like this, if no one ever claims the stuff, it goes onto the auction block. We have an auction every month, you know."

"No, I didn't know," I said, pushing the down button on the wall.

"Yes...it goes to charity."

"Oh," I said.

The elevator opened and we both stepped in. The elevator was empty of anyone else.

"You knew her, didn't you?" he asked.

"Her?" I asked.

"Beulah Smith. The one from the apartment. The one that got killed today. She was trying to reach you when she died."

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

"Well," I responded, not sounding very friendly. "I met her at the pool this morning and we talked at breakfast."

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

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

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

It seems like I'm never off duty. There's always something to repair or a light that needed changing. I'm an electrical engineer, and I go around changing light bulbs. I always have to unclog toilets because some dame flushed her cotex down the toilet or used too much toilet paper. One time, the turd was too big to go down. I had to chop it up. I couldn't believe it! Sinks are always leaking or getting clogged. It's endless. Then I have to fix the industrial washing machines downstairs. They're always breaking down. I have to keep the pool up...clean it and put in the chemicals. I have to do everything around here. In other words, I

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

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

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

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

I put my tool bag on the floor behind the door. My room looked like Vickie's with all my drawers emptied, by bed upturned, sofa torn apart, pictures thrown down from the walls. Even my dishwasher in the kitchenette was yanked out of the

cabinet.

I looked around for the phone. I had heard a faint pulsing noise, but didn't recognize it until I wanted the phone. It was coming from underneath a sofa cushion on the floor. I lifted up the cushion. It was my pale blue princess phone. I picked it up and threw the cushion back onto the sofa, putting the phone back together to stop the pulsating buzzing that's designed to drive a person crazy. I sat it back on the cabinet against the wall that used to contain my drawers.

The counter top was white with gold flakes running through it. The television on top of the counter hadn't been touched. I noticed the guy behind the television in the mirror was starting to get a pouch as if he didn't exercise every day.

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

"Val? Are you still up? This is John," I said, pushing the side button and letting it up...no reply. I pushed the button again. "Are you there?"

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

"You'd better get those detectives back."

"Yes? What happened?"

"You'd better send them to my room," I said, glancing around as if I had just seen it. "My room has been ransacked too."

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

When the detectives showed up, they looked rather peeved when they saw it was me that sent for them. There was only two of them this time.

"Well, detectives," I said, shrugging my shoulders, "what can I say?"

The one I had talked to earlier with the black hair and square face, tall, wearing a dark over coat and crowned with a 1940's style hat said to me (in a tone that was strictly business), "This is Lieutenant Johnson. My name is Lieutenant Nixon. If you want to address us, you may do so using those names. Now, we want to know what these guys are looking for. We think you know."

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

I knew they didn't believe me by the look in their eyes. The shorter detective, blond, chubby, wearing a tan rain coat jerked his chin towards his partner.

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

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

Johnson, standing there with his hands in his pockets jerked his chin at me and said, "You could have done this yourself."

"Well," I said, not knowing what else to do. I wasn't very good at lying. "I

guess I'll show you. It's a museum piece...an antique that Vickie gave me for safe-keeping. That's what they're looking for. I've been carrying it around in my tool pouch." I pointed to my tool bag in the corner behind the door.

As I stooped down to get it, Lieutenant Johnson asked, "Whose this Vickie?"

"She's the one that got shot earlier today," I said, turning and looking up, holding the dear package.

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

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

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

"Yeah, could be," said Lieutenant Johnson, fingering the box. He went to grab it, but I pulled it away.

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

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

"Vickie Two?" asked the short lieutenant.

"I mean, they both bought it together...somewhere in the Mid-East...Lebanon or Jordan. They gave it to me for safe-keeping. Maybe I should give it back to her? Vickie...the first Vickie...the one that got shot? She told me that someone was trying to steal it and that I should keep it. Maybe..." I tried desperately to keep it...trying to think of some way while I talked, but I was interrupted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is the truth?" Nixon said philosophically.

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

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

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

"Beulah Smith and Blanche Vicard are one and the same," I explained. "Both of them is the same Vickie. She's dead also, or that is, her body rests in the ground in Virginia, but her soul now resides in Blanche."

The two detectives looked at each other. I know they were thinking I was loosing it or lying up to my teeth.

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

Nixon spoke to Johnson. "It looks like all three of these guys are mixed up in some international theft. You know who Blanche Vicard is, don't you? Connected to that hood Vicarde' that owns that big mansion outside the city...nightclubs too. Haven't been able to touch him...mob, you know."

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

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

"Yeah, yeah," said Nixon. "I can see your point of view, but there's another

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

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

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

Then I thought of something.

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

Both of them looked at each other, and I knew they hadn't a thing.

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

Nixon spoke up. "We don't usually get a court order for something like this, especially for a murder case, and especially if we've been invited onto the premises."

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

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

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

After they left, I heard the buzz buzz of my door bell. Back so soon, I asked myself. I went to the door and opened it. It was Vickie. She had been hurt. She had a black eye and her nose was bleeding.

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

I went and got a cold towel to put on her face and gave it to her. She wiped the blood off with it.

"They were holding me," she shuddered.

I put my arm around her to keep her warm.

"Who was holding you?" I asked.

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

It was funny to see her in a different dress. I had only thought of her in that black dress all covered with diamonds. This dress had a wide white square collar that plunged low enough to show her bosom, and it was red and white checkered. There was blood spots covering up some of the white checkers, bringing a sense of chaos into the picture. Her chest was bloody from her nose. I took the towel and wiped it off. I tried to comfort her by kissing her and laying my head on her bosom, but she cried out.

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

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

I got up and retrieved the blanket off my bed, shoving the mattress back on with my thigh. It was a thick quilt that had been worn soft by generations of use. I placed it over her and said softly as I kneeled there, "I'll call an ambulance."

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

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

"I know where some is," I said getting up. "Don't let anyone in...oh, I have the key. Well, I'll give three knocks and then two to let you know it's me."

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

I left her, went to Val's office and came back with some tape. I helped her get her clothes off. I was surprised at my lack of arousal. I guess I went into doctor mode when I saw all the bruises on her once beautiful body. I gritted my teeth. I wanted to hit those guys that beat her up. She sat up on the edge of the sofa and I wound the tape around her ribs. She complained that it was too tight and that she couldn't breathe properly, but I had to make sure I did it properly and snug for her ribs to heal.

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

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

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

"I heard someone knock on the door. I thought it was you, so I opened it. I almost screamed, but I think I must have swallowed my tongue or something. I just choked. It was the man in the shop where I bought the alabaster box. I recognized him from the time I was in Egypt. He was in that little shop the same

time I was. He had been standing in a corner staring at me. Changing from body to body hasn't erased that look of pure evil, like he hated me. He started to follow me after I left the shop. It had been a curio shop with all kinds of odds and ends, pottery, little statues, jewelry, things for tourists, I thought.

"I had no idea that big guy with the Turkish hat and big mustache was after the box, I thought he was after me. I ran to the first policeman I saw and told him there was a man chasing me. He told me, 'There is no man after you' and to look. I looked back and he was gone.

"It was my last day there, and I wanted to pick up some little momenta of all the sights I had seen. I went to all kinds of temples and museums, but there was something weird that happened when I went to a Coptic monastery. They wouldn't let me in, but I saw the outside of it. It was built into a huge cliff. I talked to one of the monks on the outside, or rather, he talked to me. He suggested that part of the Cairo Museum that dealt with early Christian art. While at the museum, there was another kindly old gentleman that pointed out to me an alabaster box. He said it was the same that Mary Magdalene had used to anoint the feet of Christ. He then directed me to that little shop where I could pick up a copy of it for nothing. I thought maybe he was there to help the shop owner get some business, but I went anyway. And when I bought the thing, I was followed. It does sound like they wanted the box, doesn't it?

"I didn't tell you before, but after I left Egypt, my hotel in Rome was ransacked, and when I got home, my hotel room there was ransacked. I don't think my first death was an accident. But right before the accident, I remember

seeing the guy that abducted me tonight. He passed me in a car in Richland. I was on my way home. He looked at me with such blackness...more than hatred...like he was death itself. The next thing I knew was that I was walking away from the accident holding on dearly to my purse...my bag, really. It had the alabaster box in it.

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

"I'm sorry," I said sympathetically, "that you're in this mess. The police told me that I was a patsy for you and the girl that got killed this afternoon. I think you're the patsy. They set you up. They thought that once you got that box out of the country it would be easy to take it from you."

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

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

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

"Well, there was a lull in my interrogation. They were all in front of the van

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

"You wouldn't believe the luck I had. I tried to run, but the pain was too great, but there was this car that came right up to me. The driver was calling my name...I mean Blanche's name. There was another man that got out of the car and helped me in. I think the man was supposed to be my boyfriend or husband. He started calling me all kinds of sweet names and asking me all kinds of questions. He got on his car phone and...it was a limo I was in, I think. Anyway, he got on his car phone and was calling people, giving them the description of the van and the license plates, telling them to go after them.

"`I thought you had run away,' he said and blamed himself for my demise, calling himself a fool and several other names. He kept on apologizing. He kept on driving. I started hitting him with my tied up hands. He was such a gook! He finally got the message. He pulled over and took the tape off my mouth and untied my hands. I must have had some memory from Blanche because I started calling him Paul. He was going to take me to the hospital , but I got him to bring me back here to the King's. He's down there in the lobby right now waiting for me. I told him that there was another man in my life, but that I would go back with him. He is very persuasive. I told him that first, I had to go to your room and get a box of valuables from you that I had left with you, but I think you'd better keep it for now. I don't trust this guy. He just sounds or feels like a gangster or something ...

right out of the movies. He's the kind that will follow you around like a little puppy, but will bite if he doesn't get his way. I'd better go with him. His name is Paul Vicarde' and he has this large mansion on the edge of town. He wants to take me to his house and protect me. I guess he's my husband, but we haven't been living together. Maybe we broke up. I mean Blanche."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My thought got interrupted. I don't know if I was just waking up or was it that I was half asleep that I just began to notice the cigar smoke beginning to choke me. He was holding a lit cigar in between his fingers on his right hand. He waved it at me.

"You work here," he said.

"Yes," I said timidly.

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

What was this guy, I thought. He watched too many movies.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER THREE

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

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

Headlines read "Gang Style Slaying." Under that in smaller but bold letters read, "Business man Paul Vicarde' and wife Blanche Vicard gunned down by unknown assailants." The paragraph below read, "Paul Vicarde' and his wife Blanche Vicard who owned a string of downtown stores and restaurants were gunned down by automatic weapons fire early this morning between one and two pm apparently on their way home to their plush mansion just outside of town on Baker's Street and 5th Avenue.

"It was apparent that Mrs. Vicard had been badly beaten..."

I couldn't read anymore. I stared at the photo of the car that had been riddled with bullets. I felt as though someone had just pulled a plug somewhere and my soul was sinking down through my chair and then through the floor. I felt

all my blood drain from my face, following my soul. I started trembling.

"You her lover?" Nixon asked.

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

Nixon sat down to hear me better I guess.

"Why are you trembling?" he asked.

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

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

He rose from his seat.

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

"Why the morgue?" he asked monotonously.

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

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

I called my boss on the radio...told him I was going downtown with the police. I grabbed my tool bag and took it with me.

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

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

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

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

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

They took me to the morgue and let me see Blanche's body. It looked like a wax replica of the real thing. I was still in a daze, and I didn't really look at the particulars of her face. I already knew it was bruised.

They let me take the alabaster box with me. Johnson said it would be perfectly safe in the car, but Nixon said, "Let him have it. We're taking the both of them down to the station, aren't we?"

I unwrapped the alabaster box and opened it.

Johnson asked, "What are you doing?"

"It's for her," I said.

I looked at the two watch dogs and said, "Can't I be alone with her just for a moment?"

They grumbled and backed off.

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

I noticed tears rolling down my cheeks. I looked at the two watch dog cops. They noticed too. I wrapped up the box and said, "Okay, let's get out of here."

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

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

I went into the station between the two detectives as if I were being arrested. I felt like maybe they were going to. I would have a mug shot of me taken and finger prints, but that's not what they did. They just sat me down at a desk. Nixon sat behind the desk and Johnson went away to do something else. He got out a pad and began writing on it. I saw that there were different colors of paper with carbon paper in between. He was filling out some kind of form. He asked me my name and address, telephone number, description of the box, who gave it to me and a few other questions about its origin and what I was doing with it. He handed me the pad and told me to sign.

"What is this?" I asked.

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

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

"What?"

"If this box works, Vickie should be showing up pretty soon. It's worked before."

"Explain."

"This box now contains the soul of a girl named Vickie. I open the box...she jumps in. I close the box. She's inside. I open the box again...she jumps out, but it's into somebody else's body. Beulah Smith and Blanche Vicard were both the same girl, Vickie. She was in Beulah Smith, but I only knew her as Vickie. She dies, I open the box and close it. Blanche Vicard comes along. I open the box.

Vickie jumps out and goes into Blanche's body...only because they look alike. They always have to look alike. Now, Vickie is inside the box again. I got her at the morgue. The next girl I see that looks like Vickie, I open the box. Vickie jumps out and into the girl's body. Voila! Vickie again! That's why I need to keep the box with me...until I see a girl to put Vickie into again."

"You're crazy!"

He had such an incredulous look on his face. I could tell he didn't believe me.

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

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

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

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

"That's stealing isn't it?" he asked, starting to chew on a tooth pick. I guess he was nervous. Some people become nervous when they're curious. I think he was just curious.

"Not by what she told me. You see, she read this Tibetan book on things like this. What really happens is that the two souls meet on a spiritual plane that we can't see outside of the body. The time frame which we see as super fast can be

really slow to them. They have a long time in their time frame to talk things over. She then gets permission to enter into the other person's body while that other person goes off some where else." I thought I was going way off the beaten path, and instead of arresting me, he might be inclined to put me into the loony bin.

"Hogwash!" he said. "But I'll let you try if it doesn't take too long. The Captain might get suspicious."

After saying that, I knew he was curious.

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

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

"That's not your Vickie," said the detective, remaining as dense as ever. "Why, that's Denise...Denise Hopkins. She's the cutest secretary around here. Let me introduce her."

He called her over, but I don't think it was for my benefit. It looked as though he was in the habit of flirting with her. I could see it in his face...the way it lit up.

"Denise," he called to her. "I want you to see this felon I have here. He says he can change you. Do a complete make-over."

She came over and around me to sit on the front of his desk. She said, looking at Nixon across her shoulder and then looking at me, "He doesn't look like a make-up artist, nor does he look like a convicted felon. He does look cute, though."

Detective Nixon exaggerated a frown.

She said, "Getting jealous?"

I popped off the lid. That old fragrance of frankincense and myrrh...spikanard...all the orient and middle east wrapped up in one...all the spices of India and Arabia...wafted across the room. It was so heavenly I think I started dreaming of Vickie. I could see her dreamy piercing eyes and her smile staring back at me from Denise's face. I could smell Vickie's skin next to mine. Was she sitting in my lap? Was I intoxicated? I felt a swoon and Denise Hopkins swooned and fell onto the floor. I put the lid on the box. Denise started bawling like a little baby.

Detective Nixon was on his feet and around to the front of his desk kneeling beside her before I could blink or turn to see what had happened.

"Denise?" he asked in such a compassionate tone I hadn't imagined would come out of a cop. "What happened? Are you alright?"

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

"Vickie?" I asked, offering to put my arm around her.

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

"Denise?" Nixon asked again, bewildered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vickie stood up. Nixon followed her. She put her back against me and embraced my arms that I put around her.

She said, "I'm sorry. My name is Vickie Hammershed. I've come here to go to college...only...only...I'm in someone else's body, and my life is a mess." Tears started streaming down her face again. I gave her my handkerchief.

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

Vickie turned away from both of us and put her fingertips to her forehead and closed her eyes as if she had a headache. She probably did, and I was at a loss. I didn't have enough experience in girlfriends to know how to keep them.

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay," Nixon blurted out, his face setting in stone to hide his hurt feelings.

"Just who are these thugs as you call them? Do you know where they live or hang out?"

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

"Denise," the detective said mistakenly.

"Vickie," she corrected him.

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay!" I threw back at him.

We went into another room with glass enclosures. There were several computers on two long counters in the middle of the room. Nixon introduced us to

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

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

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

Nixon took us back to his desk and asked us to repeat the story of the happenings of the last two days. We told him every-thing we had held back on previous encounters with him...of who Vickie was, what the alabaster box did, saving her by putting her into different people's bodies. Nixon kept asking "Where is Denise?" It took us three hours to convince him that what we were telling him was true. Detective Johnson joined in with his listening ear. Nixon had to convince him. When he told him that what we were saying was true, he said, "Now, you've joined 'em." Nixon said, "I saw it happen with my own eyes. We lost Denise."

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

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

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

At the moment she approached the other side, things started to happen very fast...too fast for me to protect Vickie. I was knocked over the head from behind as I stood there, but I didn't go unconscious. I have a tough Celtic head. I swung around and grappled my assailant as I shouted, "Run Vickie! Run!" He got me down onto the tile floor. He was the big guy I had seen before with the big nose and mustache. He kept asking me where the alabaster box was as he hit me in the face. Every time he asked me he would hit me in the face. I got to where I thought

it was his fist that was asking me, "Where is the box!" I began seeing everything in red, but there was very little to see except the fist that kept asking me where the box was. I felt numb and everything was in slow motion. I heard gunshots and yelling, and the big guy was dragged off of me. I think I saw Detective Nixon.

I heard a big splash and someone yelling, "Denise!" I heard the shattering of glass and the smell of the orient filled the air. It was the spikanard. I remember thinking what was going to happen to Vickie now?

Someone lifted me up. I felt a sharp pain in my side. I don't remember having been hit there, but my ribs proved to be broken...the big guy's calling card.

I called out, "Bickie! Bickie!"

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

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

When I woke up in the emergency room at the hospital, I looked around for Vickie. All I could see was white curtains and nurses who skirted around tables being moved here and there. I saw a few patients on slabs, but no Vickie.

I kept looking around, hoping I would gain some sight of her. I dozed while waiting for someone to tend to me. I imagined that some of the patients were thugs or policemen shot in the swimming pool. They would have to take care of them first. I could hear doctors and nurses talking in low tones as I slipped in and out of consciousness. I was carted off and brought back. I could swear that Vickie

came over and kissed me on the forehead, but when I woke up, she wasn't there. I grabbed for her, but she wasn't there. It was like I grabbed for a ghost. Chills ran up and down my spine. I don't know today if she was a dream or if she really did visit me.

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

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

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

I didn't want to believe him. I wanted to see for myself. So after they released me from the hospital, which could have been a day or two, I went up to Denise's apartment and knocked on her door. She opened the door slowly. She had a small bandage above her left eye.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I just wanted to see for myself," I said slowly, making my way to my door.

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

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

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

In the middle of the night, I woke up sweating. I saw the lights on. I felt

someone was in the room. I cried out, "Who's there!" Then I remembered that it was me who had left the lights on. The night seemed to linger on, and I became a bit chilled, so I pulled the blankets over me. I went to sleep in the morning right before dawn, or it could have been around three o'clock. Just before I woke up to see the sun shining through the blinds, I swear I was visited by Vickie's spirit. She had come to me in the hospital and bent over and kissed my forehead. That memory came back to me very vivid as if it happened all over again. Then I was back in my bedroom, and there she was, standing at the side of my bed. She was saying something to me. She simply said, "Meet you in the park," and disappeared. And then I opened my eyes and looked around. It had been a dream...but it seemed more real...or another reality just as real as the sun streaming through those blinds. I was sad, but I was given hope.

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

Looking across from the King's is a large monument to the early settlers, and right behind that is a round brick pavement where the pathway starts. There is two park benches there facing each other, one facing the back of the monument with a fountain spraying water up into the air between them. That's where I go to eat my summer lunches and watch the children play, getting all wet, and that's where I went to wait for Vickie to show up. I guess I went there out of habit instead of thinking she might show up just anywhere in the park.

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

By the time I finished my sandwich, there was a substantial crowd milling around. I looked at each girl that passed hoping it would be Vickie. When I thought I saw her, I ran up to her crying, "Vickie!" She looked at me with such a blank stare and walked away. She didn't recognize me.

I didn't know I was being watched by a policeman, and the third time I approached a girl that I thought might be Vickie, he walked up to me patting the palm of his left hand with his club.

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

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

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

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

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

"I know who you're looking for, and her name's Denice, not Vickie. Now I

was there at the pool yesterday. I've been watching you. You go back to the hotel and cool off. If you try bothering any more of these girls, well, I'll have to take you in and you'll probably wind up in the mental ward. Take control of yourself...or we will."

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

Finally, one Sunday afternoon, I sat down on my usual park bench with my back to the sun and let the sun warm my back before I opened up my lunch. The sun felt good on my back after being refrigerated all morning in the hotel. I was sitting there listening to the hum of the cars going by and people talking and birds twittering. It almost put me to sleep. Then I saw her. There was a mother and a father strolling their little baby passing by in front of me. It was the cutest little girl I had ever seen...just smiling and looking up at the sky from her pink ruffled stroller.

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

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

The dad looked a little cross. I looked at the mom who was half smiling and agreeing with me with a nod of her head and looking down at her little one. Then it hit me like a hammer! She looked like Vickie! only with her hair pulled back. The dad looked like a tall three hundred pound football player with black hair and tanned skin...probably Indian. For that reason I laughed louder to see those two together. I turned around and covered my mouth. He could really whollop me good. But I let it out anyway. So what if I were going crazy. The laughter felt really good for a change. I ate my lunch and floated on a cloud the rest of the day.

That was three years ago as I write this. Yesterday, something quite wonderful happened. As I have been in the habit of eating my lunch in the park every day, I was sitting there facing the back of the monument, warming myself in the sun and biting down on a nice bologna sandwich on white bread with the crisp lettuce crunching between my teeth, tasting that scrumptious mayonnaise, when the cutest little girl ran up from behind me and climbed up on my lap. She smiled showing her two overly large front teeth. The middle of her upper lip was a bit pointed and she had a slight over-bite. Her auburn hair flowed down over her shoulders in large curls. She wore a white cotton ruffly dress decorated with navy blue boats and whales spouting water. Her chest was all navy blue with a white anchor across it. She just stared up at me with that melting smile of hers. I asked if she was hungry. She just continued to stare and grin. I put my hand on her soft little bottom to steady her. She caught me with my mouth full when she said, "My

name is Vickie. What's yours?" I almost choked!

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

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

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

At that instant, her mother arrived, coming from the path behind. I almost choked again. It was the woman with the big hulk for a husband...the one that looked like Vickie.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "Vickie, don't bother the man. I'm sorry. She goes around asking every handsome man if he's her daddy. You see, her daddy died in an accident three years ago."

"Do you recognize me?" I asked.

"I'm sorry...no."

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

"That's the man, Mommy," little Vickie said, looking away to her mother. She had hold of my shirt with both fists. She let go her right hand and poked me in the nose with her little fist, saying, "This is the man that took my box. You know, mommy, the ala...the ala...baster box, Mommy."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Bye, bye," waved Vickie.

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

THE END