

I KNOW WHAT YOU NEED



I KNOW WHAT YOU NEED

Stephen King

“I know what you need.”

Elizabeth looked up from her sociology text, startled, and saw a rather nondescript young man in a green fatigue jacket. For a moment she thought he looked familiar, as if she had known him before; the feeling was close to *deja vu*. Then it was gone. He was about her height, skinny, and ... twitchy. That was the word. He wasn't moving, but he seemed to be twitching inside his skin, just out of sight. His hair was black and unkempt. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses that magnified his dark brown eyes, and the lenses looked dirty. No, she was quite sure she had never seen him before.

“You know,” she said, “I doubt that.”

“You need a strawberry double-dip cone. Right?”

She blinked at him, frankly startled. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had been thinking about breaking for an ice cream. She was studying for finals in one of the third-floor carrels of the Student Union, and there was still a woefully long way to go.

“Right?” he persisted, and smiled. It transformed his face from something over-intense and nearly ugly into something else that was oddly appealing. The word “cute” occurred to her, and that wasn't a good word to afflict a boy with, but this one was when he smiled. She smiled back before she could road block it behind her lips. This she didn't need, to have to waste time brushing off some weirdo who had decided to pick the worst time of the year to try to make an impression. She still had sixteen chapters of Introduction to Sociology to wade through.

“No thanks,” she said.

“Come on, if you hit them any harder you'll give yourself a headache. You've been at it two hours without a break.”

“How would you know that?”

“I’ve been watching you,” he said promptly, but this time his gamin grin was lost on her. She already had a headache.

“Well, you can stop,” she said, more sharply than she had intended. “I don’t like people staring at me.”

“I’m sorry.” She felt a little sorry for him, the way she sometimes felt sorry for stray dogs. He seemed to float in the green fatigue jacket and ... yes, he had on mismatched socks. One black, one brown. She felt herself getting ready to smile again and held it back.

“I’ve got these finals,” she said gently.

“Sure,” he said. “Okay.”

She looked after him for a moment pensively. Then she lowered her gaze to her book, but an afterimage of the encounter remained: strawberry double-dip.

When she got back to the dorm it was 11:15 P.M. and Alice was stretched out on her bed, listening to Neil Diamond and reading *The Story of O*.

“I didn’t know they assigned that in Eh-17,” Elizabeth said.

Alice sat up. “Broadening my horizons, darling. Spreading my intellectual wings. Raising my ... Liz?”

“Hmmm?”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“No, sorry, I—”

“You look like somebody conked you one, kid.”

“I met a guy tonight. Sort of a funny guy, at that.”

“Oh? He must be something if he can separate the great Rogan from her beloved texts.”

“His name is Edward Jackson Hamner, Junior, no less. Short. Skinny. Looks like he washed his hair last around Washington’s birthday. Oh, and mismatched socks. One black, one brown.”

“I thought you were more the fraternity type.”

“It’s nothing like that, Alice. I was studying at the Union on the third floor—the Think Tank—and he invited me down to the Grinder for an ice-cream cone. I told him no and he sort of slunk off. But once he started me thinking about ice cream, I couldn’t stop. I’d just decided to give up and take a break and there he was, holding a big, drippy strawberry double-dip in each hand.”

“I tremble to hear the denouement.”

Elizabeth snorted. “Well, I couldn’t really say no. So he sat down, and it turns out he had sociology with Professor Branner last year.”

“Will wonders never cease, lawd a mercy. Goshen to Christmas—”

“Listen, this is really amazing. You know the way I’ve been sweating that course?”

“Yes. You talk about it in your sleep, practically.”

“I’ve got a seventy-eight average. I’ve got to have an eighty to keep my scholarship, and that means I need at least an eighty-four on the final. Well, this Ed Hamner says Branner uses almost the same final every year. And Ed’s eidetic.”

“You mean he’s got a whatzit ... photographic memory?”

“Yes. Look at this.” She opened her sociology book and took out three sheets of notebook paper covered with writing.

Alice took them. “This looks like multiple-choice stuff.”

“It is. Ed says it’s Branner’s last year’s final word for word.”

Alice said flatly, “I don’t believe it.”

“But it covers all the material!”

“Still don’t believe it.” She handed the sheets back. “Just because this spook—”

“He isn’t a spook. Don’t call him that.”

“Okay. This little guy hasn’t got you bamboozled into just memorizing this and not studying at all, has he?”

“Of course not,” she said uneasily.

“And even if this is like the exam, do you think it’s exactly ethical?”

Anger surprised her and ran away with her tongue before she could hold it. “That’s great for you, sure. Dean’s List every semester and your folks paying your way. You aren’t ... Hey, I’m sorry. There was no call for that.”

Alice shrugged and opened 0 again, her face carefully neutral. “No, you’re right. Not my business. But why don’t you study the book, too ... just to be safe?”

“Of course I will.”

But mostly she studied the exam notes provided by Edward Jackson Hamner, Jr.

When she came out of the lecture hall after the exam he was sitting in the lobby, floating in his green army fatigue coat. He smiled tentatively at her and stood up. “How’d it go?”

Impulsively, she kissed his cheek. She could not remember such a blessed feeling of relief. “I think I aced it.”

“Really? That’s great. Like a burger?”

“Love one,” she said absently. Her mind was still on the exam. It was the one Ed had given her, almost word for word, and she had sailed through.

Over hamburgers, she asked him how his own finals were going.

“Don’t have any. I’m in Honors, and you don’t take them unless you want to. I was doing okay, so I didn’t.”

“Then why are you still here?”

“I had to see how you did, didn’t I?”

“Ed, you didn’t. That’s sweet, but—” The naked look in his eyes troubled her. She had seen it before. She was a pretty girl.

“Yes,” he said softly. “Yes, I did.”

“Ed, I’m grateful. I think you saved my scholarship. I really do. But I have a boyfriend, you know.”

“Serious?” he asked, with a poor attempt to speak lightly.

“Very,” she said, matching his tone. “Almost engaged.”

“Does he know he’s lucky? Does he know how lucky?”

“I’m lucky, too,” she said, thinking of Tony Lombard.

“Beth,” he said suddenly.

“What?” she asked, startled.

“Nobody calls you that, do they?”

“Why ... no. No, they don’t.”

“Not even this guy?”

“No—” Tony called her Liz. Sometimes Lizzie, which was even worse.

He leaned forward. “But Beth is what you like best, isn’t it?”

She laughed to cover her confusion. “Whatever in the world—”

“Never mind.” He grinned his gamin grin. “I’ll call you Beth. That’s better. Now eat your hamburger.”

Then her junior year was over, and she was saying goodbye to Alice. They were a little stiff together, and Elizabeth was sorry. She supposed it was her own fault; she had crowed a little loudly about her sociology final when grades were posted. She had scored a ninety-seven—highest in the division.

Well, she told herself as she waited at the airport for her flight to be called, it wasn’t any more unethical than the cramming she had been resigned to in that third-floor carrel. Cramming wasn’t real studying at all; just rote memorization that faded away to nothing as soon as the exam was over.

She fingered the envelope that poked out of her purse. Notice of her scholarship-loan package for her senior year—two thousand dollars. She and Tony would be working together in Boothbay, Maine, this summer, and the money she would earn there would put her over the top. And thanks to Ed Hamner, it was going to be a beautiful summer. Clear sailing all the way.

But it was the most miserable summer of her life.

June was rainy, the gas shortage depressed the tourist trade, and her tips at the Boothbay Inn were mediocre. Even worse, Tony was pressing her on the subject of marriage. He could get a job on or near campus, he said, and with her Student Aid grant, she could get

her degree in style. She was surprised to find that the idea scared rather than pleased her.

Something was wrong.

She didn't know what, but something was missing, out of whack, out of kilter. One night late in July she frightened herself by going on a hysterical crying jag in her apartment. The only good thing about it was that her roommate, a mousy little girl named Sandra Ackerman, was out on a date.

The nightmare came in early August. She was lying in the bottom of an open grave, unable to move. Rain fell from a white sky onto her upturned face. Then Tony was standing over her, wearing his yellow high-impact construction helmet.

"Marry me, Liz," he said, looking down at her expressionlessly.
"Marry me or else."

She tried to speak, to agree; she would do anything if only he would take her out of this dreadful muddy hole. But she was paralyzed.

"All right," he said. "It's or else, then."

He went away. She struggled to break out of her paralysis and couldn't.

Then she heard the bulldozer.

A moment later she saw it, a high yellow monster, pushing a mound of wet earth in front of the blade. Tony's merciless face looked down from the open cab.

He was going to bury her alive.

Trapped in her motionless, voiceless body, she could only watch in dumb horror. Trickle of dirt began to run down the sides of the hole

A familiar voice cried, "Go! Leave her now! Go!"

Tony stumbled down from the bulldozer and ran.

Huge relief swept her. She would have cried had she been able. And her savior appeared, standing at the foot of the open grave like a sexton. It was Ed Hamner, floating in his green fatigue jacket, his hair awry, his horn-rims slipped down to the small bulge at the end of his nose. He held his hand out to her.

"Get up," he said gently. "I know what you need. Get up, Beth."

And she could get up. She sobbed with relief. She tried to thank him; her words spilled out on top of each other. And Ed only smiled gently and nodded. She took his hand and looked down to see her footing. And when she looked up again, she was holding the paw of a huge, slavering timber wolf with red hurricane-lantern eyes and thick, spiked teeth open to bite.

She woke up sitting bolt upright in bed, her nightgown drenched with sweat. Her body was shaking uncontrollably. And even after a warm shower and a glass of milk, she could not reconcile herself to the dark. She slept with the light on.

A week later Tony was dead.

She opened the door in her robe, expecting to see Tony, but it was Danny Kilmer, one of the fellows he worked with. Danny was a fun guy; she and Tony had doubled with him and his girl a couple of times. But standing in the doorway of her second-floor apartment, Danny looked not only serious but ill.

"Danny?" she said. "What—"

"Liz," he said. "Liz, you've got to hold onto yourself. You've ... ah, God!" He pounded the jamb of the door with one big-knuckled, dirty hand, and she saw he was crying.

“Danny, is it Tony? Is something—”

“Tony’s dead,” Danny said. “He was—” But he was talking to air. She had fainted.

The next week passed in a kind of dream. The story pieced itself together from the woefully brief newspaper account and from what Danny told her over a beer in the Harbor Inn.

They had been repairing drainage culverts on Route 16. Part of the road was torn up, and Tony was flagging traffic. A kid driving a red Fiat had been coming down the hill. Tony had flagged him, but the kid never even slowed. Tony had been standing next to a dump truck, and there was no place to jump back. The kid in the Fiat had sustained head lacerations and a broken arm; he was hysterical and also cold sober. The police found several holes in his brake lines, as if they had overheated and then melted through. His driving record was A-1; he had simply been unable to stop. Her Tony had been a victim of that rarest of automobile mishaps: an honest accident.

Her shock and depression were increased by guilt. The fates had taken out of her hands the decision on what to do about Tony. And a sick, secret part of her was glad it was so. Because she hadn’t wanted to marry Tony ... not since the night of her dream.

She broke down the day before she went home.

She was sitting on a rock outcropping by herself, and after an hour or so the tears came. They surprised her with their fury. She cried until her stomach hurt and her head ached, and when the tears passed she felt not better but at least drained and empty.

And that was when Ed Hamner said, “Beth?”

She jerked around, her mouth filled with the copper taste of fear, half expecting to see the snarling wolf of her dream. But it was only Ed Hamner, looking sunburned and strangely defenseless without his fatigue jacket and blue jeans. He was wearing red shorts that

stopped just ahead of his bony knees, a white T-shirt that billowed on his thin chest like a loose sail in the ocean breeze, and rubber thongs. He wasn't smiling and the fierce sun glitter on his glasses made it impossible to see his eyes.

"Ed?" she said tentatively, half convinced that this was some grief-induced hallucination. "Is that really—"

"Yes, it's me."

"How—"

"I've been working at the Lakewood Theater in Skowhegan. I ran into your roommate ... Alice, is that her name?"

"Yes."

"She told me what happened. I came right away. Poor Beth." He moved his head, only a degree or so, but the sun glare slid off his glasses and she saw nothing wolfish, nothing predatory, but only a calm, warm sympathy.

She began to weep again, and staggered a little with the unexpected force of it. Then he was holding her and then it was all right.

They had dinner at the Silent Woman in Waterville, which was twenty-five miles away; maybe exactly the distance she needed. They went in Ed's car, a new Corvette, and he drove well—neither showily nor fussily, as she guessed he might. She didn't want to talk and she didn't want to be cheered up. He seemed to know it, and played quiet music on the radio.

And he ordered without consulting her—seafood. She thought she wasn't hungry, but when the food came she fell to ravenously.

When she looked up again her plate was empty and she laughed nervously. Ed was smoking a cigarette and watching her.

“The grieving damsel ate a hearty meal,” she said. “You must think I’m awful.”

“No,” he said. “You’ve been through a lot and you need to get your strength back. It’s like being sick, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Just like that.”

He took her hand across the table, squeezed it briefly, then let it go. “But now it’s recuperation time, Beth.”

“Is it? Is it really?”

“Yes,” he said. “So tell me. What are your plans?”

“I’m going home tomorrow. After that, I don’t know.”

“You’re going back to school, aren’t you?”

“I just don’t know. After this, it seems so ... so trivial. A lot of the purpose seems to have gone out of it. And all the fun.”

“It’ll come back. That’s hard for you to believe now, but it’s true. Try it for six weeks and see. You’ve got nothing better to do.” The last seemed a question.

“That’s true, I guess. But ... Can I have a cigarette?”

“Sure. They’re menthol, though. Sorry.”

She took one. “How did you know I didn’t like menthol cigarettes?”

He shrugged. “You just don’t look like one of those, I guess.”

She smiled. “You’re funny, do you know that?”

He smiled neutrally.

“No, really. For you of all people to turn up ... I thought I didn’t want to see anyone. But I’m really glad it was you, Ed.”

“Sometimes it’s nice to be with someone you’re not involved with.”

“That’s it, I guess.” She paused. “Who are you, Ed, besides my fairy godfather? Who are you really?” It was suddenly important to her that she know.

He shrugged. “Nobody much. Just one of the sort of funny-looking guys you see creeping around campus with a load of books under one arm—”

“Ed, you’re not funny-looking.”

“Sure I am,” he said, and smiled. “Never grew all the way out of my high-school acne, never got rushed by a big frat, never made any kind of splash in the social whirl. Just a dorm rat making grades, that’s all. When the big corporations interview on campus next spring, I’ll probably sign on with one of them and Ed Hamner will disappear forever.”

“That would be a great shame,” she said softly.

He smiled, and it was a very peculiar smile. Almost bitter.

“What about your folks?” she asked. “Where you live, what you like to do—”

“Another time,” he said. “I want to get you back. You’ve got a long plane ride tomorrow, and a lot of hassles.”

The evening left her relaxed for the first time since Tony’s death, without that feeling that somewhere inside a mainspring was being wound and wound to the breaking point. She thought sleep would come easily, but it did not.

Little questions nagged.

Alice told me ... poor Beth.

But Alice was summering in Kittery, eighty miles from Skowhegan. She must have been at Lakewood for a play.

The Corvette, this year's model. Expensive. A backstage job at Lakewood hadn't paid for that. Were his parents rich?

He had ordered just what she would have ordered herself. Maybe the only thing on the menu she would have eaten enough of to discover that she was hungry.

The menthol cigarettes, the way he had kissed her good night, exactly as she had wanted to be kissed. And—

You've got a long plane ride tomorrow.

He knew she was going home because she had told him. But how had he known she was going by plane? Or that it was a long ride?

It bothered her. It bothered her because she was halfway to being in love with Ed Hamner.

I know what you need.

Like the voice of a submarine captain tolling off fathoms, the words he had greeted her with followed her down to sleep.

He didn't come to the tiny Augusta airport to see her off, and waiting for the plane, she was surprised by her own disappointment. She was thinking about how quietly you could grow to depend on a person, almost like a junkie with a habit. The hype fools himself that he can take this stuff or leave it, when really—

"Elizabeth Rogan," the PA blared. "Please pick up the white courtesy phone."

She hurried to it. And Ed's voice said, "Beth?"

“Ed! It’s good to hear you. I thought maybe ...”

“That I’d meet you?” He laughed. “You don’t need me for that. You’re a big strong girl. Beautiful, too. You can handle this. Will I see you at school?”

“I ... yes, I think so.”

“Good.” There was a moment of silence. Then he said, “Because I love you. I have from the first time I saw you.”

Her tongue was locked. She couldn’t speak. A thousand thoughts whirled through her mind.

He laughed again, gently. “No, don’t say anything. Not now. I’ll see you. There’ll be time then. All the time in the world. Good trip, Beth. Goodbye.”

And he was gone, leaving her with a white phone in her hand and her own chaotic thoughts and questions.

September.

Elizabeth picked up the old pattern of school and classes like a woman who has been interrupted at knitting. She was rooming with Alice again, of course; they had been roomies since freshman year, when they had been thrown together by the housing-department computer. They had always gotten along well, despite differing interests and personalities. Alice was the studious one, a chemistry major with a 3.6 average. Elizabeth was more social, less bookish, with a split major in education and math.

They still got on well, but a faint coolness seemed to have grown up between them over the summer. Elizabeth chalked it up to the difference of opinion over the sociology final, and didn’t mention it.

The events of the summer began to seem dreamlike. In a funny way it sometimes seemed that Tony might have been a boy she had

known in high school. It still hurt to think about him, and she avoided the subject with Alice, but the hurt was an old-bruise throb and not the bright pain of an open wound.

What hurt more was Ed Hamner's failure to call.

A week passed, then two, then it was October. She got a student directory from the Union and looked up his name. It was no help; after his name were only the words "Mill St." And Mill was a very long street indeed. And so she waited, and when she was called for dates—which was often—she turned them down. Alice raised her eyebrows but said nothing; she was buried alive in a six-week biochem project and spent most of her evenings at the library. Elizabeth noticed the long white envelopes that her roommate was receiving once or twice a week in the mail—since she was usually back from class first but thought nothing of them. The private detective agency was discreet; it did not print its return address on its envelopes.

When the intercom buzzed, Alice was studying. "You get it, Liz. Probably for you anyway."

Elizabeth went to the intercom. "Yes?"

"Gentleman door-caller, Liz."

Oh, Lord.

"Who is it?" she asked, annoyed, and ran through her tattered stack of excuses. Migraine headache. She hadn't used that one this week.

The desk girl said, amused, "His name is Edward Jackson Hamner. Junior, no less." Her voice lowered. "His socks don't match."

Elizabeth's hand flew to the collar of her robe. "Oh, God. Tell him I'll be right down. No, tell him it will be just a minute. No, a couple of minutes, okay?"

“Sure,” the voice said dubiously. “Don’t have a hemorrhage.”

Elizabeth took a pair of slacks out of her closet. Took out a short denim skirt. Felt the curlers in her hair and groaned. Began to yank them out.

Alice watched all this calmly, without speaking, but she looked speculatively at the door for a long time after Elizabeth had left.

He looked just the same; he hadn’t changed at all. He was wearing his green fatigue jacket, and it still looked at least two sizes too big. One of the bows of his horn-rimmed glasses had been mended with electrician’s tape. His jeans looked new and stiff, miles from the soft and faded “in” look that Tony had achieved effortlessly. He was wearing one green sock, one brown sock.

And she knew she loved him.

“Why didn’t you call before?” she asked, going to him.

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket and grinned shyly. “I thought I’d give you some time to date around. Meet some guys. Figure out what you want.”

“I think I know that.”

“Good. Would you like to go to a movie?”

“Anything,” she said. “Anything at all.”

As the days passed it occurred to her that she had never met anyone, male or female, that seemed to understand her moods and needs so completely or so wordlessly. Their tastes coincided. While Tony had enjoyed violent movies of the Godfather type, Ed seemed more into comedy or nonviolent dramas. He took her to the circus one night when she was feeling low and they had a hilariously wonderful time. Study dates were real study dates, not just an excuse to grope on the third floor of the Union. He took her to

dances and seemed especially good at the old ones, which she loved. They won a fifties Stroll trophy at a Homecoming Nostalgia Dance. More important, he seemed to understand when she wanted to be passionate. He didn't force her or hurry her; she never got the feeling that she had with some of the other boys she had gone out with—that there was an inner timetable for sex, beginning with a kiss good night on Date 1 and ending with a night in some friend's borrowed apartment on Date 10. The Mill Street apartment was Ed's exclusively, a third-floor walk-up. They went there often, and Elizabeth went without the feeling that she was walking into some minor-league Don Juan's passion pit. He didn't push. He honestly seemed to want what she wanted, when she wanted it. And things progressed.

When school reconvened following the semester break, Alice seemed strangely preoccupied. Several times that afternoon before Ed came to pick her up—they were going out to dinner—Elizabeth looked up to see her roommate frowning down at a large manila envelope on her desk. Once Elizabeth almost asked about it, then decided not to. Some new project probably.

*

It was snowing hard when Ed brought her back to the dorm.

"Tomorrow?" he asked. "My place?"

"Sure. I'll make some popcorn."

"Great," he said, and kissed her. "I love you, Beth."

"Love you, too."

"Would you like to stay over?" Ed asked evenly. "Tomorrow night?"

"All right, Ed." She looked into his eyes. "Whatever you want."

"Good," he said quietly. "Sleep well, kid."

“You, too.”

She expected that Alice would be asleep and entered the room quietly, but Alice was up and sitting at her desk.

“Alice, are you okay?”

“I have to talk to you, Liz. About Ed.”

“What about him?”

Alice said carefully, “I think that when I finish talking to you we’re not going to be friends anymore. For me, that’s giving up a lot. So I want you to listen carefully.”

“Then maybe you better not say anything.”

“I have to try.”

Elizabeth felt her initial curiosity kindle into anger. “Have you been snooping around Ed?”

Alice only looked at her.

“Were you jealous of us?”

“No. If I’d been jealous of you and your dates, I would have moved out two years ago.”

Elizabeth looked at her, perplexed. She knew what Alice said was the truth. And she suddenly felt afraid.

“Two things made me wonder about Ed Hamner,” Alice said. “First, you wrote me about Tony’s death and said how lucky it was that I’d seen Ed at the Lakewood Theater ... how he came right over to Boothbay and really helped you out. But I never saw him, Liz. I was never near the Lakewood Theater last summer.”

“But ...”

“But how did he know Tony was dead? I have no idea. I only know he didn’t get it from me. The other thing was that eidetic-memory business. My God, Liz, he can’t even remember which socks he’s got on!”

“That’s a different thing altogether,” Liz said stiffly. “It—”

“Ed Hamner was in Las Vegas last summer,” Alice said softly. “He came back in mid-July and took a motel room in Pemaquid. That’s just across the Boothbay Harbor town line. Almost as if he were waiting for you to need him.”

“That’s crazy! And how would you know Ed was in Las Vegas?”

“I ran into Shirley D’Antonio just before school started. She worked in the Pines Restaurant, which is just across from the playhouse. She said she never saw anybody who looked like Ed Hamner. So I’ve known he’s been lying to you about several things. And so I went to my father and laid it out and he gave me the go-ahead.”

“To do what?” Elizabeth asked, bewildered.

“To hire a private detective agency.”

Elizabeth was on her feet. “No more, Alice. That’s it.” She would catch the bus into town, spend tonight at Ed’s apartment. She had only been waiting for him to ask her, anyway.

“At least know,” Alice said. “Then make your own decision.”

“I don’t have to know anything except he’s kind and good and—”

“Love is blind, huh?” Alice said, and smiled bitterly. “Well, maybe I happen to love you a little, Liz. Have you ever thought of that?”

Elizabeth turned and looked at her for a long moment. “If you do, you’ve got a funny way of showing it,” she said. “Go on, then. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I owe you that much. Go on.”

“You knew him a long time ago,” Alice said quietly.

“I ... what?”

“P.S. 119, Bridgeport, Connecticut.”

Elizabeth was struck dumb. She and her parents had lived in Bridgeport for six years, moving to their present home the year after she had finished the second grade. She had gone to P.S. 119, but—

“Alice, are you sure?”

“Do you remember him?”

“No, of course not!” But she did remember the feeling she’d had the first time she had seen Ed—the feeling of *deja vu*.

“The pretty ones never remember the ugly ducklings, I guess. Maybe he had a crush on you. You were in the first grade with him, Liz. Maybe he sat in the back of the room and just ... watched you. Or on the playground. Just a little nothing kid who already wore glasses and probably braces and you couldn’t even remember him, but I’ll bet he remembers you.”

Elizabeth said, “What else?”

“The agency traced him from school fingerprints. After that it was just a matter of finding people and talking to them. The operative assigned to the case said he couldn’t understand some of what he was getting. Neither do I. Some of it’s scary.”

“It better be,” Elizabeth said grimly.

“Ed Hamner, Sr., was a compulsive gambler. He worked for a top-line advertising agency in New York and then moved to Bridgeport sort of on the run. The operative says that almost every big-money poker game and high-priced book in the city was holding his markers.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “These people really saw you got a full measure of dirt for your dollar, didn’t they?”

“Maybe. Anyway, Ed’s father got in another jam in Bridgeport. It was gambling again, but this time he got mixed up with a big-time loan shark. He got a broken leg and a broken arm somehow. The operative says he doubts it was an accident.”

“Anything else?” Elizabeth asked. “Child beating? Embezzlement?”

“He landed a job with a two-bit Los Angeles ad agency in 1961. That was a little too close to Las Vegas. He started to spend his weekends there, gambling heavily ... and losing. Then he started taking Ed Junior with him. And he started to win.”

“You’re making all of this up. You must be.”

Alice tapped the report in front of her. “It’s all here, Liz. Some of it wouldn’t stand up in court, but the operative says none of the people he talked with would have a reason to lie. Ed’s father called Ed his ‘good luck charm.’ At first, nobody objected to the boy even though it was illegal for him to be in the casinos. His father was a prize fish. But then the father started sticking just to roulette, playing only odd-even and red-black. By the end of the year the boy was off-limits in every casino on the strip. And his father took up a new kind of gambling.”

“What?”

“The stock market. When the Hamners moved to L.A. in the middle of 1961, they were living in a ninety-dollar-a-month cheese box and Mr. Hamner was driving a ‘52 Chevrolet. At the end of 1962, just sixteen months later, he had quit his job and they were living in their own home in San Jose. Mr. Hamner was driving a brand-new Thunderbird and Mrs. Hamner had a Volkswagen. You see, it’s against the law for a small boy to be in the Nevada casinos, but no one could take the stock-market page away from him.”

“Are you implying that Ed ... that he could ... Alice, you’re crazy!”

“I’m not implying anything. Unless maybe just that he knew what his daddy needed.”

I know what you need.

It was almost as if the words had been spoken into her ear, and she shuddered.

“Mrs. Hamner spent the next six years in and out of various mental institutions. Supposedly for nervous disorders, but the operative talked to an orderly who said she was pretty close to psychotic. She claimed her son was the devil’s henchman. She stabbed him with a pair of scissors in 1964. Tried to kill him. She ... Liz? Liz, what is it?”

“The scar,” she muttered. “We went swimming at the University pool on an open night about a month ago. He’s got a deep, dimpled scar on his shoulder ... here.” She put her hand just above her left breast. “He said ...” A wave of nausea tried to climb up her throat and she had to wait for it to recede before she could go on. “He said he fell on a picket fence when he was a little boy.”

“Shall I go on?”

“Finish, why not? What can it hurt now?”

“His mother was released from a very plush mental institution in the San Joaquin Valley in 1968. The three of them went on a vacation. They stopped at a picnic spot on Route 101. The boy was collecting firewood when she drove the car right over the edge of the dropoff above the ocean with both her and her husband in it. It might have been an attempt to run Ed down. By then he was nearly eighteen. His father left him a million-dollar stock portfolio. Ed came east a year and a half later and enrolled here. And that’s the end.”

“No more skeletons in the closet?”

“Liz, aren’t there enough?”

She got up. “No wonder he never wants to mention his family. But you had to dig up the corpse, didn’t you?”

“You’re blind,” Alice said. Elizabeth was putting on her coat. “I suppose you’re going to him.”

“Right.”

“Because you love him.”

“Right.”

Alice crossed the room and grabbed her arm. “Will you get that sulky, petulant look off your face for a second and think! Ed Hamner is able to do things the rest of us only dream about. He got his father a stake at roulette and made him rich playing the stock market. He seems to be able to will winning. Maybe he’s some kind of low-grade psychic. Maybe he’s got precognition. I don’t know. There are people who seem to have a dose of that. Liz, hasn’t it ever occurred to you that he’s forced you to love him?”

Liz turned to her slowly. “I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous in my life.”

“Is it? He gave you that sociology test the same way he gave his father the right side of the roulette board! He was never enrolled in any sociology course! I checked. He did it because it was the only way he could make you take him seriously!”

“Stop it!” Liz cried. She clapped her hands over her ears.

“He knew the test, and he knew when Tony was killed, and he knew you were going home on a plane! He even knew just the right psychological moment to step back into your life last October.”

Elizabeth pulled away from her and opened the door.

“Please,” Alice said. “Please, Liz, listen. I don’t know how he can do those things. I doubt if even he knows for sure. He might not mean to do you any harm, but he already is. He’s made you love him by knowing every secret thing you want and need, and that’s not love at all. That’s rape.”

Elizabeth slammed the door and ran down the stairs.

She caught the last bus of the evening into town. It was snowing more heavily than ever, and the bus lumbered through the drifts that had blown across the road like a crippled beetle. Elizabeth sat in the back, one of only six or seven passengers, a thousand thoughts in her mind.

Menthol cigarettes. The stock exchange. The way he had known her mother’s nickname was Deedee. A little boy sitting at the back of a first-grade classroom, making sheep’s eyes at a vivacious little girl too young to understand that—

I know what you need.

No. No. No. I do love him!

Did she? Or was she simply delighted at being with someone who always ordered the right thing, took her to the right movie, and did not want to go anywhere or do anything she didn’t? Was he just a kind of psychic mirror, showing her only what she wanted to see? The presents he gave were always the right presents. When the weather had turned suddenly cold and she had been longing for a hair dryer, who gave her one? Ed Hamner, of course. Just happened to see one on sale in Day’s, he had said. She, of course, had been delighted.

That’s not love at all. That’s rape.

The wind clawed at her face as she stepped out on the corner of Main and Mill, and she winced against it as the bus drew away with a

smooth diesel growl. Its taillights twinkled briefly in the snowy night for a moment and were gone.

She had never felt so lonely in her life.

He wasn't home.

She stood outside his door after five minutes of knocking, nonplussed. It occurred to her that she had no idea what Ed did or whom he saw when he wasn't with her. The subject had never come up.

Maybe he's raising the price of another hair dryer in a poker game.

With sudden decision she stood on her toes and felt along the top of the doorjamb for the spare key she knew he kept there. Her fingers stumbled over it and it fell to the hall floor with a clink.

She picked it up and used it in the lock.

The apartment looked different with Ed gone—artificial, like a stage set. It had often amused her that someone who cared so little about his personal appearance should have such a neat, picture-book domicile. Almost as if he had decorated it for her and not himself. But of course that was crazy. Wasn't it?

It occurred to her again, as if for the first time, how much she liked the chair she sat in when they studied or watched TV. It was just right, the way Baby Bear's chair had been for Goldilocks. Not too hard, not too soft. Just right. Like everything else she associated with Ed.

There were two doors opening off the living room. One went to the kitchenette, the other to his bedroom.

The wind whistled outside, making the old apartment building creak and settle.

In the bedroom, she stared at the brass bed. It looked neither too hard nor too soft, but just right. An insidious voice smirked: It's almost too perfect, isn't it?

She went to the bookcase and ran her eye aimlessly over the titles. One jumped at her eyes and she pulled it out: *Dance Crazes of the Fifties*. The book opened cleanly to a point some three-quarters through. A section titled "The Stroll" had been circled heavily in red grease pencil and in the margin the word BETH had been written in large, almost accusatory letters.

I ought to go now, she told herself. I can still save something. If he came back now I could never look him in the face again and Alice would win. Then she'd really get her money's worth.

But she couldn't stop, and knew it. Things had gone too far.

She went to the closet and turned the knob, but it didn't give. Locked.

On the off chance, she stood on tiptoe again and felt along the top of the door. And her fingers felt a key. She took it down and somewhere inside a voice said very clearly: Don't do this. She thought of Bluebeard's wife and what she had found when she opened the wrong door. But it was indeed too late; if she didn't proceed now she would always wonder. She opened the closet.

And had the strangest feeling that this was where the real Ed Hamner, Jr., had been hiding all the time.

The closet was a mess—a jumbled rickrack of clothes, books, an unstrung tennis racket, a pair of tattered tennis shoes, old prelims and reports tossed helter-skelter, a spilled pouch of Borkum Riff pipe tobacco. His green fatigue jacket had been flung in the far corner.

She picked up one of the books and blinked at the title. *The Golden Bough*. Another. *Ancient Rites, Modern Mysteries*. Another. *Haitian Voodoo*. And a last one, bound in old, cracked leather, the title

almost rubbed off the binding by much handling, smelling vaguely like rotted fish: Necronomicon. She opened it at random, gasped, and flung it away, the obscenity still hanging before her eyes.

More to regain her composure than anything else, she reached for the green fatigue jacket, not admitting to herself that she meant to go through its pockets. But as she lifted it she saw something else. A small tin box ...

Curiously, she picked it up and turned it over in her hands, hearing things rattle inside. It was the kind of box a young boy might choose to keep his treasures in. Stamped in raised letters on the tin bottom were the words "Bridgeport Candy Co." She opened it.

The doll was on top. The Elizabeth doll.

She looked at it and began to shudder.

The doll was dressed in a scrap of red nylon, part of a scarf she had lost two or three months back. At a movie with Ed. The arms were pipe cleaners that had been draped in stuff that looked like blue moss. Graveyard moss, perhaps. There was hair on the doll's head, but that was wrong. It was fine white flax, taped to the doll's pink gum-eraser head. Her own hair was sandy blond and coarser than this. This was more the way her hair had been—

When she was a little girl

She swallowed and there was a clicking in her throat. Hadn't they all been issued scissors in the first grade, tiny scissors with rounded blade, just right for a child's hand? Had that long-ago little boy crept up behind her, perhaps at nap time, and—

Elizabeth put the doll aside and looked in the box again. There was a blue poker chip with a strange six-sided pattern drawn on it in red ink. A tattered newspaper obituary—Mr. and Mrs. Edward Hamner. The two of them smiled meaninglessly out of the accompanying photo, and she saw that the same six-sided pattern had been drawn

across their faces, this time in black ink, like a pall. Two more dolls, one male, one female. The similarity to the faces in the obituary photograph was hideous, unmistakable.

And something else.

She fumbled it out, and her fingers shook so badly she almost dropped it. A tiny sound escaped her.

It was a model car, the sort small boys buy in drugstores and hobby shops and then assemble with airplane glue. This one was a Fiat. It had been painted red. And a piece of what looked like one of Tony's shirts had been taped to the front.

She turned the model car upside down. Someone had hammered the underside to fragments.

"So you found it, you ungrateful bitch."

She screamed and dropped the car and the box. His foul treasures sprayed across the floor.

He was standing in the doorway, looking at her. She had never seen such a look of hate on a human face.

She said, "You killed Tony."

He grinned unpleasantly. "Do you think you could prove it?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, surprised at the steadiness of her own voice. "I know. And I never want to see you again. Ever. And if you do ... anything ... to anyone else, I'll know. And I'll fix you. Somehow."

His face twisted. "That's the thanks I get. I gave you everything you ever wanted. Things no other man could have. Admit it. I made you perfectly happy."

"You killed Tony!" She screamed it at him.

He took another step into the room. "Yes, and I did it for you. And what are you, Beth? You don't know what love is. I loved you from the first time I saw you, over seventeen years ago. Could Tony say that? It's never been hard for you. You're pretty. You never had to think about wanting or needing or about being lonely. You never had to find ... other ways to get the things you had to have. There was always a Tony to give them to you. All you ever had to do was smile and say please." His voice rose a note. "I could never get what I wanted that way. Don't you think I tried? It didn't work with my father. He just wanted more and more. He never even kissed me good night or gave me a hug until I made him rich. And my mother was the same way. I gave her her marriage back, but was that enough for her? She hated me! She wouldn't come near me! She said I was unnatural! I gave her nice things but ... Beth, don't do that! Don't ... doon't—

She stepped on the Elizabeth doll and crushed it, turning her heel on it. Something inside her flared in agony, and then was gone. She wasn't afraid of him now. He was just a small, shrunken boy in a young man's body. And his socks didn't match.

"I don't think you can do anything to me now, Ed," she told him. "Not now. Am I wrong?"

He turned from her. "Go on," he said weakly. "Get out. But leave my box. At least do that."

"I'll leave the box. But not the things in it." She walked past him. His shoulders twitched, as if he might turn and try to grab her, but then they slumped.

As she reached the second-floor landing, he came to the top of the stairs and called shrilly after her: "Go on then! But you'll never be satisfied with any man after me! And when your looks go and men stop trying to give you anything you want, you'll wish for me! You'll think of what you threw away!"

She went down the stairs and out into the snow. Its coldness felt good against her face. It was a two-mile walk back to the campus, but she didn't care. She wanted the walk, wanted the cold. She wanted it to make her clean.

In a queer, twisted way she felt sorry for him—a little boy with a huge power crammed inside a dwarfed spirit. A little boy who tried to make humans behave like toy soldiers and then stamped on them in a fit of temper when they wouldn't or when they found out.

And what was she? Blessed with all the things he was not, through no fault of his or effort of her own? She remembered the way she had reacted to Alice, trying blindly and jealously to hold onto something that was easy rather than good, not caring, not caring.

When your looks go and men stop trying to give you anything you want, you'll wish for me! ... I know what you need.

But was she so small that she actually needed so little?

Please, dear God, no.

On the bridge between the campus and town she paused and threw Ed Hamner's scraps of magic over the side, piece by piece. The red-painted model Fiat went last, falling end over end into the driven snow until it was lost from sight. Then she walked on.