

Chapter III

Saturday, July 15, awoke to a blinding sun. The sky was blue as far as the eye could see and the first weather report in the morning forecast a beautiful, warm weekend throughout the East Coast.

At sunrise, those who had not left the night before, fearing bad weather, jumped in their cars and headed for the nearby countryside or the beaches of Curtis Bay and Ocean City in Chesapeake Bay, which caused a lot of traffic and commotion between 6 and 9 a.m. Then Baltimore fell back into the sweet lethargy of a summer Saturday morning. Of course, there was some activity at the docks and in the industrial area, but in the outlying districts, where the Ward's house was, all you could hear were the songs of birds frolicking in the trees.

Mary Ward had been up for a long time. She had not slept well because the short argument that she and Walter had had the night before bothered her. On awaking she promised herself to talk to her husband right away, but after listening at his door and hearing his loud snoring, she thought that it could wait, that she might put Walter in a bad mood if she woke him from a sleep that she hoped would do him good.

She had finished breakfast in the kitchen, but left the coffee on for Walter and then went out to walk in the yard. The little morning stroll was one of the pleasures that Mary liked a lot. The grass was still covered with dew and the strong scent of trees and plants rose up from the earth. She walked around the lounge chair and came abruptly upon her husband's pipe. It was broken. With a knot in her throat Mary picked it up and slipped it into her bathrobe pocket. Walter prized this pipe, which she had given him for his 40th birthday. And it was clear—he had thrown it!

Really worried, Mary went back into the kitchen. The sun was not so bright now, the garden not so beautiful and the birdsongs were annoying her. Walter had thrown his pipe!

She pulled herself together after a moment. Pam and George were arriving around 10 and she still had a bunch of stuff to do. She turned the radio on low, plugged in the vacuum (which kept her from hearing the radio) and started her housecleaning, although her mind was elsewhere. If Walter had done that (she was still thinking of the pipe), it was because he was gravely sick. Well, Walter was never sick. Anyway, not enough to break his pipe...

It is crazy what a woman can think while doing the cleaning. Mary imagined all kinds of reasons that compelled Walter to start the discussion the night before when he had expressed doubts about Pam and said that George was an idiot. And then he had eaten and drunk more than a man like him could stand... She wondered if Walter might not be having an affair. He was still a good-looking man and the secretary who worked across from him was not bad at all. No, it was a ridiculous idea! Walter must be sick—that's the explanation.

Mary heard a car stop in front of the gate and she looked out the window. Pam and George were coming with their arms full of packages. My Lord! All this time thinking like a fool, dreaming up crazy things and she had let the time slip away.

"Good morning, Mom." Pam entered, smiling and very pretty in her pink summer dress that really brought out her brown skin. George followed her. They made a handsome couple and they were happy.

"You're still in your bathrobe!" Pam was surprised.

"I got up late. Excuse me, George."

"No problem," George said amiably. "Walter isn't here? I brought him some tobacco."

Mary forced herself to smile. "He's not up yet," she said cheerfully. "We watched a movie on TV. Listen, make yourselves comfortable in the yard while I get ready. I won't be long. We're all going to wake up Walter." She left the kitchen.

Pam and George kissed and went into the yard with their arms around each other's waist. Pam looked up at her husband and whispered. "Do you really think we should tell them right away?"

George smiled. "Of course! They're going to be happy to know they'll soon be grandparents."

"I'm a little ashamed," Pam admitted, blushing.

"Ashamed!" George protested. "You should be ashamed to be ashamed! Me, I'm proud, very proud."

"They're my parents..."

“Exactly. They know what’s what. Do you think that they did anything different to have you?”

Pam laughed and George pulled her onto the lounge chair where he started kissing her before the inquisitive eyes of Mr. Kirsten, the neighbor, who was watching them over the hedge.

Meanwhile, Mary finished quickly in the bathroom, went into her room and slipped on a dress. She had to cook and make the chocolate pudding... Her worries had suddenly taken a different turn so that Walter, his broken pipe and last night’s argument fell into the background.

She closed her door and knocked on her husband’s, shouting, “Get up, Walter. It’s almost 11 o’clock!” Without waiting for an answer she went downstairs and started fidgeting with the pots and pans. As she was taking the meat out of the fridge, Pam appeared and asked if she could help.

Mary grumbled, “Go instead to wake up your father. He’s a little out of sorts at the moment.”

“Dad?”

“Last night we had an argument. He was rude and then he broke his pipe and fell asleep in the yard. I’m telling you, it was no fun. If he keeps it up, I’ll ask for a divorce.”

Pam smiled. “Dad’s one of a kind. You’d have a hard time finding another one like him.”

Then Mary smiled and joked, “Go and tell him that if he doesn’t get up, I’m going to divorce him.”

“Let him sleep,” Pam pleaded, “I have to talk to you.”

Her voice alarmed Mary. She put her knife down on the vegetables, looked at her daughter questioningly and frowned. “Something serious, Pam?”

“Very serious, mom.”

Mary put her hands on her hips and asked calmly, “Have you seen a doctor?”

Taken by surprise, Pam turned all red and nodded.

“Good,” Mary approved. “When’s the due date?”

“December.”

“Does George know?”

“Yes and he’s jumping for joy.”

Mary stepped forward and hugged Pam. “I’m happy,” is all she said.

Out of the blue, Pam started crying. Mary patted her on the back and scolded, “This is really not the time for that. When I found out about you, I didn’t stop singing for a week. My Lord! We have to tell your father as soon as possible. Come on, take the apron and finish peeling.” She quickly took off her apron and threw it at Pam. Then she dashed up the stairs, shouting, “Walter! Walter!”

Downstairs Pam burst out laughing. George scrambled out of the lounge chair to see what was happening.

“Walter!” Mary shouted in the hallway. “Pam’s having a baby!”

Her voice carried across the yard and reached the ears of Mr. Kirsten who immediately stopped cutting the hedge and rushed off to tell his wife that the Ward’s daughter was going to be a mother.

George entered the kitchen and asked, “How did she take the news?”

Pam turned to answer him, but an awful scream cut her off.

“Damn!” George said. “That’s your mother!”

There was another scream, weaker, and then a terrifying bang shook the ceiling. George rushed to the stairs and on the first steps he heard a growl that froze his blood. Nevertheless, he kept climbing. Then he stopped when he saw an enormous shadow stretch out along the walls and he heard the growling coming closer as well as a strange thumping, like pounding paws...

George shook off his nascent fear and took another step, but he could not help screaming when he saw the beast suddenly appear at the top of the stairs. What he saw was a black, frizzy mane, long pointed teeth, claws like curved swords and a blood-dripping snout. He tried to escape the bewildering vision, but as he turned around, he felt a huge weight crush down on him. He collapsed, spilling blood from his grisly wounds.

He was already a corpse by the time the beast ran off down the stairs to the first floor where he jumped on Pam who was too petrified even to scream. She fainted. The beast gutted her, tore her body to pieces with its claws and bolted into the sunny yard, leaving behind it a wide trail of blood.

The Kirstens, who were watching over the hedge, were wondering what all the commotion was about when they saw a strange animal rush out of the kitchen. Monkey, lion, tiger—it was all and none of these. It was a nightmare creature, an unbelievable thing that moved very fast, its chops rolled up over its long fangs. When the beast saw the Kirstens, it charged savagely and silently at them. It leapt

over the hedge and fell upon the couple who were frozen there in astonishment. Four seconds later the Kirstens were nothing but mangled corpses and the beast was heading down the street, sometimes sprinting like a tiger, sometimes loping like a gorilla... or a man.

At 10:30, Albert Van Loop rang at the Haslers front door. He had put on a new suit, prepared himself mentally for the meeting and was ready to be diplomatic in the discussion that was about to pit him against Mabel's father.

So, he rang and heard a noise on the other side of the door. Then the door opened on old Hasler. Albert sighed. He had hoped that Mrs. Hasler would open the door to make his first steps a little easier. "Good morning, Mr. Hasler. Do you remember me?"

Very unexpectedly Mabel's father smiled. "Of course I remember you!" he said with false friendliness. "Why don't you come in?"

Albert entered the apartment, feeling relieved. Maybe Mr. Hasler was in a good mood.

"Sit down, young man."

"Thank you," Albert said, still standing. "I came to talk about Mabel..."

Old Hasler lifted his hand and said, "I know, but sit down. You're going to go weak in the knees when you hear what I have to say. The women are upstairs changing, my boy. You're still too young to know... A cup of coffee?"

Albert was uncomfortable. Old Hasler was being friendly but a little condescending, like when you feel sorry for someone. Old Hasler took two cups, filled them with coffee, sat down and started, "Here it is: we know that you and Mabel were planning to marry..."

"We still are," Albert cut in. "In fact, that's what I came here to talk to you about this morning."

"Too late! Mabel changed her mind."

Albert stood up; his face was pale. "Now I understand why you're being so nice! You think that with Mabel not here you can make me believe that she doesn't love me anymore, is that it?"

Mrs. Hasler entered the room and said, "It's true, Mr. Van Loop. Mabel told us last night that she didn't want to marry you anymore."

"Even better," old Hasler added, obviously very happy, "she doesn't even want to see you anymore. Never again!"

"It's not true! Yesterday morning she..."

"Be quiet!" Hasler said sharply. "You are in my house and I won't let you call me a liar. Mabel wants no more of you, it's her right and nobody can do anything about it."

Albert shook his head. "Let her tell me herself," he groaned. "I won't leave here until she does, Mr. Hasler."

Old Hasler balked. Young Van Loop looked strong, his mind was made up and he could probably beat him up very easily. "Okay," he gave in, "after all, she owes you an explanation..." Then, turning to his wife, he ordered, "Go wake her up."

"That's ridiculous! She can hear everything happening down here from her room. If she hasn't opened her door, it's because she doesn't want to explain herself."

"Go wake her up! If she has something to say against the boy, let her say it!" Paradoxically, he was starting to take sides with the young Van Loop. A kind of solidarity between men.

"Thank you, Mr. Hasler," Albert said. "I was sure that I wouldn't come here for nothing."

Mrs. Hasler turned around. She would never understand men! She went down the narrow hallway, knocked softly on the door and said, "You have to come out, Mab. Mr. Van Loop insists on speaking with you."

She heard sniffing and figured that her daughter was crying, which upset her. "Open up, Mab. It's a bad time, come..."

"Well?" the father was irritated. "She's coming, isn't she?"

"She isn't opening the door and it's locked."

Old Hasler turned red. He opened a drawer, took out a key and marched firmly to his daughter's room.

"Move away from there!"

He pushed his wife back, unlocked the door and swung it open. Instantly a dark shape sprang out of the shadows, growling, and jumped at the throat of old Hasler who collapsed, pouring out blood.

Mrs. Hasler screamed before she, in turn, was slaughtered by the deadly clawing and biting, splattering the walls and ceiling with blood.

Albert Van Loop turned around and was face to face with the awful beast, whose face was smeared with blood. He tried to defend himself, but was quickly rendered powerless by the razor-sharp claws—he fell with a gaping wound in his throat.

Afterward, the beast charged at the front door, smashing it to pieces and rushed down the stairs.