

CHAPTER 2

I left the luncheonette and walked on the boardwalk. The morning breeze came in from the ocean, lifting my hair off my neck. I liked this beach because the water was so calm. The scythe of the Rockaways protected it from the deep Atlantic currents, and you could bob here peacefully, as if on a Catskills lake. The neat, interlocking planks blurred together in the distance. There was nothing on the sand but a straggling border of seaweed that marked the last high tide. A ship at anchor waited on the horizon.

I had almost no savings. The house had taken everything, and I hadn't made much at the station. I had property taxes to pay, repairs that still had to be made. I walked past shuttered restaurants, overturned terrace tables, a silent gallery of shops whose signs offered hot dogs and fried clams, fountain sodas, banana splits. The abbreviated belfry of a little Catholic church, blotted with pigeons, kept watch behind an ice cream stand.

I did try, Jane. I caught my hair in one hand, fishing in my pocket for bobby pins. Across the water, the dark bulk of New Jersey was lightening as the sun rose. I did try. Just by having you in my house—by saying those things to you, those clever remarks. I made dinner for you. I sat near you and read books. You left clouds of perfume in my bedroom, peeled apples over my sink. If there was something more than that, I couldn't think what it was, what she had wanted from me. She had looked at me searchingly sometimes, early in the morning, and it made me feel sad, diminished. When she was comfortable and happy in the evenings, after a drink or two, she acted sometimes like a child, jostling me with jokes, her voice sugary, and while I could tell I was meant to like this, to be charmed by it, I didn't and wasn't. I went cold instead. Maybe she had sensed that too.

The other woman, where had she come from? Another professor, a graduate student? Jane was invited to dinner parties sometimes with the artists and writers and critics who circulated in her scene, and she would invite me and I usually said no, that I was too tired to talk to strangers or take the train a long way. That looked like a mistake now. I crumpled, and then got angry. Incredible nerve, to accuse me of being cold and then cheat and lie, as if I had no feelings at all. My heart was racing. I pictured her making it with some girl in a cab while I sat at home reading a stupid novel.

The day around me was beginning to look very plain, mid-morning on an overcast Thursday late in the summer. I lit a cigarette and turned off the boardwalk onto one of the side streets that led to the elevated tracks of the Q. It was time to go home.

I picked up the newspaper off the front stoop and let myself in. The clock ticked in the kitchen. It was the time of day when the back of the house was the brightest. I made coffee in the Bialetti and turned to the classifieds. In the women's section, columns of ads seeking office girls and waitresses; "pleasant public manner," "well-groomed." Salaries that wouldn't fix the windows or pay the gas bill for the winter. Jane had told me she saw picketers in front of the New York Times Building a few weeks ago because of the sex-segregated classifieds. I hadn't gotten the film-editing job through an ad, of course. I had been hired for a woman's job in the front office and then had insinuated myself into the editing room. That was the only way I had ever managed to make a living: crossing a line bit by bit, as if by accident. I thought of doing it again, starting over in a secretarial position and then casting about to see if I could get something better. But I had no references now. People talked. I couldn't be sure who knew about me. And even if I managed it, they would make undiscussed exceptions for me, do funny things with my title. I wouldn't make much more than the girls answering the phones. I put my head in my hands.

I went into the small back garden and sat for a while, staring at the fence overgrown with morning glories and, beyond it, the windows of the next house. Another day turning. Hours would pass and the yard would grow dark and I wouldn't have spoken to another soul. I thought of my mother. I had seen her in the spring, around Easter time, for the first time in years. I had spent an afternoon and a night in the old family house in Chevy Chase, Maryland, the redbrick colonial with the hedge and flowers. We had been polite to each other. My mother kept

sizing me up, always pausing in the doorway of the room I was in before entering, asking discreet questions, as if I were a fellow guest in a hotel. When I was a child, she didn't know what to do with me because I was chaotic and ignorant, like all children; when I was a teenager, she didn't know what to do with me because I was hostile and sad, like most teenagers. The death of my father when I was twelve had left us marooned on separate islands. My appearance in her home in the form of a grown woman caught her off guard, as if it were a disguise I had unfairly put on. She seemed relieved to see me go.

I went through the math again: the windows, the wiring, the gas bill, the taxes.

And then, a trace of an idea. I had been carting around a bundle of Raymond Chandler paperbacks from boardinghouse to apartment to house since my first days in New York. Philip Marlowe, private eye.

Was it so impossible? It was what other ex-spies did. All it took was an office, ads in the paper, referrals. I had the training. I thought of Gerry, my old handler when I worked for the CIA, and laughed. I'd told him I didn't want to do this kind of work anymore. But this would be different.

Half of my remaining money went to pay for the first and last months' rent for a small office just off Union Square. The office contained a desk with a scarred top, which I covered with a blotter; a stopped clock, which had been screwed directly into the wall and couldn't be removed; and a cast-iron radiator beneath a broad window, the panes of glass old and rippling like water. Through this window I could see the roof of the

VERA KELLY IS NOT A MYSTERY

neighboring building, where a woman came once a day with a basket of laundry to hang up, and part of a synagogue at the end of the block. There was a tiny room in front of the office that the landlord called a “vestibule,” which fit one stuffed chair, an end table, and a lamp, and would have to be good enough for a waiting room. The landlord suggested that with some modifications, this outer room could be where my “girl” would sit. I said I would have to be my own girl. He asked what my business was. “Consulting,” I said.

By this time, my last check from the television station had arrived by mail, as they said it would, and I cashed it all out to put ads in the *Post* and the *Times*, paying for six weeks up front.

PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS
SURVEILLANCE—INQUIRIES OF ALL KINDS

Discreet, professional service
Trained in counterintelligence
English, Spanish & French

Underneath, the number of my telephone answering service, which had instructions to put calls through during the hours I would be in the office. When I first saw the ad printed, the absurdity of the whole idea hit me, but then it ebbed. It was insane to imagine that anyone would hire a woman private investigator, but it was also insane to imagine that any of the other things that had happened to me in the last five years might happen. And things were changing; or at any rate, it looked like they might. Girls only a few years younger than I was seemed

louder, freer, in the streets and on the trains. I had read about Haight-Ashbury that summer, and had recoiled. I knew I was supposed to see freedom in the whole enterprise, but I didn't; I saw a whole lot of people acting like children, as if childhood weren't a state of awful helplessness and dependence.

Once the ads were running, I started spending my days in the office. Easier there than at home. There was work to do, anyway. I gave the wood floor a deep scrubbing, which it obviously hadn't had in a long time, and twisted out the window to clean the outside of the glass. I washed the walls and went around all the gaps and joints of the desk with a pin, levering out the dirt. I brought in a radio so it wouldn't be so quiet. On the third day I got a crank call, and on the fourth day, an obscene one. It was still hot in the mornings; the leaves of a young sycamore just visible over the wall of the synagogue had given up and turned brown. On the fifth day a man with a Long Island accent called and asked me to find out why his wife had left him.

"Your wife?"

"She took the car," he said.

"She stole your car?"

"It's her name on the title. She had it for shopping and summer weekends. Down at the beach, you know." The voice tensed. "But I made the payments."

"How long has she been gone?"

"Six weeks."

"Were you having any troubles? In the marriage?"

"I'd rather tell it to the investigator, miss."

I put my fingers to my temple and closed my eyes. "I'm the investigator, sir."

There was a short laugh and then a pause. “Well,” he said. “No, you’re joking.”

“I’m not. As the advertisement says, I’m trained in counter—”

The line clicked off. I set the phone in the cradle and took a short walk out of the office, down the hall to the service elevator at the back, and then back to the office again. I decided to draw no conclusions whatsoever from what had just happened. I took up my post at the desk again, then changed my mind, went down to the street for a cup of coffee from a cart and the *Daily News*, and came back up. The next day went by the same way. I was becoming very well versed in current events. Then the day after that, and the day after that. Just after I got home in the evening, my next-door neighbor called to say that squirrels were coming from my roof onto his roof and chewing holes into his attic. I told him I didn’t know what I could do about it, since the squirrels hadn’t asked me for an easement and my efforts to broker a deal with them regarding my own attic had been unsuccessful. He told me that he considered me a bad neighbor, principally because of my weak character, which was creating a squirrel problem that would, in time, stretch up and down the block and doom the neighborhood. I hung up the phone, expressing my regrets and good wishes. I slept badly, thinking about my roof, which had a new leak despite having been fixed just after I bought the house.

The following week, when I received another call from a man asking me to find out why his wife had left him, I explained that he had been lucky to call the office on this particular day because I was a moonlighter who specialized in investigations of ladies, and quoted him an ambitious rate. He accepted my

ROSALIE KNECHT

reasoning and even sounded relieved to put the matter in my hands. "She says she's been living with her sister in Astoria," he said. "But I don't believe it. She's never in when I call. I think she's living someplace else with some man."

So I did it: I spent two weeks in my Chevrolet staking out a two-bedroom walk-up in Astoria. The boredom gave rise to strange thoughts, hallucinatory interludes in which I could play out entire alternate lives. When something startled me—a horn blowing, or a child bouncing off the passenger door of my car in pursuit of a rubber ball—I sometimes couldn't remember anything about the previous ten or thirty minutes. On my second Sunday in the car, a break: the wife paid a visit to the apartment, and I followed her when she left, hanging back a block. She led me to a behemoth apartment building by Corona Park, and I took up my station there for another week, during which time I witnessed her entering the premises with a bearded young man on no fewer than three occasions. I took photos and submitted them to my client. He cried, and then paid my invoice, gathered his hat and rain jacket, and went out desolately into a wet afternoon.

Thoughts of Jane and the other woman were like wasps. I left early that day.