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A Stranger is Watching

Mary Higgins Clark

From Chapter One

"Do you believe that the circumstances in Ronald Thompson's case, the fact that he committed the murder only days after his seventeenth birthday, making him barely eligible for adult punishment, should have been considered?" (Tom) Brokaw (of the Today Show) asked quickly.

Steve said, "As you know, I will not comment specifically on the Thompson case. It would be entirely inappropriate."

"I understand your concern, Mr. Peterson," the interviewer said, "but you had taken your position on this issue several years before..." He paused, then continued quietly, "before Ronald Thompson murdered your wife."

Ronald Thompson murdered your wife. The starkness of the words still surprised Steve. After two and a half years, he could still feel the sense of shock and outrage that Nina had died that way, her life snuffed out by the intruder who came into their home, by the hands that had relentlessly twisted her scarf around her throat.

Trying to blot the image from his mind, he looked directly ahead. "At one time, I had hoped that the ban on executions in our country might become a permanent one. But as you point out, long before the tragedy in my own family, I had come to the conclusion that if we were to preserve the most fundamental right of human beings...freedom to come and go without fear, freedom to feel sanctuary in our homes, we had to stop the perpetrators of violence. Unfortunately the only way to stop potential murderers seems to be to threaten them with the same harsh judgment they mete out to their victims. And since the first execution was carried out two years ago, the number of murders has dropped dramatically in major cities across the country."

Sharon leaned forward. "You make it sound so reasonable," she cried. "Don't you realize that forty-five percent of murders are committed by people under 25 years of age, many of whom have tragic family backgrounds and a history of instability?"

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The solitary viewer in Biltmore's room 932 took his eyes from Steve Peterson and studied the girl thoughtfully. This was the writer Steve was getting serious about. She wasn't at all like his wife. She was obviously taller and had the slender body of someone who might be athletic. His wife had been small and doll-like with rounded breasts and jet black hair that curled around her forehead and ears when she turned her head.

Sharon Martin's eyes reminded him of the color of the ocean that day he'd driven down to the beach last summer. He'd heard that Jones Beach was a good place to meet girls but it hadn't worked out. The one he'd started to fool with in the water had called "Bob!" and a minute later this guy had been beside him, asking what his problem was. So he'd moved his blanket and just stared out at the ocean, watching the changing colors. Green. That was it. Green mixed with blue and churning. He liked eyes that color.

What was Steve saying? Oh yes, he'd said something about feeling sorry for the victims, not their murderers, "for people incapable of defending themselves."

"My sympathies are with them too," Sharon cried "But it's not either/or. Don't you see that life imprisonment would be punishment enough for the Ronald Thompsons of this world?" She forgot Tom Brokaw, forgot the television cameras as once again she tried to convince Steve. "How can you...who are so compassionate...who value life so much...want to play God?" she asked. "How can anyone presume to play God?"

It was an argument that began and ended the same way as it had that first time six months ago when they'd met on this program. Finally Tom Brokaw said, "Our time is running out. Can we sum up by saying that notwithstanding the public demonstrations, prison riots and student rallys that are regularly occurring all over the country, you still believe, Mr. Peterson, that the sharp drop in random murder justifies execution?"

"I believe in the moral right...the duty...of society to protect itself, and of the government to protect the sacred liberty of its citizens," Steve said.

"Sharon Martin?" Brokaw turned quickly to her. "I believe that the death penalty is senseless and brutalizing. I believe that we can make the home and streets safe by removing violent offenders and punishing them with swift, sure sentences, by voting for the bond issues that will build the necessary correctional institutions and will pay the people who staff them. I believe that it is our reverence for life, all life, that is the final test of us as individuals and as a society."

Tom Brokaw said hurriedly, "Sharon Martin, Steven Peterson, thank you for being with us on Today. I'll be back after this message..."

The television set in room 932 of the Biltmore was snapped off. For a long time the muscular, thick-chested man in the green-plaid suit sat staring straight ahead at the darkened screen. Once again he reviewed his plan, the plan that began with putting the pictures and the suitcase in the secret room in Grand Central Station and would

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end with bringing Steve Peterson's son Neil there tonight. But now he had to decide. Sharon Martin was going to be at Steve's house this evening. She would be minding Neil until Steve got home.

He'd planned simply to eliminate her there.

But should he? She was so beautiful.

He thought of those eyes, the color of the ocean, churning, caring.

It seemed to him that when she looked directly into the camera she had been looking at him. It seemed as though she wanted him to come for her.

Maybe she loved him.

If she didn't it would be easy to get rid of her.

He'd just leave her in the room in Grand Central with the child on Wednesday morning.

Then at 11:30 when the bomb went off, she, too, would be blown to bits.

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