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The Dud Avocado

Written by Elaine Dundy

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THE DUD AVOCADO

Elaine Dundy



Virago

VIRAGO

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PART ONE

"I want you to meet Miss Gorce, she's in the embalming game."
—James Thurber (*Men, Women, and Dogs*)

CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS A hot, peaceful, optimistic sort of day in September. It was around eleven in the morning, I remember, and I was drifting down the Boulevard St. Michel, thoughts rising in my head like little puffs of smoke, when suddenly a voice bellowed into my ear: "Sally Jay Gorce! What the hell? Well, for Christ's sake, can this really be our own little Sally Jay Gorce?" I felt a hand ruffling my hair and I swung around, furious at being so rudely awakened.

Who should be standing there in front of me, in what I immediately spotted as the Left Bank uniform of the day, dark wool shirt and a pair of old Army suntans, but my old friend Larry Keevil. He was staring down at me with some alarm.

I said hello to him and added that he had frightened me, to cover any bad-tempered expression that might have been lingering on my face, but he just kept on staring dumbly at me.

"What *have* you been up to since . . . since . . . when the hell *was* it that I last saw you?" he asked finally.

Curiously enough I remembered exactly.

"It was just a week after I got here. The middle of June."

He kept on looking at me, or rather he kept on looking over me in that surprised way, and then he shook his head and said, "Christ, Gorce, can it only be three short months?" Then he grinned. "You've really flung yourself into this, haven't you?"

In a way it was exactly what I had been thinking, too, and I was on the point of saying, "Into what?", very innocently, you know, so that he could tell me how different I was, how much I'd changed and so forth, but all at once something

stopped me. I knew I would have died rather than hear his reply.

So instead I said, "Ah well, don't we all?" which was my stock phrase when I couldn't think of anything else to say. There was a pause and then he asked me how I was and I said fine how was *he*, and he said fine, and I asked him what he was doing, and he said it would take too long to tell.

It was then we both noticed we were standing right across the street from the Café Dupont, the one near the Sorbonne.

"Shall we have a quick drink?" I heard him ask, needlessly, for I was already halfway across the street in that direction.

The café was very crowded and the only place we could find was on the very edge of the pavement. We just managed to squeeze under the shade of the shade of the awning. A waiter came and took our order. Larry leant back into the hum and buzz and brouhaha and smiled lazily. Suddenly, without quite knowing why, I found I was very glad to have run into him. And this was odd, because two Americans re-encountering each other after a certain time in a foreign land are supposed to clamber up their nearest lamp-posts and wait tremblingly for it all to blow over. Especially me. I'd made a vow when I got over here never to *speak* to anyone I'd ever known before. Yet here we were, two Americans who hadn't really seen each other for years; here was someone from 'home' who knew me *when*, of you like, and, instead of shambling back into the bushes like a startled rhino, I was absolutely thrilled at the whole idea.

"I like it here, don't you?" said Larry, indicating the café with a turn of his head.

I had to admit I'd never been there before.

He smiled quizzically. "You should come more often," he said. "It's practically the only non-tourist trap to survive on the Left Bank. It's *real*," he added.

Real, I thought . . . whatever that meant. I looked at the Sorbonne students surging around us, the tables fairly rocking under their pounding fists and thumping elbows. The whole vast panoramic carpet seemed to be woven out of old boots, checkered wool and wild, fuzzy hair. I don't suppose there

is anything on earth to compare with a French student café in the late morning. You couldn't possibly reproduce the same numbers, noise, and intensity anywhere else without producing a riot as well. It really was the most colourful café I'd ever been in. As a matter of fact, the most *coloured* too; there was an especially large number of Singalese, Arab and African students, along with those from every other country.

I suppose Larry's 'reality' in this case was based on the café's internationality. But perhaps all cafés near a leading University have that authentic international atmosphere. At the table closest to us sat an ordinary-looking young girl with lank yellow hair and a grey-haired bespectacled middle-aged man. They had been conversing fiercely but quietly for some time now in a language I was not even able to *identify*.

All at once I knew that I liked this place, too.

Jammed in on all sides, with the goodish Tower of Babel working itself up to a frenzy around me, I felt safe and anonymous and, most of all, thankful we were going to be spared those devastating and shattering revelations one was always being treated to at the more English-speaking cafés like the Flore.

And, as I said, I was very glad to have run into Larry.

We talked a little about the various cafés and he explained carefully to me which were the tourist traps and which weren't. Glancing down at my Pernod, I discovered to my astonishment that I'd already finished it. Time was whizzing past.

I felt terribly excited.

"White smoke," said Larry clicking his tongue disapprovingly at my second Pernod. His hand twirled around the stem of his own virtuous glass of St. Raphael. "You keep that up," he said, tapping my glass, "and it'll blow your head off—which may be a good thing at that. Why pink?" he asked, studying my new coiffure carefully. "Why not green?"

As a matter of fact I'd had my hair dyed a marvellous shade of pale red so popular with Parisian tarts that season.

It was the first direct remark he made about the New Me and it was hardly encouraging.

Slowly his eyes left my hair and travelled downwards. This time he really took in my outfit and then that Look that I'm always encountering; that special one composed in equal parts of amusement, astonishment and horror came over his face.

I am not a moron and I can generally guess what causes this look. The trouble is, it's always something different.

I squirmed uncomfortably, feeling his eyes bearing down on my bare shoulders and breasts.

"What the hell are you doing in the middle of the morning with an *evening* dress on?" he asked me finally.

"Sorry about that," I said quickly, "but it's all I've got to wear. My laundry hasn't come back yet."

He nodded, fascinated.

"I thought if I wore this red leather belt with it people wouldn't actually notice. Especially since it's such a warm day. I mean these teintureries make it so difficult for you to get your laundry to them in the first place, don't they, closing up like that from noon till three? I mean, my gosh, it's the only time I'm up and around over here—don't you think?"

"Oh sure, *sure*," said Larry, and murmured, "Jesus" under his breath. Then he smiled forgivingly. "Ah well, you're young, you're new, you'll learn, Gorce." A wise nod of the head. "I know your type all right."

"My type?" I wondered. "My type of what?"

"Of tourist, of course."

I gasped and then smiled cunningly to myself. Tourist indeed! Ho-ho! That was the last thing I could be called—did he but know.

"Tell me about this," I said. "You seem to have tourists on the brain."

He crossed his legs and pulled out of his shirt-pocket a crumbled pack of cigarettes as du pays as possible—sort of Gauloises Nothings—offered one to me, took one himself, lit them both and then settled back with pleasure. This was obviously one of his favourite subjects.

"Basically," he began, "the tourist can be divided into two

categories. The Organized—the Disorganized. Under the Organized you find two distinct types : first, the Eager-Beaver-Culture-Vulture with the list ten yards long, who *just* manages to get it all crossed off before she collapses of aesthetic indigestion each night and has to be carried back to her hotel; and second, the cool suave Sophisticate who comes gliding over gracefully, calmly, and indifferently. But don't be fooled by the indifference. This babe is determined to maintain her incorruptible standards of cleanliness and efficiency if the entire staff of her hotel dies trying. She belongs to the take-your-own-toilet-paper set. Stuffs her suitcases full of nylon, Kleenex, soapflakes, and D.D.T. bombs. Immediately learns the rules of the country. (I mean what time the shops open and close, and how much to tip the waiter.) Can pack for a week-end in a small jewel-case and a large handbag and still have enough room for her own soap and washrag. Finds the hairdresser who speaks English, the restaurant who knows how she likes her steak, and the first foreign word she makes absolutely sure of pronouncing correctly is the one for drugstore. After that she's all set and the world is her ash-tray. If she's got enough money she's got no trouble at all. On the whole, I rather like her."

So far so good, I told myself. They neither one had the slightest, smallest, remotest connection with me. Then a thought caught me sharply.

"And the Disorganized?" I asked rather nervously.

"The Disorganized?" He considered me carefully for a moment, narrowing his eyes.

"Your cigarette's gone out," he said finally. "You have to *smoke* this kind, you know, they won't smoke themselves." He lit it for me again and blew out the match without once taking his eyes off my décolletage, which was slipping quite badly. I gave it a tug and he resumed the discourse.

"Yes. The Disorganized. They get split into two groups as well. First of all the Sly One. The idea is to see Europe casually, you know, sort of vaguely, out of the corner of the eye. All Baedekers and Michelins and museum catalogues immediately discarded as too boring and too corny. Who

wants to see a pile of old stones anyway? The general 'feel' of the country is what she's after. It's even a struggle to get her to look at a map of the city she's in so she'll know where the hell she is, and actually it's a useless one since this type is constitutionally incapable of reading a map and has no sense of direction to begin with. But, as I say, she's the sly one—the 'Oh, look, that's the Louvre over there, isn't it? I think I'll drop in for a second. I'm rather hot. We'd better get out of the sun anyway . . .' or 'Tuileries did you say? That sure strikes a bell. Aren't those flowers pretty over there? Now haven't I heard something about it in connection with the—what was it—French Revolution? Oh yes, *of course* that's it. Thank you, hon.' "

I laughed—a jolly laugh—to show I was with him.

"The funny thing," he continued, "is, scratch the sly one and out comes the *real* fanatic, and what begins with 'Gosh, I can never remember whether Romanesque was *before* or *after* Gothic' leads to secret pamphlet-readings and stained-glass studyings, and ends up in wild aesthetic discussions of the relative values of the two towers at Chartres. Then all restraint is thrown to the wind and anything really *old* enough is greeted with animal cries of anguish at its beauty. In the final stage small discriminating lists appear about her person—but they only contain, you may be damn sure, the good, the pure and the truly worthwhile."

Larry paused, took a small, discriminating sip of his St. Raphael, and puffed happily away at his cigarette.

I swallowed the last of my Pernod, folded my arms seductively on the sticky table and took a long pull on my own French cigarette. It had gone out, of course. I hid it from Larry but he hadn't noticed. He was lost in reverie.

Blushingly I recalled a night not so long before when I had suddenly fallen in love with the Place de Furstenberg in the moonlight. I had actually—Oh Lord—I had *actually* kissed one of the stones at the fountain, I remembered, flung my shoes off, and executed a crazy drunken dance.

The September sun was blazing down on us and the second Pernod was beginning to have a pleasant soporific effect on

me. A couple of street arabs came up and listlessly began to try selling us silver jewellery and rugs. After a while they drifted away. I began studying Larry closely. The mat of auburn hair curling to his skull, the grey-green eyes now so blank and far away, the delicate scar running down the pale skin of his forehead, the well-shaped nose covered with a faint spray of freckles, and his large mouth so gently curved, all contributed to give his face, especially in repose, a look of sappy sweetness that was sharply at odds with—and yet at the same time enhanced—his tough, wise-guy manner. Maybe because I had been out very late the night before and was not able to put up my usual resistance, but it seemed to me, sitting there with the sound of his voice dying in my ears, that I could fall in love with him.

And then, as unexpected as a hidden step, I felt myself actually *stumble* and *fall*. And there it was, I *was* in love with him! As simple as that.

He was the first real person I'd ever been in love with. I couldn't get over it. What I was trying to figure out was why I had never been in love with him *before*. I mean I'd had plenty of chance to. I'd seen him almost daily that summer in Maine two years ago when we were both in a Summer Stock company. I had decided to be an actress at the time. Even though we were about the same age, he was already a full-fledged Equity member and I had been a mere apprentice. He was always rather nice to me in his insolent way, but there was also, I now remembered with a passing pang, an utterly ravishing girl, a model, the absolute epitome of glamour, called Lila. She used to come up at week-ends to see him.

Then I heard from someone that he'd quit college the next winter and gone abroad to become a genius. I'd met him again when I first landed in Paris. He'd been very nice, bought me a drink, taken down my telephone number and never called me.

You're a dead duck now, I told myself, as I relaxed back into my coma. You're gone. I looked at him smiling idly. I

tried to imagine what was going on in his mind. I gave up and I thought of his tourists.

I had no trouble imagining the girl with all the Kleenex and Tampax or whatever. Cool, blonde and slender, she was only too easy to picture, but the thought of all that unruffled poise somehow had the opposite effect on my own—so I drove her away and began concentrating on the last one. What did he call her? The sly one. Here, happily, in my pleasantly drowsy state, I was able to dress up a little grey furry mouse with tail and whiskers in a black bombazine coat and bonnet. She was clutching a small discriminating list in her white-gloved claws and uttering animal squeals of anguish at the beauty of—what? The Crazy Horse Saloon? Oh dear, I really was too ignorant and too lazy to know what was on that list . . . something old . . . those Caves, I thought idly, the word conjuring up no picture whatever. Those Caves *anyway*, I persevered, in . . . Southern France? No, Spain: someplace with an A. Ha! Altamira, that's it. Yes, the Caves, I decided, framing the mouse in the doorway, or rather Caveway. Yes. They're very old . . . very, very old.

"The last type," said Larry, his voice suddenly snapping me out of my trance, his green eyes fixing me with a significant glare that made my heart lurch, "the last type is the Wild Cat. The I-am-a-Fugitive-from-the-Convent-of-the-Sacred-Heart. Not that it's ever really the case. Just seems so from the violence of the reaction. Anyhow it's her first time free and her first time across and, by golly, she goes native in a way the natives never had the stamina to go. Some people think it's those stand-up toilets they have here—you know, the ones with the iron footprints you're supposed to straddle. After the shock of that kind of plumbing something snaps in the American girl and she's off. The desire to bathe somehow gets lost. The hell with all that, she figures. Then weird haircuts, weird hair-colours, weird clothes. Then comes drink and down, down, down. Dancing in the streets all night, braying at the moon, and waking up in a different bed each morning. Yep," he polished off his St. Raphael with a judicious smack of his lips, "that's the lot. Hmm," a long

studying glance, "now *you*, I'd say, you are going to be a combination of the last two types."

"Why you utter bastard," I gasped. "That's a dirty lie," I heard myself saying, the phrase dug up from heaven knows what depths of my childhood. Then in an effort to regain my dignity: "*Really*, of all the stupefyingly inaccurate accusations. It's a pretty safe bet I bathe about sixty times as often as *you*. . ." He burst out laughing. To accuse the American male of not bathing in Paris is merely to flatter him.

The Pernod was having quite a different effect on me now. I was wide-awake, and sputtering, and so angry I could almost feel the steam rising from my shoulders.

He put his hand over mine, the one with the dead cigarette crumbled in it, and gave me a wonderful smile. "Easy, child, easy. I'm only teasing you. Don't think I *disapprove* for Christ's sake. Live it up, I say. Don't say no to life, Gorce, you're only young once."

We were on last name terms, Keevil and I.

"I'm finding your Grand Old Man just as hard to take as your Scientific Researcher," I said as nastily as I could, and withdrew my hand.

"I like you, Gorce," he said. "I mean it. Had my eye on you that summer. High-spirited." He laughed but at the same time I knew by the way his motor had started up (you could actually *see* the engine chugging through his body) and the way he was vaguely looking around for a waiter, that the interview, as far as he was concerned, was over. And he was on his way.

"Please order me another Pernod," I said quickly.

Raised eyebrows.

"Oh, for goodness sake, I'm all right. And have one yourself. Please. Let me pay for this round." He was the sort of person whose financial circumstances were impossible to guess at, and the quick cynical look he gave me made me start to apologize, but as he didn't refuse I went on. "Please. I simply must talk to you. I'm in the most awful mess," and I sighed and buried my head in my hands, stalling for time.

He signalled the waiter and ordered another round.

"O.K.," he said. "Let's have it. What's it all about?"

"Give me a minute," I pleaded desperately. "I can't just jump in like that." My thoughts were chasing each other all over the place, but nothing seemed to sort itself out. Advice, I thought. Ask his advice. On love? Finance? Career? Better stick to love, I decided, it's what's on your mind anyway.

And with that my mind went blank.

Only one small irrelevancy finally appeared. "Why are all your tourists *she*?" I finally asked.

"Because all tourists are she," he replied promptly.

"No males at all? Don't be silly."

"Nope. No males at all. The only male tourists—though naturally there are men visitors—you know, men visiting foreign countries," he explained maddeningly, "the only male tourists are the ones loping around after their wives. A tourist is a she all right," he said, finishing it off with a lot of very reminiscent laughter.

"I can see you've made quite a study of them," I snarled scornfully.

"I get around, Gorce, I get around."

And you, I told myself, are just one of the mob.

It was no joke being in love with Larry, I could see that now; it really hit me for the first time. The waiter had brought us fresh drinks and was pouring the water into my Pernod, and ordinarily this would have had quite a cheering effect on me—its changing colour usually reminded me of chemistry-sets and magic potions, but now the cloudy green liquid looked merely poisonous and the strong liquorice smell reminded me of nothing so much as a bottle of Old Grandma's Cough Remedy, hold-your-nose-and-have-a-piece-of-chocolate-quickly-afterwards. I found that the previous drinks had turned icy cold and heavy in my stomach. I felt terribly sober and the inside of my mouth tasted sour. I sighed and picked up the chits. 120 francs.

"It's cheap anyway," I said, giving him the money. I sat staring at the drink, trying to get up enough courage to down it.

"What's eating you, Gorce? Come on, let's have it."

His words rang out like coins in the emptiness and I suddenly noticed how still everything around us had become. The students had stopped surging and gone to lunch; the Arab vendors were asleep in the sun; and the waiters, even as we watched, stopped waiting and began drifting back to their stations where they came to a standstill—or as near a standstill as they ever got—still rocking gently back and forth on their heels: heart-beats of perpetual motion gently rocking back and forth, their napkins fluttering in the breeze.

The sun shone on: the shade of the shade of the awning vanished in the hot, white, shadowless mid-day. In that blaze of heat I was loving Paris as never before.

And there sitting opposite me, stretching himself luxuriously in the sun, his eyes lazily examining his half-empty drink, was Larry, the one I loved the best . . . sensationally uninterested.

All at once I sat bolt upright and let out a yelp.

I suddenly remembered what I was doing in that arrondissement in the first place. I had been in fact on my way to the Sorbonne to meet my lover, who was attending an International Students Conference there for his Embassy. And at that very moment, as if I myself had conjured him (though I supposed I must have unconsciously registered him in the corner of my eye) he came striding along the boulevard large as life: Teddy—Alfredo Ourselli Visconti himself, looking suave and Latin and livid.

I glanced at my watch. Wow! I was just an hour too late. Then, stupidly, I tried to hide my head with my hands. It was too late, of course, and the worst of it was he had also caught me trying to hide. Being a Latin, seeing me there with a young and handsome man, he naturally put two and two together and for once in his life arrived at the right answer about me.

In a panic I knew that he must not sit down with us; if he did, he would stay and Larry would go. And that would be that. There wasn't a moment to be lost. Without explanation, I dashed over to the street-corner to intercept him.

"So I've caught you at last, have I?" he said, in that half-serious half-teasing man-of-the-world voice he always reserved for matters of the heart. Whatever guilt I felt vanished in my exasperation.

"We can't all lead a triple life as successfully as you do," I replied coolly, and saw a really desperate, haggard look come over his face. "He's an old, old friend," I added hastily. "He's brought me news of home. Very important news."

"I see," he said stiffly. "Very well. We must talk of all this tonight. At the Ritz?"

"Yop." He always brought out the succinct in me.

"Shall we say at eleven o'clock then, as usual?"

"Not later?" He was always up to a half an hour late.

"It may be difficult to get away," he said, "but I shall certainly try to be on time if I can."

He looked so pleased I could have killed him.

If I hadn't been in such a hurry to get back to Larry, I would have told him then and there, as I'd been vaguely planning to do for about a week, how hellishly bored I was with all his sophisticated manœuvres. It was partly out of necessity, of course, having both a wife *and* a mistress, as well as myself, that he jammed and juggled his days and nights with arranged and rearranged rendezvous. But that was not the only reason he always turned up so late. There was another one, as I suspected when he formed the habit of meeting me around eleven at the Ritz bar: it was that he simply refused to do anything in a straightforward way. He felt that his unpunctuality increased his mystery and desirability.

The unfortunate thing was that he had reckoned without my naïvety. I was honestly so thrilled at being at the Ritz in the first place that I didn't mind how long I was kept waiting. There were so many marvellous new things to look at and so many marvellous new drinks to experiment with; sazaracs and slings and heaven knows what else, so that at first I never even noticed the passing of time. But then as the novelty wore off and I took to bringing magazines and novels along with me, I noticed how really put out he was when instead

of discovering me ceaselessly scanning the horizon for him, he found me deep in *Paris-Match*.

As I hurriedly said goodbye to Teddy, meekly apologizing for not meeting him at the Sorbonne, and promising to see him at the Ritz that evening, I had a sinister premonition of how embarrassing an homme fatal could be when his charms are no longer fatale to you.

I turned round to find Larry quietly taking in the scene. When he caught my eye he began grinning from ear to ear. I felt my ankles wobble under me.

"Watch out," he shouted as I walked towards him, "you're going to knock over that chair!"

But of course it was too late.

Larry was really enjoying himself now. He laughed and laughed when I returned. "Gorce, oh Gorce," he chortled, neighing like a barnyard in uproar, "if you're his mistress, and I *think* you are, you've skipped a grade, honey." A waggle of his forefinger. "That's not for first-year tourists, that's for the second-year ones, you know."

At this point, I now realize, there were several things I could have done. For instance, I could have nodded sheepishly or good-naturedly, or whatever one does with 'good grace'. I could have said, "Well, there you have me, I guess," and he would have said, "Now never mind, and what was it you wanted to tell me?" and I would have said, "Nothing, forget it" and he would have replied, "Well, cheer up, see you around sometime" and he *would* have, I suppose—sometime. Our Paris, after all, was really very small. And I would have at least been spared one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. No honestly, I don't think *anything* has embarrassed me so much since.

It's crazy but I wonder if all the rest of it—and I mean *all* the rest of it—would have happened if our meeting had ended then and there and in that way. Who knows? But, anyway, seeing myself and the affair with Teddy suddenly through Larry's eyes, and realizing that whatever I had done, however original I had thought of it as being before, I was only remaining strictly within the tourist pattern, and having

Larry *know* this—well, at the time it was too much to bear.

To have an affair with a man, and one's very *first* affair at that, just because he picks you up under rather romantic circumstances on the Champs-Elysées, takes you to the Ritz and things, and above all, because you're impressed with the fact that he has a wife *and* a mistress already, what could be more predictable? Tourist Second-Year Disorganized.

No, dammit, I wasn't going to be stuffed into that category no matter what. Not in Larry's mind anyway.

"Here's my advice to you, and you're old enough to give it to yourself," Larry was saying sagely. "Stay away from married men. I mean it, stay away."

"How *can* you think such things of me? It's not that way at all," I moaned. "We love each other. There's no wife in this at all. How *could* you think such a thing of me? There's something much worse though. A crackpot at the Italian Embassy who's always hated Teddy. Do you know what he's done? He's broken into Teddy's flat and burned some important papers so that Teddy got into the most awful trouble and he's been recalled! He has to leave any day now. God knows if he'll ever be able to straighten this out. It's torture. We can never meet except briefly like you saw us now, and in the open, as if there were nothing to it, for fear of getting that man on to *my* trail. Lord knows how he'd use me against Teddy! All I know is that Teddy is going back to Italy and that I'll probably never see him again." I was getting worked up by then. "And I love him so much, Larry, I really do. What shall I do?" Lies, from beginning to end.

"You poor kid," said Larry. He said it so nicely, so sincerely. I was absolutely staggered by the difference in his tone. I was feeling more than a little sorry for myself at this point, but I was also feeling more than a little elated at the way I had cleared myself of the dreaded tourist charge, at the same time getting rid of Teddy so neatly, or at any rate disposing of him in the near future.

"We've been desperate these last months. We try not to see each other but it's no good. I'll . . . I'll die when he goes."

By now I was really moved. My eyelids stung and tears began to roll slowly down my cheeks.

"Poor kid, poor kid," he kept repeating. How nice Larry was now. Not mocking, not bored, not restless. I looked into his eyes, soft eyes, interested and sympathetic. He gave a short little laugh of encouragement. It stirred me to my roots. I took a long heady swig of Pernod right into the hot molten sun, and brother, that was my undoing.

"Take it easy, take it easy," he was saying. "Everything's going to be all right." He took my hand away from my drink and held it gently in his own. By now I was maybe drunk, I don't know, but in such a state of uncontrolled passion that the mere touch of his hand on mine charged through my body like a thousand volts.

You know how it is. Some people can hack and hack away at you and nothing happens at all and then someone else just touches you lightly on the arm and it happens . . . yes, I mean I came. I mean that's what happened.

I remember looking down at the table and seeing my fingers clinging and curling around his. I remember being quite aware of this but at the same time quite unable to stop myself. Then I put his hand up to my cheek and caressed his knuckles with my mouth. A split second suspended itself into infinity in the air while my heart pounded furiously and I kept kissing and kissing his knuckles. And then it was over.

I jerked my head back sharply. I tried to pull my hand away from his. He held on tightly. His voice was very close to me, mocking and smooth. "Why you little fraud." Very softly, very clearly. "You shabby little fraud. You'll die when he goes, will you? Now how do I know you've been lying?" He was quite simply torturing me.

My eyes dug a hole in the table, unfortunately not large enough to crawl into. "You *don't* know——" I began but the whole thing was too much for me. There was one moment while I counted the seconds and then I resigned myself. With a sigh I forced myself to look at him and he looked back at me hard and down and through and I yielded up without a struggle my badly kept secret.