

CHAPTER ONE

The sharp scream burst out in the night, filling the air with the scent of fear. She woke up scared, shivering and panting, as if she'd just had a nightmare. Nevertheless, the nightmare hadn't even started yet. Turning the light on, she discovered John, her lazy and chubby John, lying next to her, clinging to the blanket covering his chest covered with curly, white hair. His eyes were wide open and horror was on his face.

None of them was able to say or do anything. It was like that scream had paralyzed their minds and bodies, and they were just looking one to the other—big eyes and pale faces. They couldn't imagine—actually, they didn't even want to try their imagination, to understand what that horrible scream, which had spoiled their night, could mean.

After a few more moments of painful silence, John said in a low voice—like he was afraid he'd awake possible ghost lurking in the dark:

“What the hell was that, Doris? Did you hear?”

“Of course, I heard, you, stupid!” she burst out. “Why do you think I'm staring to the walls in the middle of the night? You must go out and see what's going on,” she said hurriedly, her usual determination screeching the man's ears.

He looked at her shocked as if he couldn't believe his ears. Her words stirred a torrent of anger and everything was piling up somewhere in his chest.

“You've given a lot of thought to that, haven't you?” he snapped back bitterly. “Do you think I've got the guts to go out in the night after that?”

For a few seconds, she said nothing but her did the talking for her and let him know everything he'd have wanted to know. It was nothing new there. He'd been aware of her feelings for him for a long time. There'd been years since she had looked at him differently, with warmth and delight.

“Oh, God, you're so pathetic! You're a real pussy!” she exclaimed biting, knowing that merely uttering such a word might make him move. She knew what button to push as over the time, she'd learnt to use everything in her favour.

“This time, you can say whatever you want, love... This time, it won't work,” John replied, dragging his words, as if he had no care in the world. “Please, believe me! I don't care at all for the moment. I won't go out only to make you happy. It sounded as if it'd come out directly from hell, you know it, and, besides, hell and I have nothing in common, you know,” he reminded her of his favourite reply.

“I know, I know, don’t remind me!” she said annoyed. By now, she would know his replies by heart. They had been living together for too long to be anything new left to be said.

“But maybe someone needs some help and we just stay here wasting time and speaking nonsense.”

“If you are so brave, then you should go there,” he stressed out. “But, you must know, I don’t advise you to do it. You’re crazy, I have to tell you.”

“I don’t think so,” she replied, grumpily. One could sense small victory in her voice. She’d sharpened her ears to catch the slightest move. “I hear fast steps outside. I think our neighbour, Mr. Thompson, has woken up too... I think I hear others as well. What are you saying now?” she tried to challenge him.

She imagined he wouldn’t feel too good if he didn’t go out now. Men were like that. They’d take a dare immediately because they’d always try to show they were better and stronger and braver than any other man in the bucket.

“All right, back off!” he snapped. “If he is there, I’ll go too. Now, shut up, back off and let me get dressed,” John replied angrily, cornered by his nagging wife.

He got up and went to the bathroom to take his bathrobe. His gestures were abrupt, full of anger. Then, he went downstairs growling some nasty remarks about his nosey wife, who was still in bed, waiting for news from him. Of course, she didn’t have enough courage to get up and go to look through the window, at least, as she’d always do, he thought.

Opening the front door, he saw light at all the windows in the little street and felt like having stepped out into an unreal world. Not even at Christmas did their street show so much light. Then, he saw three men heading to his yard, speaking one to the other, and when he saw what they were looking at, his blood ran cold.

On his lawn, a body was lying in the light of the moon that had just got out of the clouds. It took him an instant to see the blonde hair and the white dress, which now was completely torn and stained with blood and the green of the grass. The body’s right hand laid in full sight, fingers curved, as if they had been trying to catch something in the air, but there was no drop of life in them to end their movement.

Then, the smell hit him: a little sweet and sour the same time. It was that type of smell one couldn’t forget too easily or too soon. He could bet his last quid in the bank that the scent would last there for days or maybe more.

He suddenly felt dizzy and had the strange feeling that his body had lost substance. Then, nausea hit him, like a fist in his belly, pumping all the air out, leaving his lungs longing for the comfort of a good breath. He could have used it. Instantly, he bent in a weird position and

remained at a perfect angle of ninety degrees. He couldn't get around breathing again although he made serious efforts. He felt his head spinning and making him lose focus. Now he could see everything like through a dense fog: Mr. Thompson was there and he had just bent over the body on the lawn. He was saying something, waving his hand to Mr. Reid, the one who was living in the third house across the road - that Mr. Reid with his weird wife.

Mr. Reid answered something back, and Mr. Dobbs found it quite strange that he couldn't catch any of his words. He couldn't understand them: it was like they made no sense to him.

Then he caught a glimpse of a shadow in the dark, kitty-corner to the house. He felt it like an imperious threat, although he was aware that it was effectively foolish to feel like that because nothing could have happened to him, there, where he was staying, with so many people around. He was far from a young lad with no knowledge about life. He felt sweat running down under the collar of his bathrobe. Fear caught his heart in a strong fist and shivers were running along his spine. A drop of sweat tickled his spine along its way downwards. He had no logical explanation but couldn't control the tremble of his fingers. They got a life of their own.

Lack of air and fear, bare fear, were too much for him to hold it together. He'd not been very brave on his best days, but now he was old and he did not have the advantage of youth's stupidity and ignorance that had kept him on the line in his fresh years. He simply fell on the veranda like a log, in his fall making a loud noise that turned all heads towards him.

Now, everything went black and completely silent around him and an iron fist of pain squeezed his chest. Then long wished peace surrounded him and he welcomed it as if it had been a friend liberating him of fear and the unknown. It was a secure way out although he'd never thought of feeling like that when the day would come for him.

From upstairs, in her bed, Doris had sharpened her ears to catch the slightest sound, and she could hear Mr. Reid saying loudly:

“Oh, I think Mr. Dobbs fainted. We should call his wife too, not only the police. Maybe a doctor or something, I think.”

Mrs. Dobbs started trembling, black thoughts overwhelming her. She felt her heart crumbling and tried to get out of her bed but her legs were shaking and were of not much help for her. She couldn't find her slippers. She couldn't pull herself together sensing that something very bad had happened. She knew John quite well after so many years. He was a little lazy and sometimes too stubborn for his own sake, but she knew well he wasn't a coward or a pussycat, as she'd called him just before he went out. She also knew that he'd never fainted before, however bad the situation would have been. He used to be quite a fellow. He'd never given in and she could rely on him in bad weather. He used to be her realm for years no matter what had come

and there'd been times when things had not been too good. Now, if he had fainted, she realised things looked pretty bad.

She felt something, like a huge burden, touching her heart. It was guilt, strap bare guilt. Hadn't it been for her, her husband wouldn't have gone outside at all but kept lying next to her, in their old bed. He wasn't a curious person, and no one could care less of what was going on in the street or in his neighbours' houses. He was the kind of person that believed in each one's right of privacy and he'd never approved with spying on people next door.

Then, she went downstairs, leaning against the walls, trying to keep her balance. She was shaking badly now unable to control herself, no matter how hard she tried. Something cold had overwhelmed her and nothing could chase away her bleak premonition: the worst had just happened.

Then, she managed to control her wild panic for only a moment and, suddenly, she knew that things wouldn't ever be the same for her. She was sure that something irreparable had happened and that her life was going to change for good.

This thought made her get downstairs as fast as her shaking legs allowed her. When she got into the hall, she saw the front door opening and, for a few seconds, she felt airless watching the slow movement of the door. Only then she heard the steps and saw two men—she didn't recognise them at first, getting inside with her John in their arms. John was listless and she knew that something very bad had happened to him, too, not only to the person that had screamed earlier.

She finally recognized her next door neighbours, Mr. Thompson and Mr. Reid and stared at them motionless and then, after a long while, Mr. Thompson said softly:

“Don't be afraid, Mrs. Dobbs. I think Mr. Dobbs has only fainted, that's all. I only hope he doesn't have a weak heart. What he saw out there is not for a person with a weak heart. Where should we put him? The doctor is on his way. He'll be here in a minute. Mrs. Dobbs?”

He kept talking and talking but she couldn't filter a single word through her mind. She became aware that she'd been watching him speaking, his lips moving on, but, actually, she hadn't heard a word of what he was saying. She shook her head, as if she'd wanted to get rid of the fog around her brain and to capture the sense of the words flowing around.

Mr. Thompson, noticing her befuddlement, repeated slowly, uttering each word:

“Mrs. Dobbs, are you feeling well? Where should we put poor Mr. Dobbs?”

She finally managed to pull herself together and said:

“On the sofa, I think. Yes, on the sofa,” she repeated louder, trying to recover and be her old self again. “I think that this is the best place for him now. Thank you, Mr. Thompson. Have you said the doctor was coming?”

“Yes, Mrs. Dobbs, right now. I’ve asked Mr. Brown to call him here. We’ve called the police too. They’re on their way.”

“What happened, Mr. Thompson?” she asked, somehow reluctantly, as if she hadn’t really wanted to know anything.

And that was strange for Mrs. Dobbs. She was always the first that found out what was going on around. She was the first to know if any neighbour had a row with his wife or with another neighbour or when the Porters’ little Patsy eloped with that good-looking young man, or when the Davidsons were going to divorce.

“You’d better not know, Mrs. Dobbs. It is too awful, I think. Here’s the doctor. I know the sound of his car. I’ll go to bring him inside.”

She sat down on an armchair near the sofa and watched her husband. His face looked weird and his lips had no colour at all. His left arm was still grabbing his bathrobe and seemed stuck there. His right hand was lying on one side of the sofa completely lifeless. She couldn’t hear him breathing and that made her feel uncomfortable. And, then, she knew. The doctor needn’t come. Her husband didn’t need the doctor anymore. He was gone.

She couldn’t move. She was simply staring at him and there was only one thought in her mind: “He’s dead! Oh, God, he’s dead!” The thought kept coming up like a mantra; she couldn’t stop hearing it louder and louder in her head. Then, she fell like a puppet whose strings had been suddenly cut and, nothing bothered her anymore. There was only the dark; even the pain had hidden somewhere inside.

All the people in the street gathered in front of the Dobbs’ house as always people do when they sense death and despair and they cannot help but take a part in that. They saw the doctor coming and getting into the house and, here and there, a rumour could be heard. People were whispering. Words spread out. They were saying that poor Mr. Dobbs had had a heart attack and that, probably, he had already been dead before the nice doctor could come.

Nevertheless, they couldn’t imagine why his wife hadn’t come out and why they hadn’t heard a thing of her. That was something strange. They knew very well she was a too nose-y woman to stay inside when something like that was going on in the street and especially in her own yard. It was even unthinkable.

Then, they heard the sirens of the police cars approaching the lane. They immediately shut up and watched the cars driving up Nightingale Street. They put more space between them and the Dobbs' yard, as if they wanted to take distance and show that they were not involved in the mess on their lawn. It was their lawn and their mess.

The cars stopped in front of the Dobbs' house and some people came out of the cars and headed to the lawn. Some were in a police uniform but others weren't. People watched curiously at those carrying some big black cases in their hands. All of them seem preoccupied even when they swept the public with a quick look.

All of them seemed to start talking almost the same time. One of the policemen seemed to notice the crowd in the street and shouted to another:

"James, ask them for their names and addresses and send them home. We'll talk to them later. Now I want more space here and no on-lookers in front of the house. There've been too many by here already, and, probably, they've spoilt the evidence."

"Yes, sir!" said the young man and headed to the people in the street taking a little black book out of his pocket. He seemed confident in his ability of having the job done and the hard voice of his superior didn't seem to bother him at all.

He went to each of them to ask for their names and addresses, and if they'd seen anything before the murder happened but no one saw anything. They had only heard an inhuman scream and woken up. Then, they'd gone out and seen that person lying on the lawn exactly in the same position. They couldn't see the face of the body because Mr. Thompson had told them that they shouldn't move the body until the police came. They also told James about poor Mr. Dobbs, who'd fainted in front of the house and then they left, somehow reluctantly, and went to their homes.

James came back to the other policemen and told everything to his boss, the very man who'd sent him to ask questions to the people. This one listened to him and then replied:

"Ok, James. Good job! Now go and see what's with that Mr. Dobbs. I think I've just seen two men getting into his house. I want to talk to him and to them, too."

James nodded and went to the Dobbs' front door. He went inside without knocking on the door because the door was already ajar. He heard some people whispering somewhere on the right and headed there, following their voices. When he got into the room, he saw the doctor checking the pulse of a woman, not young but not too old either. She was somewhere between forty or fifty. Nevertheless, he knew he could be wrong about her age as she was extremely pale and listless. He knocked on the door and said:

"Good evening! I'm sorry to disturb you. I'm Sergeant James and I've been sent here to see Mr. Dobbs".

That very moment, as if that was the signal she really needed, the woman burst into tears. The other two men were shocked for one moment, and then, one of them, apparently the doctor, said watching her:

“Finally, she cries. It’s better for her. She had to do it sooner or later,” he also commented, and then turned to the sergeant and said: “I’m sorry, Sergeant, but Mr. Dobbs died earlier. He had a massive heart attack and I couldn’t do anything for him. I think the shock was too much for him.”

“I see,” James nodded, although he was wondering why the shock had been so devastating, and then continued: “All right, then. I leave you now, but sir, when you’ve finished here, we must talk to you. And to you,” he said to Mr. Thompson turning to him. “Who are you, sir?”

“I’m Thompson. I’m Daniel Thompson.”

“Oh, I see. You’re the one who told the others not to touch the body. They told me so.”

“Indeed, sir! I’ve been in the Navy for some while before and I know something about such things. I’ll come at once. I must only finish talking to good Dr. Connolly. Is that all right?”

“No rush, sir, because we still have some things to solve outside now,” James said and then left the room.

He went outside and saw his boss, Chief Inspector McNamara, talking with one of the forensics. He headed to him, waited for him to finish and then said:

“I’m sorry, sir, but Mr. Dobbs died. He has just had a massive heart attack. His wife is in shock right now and I don’t think we could talk to her. However, Mr. Thompson will come out with the doctor, sir, and we can talk to them!”

“Oh, damn it! Rotten bad luck! He must’ve seen something if he died so suddenly. We’ll see,” he said in a low voice, “we’ll see.”

Thoughtfully, he turned to the older man next to him:

“So, doctor, what do you say?”

“Not very much now, but I can say she had her throat cut and she was stabbed a few times before. She didn’t die easily. I can’t say for sure right now, but she died within a period between an hour and only a few minutes ago, maybe a quarter of an hour, something like that. Before having her throat cut, she was beaten up badly, for a few days. You see, the bruises on her body have different age. Their colour doesn’t seem the same. Her face is beyond any recognition, I’m afraid. You have to identify her differently. I’ll tell you more later. I have to perform her autopsy first.”

“All right, David,” the man replied understandingly.

“However, if we consider the phone call we got, people heard that terrible scream they told us about only fifteen minutes before, so we may presume that she died then,” Chief-Inspector McNamara said. “James, go and see if she has any ID in her purse. I think I saw her purse on the ground there.”

James took the purse from the ground and looked inside. He found the ID and said:

“It’s Patsy Porter, sir. She was quite young, I’m afraid. She was only sixteen and was living right on this street, sir,” he continued, befuddled.

“Good, James. We should go and see her family this morning and tell them the sad news. We’ll talk to them later. Anyway, they must come and identify the body at the morgue tomorrow during the day”.

McNamara made a sign to the two men waiting near a stretcher with a plastic bag in their hand.

“You may take her now.”

The body was taken from the lawn and carried to the ambulance in the black plastic bag. The forensic techs started searching the place and gathered what little evidence they could find in the area. They couldn’t find the weapon used to kill her, but they didn’t hope to find it, either. It would have been too nice to be true. Afterwards they left.

Peace descended over the little street again, but, this time, silence wasn’t a comfort and people didn’t feel safe anymore. They’d known such things happened in other places, but they had nothing similar so close to their house. Suddenly, their peace seemed to have been broken and they couldn’t bring it back anymore, no matter what. It seemed hopeless to think about it now. Therefore, they started thinking about their own lives and tried to send the story they had witnessed a few moments earlier somewhere deep in their mind.

Only Mrs. Dobbs remained watching out through the window in the night, trying to see what could have made her husband die. She’d asked to be left alone, saying she’d be all right and she’d manage. She didn’t feel any curiosity towards what was going on in the street, but she couldn’t stop thinking that she had to find the thing that killed her husband.

At the same time, she felt so lonely that she couldn’t bear it. She felt emptied and deserted. She hadn’t been in love with her husband anymore; that was true. Too much time had passed, and their life had been too dull for the two of them. However, she’d cared of him and she kept caring of him, even if he wasn’t there anymore.

She couldn't stop thinking that they were meant to be together, in a way, and they'd had a good life together, even though they were in a sort of rut after twenty years of marriage.

She knew he was at the morgue now and she couldn't stop shivering thinking of the cold table he was lying on. The loss was deep and her insecurity made it deeper. Then, there was also guilt. She was the one having sent him to see what was going on in the street. Moreover, she hadn't even known that his heart was weak. She was so selfish that she hadn't paid attention to any of his complaints about his health, and now it was too late to do anything about that or to remember what he used to say.

She kept looking into the night outside and had the feeling she saw someone crossing the lawn. The person had a flashlight and seemed to look for something fallen on the ground. She didn't know who the person was and she didn't even think that she could be in danger because the light in the room was projecting her image in the dark. She presumed that police were looking for evidence on the ground and nothing more.

However, the person in the shadow saw her looking into the yard and knew very well how much she loved to gossip. She wasn't a person to keep her mouth shut. In a rush, the shadow made a decision and took a detour by going to the Dobbs' the back door. He tried to open it slowly, without any noise. He wasn't heard. It was done.

CHAPTER TWO

It was almost ten o'clock in the morning when McNamara, together with James, came back on Nightingale Street to ask questions about the murder. First, they went directly to the Porters, and knocked on their door. Waiting—waiting seemed such a huge part of their lives that they didn't even bother to notice it anymore—they heard some hurried steps on the stairs and then, the voice of a woman yelling:

“One moment, please. I'll come at once!”

After a few seconds, the door opened. The woman in the door, looking at them inquiringly, was short and a little plump. Her face wore signs of acute tiredness and seemed strangely old: she looked anywhere between forty and sixty.

“Yes. Who are you, please?” she asked perplex to see some unknown people at her door in the morning. They didn't seem to be salesmen or those marketing people—the ones making those seemingly pointless studies. She felt a bit awkward because she'd opened the door but she'd expected to see her friend, Mrs. Brown.

“We're with the police, ma'am. Here are our badges”, said the tall one showing her his badge. “I'm Chief Inspector McNamara and this is Sergeant James. May we come in and talk with you, please?”

She let them inside, bending her head, but said nothing. She only stepped aside, her heart tight with a bad feeling. She had tried hard to chase away the words she'd heard the night before about a girl lying dead in the Dobbs' yard but they'd kept haunting her over and over.

The previous night, she'd not gone out because she'd felt alone and had been quite afraid, despite having seen her neighbours out when she found the courage to look out of the window. Moreover, she couldn't stand such a show. She never could. Even when she saw an accident on the road, she used to turn her head. Nausea would have hit her and kept being present for the entire day otherwise.

She led them into a living room that seemed to have seen better days. She said nothing at all, and, with a trembling hand, she showed them the sofa to sit down.

The policemen sat down and McNamara tried to find a way to tell her that her daughter was probably at the morgue. Experience had taught him that there was no perfect way to tell such a truth and hurt less. Therefore, he tried to steal some time and delay the dreadful moment by asking her some routine questions:

“Where’s Mr. Porter, please?”

He imagined it would’ve been easier for her if she had someone on her side to comfort her after their leaving. He knew that, generally, people would bear such things easier when they were together, regardless what their mutual feelings were.

Hardly had he asked the question, than he noticed with horror that tears filled her eyes. For a few moments he thought she would burst into tears but then she said slowly and a little ashamed, as if she’d had some painful and shameful sin:

“He left, you know. A week after Patsy, my daughter had left, he left too. He was so angry with Patsy and me. Oh, dear! He said I was to blame for the girl’s leaving with that boy.”

“What boy, ma’am? Do you know his name?” McNamara asked hoping he found a lead. So far, he hadn’t found out anything about any possible connections to his victim.

“Oh, yes! He was a good-looking boy with some too smooth talk but he was good. He used to work for Mr. Brown’s pub at the other end of the street. He left the same time with Patsy’s leaving home, I can say. I don’t know where they’re now.”

“Do you know his name?” McNamara asked her again.

“I think, Peter. I’m not sure. I didn’t ask Patsy because I didn’t know she was going out with him until she’d left the note and went away, but that was written on the note. That she was leaving with Peter from the pub on the corner, and then, I was too ashamed to go to the Browns and ask them. However, what’s the matter? Has something happened to my husband or Patsy?”

Her voice was almost bagging for a negative answer although she could read everything in McNamara’s eyes. His eyes were as dark as his shadowed face. She could see that he had something bad to tell her, and her heart tightened to appease the news he was going to break to her.

McNamara, cursing himself for not having sent Jo to deal with Mrs. Porter, tried to find suitable words to tell her in a soft voice that, apparently, her daughter had been found dead in the Dobbs’ yard or they were thinking that, at least, but he couldn’t utter any word, even though he’d done such a thing before and not only one time.

The woman seemed so fragile that he couldn't tell her the truth bluntly in the way he'd have done before in other circumstances. He was afraid she'd fall into pieces in front of him and he didn't feel like gathering the pieces afterwards. He wasn't quite the type of man to do it. Damn it! He didn't even know how to do it.

Looking her straight in her eyes, he was trying hard to decide what to do. The silence was so acute that all of them could feel it scratching their skin and deafening their ears. Finally, when she felt she couldn't bear the silence anymore, Mrs. Porter whispered with the last drop of courage of someone on the edge of the abyss:

“It is bad, isn't it? Which one of them, please? I hope it isn't Patsy!”

She looked up in McNamara's eyes to guess the answer and then she knew. His eyes were telling everything she wanted to know. It was Patsy. Another painful thought penetrated the fog of her mind: she was the one in the Dobbs' yard last night.

For one moment, she had the strange feeling that her heart stopped beating but she was wrong. Her heart kept beating but it was her mind that didn't work anymore. That is why she could not notice the heart beating. For one moment, only one moment, she didn't react at all. She remained stoned with her hands joined in her lap and with a grimace in the corner of her mouth.

McNamara saw recognition in her eyes. He stood up to put his hand on her shoulder comfortingly but surprised by the thought he almost started inside. He'd never had such inclinations. He always tried to remain cold and detached from anything. Only finding answers and convicting killers counted.

The next moment, something broke inside the woman. First, she groaned and then, she burst into tears. Somewhere in her mind, she had a vision of her plans for Patsy, for the day she'd have come back home but that day would never come anymore and the vanity of her plans kicked her in her stomach leaving behind only pain, sharp and devastating pain.

McNamara watched James hoping for help but then he dropped the idea. He said in a voice sounding as if he apologized:

“I'm sorry, Mrs. Porter, but I must ask you to come down to the morgue and identify the body, just to be sure.”

A glimpse of hope nested in her soul but died almost instantly. She knew it was hopeless to think that police had been wrong. She'd already felt it in her soul: her Patsy was gone and left behind only amazement for such a short life.

She'd been feeling an acute loss during the last two weeks, as if the time had stopped and nothing new would have ever come again. She hadn't believed in such things before. She'd

called them crap. But now she was thinking that such presentments really existed. Then, she managed to utter a few words with difficulty:

“When do you want me to come?”

“When you feel able to, but sooner the better... Do you want me to send you a car to take you this afternoon?” McNamara offered to help her.

“No, thank you, but I’ll come by myself. Maybe I’ll ask my friend, Mary, you know, Mary Brown, to fetch me. I don’t think she’d be upset...” She realised she was talking twaddle and gave up.

“All right, Mrs. Porter, then we’ll see you there at noon. Now, I think we’d better leave you alone,” McNamara said, standing up again. He felt a huge rush to go because he didn’t know what he could do for her as he wasn’t the comforting type of person. The regret that he hadn’t sent another one to talk to the mother gnawed at him again.

Mrs. Porter nodded, but said nothing. She stood up with difficulty and led the two policemen to the door. She opened the door and, after their leaving, she eased the door closed without a noise. She leaned against the wall for a few seconds and then she slid down. She remained like that for a while, completely numb, and only then she burst into tears.

“Come on, James. Let’s call on Mrs. Dobbs to see how she is. She might have something to tell us now and she probably want to see someone,” McNamara said.

“Yes, sir, I think this is a good idea,” James agreed following him down the street.

They headed to Mrs. Dobbs’ house and when they got to the door, they knocked, but no answer came from inside. They watched each other questioningly and knocked again. James stepped back a little and looked up towards the first floor.

“Sir, I think something’s odd. It’s ten o’clock and there’s still light on the first floor.”

“Who knows why? Nevertheless, we should go at the back too. She might be there. It’s clear she’s at home if there’s light. Stay here and keep knocking, maybe she hears you. I’m going to see at the back of the house,” McNamara said. “I’ll call you if there’s something.”

He went with big steps to the back of the house watching thoughtfully the lit window James had noticed. Maybe the woman fell asleep, who knows? She might not have woken up yet. Perhaps, she was exhausted after the previous night. He knew he shouldn’t think of the worst as it wasn’t ever a good idea to anticipate such things.

He got to the back of the house and wanted to knock on the door when he noticed the door wasn't closed. He pushed it more and called:

“Mrs. Dobbs, are you at home? We're with the police.”

No answer came from inside. He heard only his own voice bouncing off the walls. Then he went to a side of the house and shouted:

“James, come here. Something's wrong.”

James left the front door and went to the back of the house where he found McNamara waiting for him. McNamara made him a sign and both entered the house slowly, ready to fight back. They looked inside the first room and saw there was the kitchen. It was clean with no sign of recent use. They kept heading onto the corridor and making extremely little noise. They opened the door on the left and saw the pantry. They reached the entrance hall. Another small corridor was lying before them and, on the left, they could see the stairs. Near the stairs, there was a door and on the right another.

James checked the room on the left and saw a small but cozy drawing room. McNamara opened the door on the right of the stairs and looked inside: it was an empty dining room.

They started on the corridor towards a small room on the left. It was the living room and behind the door, there was a trace of blood; however, before anything else, the strong smell of blood hit them strongly. They knew it very well as they'd felt it too many times before.

McNamara looked behind the door and with no word made a sign to James to look too. When he did, James felt a slight nausea in his throat: that happened to him always. He'd already resigned with the thought he wouldn't ever get used to it.

Mrs. Dobbs was lying face down and there was a splash of blood almost completely coagulated under her. Around, there was a small table knocked down and a broken vase with flowers. The water wetted the floor parquet and the flowers had fallen a little aside.

“She seems to have heard something and come to the door. She tried to defend herself when she was grabbed, I think, but she had no chance,” McNamara said. “Probably, because the person was stronger... And of course there was the surprise, too.”

“I call to the headquarters, boss, to send the coroner and the forensics.”

“All right, James. Till they come, let's wait in the front hall. I don't think you want to stay here too much. Neither do I.”

Mrs. Thompson saw the cars crowding in front of the Dobbs' house. After the night before, she was more than curious, so, she went outside with a determination she didn't usually feel and headed to Sergeant James who was speaking to a man dressed in a brown jacket. She'd already seen James the night before when he'd spoken to them.

"Do you mind, sir? What's happened now?"

"You'd better go inside, ma'am. We'll come to you later and explain you everything."

Alice Thompson didn't want to leave, but she couldn't find an excuse or something smart to say. When such a thing happened, she behaved obediently and she didn't know how to refuse an order, even though James made it sound like a mere request. Slightly thoughtful, she headed to her house when she heard someone calling her name:

"Alice, what's going on?" asked her a lady in a summer outfit, although it was quite cool. The summer was on the verge of end and autumn was already in the air and in the colour of leaves.

It was Mary Reid, her neighbour. She'd also heard the police cars, and, after the night before, obviously she was imagining the worse and she wasn't far from truth.

Mary was a woman about thirty, a little plump, swarthy-faced and green-eyed. She'd got married one or two years before, Alice didn't know very well because they'd moved in the area only half a year before, after having bought the house from Mr. MacDonald's grandsons. Poor Mr. MacDonald died one year before.

Alice and Mary made some sort of friends but only because they used to stay at home in the morning, while their husbands went to town for work. They weren't very close, even though the difference in age wasn't too big between them, but the truth was that both of them had completely different interests. They weren't fit to be friends. Alice was the typical and obedient housewife that would take care only of her house and husband, while Mary was nothing of the kind. She was an independent woman and obviously, Mary didn't seem to need or heed her husband's opinions. She even used to do always what she wanted regardless what the poor guy would've said. The quarrels heard from their house were legendary, even though quite entertaining sometimes.

"I don't know, Mary," Alice answered. "I'm afraid, something bad happened at the Dobbs'. I think something happened to Mrs. Dobbs. That young policeman over there didn't want to tell me anything... He sent me away quite fast... He said they were going to talk to us later," Alice replied.

She headed to her house, failing the chance to see the grimace on Mary's face, but suddenly she turned back and said:

“What do you think, Mary, would you come to drink some tea, oh, sorry, I’d better invite you to coffee. I know you don’t like tea, although I don’t understand why.”

“I don’t know, Alice”, Mary said without paying attention the other one’s reproach. She seemed to think a little. “All right, I’ll come. I can’t work now anyway. I’ll think only of what happened there and make a lot of speculations. All right, I’ll come. Thus, I’ll relax a little and then, I’ll be able to work more and even better,” Mary said following Alice.

Hearing about her work, Mrs. Thompson turned up her nose, but Mary didn’t see her. She’d learnt how to ignore Alice’s disapproval. Alice didn’t like to hear of Mary’s work. She didn’t think it was a dignified occupation for a married woman. She was pretty sure that Mary should’ve taken more care of her household, and she shouldn’t have wasted her time with absurd things.

Alice opened the door and invited her in the house. They went into the kitchen, and Mary sat down at the kitchen table while Alice started making coffee for Mary and tea for herself. She seemed willing to say something but she was shrinking from saying it.

Mary was watching her amused. She knew Alice wanted to say something, probably a small wife-to-wife reproach, but she didn’t seem to have the courage to start. As she was bored she decided to push her a little. It wasn’t like she’d pay attention to what Alice would say. She never paid attention to her but now and then she liked to play around.

“Say it, Alice. If you have something to say, say it. You shouldn’t shrink from do it. I couldn’t get mad with you,” Mary said, adding in her mind: “You’re far too stupid and have no spine, so I couldn’t get upset with you.”

Alice tried to find the most appropriate words, and then, she started hesitating:

“You, know Mary, I’ve heard your husband yelling at you yesterday afternoon. You know, I don’t want to advise you how to run your marriage, far from me that. I think everyone should do whatever they want,” she said, thinking exactly the opposite. “But,” she continued, as if she had no two-faced thought, “maybe if you took more care of him and if you did more household jobs... I mean, a wife should always put her husband first and only then the other things that could interest only her.”

“I know you think like this, Alice. But I don’t,” Mary replied decisively, enjoying herself. She liked throwing Alice’s opinions back into her face. “A husband may be here today but tomorrow he might be with another woman, and, believe me my dear, nothing could stop it, if it’s meant to be. You can’t stop it even if you cook the perfect dinner and your house is spotless. But, you see, if Michael leaves, even if tomorrow, I won’t have to ask him money to live and I won’t have to wait for alimony each month, being afraid that he might want to punish me a little or might not care a bit of me to send me the money on time. I’ll go on with my work. I’ll have

that whatever the circumstances. Anyway, no matter what, I couldn't stay all day in the kitchen, cooking his favourite dishes. I'd die with boredom. He knows it, and he also knows he isn't everything in my life. He's not sure on me now, and he might think twice before leaving me. Nevertheless, if he does so, and I don't think it is impossible, I won't be a deserted woman, left with nothing."

"I don't believe what you say," said Alice. "A husband always appreciates when his wife makes small things for him. He appreciates her if she's there for him. If he knows he is the first and the most important thing in her life, then he appreciates and loves his wife more and he won't desert her. I saw it with Mr. Thompson. I know what I say."

"You know nothing, damn it!" Mary said to herself. She knew better what the "wonderful" Mr. Thompson could do, but she couldn't say it to her friend. Anyway, she was sure Alice wouldn't have believed a word, and would've accused her of being envious. Instead, she said:

"Maybe, Alice. Maybe you're right," she repeated even though she didn't think that. "I saw my mother, you must know. She was exactly like you: the typical housewife. She didn't think of anything else but her husband and his pleasures all the time. Then, she was left alone with three children to bring up and no money in her pockets, and even with no friend. Friends were his, not hers. She had to start all over again... If you think about it, she had no training. It was very difficult for her; I can say it to you. The only thing she could do was clean people's houses. That was everything she could do. She didn't know anything else. So, Alice, I'm sorry, but I prefer being exactly in the way I am. If Michael leaves one day, and he might do it, who knows, I won't be left having no job, money or friends. And, by the way, I prefer having my own friends, if you understand me, not his."

Alice couldn't say anything for the moment, but she couldn't stop herself thinking that Mary was wrong. Who knows? Maybe her mother wasn't good enough. If you stopped thinking, usually daughters behaved exactly like their mothers, and considering the way Mary was behaving...

She knew that if you were doing your best and as well as you could, it was impossible to be deserted. Her husband wouldn't do that, unlike Mary's, who would do it. She was sure of that.

Mary was too lazy and didn't do anything for him. She didn't cook but bought everything already cooked from the grocer's. She didn't take care of his clothes and she didn't care if he were too tired when he got back from work. She'd ask him to mow the lawn and do various things in the house. She even heard her telling him to do the cleaning if wanted a neat house and iron his clothes if he wanted ironed clothes. It was inadmissible. A wife shouldn't do that.

Mary, on the other hand, thought Alice was a simpleton, even if she was older. Mary knew, as everyone in the street did, that Mr. Thompson was seeing Ann, the young typist living on the same street.

That's why he was so tired when he came home. And, maybe, who knows, there might have been others, too. Alice wouldn't ask him to do anything in the house and he was like a king in his own castle. He had Alice for cleaning, cooking and taking care of his clothes, and he also had Ann for his soul and for fun. But she couldn't tell that to Alice: it would've been too cruel. The little wife satisfied with her marriage and her husband! However, who knew, maybe, Alice wasn't as satisfied as she pretended to be. God knew!

Alice drank her tea keeping silent, but she couldn't stop herself from feeling bitter thinking that Daniel wasn't as loving as he used to be before, at the beginning, during the first months. Anyway, she couldn't deal with his passion, so, maybe, it was better like that even though she'd have liked to have something else. She felt that something was missing from her life but she couldn't say what. She didn't want to think of that, so she turned her eyes to Mary and asked her:

“What are you writing these days?”

Actually, she wasn't interested in what Mary was writing at all. She didn't read anything else but some magazines and sometimes the newspapers Daniel brought at home in the evening.

“A little story with ghosts,” Mary cheered up. She liked talking about her work because she felt on a safe territory. “The ghost of a man falls in love with a living woman and pursues her everywhere. It is something romantic and comic the same time. All sorts of funny things happen”.

“I wouldn't like to read it!” Mrs. Thompson exclaimed, horrified of such an idea, because she was a too pragmatic woman, in her way, of course, to taste such things.

“Don't worry!” Mary snapped harshly. “There are a lot of people that like to read such things. My editor told me that I could make good money with it and this is important, don't you think? I want to visit Egypt one day and, who knows, maybe this little story might help me see my dream come true,” said Mary winking, gesture she knew Alice didn't like at all. She saw her making faces a few times.

“However, I hope you manage,” Alice grumbled. “Do you want some more coffee, Mary?” she asked, being suddenly bored with Mary and hoping this one would leave.

“No, thank you,” Mary replied, inferring what the other woman was feeling. “I think I must go. I have enough to write, so I'd better leave you now. See you soon! Maybe we'll see each other later.”

After Mary left, Alice washed the cups and put them back in the cupboard. She started thinking of Mary's weird marriage with Michael Reid and their terrible fights. She could hear them even though she was living two houses away and she knew the entire street could hear them. They'd become quite famous and were a reason for fun in the little street where usually nothing happened. Well, at least so far.

She was sure their marriage wouldn't last, she was shaking her head thinking of that. Mary was too selfish to keep it and she didn't make the smallest effort for that like it didn't matter at all. Michael would get sick with all that some or other day, and leave her with her stupid stories. She'd like to see what Mary would say then. Certainly, she'd lose some of her self-confidence as she'd have lost some of her identity. A husband could offer you that, Alice thought, and felt a sort of fondness thinking of poor Daniel, who'd come tired to the bones in the evening, working so hard to offer her a better life than she'd had before meeting him.

CHAPTER THREE

While thinking of Mary and her husband, although she was completely absorbed by her thoughts and still in front of the sink where she'd washed the cups, she heard a knock on the door. She went to open the door and saw James, the policeman she'd talked to earlier, and another man. They greeted her asking to speak with her. She invited them inside politely, as she'd been taught, and led them to the living room where she showed them to sit down and then sat before them.

"Mrs. Thompson," the older man began, "I'm Chief Inspector McNamara and you already know Sergeant James. I'm sorry to tell you so directly, but Mrs. Dobbs was killed last night."

"Oh, God! I knew something was wrong when I saw the police. And, she didn't come out at all this morning. She'd come out in the yard early in the morning. Well, I thought she might not have felt well after everything that happened last night," Alice said, stopping herself when she realised she was talking nonsense. She pulled herself together and asked: "What happened? Who killed her?"

"We don't know now, but we'll find out, that's sure," McNamara replied a little annoyed because everyone was expecting miracles from them, and everyone wanted police to have some answers on spot. They were supposed to tide things up at once and usually, unfortunately, things were quite far from that. It was necessary some work, even a lot of work. He went on: "I'd like to know if you or maybe your husband heard something last night. You live practically across and maybe who knows..."

"Oh, I don't know if he heard or saw anything, but I didn't hear a thing. You know, after I heard about that girl on the Dobbs' lawn, I took a sleeping pill, because I knew I'd been thinking too much of that and wouldn't have slept at all. Usually, I don't do that. I mean, taking pills, but now I had to. I fell asleep in ten minutes, I think. I had just woken up when you came. I'm sorry, but I can't really tell you anything. After you left last night, I don't know what happened."

"When is your husband going to come back at home today, ma'am?" McNamara asked. "We'd like to talk to him too. Maybe he knows something, he saw something..."

"I'm not very sure. He might come at six; he should come at six, normally, but sometimes he has to solve problems and must stay at work till later, even quite often lately. He

happened to come at home only at ten or later. Sometimes I don't even see him in the evening. He says I shouldn't wait for him. He doesn't want me to get too tired."

"All right, ma'am," McNamara said, who already understood how the things were. "Where does he work? Maybe we'll call him and ask him a few questions on the phone and finish with this discussion."

"Well, he is an accountant," Alice said proudly. "He works for Expert Audit Co. It is in town, you know. He has to travel every day. We've moved here because we prefer the peace and quietness of suburbs. It is so different from the town, isn't it?"

"Hmm", grumbled McNamara, sick of hearing her holding forth relentlessly. "Well, ma'am, can you tell us a few things about Patsy Porter? You must know her as she was leaving next door."

"Well, I can tell you what I know, but unfortunately, I don't know much. She is not the kind of girl to whom I pay too much attention," she said primly. "I think she's sixteen or something like that. I know I heard she'd left school. It was a serious scandal at her house that day. They shouted one to the other for hours. Poor Mrs. Porter was very upset then. Patsy is a very beautiful girl for her age, well, if you like dyed hair and very long and thin legs, as she has. She's not very smart and she's shallow, if you know what I mean. I've heard she left the house with a young man who was working for Mr. Brown's pub. I, myself, didn't know him very well. I think I've seen him only once or twice when he took her home, if that was he. That's it. However, when I saw them, I didn't think they were so close. She didn't seem too fond of him. I don't know where she is now and I think my husband doesn't either. He wasn't too interested in what was going on at the neighbours'. I've told you he is quite tired when he comes back home and I can't bore him with such things."

"I see, ma'am," McNamara said, already tired of hearing her decisive and bitter opinions. "However, if you remember anything, you can call us. Here's my card," he said taking a card out of his coat pocket.

"Of course, sir!" Alice said taking the business card. "By the way, sir, has anything happened to Patsy?" she asked curiously, although she'd have liked not to be too obvious.

"We don't know yet," McNamara lied. "For the time being we only presume things, ma'am. Thank you a lot. We're leaving now, but if you remember anything, please contact us," he said pointing to the card in her hand.

"Of course, sir," Alice said putting the card in the apron pocket. "But I don't think I know anything else", she said seeing them off.

After the door closed behind them and they reached the street, James looked at McNamara and said:

“Sir, don’t you have the feeling that Mr. Thompson plays on two fronts?”

“Yes, I do. I might be wrong and he might have something to do at the office. Who knows? What’s interesting is the fact that the woman hasn’t thought at least for a second that Patsy could be the girl found on the lawn. I don’t think she’s very smart or if she is, then she’s very absent-minded or completely disinterested in the entire situation, and I don’t buy it. She couldn’t hide her curiosity.”

James accepted, nodding.

“However, let’s go and see the woman we saw visiting Mrs. Thompson this morning and after we talk to her, we go and see the people next door. I think it’s Mrs. Reid,” McNamara guessed, looking on a page in his little black book.

They went and rang at the Reids’ door. After a while, Mary Reid came and opened the door smiling when she saw the two men.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she explained them, when she saw their look. “I was sure you’d ask questions to everyone in the street. I know this is the procedure. I also read thrillers now and then. Please, come inside,” she said showing them into the house and leading them the way to her study.

“I’m sorry I’ve brought you here,” she apologised “but this is the most comfortable room in the whole house, at least for me. I don’t like to stay in the living room and I don’t have a drawing room. This one should’ve been the drawing room. I turned it into a study for me. It looks good, doesn’t it?”

McNamara, almost exasperated with her explanations looked around and, noticing the computer on the desk, asked their talkative hostess:

“What do you work, ma’am?”

“Ah, I write stories,” she said blushing. “I’m not a famous writer or something like that, and I won’t become, I’m sure, I don’t have enough willpower, I think... I make some money, that’s all. Of course, I can’t say I don’t like what I do. It’s interesting to make your imagination work instead of being an accountant or something like that,” she continued making a face as if someone had put a lemon before her. “You must understand me, I’m sure. Your work also involves imagination, I think. You have to think of various scenarios and find solutions all the time, don’t you?”

McNamara smiled to her. He liked her, in a way, even though she was wasting his time with pointless discussions. He always thought that you must know the people you were dealing with during an investigation, and the woman revealed herself fast. She was like an open book, completely different from Mrs. Thompson. Her nature was like fresh air after they’d just talked

to Alice Thompson, who was rather a stiff woman and didn't have an agile mind like the woman before them. Alice Thompson was too full of her role of a wife.

"Indeed, ma'am," he approved her presumption. "I'd like to know if you heard or saw anything last night after we'd left here".

"To tell you, sincerely, I couldn't have heard anything even if I wanted... You know, I had a monstrous scandal with my husband last night" she admitted with some hesitation, blushing slightly, although she wanted to seem nonchalant. "You know" she continued "he was really upset with me because I'd gone out in the street in my gown... Well, I must admit that my gown is quite short and thin. Actually, it doesn't hide too much, maybe almost nothing. The matter is I put on the first thing I saw when I heard that scream and went out. Imagine how furious he got when he saw me! I was quite happy he was concerned with what happened to that girl and then to Mr. Dobbs. I wouldn't have liked to have a row with him before the others in the street—these people talk too much and about us, they talk most of the time. This is, actually, their main concern. I know they listen to our quarrels with interest because they don't have too much fun otherwise over here.... And I know my husband well: he couldn't have stopped himself from yelling at me if he'd seen me dressed like that before getting inside. Anyway, that's it. He saw me in the end, you know, when we got inside, and I had to listen to all his accusations. Of course, I told him what I thought of his behaviour. He was right in a way, I don't say no," she tried to seem reasonable, "but he should have thought I hadn't done it on purpose. I didn't have enough time to choose the right gown to go out in such circumstances. Would you have thought what to wear if you had heard such a scream? It was horrible!" she explained, and the mimic of her face was telling everything.

"No, indeed," McNamara answered smiling again hearing her explanations.

He could also see that she had a great body, even if she was a little plump. He was sure that if he'd been her husband, he'd have done the same thing as Mr. Reid. He'd been horrified. He wouldn't have liked that anyone else could see that body, but him.

"So, I'm sorry, but I couldn't hear a thing," Mary continued peacefully. "We yelled at each other for at least two hours, if not more. It wasn't a great night," she grinned. "We didn't even talk to each other this morning. He prepared breakfast for himself and left at work with no word," she said but she didn't seem upset at all that things were so bad between her and her husband.

James, completely baffled couldn't refrain from asking her:

"And don't you mind it, ma'am, at all?"

"What should I mind? That he doesn't speak to me? No, I'm used to that. He does that every two days. It's not a real problem," she sent the hypothesis away with a gesture. "He always

does that. He finds a reason to make a scandal: my dress or tights, I've forgotten to prepare dinner or I haven't ironed his shirts... Anyway, I don't ever do that and he should've known it already. I know I warned him at the beginning. I told him I'm not the household type and he shouldn't expect such things."

The two men looked at her completely stunned now. They'd never seen such a wife or at least one to admit so openly such things.

"But how can you bear it?" James asked again, although he was actually thinking of her poor husband who had to live with her laziness. James thought that, had he been in his place, he wouldn't have lived with her for at least one day. He wouldn't have accepted that his wife dressed that way or didn't do anything in the house. Chores were meant to be shared.

"But it's really interesting, you know?" she told them smiling widely. "If we got along just fine, with no quarrels and scandals, I'd die of boredom! I'm sure I'd die!" she insisted. "Quarrels bring something fresh in our lives, in my opinion, and thus we won't get bored one with the other too soon. Today I'll play my usual role of upset and hurt woman and tomorrow he'll try his best to make me happy. Isn't he nice?" she said smiling sweetly, maybe too sweetly.

James felt down for the count and watched her with wide eyes, like little saucers. McNamara couldn't bear anymore. He wanted only to go out and laugh out loud so, although he hadn't had a chance to ask her about Patsy, he thought it was enough time to do that later. He stood up and said:

"Then we're leaving, ma'am, and we'll keep in touch. We will surely have more questions for you and also for your husband."

Mary saw them off and returned to her work, thinking that, actually, they hadn't asked her any pertinent question and that seemed really strange. Soon, she forgot about them and returned to her love story. It was more interesting and, besides that, she had a deadline and she didn't want to miss the chance to gain the big sweepstakes.

Once out of the house, McNamara burst into laughter. James watched him bewildered.

"Why are you laughing, sir? I don't think it's funny. These two are a literally crazy, don't you think so?"

"Oh, no, James, not really... We all have our own craziness... I know these two seem completely mad but I think that their life is really interesting, indeed. I'm sure they don't get bored, as Mrs. Reid said. How could they? However, James, think: we already have two interesting families. On one side, the Thompsons, with Alice, the caring little wife, and Daniel the skirt chaser, I'd put my money on it, and on the other, we have the Reids, with Mary, the little gambler, figuratively speaking, and Michael, jealous and possessive. They are very interesting, aren't they? It's strange that they're so two different families and they have certain

relations, though. Who would've believed that Mary had something to talk about with Alice and vice versa? They are like oil and water, James."

"Oh, no, sir, I think they're merely crazy, each one in their way, and that's why they get along. I'm from the country, sir, and I don't taste such things," he said. He was coming from a little country village where he hadn't ever had a chance to see anything remotely like that.

"Don't fret, James," McNamara said smiling. "Let's see the other people in the street. I can't believe they're more interesting than that, though. I think we must talk to the Randalls now. They live exactly between the Thompsons and the Reids."

They went to the Randalls' house and rang at the door. They insisted but no answer came from inside. Alice Thompson, who'd been watching them all this time, came out in the door of her house and told them:

"They're not at home now. They have the grocer's shop in the corner and they're there now. Their children are at school, probably, and don't come back until three. I never hear them earlier and you must know they're very noisy usually."

"Thank you, ma'am, then we go to the grocer's and talk to them," McNamara said. "See you soon!"

"Have you seen, James, I think she was watching us from behind the curtains," McNamara said. "What do you think?"

"I don't have an opinion anymore, sir. With these people I really don't have an opinion," James replied, seeming a little out of balance.

They didn't usually run into normal people during their investigations, but he could understand those, in a way or another. They were mostly criminals, but these, here, on Nightingale Street, were quite something out of ordinary.

McNamara and James advanced to the other end of the street. After a few steps, they stopped for a moment in front of a small house on the left, with the windows and door painted in blue and white walls. There was a small garden in front of it with multi-coloured flowers, standing proudly under the pale sun.

McNamara watched avidly the little house and flowers. He was sure that at sunset it was a real relish to stay on the house veranda smelling the heavy smell of flowers in the night.

"It's a restful house, don't you think, James?" McNamara asked, pointing with his head to the house with blue transoms, feeling a bit wry for having noticed that.

“Yes, it is, sir. The truth is that almost all little houses from suburbs have a special charm, as far as I could see. But you must know that at home, at my parents, it’s much more pleasant. The green is greener and there are more birds...,” he said nostalgically.

“I see your point, James,” McNamara said smiling. He found it was funny how such little sentimental notches could lie where you expected less. “In the country, there’s a lot of peace and serenity... You know, I’m curious to see the owner of this house. However, we’ll meet this one soon. He must be on the list Mike drew up. And you see, the contrast with the house next door is welcome.”

“Yes, it’s a very good combination of white and yellow, sir,” James agreed, looking at the house next door.

After a few moments, they went away, without realising that someone was watching them from behind the yellow curtain of the house on their right side. They headed to the grocer’s and, on their way, they savoured the peace of the little street, whose children were still at school. The street was small, but clean and restful.

The grocer’s wasn’t too big, but seemed to have enough merchandises if you could believe the advertisements on the outside wall. The policemen got into the shop and saw a man with a white apron tied at his waist arranging some oranges on the counter. The smell of spice in the air pinched their noses but it wasn’t unpleasant at all. The grocer looked up and saw the two newly entered, but he didn’t have a chance to say anything because one of them said first:

“Good day! Mr. Randall, I presume,” McNamara said.

“Yes, sir. And you are...?”

“I’m Chief Inspector McNamara, and this is sergeant James. We’re here to talk to you about the girl found in the Dobbs’ yard last night and about Mrs. Dobbs.”

“Has anything happened to Mrs. Dobbs?” Mr. Randall asked dreadfully. He had heard about poor Mr. Dobbs but to think that also something happened to Mrs. Dobbs it was really upsetting.

“I’m afraid, so, sir. She was also killed last night.”

“Oh, God! Alison, come here, dear!” Mr. Randall shouted.

“What happened?” the woman getting into the shop from the back asked.

She was a tall and skinny woman with severe air and a lot of wrinkles. Her eyes were sharp with no trace of humour in them and she seemed like she’d never smiled in her life.

“Listen, Mrs. Dobbs was killed last night!” her husband told her.

“Oh, dear, poor Mrs. Dobbs! She was a very meddling woman, I know, and she bothered us all the time with her intruding nature, as otherwise all our neighbours, but I couldn’t have ever imagined that such a thing could happen to her... Eh, you know, the cat died because it was too curious,” she said reproachfully even though she’d just heard the woman had died. “How did she die?”

“I think she was stabbed about four times, ma’am. It wasn’t too pleasant to see,” McNamara said biting wanting to turn back the reproach he felt in Mrs. Randall’s voice.

About dead people, only good things, he’d been taught. And they weren’t talking about a villain that had made a lot of wrongdoings, but only about an old and meddling woman. She hadn’t deserved such a fate, in his opinion, no matter what, so he resented Mrs. Randall’s affirmation. He already labelled her as a woman with a narrow mind.

“Oh, poor thing! How could we help, sir?” Mrs. Randall asked, not overly concerned, but feeling the sting of his sever admonishment.

“Did you hear or see anything last night? Especially after the police had left...”

“I must tell you we saw only the end, when the police came. We woke up with some difficulty because we had a long work day yesterday. We heard that scream like in a dream and, initially, I didn’t even want to wake up. My husband woke up with even more difficulty,” she said watching her husband reproachfully, but this one kept quiet. “And I haven’t heard anything from the Dobbs, so far, even if they live next door. We went to bed as soon as you’d left and I fell asleep at once. I’m afraid we cannot help you too much,” Mrs. Randall said and her husband nodded, showing his full agreement.

“Well, then. What do you know about Patsy Porter?” McNamara asked, while James kept writing in his little book.

“She’s a very stubborn girl and she’s been badly brought up, I can say,” Mrs. Randall began, peevishly, leaving the impression that in their family she was the one talking and making decisions. “She made a lot of problems to her poor mother when she was here, but she didn’t know to control her either,” she continued severely. “Poor Mrs. Porter still hurts because her daughter left. She seems to have left one day, a few months ago, I think. Everyone says she left with that young man who used to work in Mr. Brown’s pub. He was a hard working boy or so he seemed but the girl stole his minds. He couldn’t see anything else before his eyes. I’m sure he trusted that the sun was rising up when she showed up.”

“Did she love him too?” McNamara asked her.

“I’m sure she didn’t”, Mrs. Randall said wickedly. “She was playing with him, that’s all, and that’s why I was very surprised to hear they left together. Something didn’t seem all right. I’m sure about it. It wasn’t all right at all.”

Seeing the confusion on McNamara's face she explained:

"I couldn't imagine she'd leave with him. And, I'm sure," she said making a large gesture that should've included the entire street, "everyone here was thinking the same. Had she been to leave with a man, then she'd have left with an older one, even a much older one. I remember she was making eyes to all the men over thirty in the street. It was really strange her leaving with such a young boy, you should know. But, however, both of them disappeared the same day and I heard they left a note to her mother and she was writing that she was leaving with Peter, so that's it."

"So, you'd never imagined they'd eloped together," McNamara wanted to make sure he understood.

"Not at all," she said decisively. "She wasn't for that boy. She was aiming at something more, you must know. She used to say she didn't go out with children and only an older man could satisfy her taste. And I wasn't the only one hearing her. Many others did. She used to make eyes to my husband too," she said accusatively, and glanced severely to her husband as if he'd been involved in something very bad.

Mr. Randall blushed slightly and tried to deny but his wife's eyes didn't leave him and, reluctantly, he admitted she was right although, inside, he was boiling with rage.

"Yes, this is true! She was flirting with each of us. Mr. Reid didn't notice her, you know, but usually he doesn't notice anything else but his wife. I'm afraid trust doesn't play a role in their marriage and he's quite jealous, if you want my opinion. They quarrel all day long, the two of them. You hear them yelling one to the other from afar."

"Indeed," his wife approved. "One day he'll kill her, I'm sure. I say they should split up, it would be better for both of them. The two of them are not meant to live together. Each one would be better with someone else."

"Don't be dolt," Mr. Randall contradicted her condescendingly. "They only quarrel, that's all. He doesn't beat her or anything. She's a little different from what a traditional wife should be, that's why everything happens. She doesn't seem to care of his needs too much and she doesn't care about cooking, ironing and such. She dresses in the way she likes and she doesn't take his wishes about that into consideration. But she also works and seems to have a certain financial independence so she doesn't pay too much attention to what he wants. That's all," he replied, making his wife to spring up as if something bit her on her backside.

"That's not all," Mrs. Randall said forcefully. "The man is upset because she dresses so that all men could see her legs up to the top and she doesn't even cover her breasts too much. All men look at her and they have why, and her husband, of course, doesn't like it. I think it's

normal. Don't tell me you'd like me show my legs and breasts to the entire street?" she asked turning warlike to her husband.

He looked at her a little shocked, but, as the other two men could see, he wasn't shocked because of the presumption to see her in short skirts or very bare-shouldered blouses, although that seemed really weird to him too. No, he was shocked because she thought she could arouse his jealousy in any way. He'd stopped being jealous long time ago, even almost as soon as they'd got married. There was nothing in her that could attract him. He could see only her small and mean eyes, her tight mouth, and her moralizing nature. And he couldn't imagine that someone else would see something different in her. And that was a real pity because thus he might've had her taken out of his hands. He'd have got rid of her.

McNamara and James knew well what he was thinking and tried to avert their eyes so that Mrs. Randall didn't understand too, seeing her husband's thoughts reflected so well in their eyes.

"Did anyone seem interested in Patsy in a special manner?" McNamara asked trying to chase away any of Mrs. Randall's thoughts at her husband's reaction.

"Mr. Graham seemed to like her," Mrs. Randall said evasively. "But however," she pushed aside any idea that could bloom from there, "he wouldn't have done any gesture in her direction, I could swear. You shouldn't think of that."

"Why not?" James asked curious to find out what made her so confident in her opinion.

"He's a teacher, you know?" Mr. Randall said. "He seems very serious and I don't think he'd try to seduce a minor. He doesn't look like having such inclinations or at least the courage," he said having the satisfaction of seeing his wife narrowing her eyes because he spoke before her and didn't leave her the chance to share her opinion first.

"I see," James said. "Who else was also interested in her or paid her some attention?"

"Mr. Thompson," Mr. Randall replied fast. "I've got the impression he liked her quite a lot. Patsy had the same coloration as his wife, but she was younger and, obviously, much merrier. Mrs. Thompson doesn't smile too much and seems interested only in keeping her house clean and her husband smartly dressed. She doesn't know what a dance means and doesn't go out too much. I've seen them going to a restaurant only once so far, when they were invited to a wedding."

"Don't speak about her like that," his wife interrupted him upset. "Alice is a very good woman, and you rarely can find such an upstanding woman these days. She knows how to take care of her house and husband. He should be enormously grateful for having such a wife! Not everyone has this luck!" Mrs. Randall burst out vehemently. "Think of Mr. Reid!"

Randall abandoned the subject but James and McNamara had already understood what was all about and could imagine why Mr. Thompson was paying attention to Patsy. A man sometimes prefers a woman to talk with and have fun with, not only one that keeps the house in pristine conditions. There were maids for such a thing, after all.

“So,” McNamara interrupted the silence, “have you seen Patsy or maybe, have you seen Peter lately?”

“Oh, no,” Alison Randall answered. “None of them has come back or written or anything else... They left for good, I think,” she said with a reproach for Patsy in her voice. “Ungrateful child, I’ve always said. Poor her mother struggled with her alone because her father rarely came home. You know, he’s a salesman. And even then he wasn’t too interested in what was going on in the house. He was of no good. Maybe if he was more interested, the girl wouldn’t have ended up a mere light skirt,” she said scowling.

“Very well, Mrs. Randall, thank you. Here’s my card and call me, please, if you remember anything, even if you consider it’s not very important,” McNamara said offering her his card and shortening thus the discussion that had been following the same lines.

After getting outside where no one could hear them, McNamara turned to James and said:

“I think Mr. Thompson really liked Patsy. He certainly could see something of his wife in Patsy, but this one should’ve been a bit more amusing than his prim and hardworking wife. He might’ve answered to her flirt, what do you think, James?”

“Yes, sir, he might. But, you know, I think that the teacher could also be on the list, as well as Mr. Randall. You saw he blushed when his wife mentioned Patsy’s habit of encouraging older men, associating him to that too. Maybe, Mr. Reid could be taken out of the list, though, what do you say? He’s too possessive and jealous for his wife to have cared for the kid, what do you think?”

“I don’t know that yet, James. I first must see and talk to him and only then, I’ll have an opinion. Maybe he also plays some games with his wife and he might also be sick of so many quarrels in the house, don’t you think? No one could enjoy a continuous scandal.”

“Maybe, it’s so, sir, but don’t you think that Mary Reid would’ve seen something if her husband liked Patsy? She doesn’t seem a simpleton. Her mind is rather sharp, even if she’s in the way she is.”

“Maybe she is, who knows? And Randall blushed because of fear of his wife, too, I tell you, not only because he’d like the girl, although I also think he liked her just fine. With such an old crone at home, it would’ve been impossible not to. The man doesn’t have too much joy in his life with that woman as a wife. Now, let’s go and see the Browns too. They are at the pub, or at least they should be.”

They crossed the street to the pub that was small, specific to suburbs. It was cozy and the people inside seemed to have a great time. At the counter, there was a massive man with big hands and red face, forty, with a special allure due to his red curly hair that seemed like it had not seen a comb that day. Actually, his hair was always the same: it had its own life. Hadn't been his age and height, he could've been considered a naughty boy, because of his eyes and hair.

He had a merry air, and his clients seemed to like him as the people in the pub felt there like at home, comfortably, and McNamara could imagine that they, probably, came there every day, as generally happens in any pub in a neighbourhood, suburbs or small villages where people know each other and where the pub is the meeting place for most of people, especially men.

People were talking and laughing. Although there were few women inside, in McNamara's prejudiced opinion, there was a lot of noise and people seemed to talk at the same time. McNamara and James went to the counter and sat on the high chairs in front of it.

Mr. Brown, the publican, came to them and said:

"Good day, to both of you! What should it be?"

"Coffee, please, for both of us," McNamara ordered putting some money on the counter to pay for the drinks. Only afterwards he showed his badge. "We're with the police, sir, and we've some questions for you and your wife."

"I see," Mr. Brown said trying to figure if that was about what had happened a night before. "I can answer your questions, no problem, but my wife has just left. She went to Mrs. Porter, at the other end of the street and she said she might have to stay there for a while. Mrs. Porter seemed to have a problem, something. She didn't say what exactly on the phone, but it seemed serious. My Mary said she was sobbing."

"Well, then, we'll ask you. Do you know with whom Patsy Porter used to flirt? We've heard that she liked to encourage some men living on this street."

"Indeed, it's true. She made eyes almost to everyone on this street and some of men answered back too. Now here's a girl that really asks for trouble, if you want to know my opinion. It's that kind of girl that prefers older men, and, between you and me, you know that men usually are silly enough to answer to such things, especially if they're of a certain age. They feel a little flattered and even proud to make an eel to pay them attention, especially if they had the impression their days as seducers had gone."

"Were you also among the men she tried to charm, sir? Did you also answer to her encouragements?" James asked.

"Oh, no!" the man said laughing. "I might've been flattered for a while, you know," he winked to them roguishly. "I'm forty-four already and I think I liked that such a young lass paid

me attention. Who wouldn't? She's quite pretty, you know. But, on one hand, how could I put it, I have a happy marriage and I don't say it only to say it. My wife looks great, although she's twenty years older than Patsy. She's a very merry woman and she satisfies me entirely, if you know what I mean," he said winking to them. "On the other hand, Patsy was doing that with all the men in the street, and, honestly, I don't like this kind of girl... I think a lass should be cheerful and have a little fun, but that doesn't mean she should also be a cheap flirt. If she'd really liked someone in a special way, I'd have understood, but she hadn't. It wasn't like that. Everything was like a sport to her. She wanted to have an older lover, that's all. You know...nothing serious. She probably thought she'd have more distinction if she'd go out with an older man, possibly with a certain material situation... I don't know."

"We've heard she left with Peter, the boy who worked for you before," James said.

"I heard that too, but it's too odd, you should know," he said scratching his scalp. "That boy wasn't for her. He was too young, only twenty. He used to follow her everywhere with puppy eyes, you know. When I saw, I told him the girl was just playing with him, but I don't think he believed me — he was reeled in... When I heard they'd left together—you know, my wife is a good friend of Mrs. Porter and she told her about—I couldn't be more astonished. I wouldn't have thought it possible. But maybe, I was wrong, who knows?" he continued doubtfully, though. They could see that he was stuck on his first opinion.

"Wouldn't it have been possible she only said she was leaving with Peter, but actually she'd left with another man?"

"I don't know, to be honest. It could have. But I know he also left the same day she did. He took his weekly check and said he was going to work in town because there he'd be paid better and had friends there."

"After he left, didn't you hear anything of him?" McNamara asked him.

"No, nothing. He didn't come by here or called. I don't know anything of him now. He was a good lad, you should know, very hardworking. And he never left his work unfinished, not even after falling in for Patsy. I really regret him. I hired one afterwards, but I had to fire him because he did nothing right. He was interested only in having a big pay check but with no work at all. Many times I had to do his job too, and you see, it didn't work for me at all," he said frowning for the first time.

"But about Patsy, have you heard anything ever since?" McNamara came back to the subject that interested him.

"No, sir! My wife told me Patsy hadn't even bothered to call her mother and tell her where she was or what she was doing," he said reproachfully. "Poor woman is sick with worry,"

he said, shaking his head and the two policemen understood he didn't agree with what Patsy was doing.

"Have you heard that Mrs. Dobbs was also killed last night?" McNamara asked him watching his face closely to see the answer there before his words came out.

"Oh, no, was she?" Mr. Brown exclaimed in pure shock. "I've heard a young girl was killed in the Dobbs' yard, that's all. How was she killed? Mrs. Dobbs, I mean?" he asked without even trying to hide his curiosity.

"Well, she was stabbed in her drawing room," McNamara answered to him. "She might've noticed something that could be related to the girl found earlier in the yard and I think the killer saw her too."

"I know we haven't had such a thing around here before," Mr. Brown said, "but wasn't a burglary?" he asked. He'd believe it would make more sense that she'd been killed during a burglary than otherwise.

"No, sir," James answered, "nothing was stolen from the house, in our opinion, and in the room there are only signs of a short fight, that's all."

"I see..." he murmured. "Poor, Mrs. Dobbs! She liked to pry on everyone, I know, but otherwise she was really kind... good-hearted," he said. "She shouldn't have died like that," Mr. Brown continued, shaking his head as if he still couldn't believe it, and McNamara could read grief on his face.

That moment, a man somewhere between thirty or forty, came to the counter:

"I'd like a beer, Mr. Brown, please."

"Of course, Mr. Graham," he said with a professional smile on his face, in spite of the sadness he'd shown a few seconds before because of Mrs. Dobbs' death. "As usual, isn't it?"

"Yes, please," said the young man absently, turning around to see if there was anyone he could sit down with and talk.

Mr. Brown turned and took a bottle from the shelf behind him and then put the bottle of beer before the man.

McNamara, hearing the name of the man had already turned and watched him for a few moments and then, taking off his badge, he said:

"We're with the police, sir. May we accompany you at a table there and ask you a few questions?"

Mr. Graham seemed a little confused, even alarmed for a moment, McNamara thought, but accepted the invitation reluctantly. He showed them to a small table in the corner and invited them to sit down on the bench in front of him.

“What’s this about, sir?” he asked curiously drinking a little from his bottle first, as if to gather courage to start the discussion.

“Haven’t you heard anything about the girl killed in the Dobbs’ yard last night?” James asked shocked, wondering about the kind of game the man was playing.

He’d have thought the people would’ve imagined the police would come and ask questions about the lass found murdered, because that was the usual procedure and even though they hadn’t ever had anything to do directly with such an investigation, they could’ve found out how it worked from movies at least.

“I’ve heard nothing,” Mr. Graham answered astonished by the news. “I wasn’t at home last night, you should know. I stayed with a girl-friend in town and I’ve come back now. I’ve just come back. What girl? Do we know her?” he asked and the edge of fear resonated in his voice.

“If you weren’t at home, then that’s understandable,” James said without showing him that he’d noticed the fear in his voice. “Well, last night a lass was killed in the Dobbs’ yard, and Mr. Dobbs died immediately after he’d seen her or maybe because he’d seen something else, we don’t know yet. During the night, after everyone left, inclusively the police, Mrs. Dobbs was also killed in her own living room.”

McNamara who was watching Mr. Graham’s face saw he was stunned. News came fast, a piece after another, and no piece was cheering. The man seemed to have known nothing of all of those and was really shocked.

“To fill in the official report, sir,” he asked him “could you tell us the name of the person with whom you were last night? I’m sorry, but we must write it down. We must find out what everyone living nearby did last night.”

“Of course, no problem,” Graham said a little reassured now. “It’s just a friend in town. Actually, she also teaches in the same school as I. Her name’s Laura Bradshaw and we’ve been going out together for a while. We were to some friends last night because they celebrated their first year of marriage and then we went to her house because it was too late and stayed there till this morning when we went together to school. If you want to talk to her, this is her address and phone number,” he said, taking a little black book out of his pocket and tearing a sheet of paper on which he wrote the address and phone number and handed it in to McNamara.

“What could you tell us about Patsy Porter, sir?” McNamara asked him.

“Patsy Porter? Is she the girl found in the Dobbs’ yard?” Graham asked shocked. There was also a little grief for the young girl if not more. Maybe he liked her too, as the others.

“We don’t know for sure yet, but she might be Patsy, because she matches the description. However, could you tell us anything about her?” McNamara repeated.

“Well, Patsy was my student for three years and then she left school. She was a really beautiful girl, and she knew it, even very well, and the boys in the school were all crazy about her. However, she didn’t use to go out with boys of her age. I saw more men waiting for her in front of the school, of course not all of them at once,” he said, a trace of smile in his voice. “She seemed to prefer men of a certain age, at least fifteen years older than she. You realise I couldn’t know who the men waiting for her were as Edinburgh isn’t a small village, you know it. You cannot know everyone.”

“We’ve heard she flirted with all the men in this street, inclusively you, didn’t she?” McNamara asked.

Mr. Graham blushed a little and said reluctantly:

“Yes, she did, it’s true. Some of the men didn’t care of her games, you know, and I didn’t either, even if the lass was very attractive. Ok, I liked the girl, a little,” he admitted. “Who wouldn’t? ... You must know though that I couldn’t think of her that way... she was my student, and, also a minor. I couldn’t stop thinking of her age, even after she left school and I wasn’t her teacher anymore... I don’t want any problems with the law. I can’t afford it in my situation. As a teacher, I have a reputation to keep, I hope you understand it,” he insisted.

“So you didn’t encourage her at all, sir?” James asked him curiously.

“Of course, not!” Mr. Graham scowled, considering the presumption outrageous. “She’d always try to make me pay her attention, of course, as she did with everyone, but I managed not to let myself dragged in the game... Once she wrote me a letter, I remember, and another time, she asked me if I wanted to go with her to a dance in town, to a disco. But I didn’t accept it... I don’t do such things or at least not with kids of her age... No, I didn’t encourage her at all.”

“Hadn’t she been your student, would you’ve accepted her invitation?” McNamara asked him feeling that the man was weak enough to have accepted.

“No, I’ve already told you!” Mr. Graham burst out already very irritated, unable to keep a low volume to his voice anymore and people around looked their way curiously. “She was a minor, damn it, and I don’t need such problems. I’m a teacher, for God’s sake, and I must show some decency and morality! I like the job I’m doing, even if I don’t make big pots of money from it. I can’t afford being fired or worse because I’ve fancied a nice face. And she’s only that—a nice face. She didn’t have anything to offer or at least not to me!”

“I see,” McNamara replied with some restraint. “Do you know anything about which men in the street accepted to go out with her in the end?”

“I can’t be sure, but I think Mr. Thompson accepted,” he said, thinking that giving them that didn’t really matter. In the end, they’d have heard of Thompson’s affair with Patsy because he knew other people had seen them together. “I saw them in town once when I was with my girl-friend in a restaurant... Patsy and Mr. Thompson passed by the restaurant where we two were dining. I could notice they were having a very serious discussion, and he seemed a little upset, I think.”

“When did that happen?” James asked, suddenly very interested, thinking they finally had a more direct line of investigation.

“Two weeks ago or maybe two weeks and a half... I can’t remember exactly... I was quite surprised, because Mrs. Dobbs, you know, Mrs. Dobbs used to gossip a lot, told me that Patsy had left with a young man who was working here in the Browns’ pub and she wasn’t ever wrong in her affirmations. I remember I thought that her infallible nose finally made a mistake.”

“Knowing that Patsy preferred older men weren’t you surprised that she eloped with a kid of only twenty?” McNamara asked incredulously not bothering to hide his disbelief.

“I was a little surprised,” he admitted, “but then I thought the girl might’ve changed her ideas. Peter was five years older than she, though, and he wasn’t a student, you know. I thought she’d found something interesting in him and come back to normal, I mean, to be like the other girls of her age. Things like that still happen,” he said sounding like he was trying to convince them he was right.

“I see,” McNamara said, although he didn’t really see anything. He couldn’t see any logic in what Graham was saying, because he knew very well that people rarely changed and when they did it, the change was only at the surface. Life taught him things like that and he put more stock on his experience than in the psychological mumbo jumbo of the man before him.

“And teenagers do such thing all the time,” the man explained. “Today they love someone, and next day another one. At fifteen, sixteen they’re not at the age when they have steady relations,” Mr. Graham added in his class-voice, trying to seem confident even though he wasn’t sure that the two men would buy it.

McNamara studied his face for a few moments and was about to laugh seeing that, actually, he was simply trying to make them believe his pseudo-psychological crap. The policeman didn’t like Edward Graham’s small and dark eyes, either, because he could read in them badly hidden cunning, and he didn’t like his mouth, whose line betrayed wickedness.

Graham didn’t seem to have too much willpower and McNamara doubted he’d have refused a young girl like Patsy if she’d come onto him. He’d have found a way to be with her.

People always found a way to fulfil their dark wishes and they always thought they were smarter than the people around and, consequently, they wouldn't be caught and pay for their weaknesses.

The three men drank each a bit of their drinks, McNamara thinking of his next question, when, suddenly, his cell phone rang.

“McNamara!” he said, and then listened frowning.

It was the coroner who had some very interesting news for him, but the problem was the news changed absolutely everything as nothing he knew made sense anymore, if anything had made so far, he told himself bitterly.

“We have to leave now, James. Thank you, Mr. Graham, for everything you've told us. Here's my card. If you remember anything, but anything, please call me at the office or on the cell phone,” he said offering his card to Mr. Graham. “We have to leave now, James!” he repeated standing up.

James followed suit and they both waved to Mr. Brown and left the pub.

“What's happened, sir?” James asked, while they were heading to the car they'd parked at the end of the street, not far from the bar.

“Apparently, the girl found in the Dobbs' yard is not Patsy Porter. The coroner says her hair wasn't light brown, as we've thought, even though the lass used to dye her hair. Patsy probably dyed her hair too, but hers should have been light brown, and the girl we found has dark brown hair at origin. Moreover, the height doesn't match Patsy's. This one is taller than she is. Oh, yes, and apparently, Patsy didn't have appendicitis, and this one does... She wasn't beaten to death and then had her throat cut off, as we'd initially thought, but the knife did the entire job... Yes, she was beaten first and then raped repeatedly and wildly for a number of days... and then she was stabbed with a sharp knife—the kind of knife used for hunting. It's about the same knife used to kill Mrs. Dobbs. Ah, and something else also very interesting: the girl was pregnant in four months. And it seems she'd been also tied up for three or four days if not more.”

“Oh, God!” James said. “So, we've done nothing else but wasting our time this morning, sir. We've asked questions about a girl who's not involved and where we shouldn't, probably, should we?”

“Maybe not, James... It must've been someone that knows various things about this street and the empty house next to the Dobbs', because a stranger couldn't have pulled it out. The house's been empty for months since the owner died of cancer... I'm afraid that our killer wanted to kill her there, with no witnesses around, but he couldn't. Maybe the girl escaped from his hands and she had to die in the Dobbs' yard. Certainly, the killer must've known that Mrs. Dobbs used to go to sleep at nine so he imagined the way was free because otherwise I don't

think he'd have risked it. Everyone knew that she was a gossip... And also it's sure that he knew that Mr. Thompson usually comes late at home and Mrs. Thompson doesn't have the habit to survey her neighbours' houses. He was aware that the Reids have something else on their minds than watching what's going on in the street. It must've been someone with tight relations with the street, I bet on that," McNamara said decisively.

"And don't forget, we found Patsy's ID in the victim's purse, and this is quite strange. Why was it there and where's the victim's ID? It's quite weird, isn't it? ... Anyway, at least we've found out something about Patsy and her neighbours and I think this is important because now, at least we know the people in the play."

The two men watched each other thoughtfully. Then McNamara said:

"Come on, let's go back to office. Let's check the past of each person in this street and we may come back later to question the others. First we must find out who's the dead girl."

