

Eight Detectives

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1. Spain, 1930

The two suspects sat on mismatched furniture in the white and almost featureless lounge, waiting for something to happen. Between them an archway led to a slim, windowless staircase: a dim recess that seemed to dominate the room, like a fireplace grown to unreasonable proportions. The staircase changed direction at its midpoint, hiding the upper floor from view and giving the impression that it led up to darkness and nothing else.

‘It’s hell, just waiting here.’ Megan was sitting to the right of the archway. ‘How long does a siesta normally take, anyway?’

She walked over to the window. Outside, the Spanish countryside was an indistinct orange colour. It looked uninhabitable in the heat.

‘An hour or two, but he’s been drinking.’ Henry was sitting sideways in his chair, with his legs hooked over the arm and a guitar resting on his lap. ‘Knowing Bunny, he’ll be asleep until dinner time.’

Megan moved to the drinks cabinet and examined the bottles, carefully turning each one until all the labels were facing outwards. Henry took the cigarette from his mouth and held it up in front of his right eye, pretending to watch her through it: a mock telescope. ‘You’re breathing through your shoes again.’

She’d been pacing back and forth for most of the

afternoon. The lounge, with its white tiles and wipe-clean surfaces, reminded her of a doctor's waiting room; they could have been in a red-brick hospital back home, rather than a strange Spanish villa at the top of a ragged, red hill. 'If I'm breathing through my shoes,' she muttered, 'then you're walking with your mouth.'

A few hours earlier they'd been having lunch at a small tavern in the nearest village, a thirty-minute walk through the woods from Bunny's house. Bunny had stood up at the end of the meal and they'd both immediately noticed how drunk he was.

'We need to have a conversation,' he'd slurred. 'You've probably been wondering why I asked you here. There's something I've wanted to discuss for rather a long time.' It was an ominous thing to say to his two guests, both entirely dependent on him in a country they'd never been to before. 'When we're at the villa, just the three of us.'

It had taken them almost an hour to walk back to the house, Bunny struggling up the hill like an old donkey, a grey suit against the red earth. It felt absurd now to think of the three of them in Oxford together, all those years ago; he'd aged seemingly ten years more than they had.

'I need to rest,' he'd drawled, after letting them into the house. 'Give me some time to sleep, then we can talk.' So while Bunny had gone upstairs to sleep away the heat of the afternoon, Megan and Henry had collapsed into arm-chairs on either side of the staircase. 'A brief siesta.'

That was almost three hours ago.

Megan was looking out of the window. Henry leaned forward and counted the number of squares between them:

she was standing diagonally across from him, a distance of seven white tiles. ‘This feels like a game of chess,’ he said. ‘Is that why you keep moving about? You’re putting your pieces in place for an attack?’

She turned to face him, her eyes narrowed. ‘Chess is a cheap metaphor. It’s what men use when they want to talk in a grandiose way about conflict.’

An argument had been building between them all afternoon, ever since Bunny had brought their lunch to a sudden end. *The three of us need to have a conversation, away from Spanish eyes.* Megan looked out of the window again and there it was, as inevitable as the weather: the impending argument, a black stain layered over the blue sky.

‘Chess is all about rules and symmetry,’ she continued, ‘but conflict is usually just cruel and dirty.’

Henry strummed the guitar as a way of changing the subject. ‘Do you know how to tune this thing?’ He’d found it hanging on the wall above his chair. ‘I could play this if it was tuned.’

‘No,’ she said, and left the room.

He watched her walk deeper into the house: successively smaller versions of her framed by further doorways along the corridor. Then he lit another cigarette.

‘When do you think he’ll wake up? I’d like to get some fresh air.’

She was back, the biggest version of her standing in the nearest doorway.

‘Who knows,’ said Henry. ‘Right now he’s sleeping the sleep of the just-had-lunch.’ She didn’t smile. ‘You can go ahead and leave. I think anything he has to say can wait.’

Megan paused, her face as pristine and unreadable as it

was in her publicity photos. She was an actor, by profession. ‘Do you know what he’s going to say to us?’

Henry hesitated. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Fine. I’m going outside, then.’

He nodded and watched her leave. The corridor led away from the lounge in the direction he was facing and he saw her walk down it and through a door at the end; the stairs were to his left. He continued toying with the guitar strings until one of them snapped and the flailing metal cut the back of his hand.

At that moment the room darkened and he automatically turned to his right: Megan was at the window, looking in, the red hills behind giving her outline a demonic glow. She didn’t seem able to see him; maybe the day outside was too bright. But he felt like a creature in a zoo anyway, with the back of his hand held over his mouth as he sucked the slight cut, and his fingers hanging from his chin.

Megan took shelter on the shaded side of the house.

Standing in a clump of wildflowers, she leaned back against the building and closed her eyes. From somewhere nearby came a soft, percussive sound: dip, dip, dip. It seemed to originate from behind her. She thought at first it was the carried sound of the guitar, coming through the walls, but it wasn’t melodic enough for that. It was very faint – almost not there at all – but she could still hear it, as unmistakable as a stone in her shoe.

Dip. Dip. Dip.

She turned around and looked up. Through a wrought-iron grille she could see a fly repeatedly hitting itself against the closed window of Bunny’s bedroom. The one

next to hers, on the top floor of the house. It was just a tiny fly, trying to escape; then she saw that there were two of them. Three, in fact. Now four. A whole swarm of flies, trying to get out. The corner of the window was dark with them. She could picture the dead ones littering the windowsill. She found a small stone on the ground and threw it at the window; the black cloud scattered at the audible clunk, but no sound came from inside. She tried again, but couldn't rouse her sleeping host.

She grew impatient and picked up a whole handful of stones, throwing them one by one until her hands were empty. She walked back around the outside of the house, in through the door and along the corridor to the foot of the stairs where Henry, surprised by her sudden appearance, dropped the guitar with a clatter on the cold, white floor.

'I think we should wake Bunny.'

He saw that she was worried. 'Do you think something's wrong?'

In fact, she was angry. 'I think we should check.'

She started up the stairs. He was following closely behind her when she saw something that made her stop and cry out. Instinctively, he put his arms around her. It was an attempt to keep her calm, but it was done clumsily and it left the two of them locked together, unable to move.

'Let me go.' She elbowed him off and ran forward, and then with her shoulders out of his way he saw what she had seen: a pointing finger of blood reaching from below Bunny's door towards the top of the stairs, pointing straight at him.

*

Neither of them had ever seen so much blood. Bunny lay on the sheets, face down. A knife handle emerged from his back, with a twisted red trail leading up to it from the lowest end of the bed. The blade was almost entirely hidden; they could just see a thin line of silver between his body and the black handle, like a glimpse of moonlight coming through a crack in the curtains. ‘That’s where his heart is,’ said Megan. The handle itself could have been part of a sundial, the dead body unknowingly marking the passage of time.

She approached the bed, stepping around the puddles on the floor. When she was a foot away from the body, Henry stopped her. ‘Do you think we should?’

‘I have to check.’ Absurdly, she pressed two fingers into the side of his neck. There was no pulse. She shook her head. ‘This can’t be true.’

In a state of shock, Henry sat down on the edge of the mattress; his weight caused the bloodstains to spread towards him and he leapt up as if waking from a bad dream. He looked at the door, then turned back to Megan.

‘The murderer might still be here,’ he said in a whisper. ‘I’ll search the other rooms.’

‘Okay,’ Megan whispered back; and because she was an actor she whispered in a way that was as clear as speaking. It was almost sarcastic. ‘And check if all the windows are locked.’

‘You wait here.’ And he left.

She tried to take a deep breath but the air in the room was rotten already, and the few telltale flies were still tapping against the edge of the blisteringly hot day. They must have grown bored of the body. She walked over and lifted

the window by a couple of inches. The flies shot straight out and dissolved into the blue sky, like grains of salt stirred into soup. As she stood there by the window, cold with shock, Megan could hear Henry searching through the nearby rooms, opening wardrobes and looking under beds.

He appeared in the doorway again, a disappointed look on his face. 'There's nobody up here.'

'Were the windows all locked?'

'Yes, I checked.'

'I thought so,' she said. 'Bunny locked everything obsessively before we left for lunch. I watched him do it.'

'What about those doors, are they locked?' He indicated with his hand the two doors to the balcony behind her. She stepped over to them and pulled at the handles. They were bolted from the inside at the top, middle and bottom.

'Yes,' she said. She sat down on the edge of the bed, ignoring the spreading blood. 'Henry, do you know what this means?'

He frowned. 'It means they must have left by the staircase. I'll lock all the doors and windows downstairs. Stay here, Megan.'

'Wait,' she began, but he had already vanished. She heard his bare feet thudding unmusically on the steps that were as white and hard as piano keys, heard him pause as he reached the turning in the staircase and slap one palm flat against the wall to steady himself, then heard the course of his movements around the floor below.

She opened a drawer in Bunny's bedside cabinet: there was nothing inside but underwear and a gold watch.

Another held a diary and his pyjamas. He'd fallen asleep in his clothes, of course. She took the diary out and flicked through the pages. The entries had stopped almost a year ago. She put it back. Then she looked at her watch.

How long would she have to wait here, indulging Henry's makeshift display of taking control, before she could go down and confront him?

With each door that Henry closed the house became incrementally hotter, so while he'd started the process in a rush he was now moving slowly and methodically, breathing heavily and walking through each room multiple times to make sure he hadn't missed anything. The layout was confusing and he wondered why Bunny had come to live alone in a house so large. None of the rooms seemed to be the same shape or size and many had no windows. 'No light, but rather darkness visible.' It's what you do when you have money, he supposed.

He walked back to the lounge and found her there, perched on the chair he'd been sitting in and smoking one of his cigarettes. He felt he should say something playful, to delay confronting reality at least for a moment. 'All you need is the guitar and a haircut and it would be like looking in a mirror.'

Megan didn't respond.

'They've gone,' he said. 'There are plenty of windows and doors down here, of course. They could have got out any way they wanted.'

Slowly, she dropped the cigarette into an ashtray and picked up a small knife that she'd placed beside it. He hadn't even noticed it; just another slender object blending

into the sparsely decorated room. She got to her feet and held the blade out towards him, the tip pointed at his chest.

‘Don’t move,’ she said, quietly. ‘Just stay right there. We need to talk.’

Henry stepped away from her. The backs of his knees touched the chair opposite hers and he crumpled into it. She jumped at this sudden movement, and for a moment he felt powerless, gripping the arms of his chair in desperation. But she stayed where she was. ‘Are you going to kill me, Megan?’

‘Only if you make me.’

‘I could never make you do anything.’ He sighed. ‘Can you pass me a cigarette? I’m worried that if I reach for one myself I might lose a finger or two. I might end up smoking my own thumb, like a little cigar.’

She took one out of the packet and threw it towards him; he picked it up and lit it carefully. ‘Well,’ he said. ‘You’ve been looking for an argument all afternoon, but I pictured something more civilized than this. What’s the idea?’

Megan spoke with the confidence of someone who’s outsmarted their enemy. ‘You’re trying to act calm, Henry, but your hands are shaking.’

‘Maybe I’m cold. Is it me or is the Spanish summer a little nippy this year?’

‘And yet the sweat is pouring off you.’

‘What do you expect? You’ve got a knife to my face.’

‘It’s a small knife, you’re a big man. And it’s nowhere near your face. You’re shaking because you’re worried about being found out, not because you think I’ll hurt you.’

‘What are you implying?’

‘Well, here are the facts. There are five rooms upstairs. They all have bars on the windows. Thick black bars, the kind they have in cartoons. Two of the rooms have doors leading to balconies and both of those were locked. The windows, too. You checked them yourself, just now. There’s only one staircase leading up to the top floor, this one right here. Does that all sound about right?’

He nodded.

‘Then whoever murdered Bunny must have gone up that staircase.’ She pointed at the shadowed hinge of the stairs, where they turned and briefly lost all their light. ‘And come back down by it. And you’ve been sitting here at the bottom ever since we got back from lunch.’

He shrugged. ‘So what? You’re not suggesting I had anything to do with this?’

‘That’s exactly what I’m suggesting. Either you saw the killer going up that staircase, or you went up there yourself, which makes you either a murderer or an accomplice. And I don’t think you’ve been here long enough to have made any friends.’

He closed his eyes and concentrated on her words. ‘That’s nonsense. Somebody could have crept by me. I was hardly paying attention.’

‘Someone crept past you in a silent, white room? Which was it, Henry, a mouse or a ballet dancer?’

‘Then you really think I killed him?’ Her whole argument clicked into place and he stood up in protest. ‘But Megan, there’s one thing you’ve failed to mention. I may have been sitting here since lunchtime, minding my own digestion, but you’ve damn well been sitting here with me.’

She tilted her head to one side. 'That's true, mostly. But I can think of at least three times I've stepped outside for some fresh air. I wonder if that's why you've been smoking so much, to drive me out? I don't know how long it takes to plunge a knife into someone's back, but I'd imagine it can be done pretty quickly. Washing your hands afterwards probably takes up the bulk of it.'

Henry sat back down. 'My god,' he struggled to get comfortable, 'you're actually serious, aren't you? We've just found our friend lying dead upstairs and you're really suggesting that I did it? Based on what? The fact that I've been sitting near a staircase? When we've known each other for almost ten years?'

'People change.'

'Well, that's true. These days I think Shakespeare is overrated and I don't go to church any more. But I hope someone would have told me if I'd left the house without my sense of morality.'

'Don't take it so personally. I'm just connecting the dots. You've been here the whole time, haven't you?'

'Don't take it personally?' He shook his head in disbelief. 'Haven't you ever read a detective story, Megan? There's a million ways it could have been done. Maybe there's a secret passage leading upstairs.'

'This is reality, Henry. In real life, if there's only one person with motive and opportunity, then they're usually guilty.'

'Motive? And what exactly is my motive supposed to be?'

'Why did Bunny ask us here?'

'I don't know.'

‘I think you do. After five years of silence he sends both of us a letter inviting us to his house in Spain. And both of us come running. Why? Because he was planning to blackmail us. You must have known that?’

‘Blackmail us? Over what happened in Oxford?’ Henry waved away the idea. ‘It was Bunny that was driving the car.’

‘We weren’t exactly innocent though, were we?’

‘That’s nonsense. I came because he told me that you’d be here and he said that you wanted to see me. There was nothing about blackmail.’

‘Do you have his letter with you?’

‘No.’

‘Then we only have your word for it?’

He stared vacantly at the floor. ‘I still love you, Megan; that’s why I came. Bunny knew exactly what to say to get me here. I can’t believe you’d think I could do something like this.’

She was unmoved. ‘I wish I could live in your world, Henry. You’re probably picturing us breaking into song any second now.’

‘I’m just telling you how I feel.’

‘And like I said, I’m just joining the dots.’

‘Except.’

‘What?’ She looked at him suspiciously. The knife twitched in her hand. ‘Except what, Henry?’

He stood up again, one hand on his head and the other pressed against the solid white wall. Then he began to pace back and forth. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll keep my distance.’ She tensed; the tip of the knife followed his movements. ‘What if, when you went outside for a few minutes of fresh

air, I left too? I could have done. You wouldn't have known about it if I had. And then the killer could have struck.'

'And did you?'

'Yes,' he said, sitting back down. 'I went to get a book from my bedroom. That's when the killer must have got by me.'

'You're lying.'

'I'm not.'

'Yes, you are. You'd have mentioned this sooner if it was true.'

'I forgot about it, that's all.'

'Henry, stop it.' She took a step towards him. 'I'm not interested in being lied to.'

He held out his hand; it wasn't shaking. 'Well, look at that. I'm telling the truth.'

She kicked the leg of his chair and his hand became a claw as he steadied himself against the armrest. 'This conversation has gone on long enough. I just want to know what you plan to do next.'

'Well, there's no telephone here, so I was going to run down to the village and fetch the police and a doctor. But if you're planning to tell them I'm guilty, that makes it rather difficult for me, doesn't it?'

'We can worry about the police later. Right now I just want to make sure that if I put this knife down I don't end up lying on the bed next to Bunny. Why did you kill him?'

'I didn't.'

'Then who did?'

'A stranger must have broken in and killed him.'

'For what reason?'

'How would I know?'

She sat down. ‘Look, I’ll help you out here, Henry. It’s not inconceivable to me that you had some justification for doing this. Bunny could be cruel, we both know that. And reckless. I might even be able to forgive you for it, in time. But if you want me to lie for you then you should stop testing my patience. Why now? And why like this?’

‘Megan, this is madness.’ Henry closed his eyes. The heat was unbearable, with all the doors and windows closed. He felt that they were two specimens suspended in oil, being studied by someone.

‘Then you’re still protesting your innocence? Christ, we’ve been through this Henry. You’ve been tried and convicted by the jury of twelve potted plants lining the hallway. You were here the whole time. What else is there to say?’

He buried his head in his hands. ‘Just give me a moment to think.’ His lips moved silently as he went back over her accusations. ‘You’ve given me a damn headache.’ Absurdly, he reached down and took the guitar from the floor beside him. He began to pluck at its five remaining strings. ‘Could they have been hiding upstairs when we came back from lunch?’ His forehead was dripping with sweat. ‘There’s no way they could have left. Unless it was right when we got back. In fact. In fact, I think I’ve got it.’

He was on his feet again. ‘I think I now know what happened, Megan.’

She tilted her head up towards him, an inverted nod of encouragement.

‘Megan, you little spider,’ he said. ‘You little conniving snake. It was you that killed him.’

Megan looked distinctly unimpressed. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘I can see you put some thought into it. Here we are, two suspects with the same opportunity and a motive broad enough to cover both of us, so that all you have to do is deny everything and it all gets blamed on me. That way it comes down to which of us is the better actor and we both know the answer to that.’

‘As I pointed out, Henry, you’ve been sitting here all afternoon guarding your kill. So how could I have done it?’

‘There’s no need to frame me, to fake evidence. Not when you can just deny everything, until your throat dries up. That was your plan the whole time, wasn’t it? When the police arrive they’ll find two foreigners here and a dead body. One of them will be me, flustered and incoherent, trying to argue that someone might have crawled upside down along the ceiling to get up that staircase without being seen, and the other one will be you, perfectly in control, denying everything. The English rose against the brutish male. We both know who they’ll believe, and how can I convince them otherwise? I can’t even order a coffee in this damn country.’

‘That’s your theory, is it? Then how did I sneak past you, Henry? Did I crawl along the ceiling, like you suggest? Or have you come up with something more convincing in the last twenty seconds?’

‘I don’t need to. It’s the wrong question.’ He stood up and walked over to the window, no longer afraid of her. ‘It’s true that the top floor of this house is locked up tight. And that staircase is the only entrance to it. And it’s true that I’ve been sitting here all afternoon, since lunch, since Bunny went up to his bedroom. I haven’t even used the toilet. But it’s also true that when we first got back and I

was hot and dirty from the road, I went to wash. And I left you sitting here all alone, right here. And when I returned you hadn't moved. It took me about nine or ten minutes to wash my face, neck and hands; it was so brief I'd almost forgotten about it. But then how long can it take to plunge a knife into someone's back?'

'That was hours ago.'

'Three hours ago. And how long do you think he's been dead? There's blood all along the corridor.'

'We'd just come inside; he'd only just gone upstairs. He wouldn't even have been asleep by then.'

'No, but he was drunk enough that it wouldn't have mattered. Once he was face down on the mattress he was totally defenceless.'

'So that's it, is it? You're accusing me of killing him?'

Henry smiled, proud of his logic. 'That's right, I am.'

'You pathetic, gloating fool. He's dead and you want to play games about it? I know it was you. Why are you doing this?'

'I could ask you the same thing.'

Megan paused and thought the matter through. The hand holding the knife relaxed. Henry was looking out of the window now, a halo of red hills visible through the smeared glass. He was taunting her with his lack of fear; it was a way of asserting his authority.

'I see what you're doing,' she said. 'I see it quite clearly now. It's a matter of reputation, isn't it? I'm an actor. A scandal like this would ruin me. As long as there's the slightest fragment of doubt, my reputation will be shot. You think I have more to lose than you, so I'll have to cooperate?'

He swung around, suntanned by the bright daylight at his back. ‘You think this is about your professional reputation? Not everything is about your career, Megan.’

She bit her lower lip. ‘No, I don’t suppose you would admit it, would you? First you’ll show me just how stubborn you’re willing to be. And then what? When you’ve convinced me that I can’t win, that my career will be ruined if I don’t cooperate, you’ll make your proposal. You’ll come up with some kind of story and ask me to corroborate it. If that’s really what this is about, you’d be better off just telling me the truth.’

He sighed and shook his head. ‘I don’t know why you keep saying all these things. I’ve explained the circumstances of the crime. But even the best detective can’t do anything in the face of outright denial. I could pull my hair out, that’s all. But I don’t think baldness would suit me.’

She stared at him. Neither of them said anything for about a minute. Eventually she placed the knife on the table beside her and spun the tip of it away from him.

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘Pick up your guitar and keep playing. I’m accusing you and you’re accusing me, that’s obviously the situation we’re in. But if you think that I’m the kind of woman that will crack and be convinced the sky is green just because a man says so, then you’ve underestimated me.’

‘And if you think you can just put your foot down and flutter your eyelashes and I’ll sing like a bird, then you’ve overestimated your powers.’

‘Oh,’ Megan blinked, ‘but I thought you still loved me?’

Henry sat down in the chair opposite hers. ‘I do, that’s

what makes this so maddening. I'll forgive you for everything, if you'll just admit that you killed him.'

'Then let's talk about something we've never talked about before.' She picked up the knife again; real fear showed in his eyes for a moment. 'You have a violent side, Henry. I've seen you drunk, I've seen you starting fights with strangers because you didn't like the way they were looking at me. I've seen you shouting and screaming and smashing glasses. Are you going to deny all of that, too?'

He stared at the floor. 'No, but that was a long time ago.'

'And did you ever see me behaving like that?'

'Maybe not, but you can be cruel.'

'A sharp tongue never killed anybody.'

He shrugged. 'So I have a short temper. Is that why you wouldn't marry me?'

'Not entirely. But it didn't help.'

'I was drinking a lot in those days.'

'You were drinking a lot at lunch.'

'Not a lot. Not like back then.'

'It was enough, clearly.'

Henry sighed. 'If I'd wanted to kill Bunny I'd have done it in a better way than this.'

'Henry, I know it was you. We both know it was you. What are you trying to convince me of, exactly? That I'm going mad?'

'I could say the same thing, couldn't I?'

'No, you couldn't.' She picked up the small knife and stabbed it into the arm of her chair; it went straight through the upholstery and stuck in the wood. 'Bunny is upstairs dripping like a tap, and we're just sitting here arguing.'

What are the police going to think when they find out how we've spent the afternoon?'

'This is like a bad dream.'

Megan rolled her eyes. 'Another cheap metaphor.'

'Well, if this is the way we're spending the afternoon, I'd like to have a drink in my hand. Would you care to join me?'

'You're sick,' she said. And he poured himself a whiskey.

Half an hour later nothing had changed; they'd gone over the situation several times and come to no conclusion.

Henry had finished his drink; he was holding the empty glass up in front of his eyes, looking through it at the squashed and hollow room, moving his hand from side to side. Megan watched him, wondering how he could be so easily distracted.

Henry looked over at her. 'I'll have one more and then I'm done. Would you care to join me?'

The doors and windows were still shut and the room was stifling. It was as if they'd agreed to inflict it on themselves as a punishment.

She nodded. 'I'll have a drink with you.'

He grunted and walked over to the cabinet. He filled two large glasses from the tall decanter of whiskey. It was warm, of course. He took one in his hand, swirled it rhythmically, and passed the other to her. Her eyes widened at the size of it, two thirds full. 'One last drink,' he said.

'We need to discuss what to do next,' said Megan, 'assuming neither of us is going to confess. Do we need to

involve the police at all? Nobody knows we're here. Maybe we can just leave in the night?

Henry sipped his drink in silence. They sat like that for several minutes, Megan shielding her glass with her hand. When she finally lifted it to her mouth, she paused before putting it to her lips. 'How do I know this isn't poisoned?'

'We can swap glasses,' he said.

She shrugged. The conversation didn't seem worth the exertion. She took a tiny sip. 'Tastes fine,' she said. He was staring at her in silence, in a way that made her uncomfortable. 'On the other hand, for the avoidance of doubt.' He sighed and handed her his glass; she took it and gave him hers.

He sat back in his chair, exhausted, and raised his glass. 'To Bunny.'

'To Bunny, then.'

The whiskey was as orange and fiery as the impending sunset. Henry lifted the guitar again and picked out the same clumsy tune as before. 'We're back where we started,' he sighed.

'Like I said, we need to discuss what happens next.'

'You want me to say we can just run away together and pretend we were never here? Like last time. That was your plan all along, was it?'

'Why are you doing this to me?' Megan put down her glass and shook her head. 'Is it because I called off our engagement? But that was so long ago.'

Sipping from his drink had become Henry's primary means of punctuating the conversation. But in response to this he put the time in and lit a cigarette. 'I'll say it again, Megan. I do still love you.'

‘That’s nice to know.’ She looked at him expectantly. ‘Are you feeling dizzy yet, Henry?’

At first he was puzzled, then he glanced at his glass. He’d drained it all the way to the bottom, except for the final half-inch. He reached for it and found that his left arm was almost asleep. His shapeless, clumsy hand knocked the glass to the floor where it smashed, a brown circle on the white tiles. He looked back at her. ‘What did you do?’

The cigarette fell from his mouth and into the body of the guitar, leaving a spiral of smoke creeping up between the strings. Her face showed no emotion, just a hint of concern.

‘Megan.’

He tumbled forward off the chair, half of his body frozen. The guitar bounced to one side. He lay face down on the white floor, shaking without rhythm. Saliva pooled on the tile in front of his chin.

‘That’s the thing about lying, Henry.’ She stood up and towered over him. ‘Once you start, you can’t stop. You have to follow it where it takes you.’