

## **“Thea’s First Husband”**

by **B. K. Stevens**

*Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, June 2012

She had learned to brace herself against it. It happened whenever they met new people—sometimes at large social events connected to his firm, more often at the charity dinners and political fundraisers he’d grown so fond of attending. They’d be greeting clients from out of town, or sitting down at a table with an unfamiliar couple, or meeting the guest of honor in a receiving line, and that sly look she’d grown to know so well would come into his eyes.

“This is my lovely wife, Thea Hanover,” he would say, reaching out to shake hands. “And I’m Edward Hanover.” He would pause then, for three seconds. “I’m Thea’s first husband.”

Usually, people didn’t get it. Usually, they’d just look confused, and nod, and introduce themselves. But too often someone—usually, a woman—would be tactless enough, or innocent enough, to press for clarification. “Oh,” she’d say. “Then you’re divorced?”

That was what Edward always seemed to be hoping for. He’d smile, and the sly look in his eyes would morph to delight. “No, we’re not divorced,” he would say, and he’d pause again, again for three seconds. “I’m just a realist.”

Usually, people got it then. They’d look at her, and they’d look at him, and they’d get it. Most would just smile awkwardly and make some neutral remark. But some of the men would chuckle, and some of the women would give her a pained, pitying look.

She hated it. She’d asked him to stop doing it, a hundred times. “You make it sound as if I married you for your money,” she’d say, “as if I’m itching to move on. People will think I’m a gold digger.”

“It’s just my little joke, Thea,” he’d say. “Don’t worry about what people think.” Then, again, he’d pause. “And with a man my age, a woman your age—I’m just saying what they’d think anyway. And, of course, I *do* expect you to have another husband some day, when the time comes. You’ll still have so much of your life left—I wouldn’t expect you to spend all those years alone.” He’d turn to her then, and look at her hard. “And I don’t expect you to move on too soon, no matter how much you might be itching to. Not considering the way things are settled.”

The worst part was that she hadn’t married him for his money, not really. She’d married him, more or less, for love.

Even so, almost from the beginning, it had been hard. The first year or so was fine—not exciting, she’d never expected that, but pleasant and companionable, with his big new house to decorate and the fun of having a clothing allowance so large that she usually had something left over at the end of the month. As often as he could manage, he’d come shopping with her. He never begrudged her anything, always urged her to get more; he seemed to enjoy buying things for her, just as he enjoyed getting things for the house. But then, for no reason she could see, she felt him drawing away, seeming less pleased with her, less open. Before the second year ended, he was making the joke. Then he started bringing young men home.

Scott Crawford, a junior partner at Edward’s law firm, was the first. Edward invited him to dinner but didn’t ask Thea to cook, even though she liked to cook, even though she’d started cooking at her parents’ restaurant as a teenager and was at least as good as the personal chef Edward now shared with two other senior

partners. Clearly, though, Edward didn't want Scott Crawford to see her as a cook. Before he left for the office that morning, Edward gave her instructions. She was to have her hair and nails done and to wear the red silk dress he'd special-ordered from the designer in Hong Kong. She was to wait upstairs until after Edward arrived with Scott Crawford, and then, while they were drinking Scotch in the great room, she was to walk down the broad, highly polished staircase and join them.

She played her part. He won't make the joke tonight, she told herself. It would be ridiculous—Scott Crawford obviously knows him already, so there's no reason for Edward to introduce himself. The men stood by the fireplace; Edward was pointing to the new Picasso sketch above the mantel, and Scott Crawford, glass in hand, was nodding in admiration. When she was halfway down the staircase, both men looked up at her, and Edward swept out his arm to take Thea in.

"At last!" he said. "Scott, this is my lovely wife, Thea." He paused. "And I, of course, am Thea's first husband."

Scott Crawford got it instantly; Thea could see that in his eyes. But he didn't comment, and didn't chuckle, and didn't give her a pained look.

At dinner, Edward told Thea about Scott's charity work. "His mother runs this remarkable foundation, Music Matters. It provides free after-school music lessons for inner-city young people. And on Saturdays, it brings them together for choral and instrumental groups. Scott coordinates the Saturday programs himself."

"That's wonderful," Thea said, smiling at Scott Crawford. He was about Thea's age, and nice looking—perhaps not handsome, not technically, but there was nothing wrong with the way he looked, and Thea felt glad about having him at the table, about being able to glance at him from time to time. "That must be very satisfying."

"It is," Scott said. "Those kids—week after week, they surprise me with what they can do, with how dedicated they are."

"Maybe you'd enjoy getting involved in that, Thea," Edward suggested. "I'm sure Scott could use some help on Saturdays—with making phone calls, and filing, and so forth. You could do that."

I can do more than make phone calls and file things, she thought, but smiled. "You've always said you don't want me to work."

"I haven't wanted you to work for a salary," he said, "since there's no need for that, and since it wouldn't be right for you to take a paying position away from someone who *does* need it. But volunteer work—that's perfectly appropriate. After all, Thea, you can't do nothing but shop all day, every day."

As if I've never done anything but shop, she thought; as if I didn't work fifty hours a week, more than fifty, until I married you. She smiled again. "That's true."

"So, how about it, Scott?" Edward said. "Wouldn't you like to have Thea help on Saturdays?"

Scott looked at them, at the senior partner and his beautiful young wife. "Sure," he said. "We're in good shape for volunteers right now, but we can always use more. If Thea's interested, my mother and I would be glad to have her help."

So every Saturday, for the next five weeks, Thea joined Scott in the cramped office of the community center where the choral and instrumental groups met. They were never alone together for long: His mother would pop in often, and so would his sister, and his friends, and the wives of his friends. Usually, they didn't have any particular reason for popping in; Thea got the feeling that Scott had

asked them to pop in, that they were popping in to make a point. But she enjoyed those Saturdays, enjoyed doing the simple tasks Scott found for her, enjoyed listening to the music groups practice, enjoyed chatting with the children when there was nothing left for her to do. On the fifth Saturday, when for once she and Scott were alone in the office, he turned away from his computer and smiled.

"How did you and Edward meet?" he asked.

She laughed. It was the first personal question he'd ever asked her. "Oh, I was tending bar at this place in the Flats. And he started dropping by, almost every night. I don't know—maybe he thought it had local color or something, but really it was just a dive. Anyhow, we'd talk, and he was so smart and funny; I liked listening to him. Then he asked me to dinner, and then—well, that's how it started."

Scott nodded. "And he was already divorced?"

"Oh, yes," Thea said. "For years and years. Did you know, he invited his ex-wife to our wedding? That seemed odd—it was such a small wedding. But she came, with her new husband. Well, not so new—they've been married for years and years, ever since the divorce. Anyhow, I talked to her after the ceremony. I thought she might be mean to me, but she was nice. She seemed really smart."

He grimaced. "Another slick, overeducated lawyer. The world probably has too many of us." He was silent for a moment. "I've been thinking, Thea. There isn't much for you to do here on Saturdays. You must be bored. How about coming on Thursday afternoons instead? I won't be here—I'll be at work—but you'd be a big help to the administrative assistant, Sharon. You'll like her. How does that sound?"

It sounded a little sad. She'd come to look forward to these Saturdays, to listening to the children play and sing, to spending time with Scott, who was always so nice to her. But she felt this was a good decision; for reasons she couldn't quite understand, she felt relieved. "Of course," she said. "If I can help more on Thursdays, that's when I'll come. I won't come on Saturdays anymore."

But Edward didn't like having her go to the center on Thursdays. After two weeks, he decided it was a bad neighborhood, and sooner or later someone was bound to snatch her purse. That was the end of volunteering for Music Matters. Over the next few months, Edward brought more young men home for dinner, young men who worked for political candidates he contributed to or charities he supported. Always, Edward offered them Thea's services as a volunteer; always, she found a way to say no. She was irritating him. She could see that, but she felt saying no was the smart thing to do.

Then, one morning at breakfast, Edward put down his newspaper. "You should get a personal trainer," he said.

She pressed down her spoon, easing out another section of grapefruit. "I don't need one. I've got my spinning class, my yoga class—I go to the club every day to swim and work out on the machines. I weighed myself this morning, Edward. I'm eight pounds lighter than on the day we got married." She knew being thin was important, even though he'd never said a word about it, even though she'd always been thin. After he'd started drawing away from her, she'd worked hard to lose those eight pounds, even though she hadn't needed to. She'd thought, somehow, it might help. It hadn't.

"Oh, I know," Edward said. "And you look fine. But all my friends' wives have personal trainers."

So this was about having the things his friends had. She understood about that. She sighed. "All right. After Andre comes here for his sessions with you, he can work with me."

"No. Andre works with men; he doesn't have much experience with women. And the gym downstairs isn't set up for you—the weights are too heavy. You should have a personal trainer at the club."

Maybe she could use this. "You're right. My sister's wedding is barely three months away—I want to look my best for that. Maybe, if I lose five more pounds before the wedding, you'll think about—"

"This isn't about your weight, Thea." Edward snapped his newspaper back into position. "And it certainly isn't about your sister's wedding. We've been over that. If you feel you must attend, you may, but I have no intention of going. I loathe Buffalo, and weddings bore me. Now, I've heard good things about a trainer named Tony; some of my friends' wives use him. I'll set up a session for this afternoon."

It was settled. At three o' clock, she went to the club and had her first session with Tony. He was just her age—thirty-two—and he was magnificent. He was muscular, but not in an exaggerated way. His chin-length light brown hair was streaked with gold, so subtly that it must be natural, or at least expensive; and any attempt to find fault with his eyes, nose, mouth, or chin would just be silly. They met, five times a week, in a small room near the main gym. When Thea leaned over to touch her toes, his hands rested lightly on her hips, then moved down to close on her thighs; when she reached up to stretch, his hands followed the movement of her body, brushing softly against her breasts. He never said much. He didn't have to. By Monday of the third week, she wore a leotard instead of sweatpants, and she spent half an hour on her hair and makeup before heading for the club.

That was the day that he paused when she stretched, that his hands eased forward to cover her breasts, that he turned her around to face him and put his arms around her waist, drawing her close against him. She put her arms around his neck, tilted her head back, and closed her eyes.

"Excuse me," a man said, opening the door to the small room. He was short and dark and wiry, with sharp little eyes and a jutting chin. "Oops—am I interrupting? I thought I had a session scheduled in here, but maybe not. Say, you're Thea Hanover, aren't you? Hi—I'm Paul Addison. I'm a friend of Edward's. Gosh—it's been a long time since I've seen you. Can I buy you a lemonade, or a green tea, or whatever they serve in that café downstairs?"

"Fine." Thea backed away from Tony. Paul Addison—the name meant nothing to her, and his face didn't register. But Edward knew so many people; there had been so many introductions over the past three years, often so humiliating that she couldn't focus on the faces of the people she was meeting. Tony looked at her helplessly, then ambled off. Too bad—she'd been so ready, not necessarily for going all the way, though she'd taken note of two decent-looking motels on the drive to the club, just in case. Well, she'd be back tomorrow.

She slipped into her jacket and followed Paul Addison to the café, smiling as he bought her a cranberry juice. "It's nice to see you again," she said, sitting down across from him in a bright orange booth. "I'll tell Edward you—"

"Don't do it, Thea." He took a sip of his pomegranate yogurt shake and winced. He leaned forward, his arms folded on the table. "Not over a jerk like Tony

Gleason. You handled the Scott Crawford situation real well—or maybe he handled it, maybe you just followed his lead. But at least you had enough sense to see the situation couldn't go any place good. You should've seen that this time, too—it's a lot more obvious this time."

She grasped her plastic bottle of cranberry juice in both hands. Damn, she thought. Damn, damn, damn. "Who are you? How do you know about Scott?"

"Like I told you," he said, "my name's Paul Addison. What I didn't tell you is I'm a private detective, and six months ago your husband hired me to watch you. So I watched you when you were with Scott, and I watch you when you're with Tony. I watch you pretty much all the time when you're not with Edward."

This was it—the disaster she'd dreaded vaguely for months, though she hadn't been able to put a name to it until now. "Bastard," she said, and started to get up.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her back into the booth. "Think about it, Thea. I didn't have to tell you. I could've let you make a fool of yourself with Tony, taken pictures, and collected a fat fee. But I didn't. I decided to help you—to warn you. You know how Edward found out about Tony, why he wanted you to work with Tony? It's not because his friends' wives use Tony. His friends' wives are too smart to go anywhere near Tony. Tony's a whore, Thea. He plays up to rich women—to wives of rich men. He screws them, and then he squeezes them for money by threatening to tell their husbands. One wife stopped paying, and sure enough, her husband found out. Edward's firm is representing the husband in the divorce. That's how Edward found out about Tony."

She pressed her hand against her forehead. Scott, Tony, all the young men who had come to dinner—was that why? But that's so mean, she thought. "He's been testing me," she said. "But why? I've never given him one reason not to trust me."

"You came damn close to giving him a reason five minutes ago," Paul pointed out. "But it's okay. I stopped you before you crossed the line. He never has to know."

"Not if I pay you." Thea started to get angry again. "That's why you stopped me. Instead of paying Tony, I pay you."

"Nah, you don't have to pay me." Paul gave his pomegranate shake another try before pushing it aside. "Edward pays me plenty. As long as you don't actually screw anyone, this job could go on forever. And in lots of ways, it's easier than most jobs I've done. Not in all ways. I'll tell you the truth, Thea. In my line of work, lots of the jobs I do sort of turn my stomach. This one turns my stomach more than most. I hate to tell you, but your husband's a son of a bitch."

"He's not." Ridiculously, she felt tears coming to her eyes, and wiped them away with her fist. "He's nice. At least, he used to be nice. And then—I don't know why things changed. I don't know what I did wrong."

Paul looked at her for a long time; she thought she saw real sympathy in his eyes. "I don't think it's anything you did," he said at last. "I think it's what he did; I think it's who he is. His mother lived too long. Edward had to wait too long to be rich."

She shook her head. "He's always been rich."

"By your standards, sure," Paul said. "By my standards, definitely. Successful lawyer, big practice—and his first wife made even more than he did. They lived pretty well. And when she left him for another man, she didn't ask for a penny. Lucky guy. But he didn't come into the real money until his mother died four years ago. By then, I think he felt entitled to—well, he's an interesting guy, I've spent lots of time trying to figure him out, but you don't want to hear my theories.

The point is, I don't think all this has much to do with you. I think it has to do with his first wife cheating on him, and with him going a little overboard when he finally got his mother's money, and with him afterwards feeling like maybe he'd been a fool."

She tried to fit all that in with the way Edward had treated her. The money part didn't make sense; Edward had always been rich. And the other part wasn't her fault. "I knew his first wife cheated on him," she said. "I'm sure that hurt him, and I'm sorry. But *I* never cheated. I mean, Tony, yes, but that wouldn't have happened if Edward hadn't pushed me to—I mean, why did Edward do that? It wasn't fair."

"No, it wasn't," Paul agreed. "If you left him, I wouldn't blame you."

She thought about that, not for long. "No, I don't want to leave him."

"I figured you wouldn't. I know about the prenup. If you get divorced, you get just about nothing. If you stick it out, you get just about everything."

"It's not just the prenup," she said, though she had to admit she'd come to love living in that house, and not going to work, and having the clerks in all the stores be nice to her. But it was also not wanting to go to her sister's wedding as someone whose marriage hadn't worked out, after her parents had told her to be careful, after her sister told her flat-out she was making a mistake. And Edward could still be nice, especially when it was just the two of them, at night, when he could still make her feel so pretty and special. "I like my husband—I love him. I want to make things good again."

"So confront him. Don't mention me—just say you figured out what he's been up to with Scott and Tony and the rest. Say you resent it, and he'd damn well better stop."

Confront Edward? No. He'd make her feel stupid—he could always turn whatever she said against her. Or he'd get mad and silent, and that would be so unpleasant. She shook her head. "I can't. He's too smart—it'd be too hard." She looked at Paul more closely. "You've really been watching me for six months? But I never even saw you before today."

"That's pretty much the goal when you're watching someone." He smiled at her, his sharp little eyes sparkling. "Thanks. You just paid me a nice compliment."

"And you really don't want money from me?"

"I really don't. Like I said, in lots of ways, this is an easy job. Now that I won't feel like I'm setting you up, it'll be easier. I'll just keep following you around to all the fancy places you go, drinking espresso and every so often taking pictures of you doing nothing in particular. It's safe, it's pleasant, and Edward pays well—I got no complaints."

She thought that over. "It sounds a little creepy."

"A little," he admitted. "But you'll get used to it. So, what'll you do about Tony?"

"I'll never see him again," she said promptly. "I'll report him to the club for trying to take advantage of me. I'll tell Edward—"

"Let's think about this," Paul cut in. "So far, I've been telling him there's nothing going on between Tony and you, that it's all sit-ups and jumping jacks and things like that. We're gonna have to account for the change—we're gonna have to work out a narrative. I should take pictures. And you shouldn't be wearing a leotard when I take them, and your hair shouldn't look so nice."

Thea blushed. "What should I do?"

He pursed his lips. "Come to the club tomorrow. Wear sweat pants, pull your hair back, don't wear makeup. Tony won't care—it's not the leotard that turns him on. Lead him on a little. When he makes his move, smack him in the face, run out of the room, and go home. When you see Edward, tell him you're switching to another club, but don't say why. Act sorta upset, but just say you don't like this club anymore."

"But you said you want to take pictures," Thea objected. "Tony and I always work out in a private room, with the door closed. How can you—oh."

"Yeah, I've got a camera set up. A bug too. How do you think I knew just when to barge in? Now, leading Tony on, acting upset for Edward—can you pull that off?"

Thea smiled slightly. "I had the lead in my high-school play, junior year. That's when I decided to drop out and head for Hollywood. I got as far west as Cleveland."

"Then you can pull it off." Paul grinned. "Afterwards, I'll call Edward, show him the picture of you smacking Tony, describe how shocked you were. Maybe he'll report Tony to the club, but I bet he'll let it go—he won't want to come that close to scandal. Well, that should work." He stood up. "See you around, Thea."

"But I won't see you," she said, and felt a little sad. Paul could be crude, and he had strange ideas about Edward. But really, he'd been very nice.

The plan worked as Paul had predicted. She enjoyed smacking Tony. At dinner that night, Edward got exasperated when she wouldn't explain why she'd decided to switch clubs. When he came home the next night, though, he gave her emerald earrings. Paul must have done a good job when he made his report, she thought, smiling at herself in the mirror, admiring the way the emeralds complemented the traces of hazel in her eyes. Her matron-of-honor dress was pale green; she could wear the earrings to her sister's wedding, as fresh proof of how much her husband loved her.

She went about her business—shopping, working out at her new club, sometimes having lunch with wives of Edward's friends. It felt odd, knowing Paul Addison was watching her. But it didn't feel bad. It felt almost comforting. Ever since she'd married Edward, she'd often felt lonely. She saw lots of people, but they were all people she knew through Edward. She couldn't really talk to any of them. Paul felt like a friendlier presence, even though she never saw him. My guardian angel, she thought once, and felt embarrassed that it had occurred to her; but from time to time, she found herself thinking it again.

She hoped things would get better with Edward, now that she'd proved herself with Tony—or, at least, seemed to prove herself. He didn't seem any warmer, though, and he still cut her off whenever she mentioned her sister's wedding. The real test, she decided, would be the retirement dinner for Marty Thompson, a senior partner at Edward's firm. Everyone from the firm was coming, and there would be new people, too, Marty's out-of-town relatives. There would be introductions. If Edward doesn't make the joke, Thea thought, that means things are better.

She dressed carefully—the new earrings, of course, and an off-the-shoulder soft black dress with a demurely flaring skirt. She looked just the way Edward liked her to look—sophisticated, sexy in an understated way, more glamorous than the other wives but not showy. When she came downstairs, Edward lifted his eyebrows and said she looked nice. Maybe this would be a good night.

At the country club, Marty stood near the door of the banquet room, his chunky old wife standing next to him, wearing some drab powder-blue thing. His out-of-town relatives clustered nearby, along with half a dozen partners and associates from the firm; they all had glasses in their hands. Marty seemed to be handling the introductions himself. So this wouldn't be a test for Edward after all. Thea felt slightly disappointed, slightly relieved.

Marty waved broadly when he spotted them. "Folks," he said, "this lovely young woman is Thea Hanover. And this reasonably well-preserved specimen is Edward Hanover." Marty paused for three seconds. "Edward is Thea's first husband."

All the partners and associates laughed—loudly, without reservation. The out-of-town relatives laughed, too, though some looked confused, not sure of why they were laughing. Edward's laugh was the loudest and lasted the longest. Then he shrugged, lifting both hands to shoulder height and spreading his fingers. "What can I say? I can't deny it—I'm a realist. Marty, you son of a gun."

Willing herself to smile, Thea didn't let her shoulders stiffen too much. They all know the joke, she thought. Every single person in this firm knows the joke. Every single person knows it's all right to laugh at me.

Finally, someone else arrived, and attention shifted. She detached herself from Edward and found the bar. White wine, she thought. I should ask for white wine, take one sip, and then just hold the glass in my hand until dinner starts.

She asked for a double Bourbon, straight up, and walked to the window overlooking the river. She stared out at nothing and drained her drink. I hate him, she thought. He's a horrible person. I wish he were dead. I hate him.

Someone touched her arm, and she turned to see Scott Crawford. "I was thinking about you the other day," he said. "Remember La'Sheka, that tiny girl who could barely hoist her cello onto the stage? She played a solo at the spring concert—it went very well. Afterwards, she came over to me and said, 'I wish Miss Thea had been here. Miss Thea always liked my music.' "

Coming on such a night, the unexpected sweetness of it made her want to cry. But the last three years had taught her self-control. She smiled. "What a nice thing for her to say. I hope the children don't think I lost interest in them."

"No, I'm sure they don't think that." He drank some Scotch and looked at her. "How have you been, Thea? How are things going?"

"Oh, fine." She wished she had some new accomplishment to tell him about, some new interest to describe. But she couldn't talk to him about shopping or working out or going to lunch, and she hadn't been doing anything else. She never did anything else. sister's getting married in three weeks, in Buffalo; I've been very busy getting ready for that. How about you? Are you handling any big cases?"

He half laughed. "Nothing very big, nothing very interesting. Music Matters, though—that's thriving. We're thinking of starting two new groups, a string quartet and an a cappella choir. First, though, my mother has to raise money to pay the teachers. Well, if anybody can do it, she can."

She was about to reply when Edward walked over, smiling placidly. "I see you two have found each other. How nice. How's that foundation doing, Scott?"

Did Scott flinch? Probably not—probably, Thea had imagined it. "Very well. I was just telling Thea we're thinking of expanding, if we can find the money."

Tilting his head back, Edward laughed briefly. "That sounds like an appeal for a check. Happy to oblige. And if you're expanding, maybe you can use Thea on Saturdays again. How about it, Thea? Feel like doing something useful?"



“No.” Was it the Bourbon giving her courage, or the humiliation and anger and hatred? “There wasn’t enough for me to do on Saturdays. It was boring. I could go on Thursdays. There’s more for me to do.”

Edward frowned. “I told you, I don’t want you to go to that neighborhood in the afternoons. And on Thursdays, Scott won’t be there to protect you.”

“It’s perfectly safe.” She turned her back on him. “Scott, please tell Sharon I’ll volunteer on Thursdays again. I’ll start this week.”

Clearly, Edward didn’t like it. But he wouldn’t stoop to arguing with her. During the following days, they barely spoke to each other. At breakfast, at dinner, they sat at the table and said nothing beyond routine inquiries and terse responses. As she ate, the sentences that had first come to her as she stood by the window kept going through her mind: I hate him. He’s a horrible person. I wish he were dead. I hate him. The words became a mantra; it felt comforting to hear herself think them. Could Edward sense that something had changed, that she hated him now? Thea hardly cared.

On Thursday, she went to the community center, helped Sharon in the office, and purposely stayed later than usual, stayed until well after it had started to turn dark. She’d had to park two blocks away from the center, and she felt nervous as she walked those two blocks, feeling the sharp chill in the air, noticing how few people were left on the street, how unsavory those few looked.

And then a man wearing a hooded jacket stepped out of an alley and grabbed her, pulling her into the alley, shoving her hard against the brick wall of a crumbling building. She started to scream, but he struck her in the face, shocking her into silence, and tore her purse from her hand. When she tried to pull away, he hit her again and ripped her coat open, his hand on her throat now, reaching for the braided gold necklace Edward gave her for Christmas. He’ll kill me, she thought. After he takes the necklace, he’ll kill me.

But someone pulled the man away from her, punching him in the face and the stomach. The man in the hooded jacket punched too. The other man punched again, snatched her purse back, and let it fall to the pavement. The man in the hooded jacket ran away, and the other man ran after him.

Thea sank down sobbing, too terrified and exhausted to think about what had happened, clutching her purse to her chest, putting her hand to her throat to feel that the necklace was still there. The other man ran back, slightly out of breath, and crouched next to her, putting his hands on her shoulders. It was Paul Addison, the private detective.

“The bastard got away,” he said. “Are you all right, Thea? Did he hurt you?”

She stared at him blankly. My guardian angel, she thought; this time, the phrase didn’t embarrass her. “Thank God he didn’t get my purse,” she said, “or my necklace. Edward would’ve been so mad.”

Paul chuckled. “That’s one hell of a thing to be thinking about at a time like this. Can you stand up? Here, let me look at you. You sure you’re okay?”

He pulled her coat together and rebuttoned it, smoothed her hair back from her face. She looked at him gratefully. “I’m fine. Thank you, Paul. I’ll never be able to thank you enough. And can you please not tell Edward? He’ll say that it proves he was right about coming here in the afternoon, that I—”

“Forget it.” He gave her a quick, warm smile. “Edward will never know. But you should pull yourself together before you go home. How about a drink? I know a decent place, not far from here.”

"That sounds wonderful." He walked her to her car and gave her directions, and five minutes later she joined him in the bar—just one room, long and narrow and dimly lit, warm with the smells of onion rings and barbecue sauce. She felt instantly at home. Paul sat at a back table; he'd already ordered a double Bourbon for her, a gin and tonic for himself. She sat down across from him, smiling shakily.

"How did you know I like Bourbon?" she asked.

"Oh, I know lots of things about you." He took a sip of his drink. "So, how have you been, Thea? How are things going?"

The same questions Scott Crawford had asked her. But this time, she felt she could tell the truth. "Things are worse. After you showed Edward the pictures of me and Tony, he gave me emerald earrings, really nice ones, and I thought that was a good sign. But then, at this party, he laughed at me—everyone laughed at me, like I'm some big joke. And he still doesn't trust me, and he barely talks to me."

Paul nodded slowly. "Why did you marry him? You didn't love him, did you?"

"I thought I might." She took a long drink. It felt wonderful to be this honest with someone. "I liked him, anyhow. Before we were married, we had some good times. He was funny—not crude, like so many guys, but witty, you know?" She paused and took another sip. "And I was tired—tired of living in crummy apartments and never being able to buy nice things, tired of working so hard day after day and still being broke before the end of the month. And I was tired of being with men who said they loved me and wanted to marry me but just sponged off me and then dumped me without paying me back. Edward seemed different—he *was* different. I wasn't crazy about him. But all the men I'd been crazy about turned out to be such losers. I thought Edward and I could just be nice to each other, and it would be all right."

"But it hasn't been all right." He met her gaze directly. "You could leave him. Forget the prenup, forget the money. Just leave him, and find someone who can appreciate you."

Was Paul talking about himself? Was he asking her to leave Edward and come to him? For thirty seconds, she let herself think about it; it felt exciting. She liked Paul but didn't know if she could love him, and she couldn't see giving everything else up, not for a man who might turn out to be no different from the others. She shook her head. "I don't think that'd be smart."

"Probably not," he agreed. "Well, I'm glad I could be there for you today."

"Yes, thank you for that," she said. "If you hadn't been—oh, my God. So you were waiting outside the center, the whole time I was there?"

"No, most of the time I was inside. It gets pretty cold waiting in my car. Besides, I had to keep an eye on you, so I could tell Edward you weren't doing anything nasty."

That made her wince. "But how did you get inside? After the children arrive, Sharon locks the doors."

He shrugged. "Any private detective worth his salt can get past pretty much any lock. And the center doesn't have a security system—not enough worth stealing, I guess. Security systems are tough. The one at your house, for example—I got a look at that one time when Edward had me come over to make a report, and it's top of the line. I couldn't get past that. I'd have to know the keypad code."

Why had he mentioned that? Suddenly, she didn't feel so comfortable with Paul anymore. She finished her drink. "I'd better get home. Thank you, Paul."

"No problem. Say, you're going shopping tomorrow, right? Still looking for the perfect wedding gift for your sister? What do you say we have lunch? "

"That sounds nice," she said, "But what if someone's watching?"

"Hey, *I'm* the one who's watching. And I'm not telling Edward a thing. So, lunch tomorrow?"

He'd saved her purse, maybe so much more than her purse. How could she say no? She said yes, and the next day she said yes again, and then they were meeting every day for lunch or drinks. He urged her to talk about Edward, and she told stories about him, laughing at him, not feeling guilty when Paul joined in. "He's so vain about his looks," she said. "And really, for someone his age, he *does* look good. He wants to stay in shape, but he won't go to a club—I think he doesn't want to compare himself to younger men, more muscular men. So he's got all this equipment in the basement, and he works out just about every night, sometimes until after midnight."

Paul chewed on his Reuben. "What sorts of equipment?"

"Oh, every kind. A treadmill, free weights, a stationary bike—"

"Free weights? Those can be dangerous."

"Well, he doesn't use them unless his personal trainer's there to spot for him. His name is Andre. He has the funniest accent; I don't know if it's French, or what."

She told two amusing stories about Andre, but Paul didn't seem especially interested. "Edward seems sort of paranoid," he said, more or less out of nowhere.

"I guess," she said, confused. "He must be, if he's so worried about me cheating on him."

"Yeah, there's that. And that fancy security system he has. Is that because he has all those paintings?"

"He *does* have a lot," she said. "He likes to show them off when people come over."

"I bet," Paul said. "So, he's vain. I bet he chose his birthdate for the keypad code, didn't he?"

He shouldn't ask that, she thought. I shouldn't answer. But she couldn't help laughing. "Even worse. I suggested using our wedding date—we'd just been married, and I thought it'd be romantic. But it had to be all about him." Stop talking about this, she told herself, though she had an inexplicable urge to tell him the rest. "We can't meet for lunch tomorrow. I'm leaving for Buffalo."

"I know," he said. "I'm going, too—Edward wants me to make sure you don't screw any old high-school sweethearts."

Even at my sister's wedding, she thought angrily. He doesn't trust me to be decent, not even there. I hate him. He's a horrible person. I wish he were dead. I hate him. "That bastard," she said.

"That sums it up," Paul agreed. "But I won't embarrass you—you'll never even know I'm there." He reached across the table, resting his hand on hers. It was the first time he'd touched her since he put his hands on her shoulders after saving her from the man in the hooded jacket. "Do you ever think about it, Thea? Do you wonder what it would be like if you came back from Buffalo and Edward just wasn't there? Do you wonder how it would feel if you had that whole house to yourself, if you were free?"

For just a few seconds, she let herself think about it. Then she shook her head. "That isn't going to happen."

“Of course not,” Paul agreed. “So, you said the keypad code had to be all about him. His social security number? The date he graduated from law school? I bet it’s really funny. Come on, Thea. I could use a laugh.”

Paul’s hand was still warm on hers. To be free, she thought. No more tests, no more cold silences, no more jokes. “The date he made senior partner.” She heard herself say the words and felt cold clear through. She pulled her hand away. “I have to go,” she said, and left. I didn’t tell him the numbers, she thought. He doesn’t know when Edward made senior partner. And we were just joking around.

That night, she asked Edward, again, if he’d come to Buffalo—not that she’d enjoy having him with her, just that it would feel good to go to her sister’s wedding with an escort. But Edward wouldn’t give her that small pleasure. She’d have to go as a woman whose husband didn’t care enough about her to take her to her sister’s wedding. In the morning, she packed carefully—her most expensive dresses, her nicest shoes, the emerald earrings and her other best jewelry in a cloth case she could carry in her purse. Edward was too busy to drive her to the airport, so she took a cab. And Paul will be there, she thought. It would be almost like having an escort—an escort no one could see, but an escort all the same.

At the baggage claim in Buffalo, Thea’s sister waited with her fiancé and two cousins. They had balloons and a pink and purple welcome sign; when they spotted Thea, Ginny and the cousins made a run for her, shrieking, and enveloped her in hugs. The fiancé, whom Thea hadn’t met before, held his hand out awkwardly; but when Ginny slapped him between the shoulders and called him an idiot, he grinned, embracing Thea quickly and kissing her cheek. He was a mechanic; Ginny had told her that he’d been saving his money, that he’d made the first payment on his own shop. Ginny would manage the convenience store attached to it, making the coffee and doing the books.

They scooped Thea up and took her to her parents’ house, where her mother was frantically making potato salad for the rehearsal dinner but paused to take Thea in her arms, look deep into her eyes, and say she looked too thin. Her father came in from raking the backyard and insisted on carrying her suitcases up to her old bedroom, where a cot was crammed against the wall. She’d have to share her room with Aunt Maria from Rochester, he said; more aunts and uncles and cousins would be sleeping in the den, the basement, even the dining room. Everything was crowded and crazy and loud and lovely; Thea breathed it in like life. She hung her expensive dresses in her cramped old closet and unpacked her lingerie and jewelry into the beat-up bureau under the mirror, still studded with cut-out magazine pictures of actors and singers she’d once adored.

At the rehearsal, everything went wrong: People argued and yelled and stamped in and out of rooms, and in the end it was fine. When they left the church, Thea thought she caught a glimpse of Paul in a car parked down the street, but she couldn’t be sure. The rehearsal dinner was, of course, held at her parents’ restaurant. Wearing the red silk dress special-ordered from the designer in Hong Kong, Thea tended bar, chatting with old friends, flirting openly with one of the high-school sweethearts who had inspired her husband to hire a private detective. By ten o’clock, she’d kicked off her high heels and put on one of the pairs of the slippers her mother always kept stowed behind the bar. By midnight, almost everyone had gone, and Thea sat at a back table with Ginny, eating beef on weck and drinking Bud Lite, confessing how miserable she was.

“Then end it,” Ginny said. “My God, Thea! You’re only thirty-two. That’s way

too young to give up on love, to give up on happiness. Just come home. You don't have to move in with Mom and Dad if you don't want. Wayne and I have an extra room. You can stay there until you find a job and can afford a place of your own. Maybe you could go back to school."

Thea shook her head. "Too boring. Too embarrassing. Too hard."

"Fine," Ginny said. "No school. But you can't just keep drifting. Not this time. You can't just let things happen and hope they'll be okay. For once, you have to actually *do* something. Do it, Thea. Walk away and start over."

Could she really do that? Maybe. But something nagged at her. It was much too late, but she went to the ladies' room, pulled out her cell phone, and called Edward.

"Good heavens, Thea," he said. "It's almost one o'clock in the morning. Why are you calling so late?"

"Because I want you to come here," she said. "I want you to come to Ginny's wedding. You can find a flight that leaves in time. Or you can leave right now; you can drive here. That'd be better. Please, Edward. I really, really need you to come to Buffalo. I don't want you to stay in Cleveland, not even for the rest of the night."

"That's ridiculous," he said. "Why is this so important to you all of a sudden?"

Because the private detective you hired has been flirting with me, she thought. Because I told him the keypad code, and I think he's going to come into the house while I'm out of town and kill you. But explaining all that would be so hard, and Edward would be so mad. "I miss you," she said.

"You must be drunk," he said. "Go to bed. I'll see you Sunday night."

He hung up. She held her cell phone in her hand and gazed at it. I tried, she thought. I really, really tried.

She slept in late the next morning, shutting out Aunt Maria's snores, then went downstairs in her bathrobe to linger at the kitchen table, indulging in a makeshift brunch of eggs and chicken wings, potato salad and bratwurst. Aunts and uncles and old friends came and went; she chatted with them lazily and allowed herself an occasional half glass of wine. Finally, she went upstairs and showered, blow-drying her hair expertly, slipping into her pale green matron-of-honor dress. She reached into her top bureau drawer and took out the cloth jewelry case.

The emerald earrings weren't there. She stared at the case, picked it up and shook it, probed it with her fingers. Then she grabbed her purse and emptied it out on the bed, shaking it, pulling out the lining. No. The earrings hadn't fallen out of the case; they weren't hiding in her purse; they simply weren't there. All her other jewelry, yes—but the emerald earrings were gone. She looked down at the bed where Aunt Maria from Rochester had slept after Thea had insisted on taking the cot herself; she thought of the aunts and uncles and cousins crowded into every spare space in the house. One of them, she thought. But which one? She couldn't say anything to any of them, not without accusing all of them; she couldn't say anything without ruining Ginny's wedding. She'd just have to let it go. When Edward realized the earrings were gone, he'd be mad. She'd have to weather that.

Or maybe not, she thought for an instant; but she shut the thought out, put on her pearl earrings, and got to work on her makeup.

The wedding made her weep with happiness, and with envy. Thea had always been the beautiful sister, and Ginny had always been the plain one; everybody had

always said that, and Thea had always denied it but known it was true. Today, seeing Ginny in her long white dress and lacy veil, holding Wayne's hands and looking so happy, Thea felt Ginny was the beautiful one. I want that, Thea thought. I want to be happy like that. When I get to Cleveland, I'll tell Edward, and I'll pack whatever he'll let me keep and come back here. I'll stay with my parents until Ginny and Wayne get back from the Finger Lakes, and then I'll move into their spare room and find a job. When they left the church, she looked for Paul again, for the parked car where she might have seen him yesterday, but the car wasn't there.

Wayne's parents had insisted on splitting the costs for the reception. It was a grand affair at a downtown hotel, with a lavish buffet and a live band. Once, after dinner, Thea thought of calling Edward again. I could tell him about Paul, she thought, and say I want a divorce; those two things together might make him come here, or at least put him on his guard. But he'd probably just say that she was being ridiculous, that she must be drunk; he'd definitely be mad. It's fine, Thea told herself. Nothing going to happen. Edward's fine. She danced until two o'clock in the morning, kept dancing until long after Ginny and Wayne had driven away for their three-day honeymoon.

On Sunday morning, Thea ate half a pancake, packed, and flew to Cleveland. She took a cab to the house, called out to Edward as she opened the door, and heard no response. She lugged her suitcases upstairs, called out to him again, and heard nothing. She drew her breath in sharply and sat on the bed for five minutes, her hands clasped. Then she walked down to the basement. He lay on the smooth, sloped wooden bench, the steel bar holding the free weights crushed down on his throat. His pale, dead eyes stared up at her.

She looked at him for a long moment. He actually did it, she thought. My God. She didn't know how to feel. Slowly, she walked upstairs and dialed 911.

That wasn't the end of it. After the funeral, the police came back so often that she decided she needed a lawyer. She thought it over for ten minutes before calling Scott Crawford. Yes, he said. He didn't usually handle this sort of case, but he'd take this one if she wanted him to, if the police were making her uncomfortable.

From then on, Scott was with her every time she met with the two detectives who didn't seem to like her very much. Edward had died not long after midnight on Saturday. Yes, the detectives knew she'd been in Buffalo then; they didn't need to see the pictures of her dancing at the wedding reception. But the detectives also knew other things. They knew about the prenup. They'd talked to Andre, and they knew how often he'd warned Edward about never using the free weights unless Andre was there to spot for him. The detectives knew about Tony too. They'd talked to several people who worked at Thea's old club, and they'd gossiped about Tony's reputation, about how she and Tony had worked out in a private room with the door closed, about how she'd shown up one day in a leotard before dropping out of the club abruptly.

The detectives had also talked to Tony, and they hadn't been impressed. He'd been at a bar that Saturday night, he'd said, until he'd gotten a cell phone call around eleven o'clock, from a man claiming to know what he'd been up to with an ophthalmologist's wife, threatening to tell the husband unless Tony met him at midnight in a park near the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Tony had driven there and waited nearly an hour before going back to the bar. The detectives traced the

call to a phone booth in Beachwood but couldn't find anyone to confirm that Tony had been anywhere near the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame that night.

The detectives also knew Edward had joked about being Thea's first husband, and they knew how upset she'd seemed after people laughed at her at Marty Thompson's retirement dinner. And, somehow, they knew about the emerald earrings. They'd spoken to the jeweler; they knew how expensive the earrings were, and they found it odd that Thea couldn't account for them, that she'd never reported the theft. Thea explained about the house being full of relatives, about not wanting to ruin Ginny's wedding by accusing people. The detectives took notes but didn't seem to understand. Scott understood. He understood everything. He shot sharp challenges back to the detectives during all the interrogations, defusing their questions with sarcastic incredulity. After they left, he patted her hand and told her not to worry.

Finally, after nearly two months, the detectives stopped coming; after another month, Scott asked her out to dinner, and they had a wonderful time. He asked her out again, and again; once, they had dinner at his mother's beautiful house, and Scott's sister was there and was very nice to Thea. Often, Thea and Scott met for lunch; sometimes, they went to plays or concerts; once, he made dinner for her at his penthouse apartment overlooking the lake, and she stayed for the night. After that, they often spent the night together, either at his apartment or at her big house with all the expensive paintings. She started volunteering at Music Matters on Saturdays again, and she and Scott laughed and talked and had a nice time.

Always, every time her phone rang, she flinched, expecting it to be Paul; but he never called. Another three months went by. Maybe Paul got scared off when he saw the police come back so often; maybe he'd decided it would be too dangerous to try to make contact with her. She stopped flinching when the phone rang. She thought she was probably in love with Scott, and that he probably loved her. She was very happy, just waiting for the question. We'll get married in Buffalo, she thought. We'll have the rehearsal dinner at my parents' restaurant.

And then her phone rang, and this time it was Paul. "Hello, Thea," he said. "I've been thinking about you. I've been thinking we should get together."

She was sitting down, but even so she had to grip the edge of the desk to steady herself, to keep the room from crashing down around her. "Hello, Paul," she said. "Actually, I don't think that would be a good idea. I'm seeing someone else, and—"

"Oh, I know about Scott Crawford. I don't think he's the right man for you. Say, did the police ever track down those emerald earrings? The ones Edward gave you, the ones you lost in Buffalo?"

Any private detective worth his salt can get past pretty much any lock, she remembered. Friday night, when we were at the rehearsal dinner, when Paul had been in Buffalo watching her. "No. The police never tracked them down."

"That's good," Paul said. "If they ever showed up in Tony's possession—under a loose floorboard in his apartment, say, or under a tomato plant in the garden at his parents' house, or in a pawnshop where the sale could be traced to him—that'd be awkward. And I'm sure Tony was smart enough not to keep any pictures of you two together, of you in that leotard and him with his hands all over you. It'd be awkward if pictures like that showed up too. So, let's have dinner tonight. We can meet in that bar where we first had drinks, after I saved you from that man who

attacked you.”

You set that up, she thought, realizing it for the first time. You set everything up. “I’m having dinner with Scott tonight,” she said.

“Break it off.” It wasn’t a suggestion. “I’ll see you at six, Thea.”

She never had dinner with Scott again. But it wasn’t too bad. Edward had thought movies were stupid, but Thea enjoyed them, and Paul did too; they went to many movies. Even when they weren’t movies she’d have picked, it was better than going to dinners where people spoke to her only because she was Edward’s wife. They also went to Cavaliers games, and Paul talked about getting season tickets for the Indians next summer. Edward hadn’t let her cook for him, but Paul did, and he said her lasagna was the best he’d ever had. He decided to open his own private detective agency and needed two hundred thousand dollars. She thought that maybe that was what he really wanted, that he’d leave her alone now. After she gave him the money, though, he moved his clothes into the house. Everything seemed settled. It’ll be all right, she told herself. He’s nicer to me than Edward was—and if he decides I need to be watched, he’ll just do it himself.

He offered to have the wedding in Buffalo, but that didn’t feel right to her, not with Paul. They’d do it in City Hall, they decided, just the two of them, and then they’d fly to Florida and go on a cruise. Paul had always wanted to go on a cruise. She thought about buying a new dress for the wedding but decided her light blue suit looked good enough.

On the first night of the cruise, they found themselves seated at a small, round table with a middle-aged couple from Atlanta. Paul reached across the table to shake the man’s hand. “I’m Paul Addison,” he said, “and this is the lovely Thea Addison.” He paused for three seconds, turned to Thea, and smiled. “Thea’s my first wife.”