

GOOD TO HER

Chapter One

It was Saturday, June 27, 1964. Nate sat alone at his table in Dinty Moore's, off to the left as you come in, past the bar, and toward the rear of the room. It is his usual table, round and extra large, according to the proprietor's decree. "A table's gotta be big enough for a man to spread out his paper and far enough from any other for him to stretch his legs." That was James Moore's word on tables. But tonight the table seemed larger to Nate than usual. Perhaps it was the uninterrupted span of the linen tablecloth, so white and heavily starched, stretching across its rounded surface that made it seem so large. Perhaps it was the mirrors on the walls or the standing mirrored pillars scattered about the room that picked up the reflection of the table and threw it back into his face. Perhaps it was that he was alone. But he had often sat at this table, surrounded by mirrors, alone.

It was just past eight-thirty in the evening, Nate's confirmed time for dinner at Dinty Moore's. The room was nearly empty with only a few patrons sitting about, lingering over coffee and dessert. Those on the way to the theatre had already rushed off to make their curtains. Those who would drop in for a late supper or after-theatre drink were still hours away. In the lull, the place was his. Celebrated bright lights above, vigorously scrubbed white tiles below, meticulously polished mirrors everywhere. Behind, the open kitchen in the back, the line of tall white hats tilting as the chefs stir their big brass pots. White-coated waiters scurry about, clearing and re-setting tables for the next round of diners, yanking

and replacing tablecloths with practiced hands. All across the room fresh white cloths are unfurled like sails and let to billow in the air a moment before being brought down again and resettled snugly across their tabletops. Creases are smoothed, clean plates brought, fresh cutlery and glassware. And on each table, the basket of rye bread is placed, the cabbage salad, the beets. *I just don't like them, Nate.*

His Dewar's and water sits by his right hand. The department store bill is in his inside jacket pocket. His newspapers lie in a pile at his left elbow. Tonight, the *New York World-Telegram and Sun* is on top. From where he sits, facing the beveled-edged glass front doors, Nate can see straight across the floor and out through the glass to the traffic passing by and the customers walking in.

"Everything all right, sir?"

"Swell, thank you, Red."

It was the last Saturday in the month, and because of the late-night theatre crowds strolling in, done up in their Saturday finest, Saturdays had always been the day Sallie was most likely to accompany him to Dinty Moore's without complaint. On other days she might balk at going at all. *There are other restaurants in New York, you know.* She'd laugh as she said it. That laugh comes back to him now, charming and gay and bright, as he looks again toward the front doors. A radiant sound, light and alive and young as she was, he'd heard her laugh before he ever saw her face. It had swept across the room like it was seeking him out. He'd looked up, just as he looked up now, and there she was, standing at the door, surrounded by sailors.

The special on Saturday is the Irish stew. He would have that, and Sallie, the chicken fricassee.

The theatre crowds were what got Sallie into Dinty Moore's. She came more for them than the food, and would refuse to come at all if there was a fight on he was determined to see. *Honestly, Nate. How can you watch that awful stuff?*

Again, he sees her eyes light up as she fastens on the Saturday night crowds pouring in through the doors just after eleven, when the theatres broke. He watches her direct her gaze to the mirrors affixed to the walls (as all Dinty Moore regulars learned to do) to track a celebrity's progress across the room. He recalls how she loved checking out the late-nighters, the men in tuxes, some of them, most in three-piece suits, such as he wore, with red or blue striped silk ties knotted high on the collars of their starched white shirts. The women in fancy gowns and furs, diamonds or what passed for them, at their wrists and throats.

Oh, look at that one. Her voice comes back to him, whispery and low. *She's too beautiful to be real.*

Again, he sees her green eyes and rosebud lips, her golden-bronzed tresses swinging beneath one of the hats she always wears and he resents for obscuring those glorious tresses. Again, he hears her high heels clicking on the tiles. Sallie was a stunner and always dressed to kill when they went out for an evening, so Nate never understood why, when comparing herself to the other women in the place—scrutinizing as only she could, with the critical eye of a horse breeder, their hair and makeup, the cut of their gowns, the size of the sparklers issuing from their fingers and ears—she seemed to find herself lacking.

“They don’t hold a candle,” he’d say and give her hand a squeeze whenever he heard her reach that blatantly erroneous conclusion.

Always, she’d answer with, *You’re so good to me, Nate.*

Tonight, he wondered.

Dinty Moore’s was his place, New York his town. The two rolled into one—his only love until Sallie came along. Just over fifty years ago tonight, his great late friend, James Moore, had opened his restaurant here at 216 West 46th Street. March 7, 1914, was the date. Long before he met Sallie, long even before he met James. Originally, his friend had set up shop under his own first and last names. ‘James Moore’s’ read the sign that would swing in a stiff breeze on the south side of 46th Street, between Broadway and Eighth. “So where did Dinty come from?” Sallie had asked when they first met. “From the comic strip, *Bringing Up Father*,” Nate had replied, always pleased to be able to answer her questions. The strip, he explained, was written by James’s old friend the cartoonist George McManus and turned out to be an instant hit for King Features. It told the tale of an Irishman named Jiggs who wins the Irish Sweepstakes and sees no reason his sudden accumulation of wealth should mean he can’t continue hanging out with his working class pals at his favorite tavern. That tavern was run by a guy McManus dubbed Dinty Moore. “And James, being an Irishman himself,” Nate went on, “took such a liking to the character he changed the name of his joint from James Moore’s to Dinty Moore’s.” The name stuck and Dinty Moore’s became a favorite of the Broadway theatre crowd, the sporting and gambling crowds as well, although, to Nate’s consternation, his friend’s restaurant was never awarded landmark

status or declared a national monument, which Nate and not a few others, Walter Winchell among them, thought it should have been.

“Walter Winchell? Really, Nate?”

“Really, sweetheart.”

Old Man Moore, as James came to be known (also the Corned Beef and Cabbage King), though Nate never called him anything but James, always made sure there was fresh rye bread on his tables as his customers sat down, along with a plate of cold sliced roasted beets and a simple chopped sweet and sour cabbage salad. There they were tonight, on every table, just where James would have placed them were he still around to do so: the rye bread in their baskets, the cabbage salad and cold sliced beets in their white porcelain dishes with the thin green trims. “They get the juices running,” James would reply if asked to explain their purpose. But Sallie never took to the beets. Again, she sits beside him. He smells her perfume, hears her voice.

“I just don’t like them, Nate.”

Again, her long slender fingers come up over the rim of the table and daintily push the beets away.

“Have what you like. Price is no object.”

Again, her reply. “You’re so good to me, darling.”

Again, he wondered.

At Dinty Moore’s people everyone knew walked in through its doors: George Jessel and Frank Sinatra, Mel Brooks and Steve Allen, J. Edgar Hoover and Judy Garland. People no one knew came in as well. Guys with everyday jobs, insurance men and real estate brokers and

ordinary working stiffs like himself—vice president and treasurer of the American Chicle Company. The irony of Sallie disapproving when he brought gum home for the girls was like a running commentary on their marriage. “It’s unladylike” was her pronouncement on the gum. “Makes them look like cows chewing their cud.” Sallie didn’t mind the chocolates as much. As a member of the board of directors of the Suchard Chocolate Company, Nate periodically received complimentary packages of small, tear-shaped chocolates, each individually wrapped in foil, and he’d take those home for the kids, too. Sallie would dole them out to the girls a few at a time, but the gum she always threw away at once, or gave to the women who came in to clean and to the doormen in the building.

Movie stars and stage actors, they made her green eyes shine.

“There’s Lauren Bacall,” he’d whispered one night, spotting the actress strolling in on the arm of her then husband, Humphrey Bogart.

“She’s my idol,” Sallie had whispered back. “I’d kill for her looks.”

Big names in publishing and broadcasting came in right off the street. Newspaper people like Louella Parsons, Dorothy Kilgallen, and Nate’s equal in fondness for the place, Walter Winchell. Screenwriters like Paddy Chayefsky and Ben Hecht, who had died only two months ago at the age of seventy, were likely to show up. Actors’ agents and press agents, and a string of sports icons Sallie maybe had heard of but didn’t know on sight made regular appearances. Discreetly, Nate used the mirrors to point them out, while quietly ticking off their names: Yogi Berra. Whitey Ford. Mickey Mantle. Roger Maris.

He thought how she’d love it tonight, with Richard Burton doing Hamlet just across the street at the Lunt-Fontanne (and Gielgud’s voice as the Ghost, he’d heard). How she’d relish

the chance to dissect the crowds that Burton's show brought streaming in, though they represented a mere fraction of the hordes that stood out in the street, four or five thousand strong each night, so the papers claimed, craning for a look not at him but at Elizabeth Taylor waiting in the limousine for her man. Those bold enough to venture down to Dinty Moore's on the off-chance of getting in without a reservation were politely but firmly turned away at the door.

"Get rid of them, but do it with a smile." More times over the years than he could count he'd heard James issue that instruction to his headwaiters. "We'll want them back another night."

Among the specialties of the house were a first-rate bean soup, James's signature corned beef and cabbage, an authentic Irish stew, prime ribs and steaks that came with baked potatoes large enough, some pundit once declared, for a man to hide behind, that chicken fricassee Sallie was partial to, and the famous and later disputed Dinty Moore's beef stew.

"Oh, tell me about that," Sallie had pleaded when the subject came up, always eager to hear his tales of a time that nearly or actually predated her.

"It was back in 1935," he began.

"1935!" she exclaimed, like it was the dark ages. "I was ten years old."

"Be that as it may," he replied. "I'd just started coming in on a regular basis, and this company called Hormel that makes Spam----."

"Spam!" Sallie cried. "That awful stuff they feed the GIs?"

“The one and same company,” he told her. “Well, they made up batches of their own beef stew, put it in cans, and labeled it *Dinty Moore Beef Stew*. To this very day they shamelessly promote their infinitely inferior product under the appropriated name.”

“What nerve!” Sallie declared.

“James thought so too. And he took them to court over it. I sat by his side every day of the proceedings.”

“Did you, Nate?” Her green eyes went wide.

“Proud to do it, too. But the authorities found that James hadn’t properly registered the trademark, so he lost exclusive rights to the name.”

“Oh, no,” Sallie groaned, and brought her rosebud lips together in a delicious little pout. “How terrible.”

“Terrible it was. And is. But James, being a man of character, wasn’t one to take a thing like that lightly. All through the rest of the 1930s and into the ‘40s he ran display ads in the *New York Times* that read: ‘Mothers and wives beware: original Dinty Moore does not sell corned beef and cabbage or Irish stew or anything in cans.’”

“Good for him!” Sallie exclaimed, and laughed her radiant laugh.

Again, he looks toward the front doors, hoping to hear that laugh and straining for a glimpse of her. But what he seems to see instead is the ghost of James’s tall frame blocking his view. Arms spread wide, he’s welcoming guests, ushering them into his restaurant as he might into his living room. Just as in the old days, he’s kissing cheeks, patting shoulders, drawing the women close. Then his long arms are sweeping outward as he graciously hands his guests off to Sullivan or McCann or O’Leary, or whichever Maitre D’ is on duty

that night, to be shown to their tables. Now he sees, or thinks he does, James zigzagging across the room, conducting his evening rounds. He sees him stopping at tables, bending low, asking how his customers, who are more than that to him, are doing, how they're enjoying their meal. "That fish fresh enough for you?" He hears his great, booming voice. "That soup too salty? Say the word, I'll take that chef outside and shoot him."

Nate looks away, picks up the *Telegram*, glances at the front page. The department store bill in his pocket presses like a stone against his heart and makes it hard for him to concentrate on the news.

He recalls the first time he set eyes on her. In this very establishment on a Wednesday night. November 21, 1945, to be precise. The purest chance had brought her to him. He heard a laugh that seemed to seek him out. He glanced toward the front door, and there she was, standing in the company of sailors, six of them recently home from the war and eager to crash a good party. A beauty such as he had never seen. Tall, taller than he, heartbreakingly slender. No more than twenty.

And later in the evening when he'd gone over to their table, introduced himself all around, and taken her hand, like velvet it was, he saw how her eyes turned from hazel to jade according to the light, and how like rosebuds were her lips. "I'm a dancer, you know," she'd gaily announced. No, how could he know? It was the first time they'd met.

As it happened, the Old Man had closed his restaurant that Wednesday for a private celebration honoring his double escape from the hands of the law earlier in the day. "Merits a good bash, wouldn't you say?" James's first reprieve had come when the jail term he'd been threatened with was rescinded (the judge, Ramsgate it was, Nate somehow pulls the

name from beneath the layers of the years, deciding that Moore's advanced age of seventy-seven made incarceration inappropriate). His second reprieve arrived in the form of an unknown young woman of apparent means who showed up out of nowhere in Manhattan's Criminal Court and paid the fine Ramsgate saw fit to impose. Five thousand dollars—the largest to that date in War Emergency Court. Refusing to give her name, the mystery woman simply walked up to the court clerk and handed him a certified check for the full amount. Nate had been there to witness the entire transaction, he would later assure Sallie, and could, therefore, swear to the veracity of the events. James's unknown benefactor then had hopped back into the cab she'd been seen to keep waiting in front of the courthouse and disappeared.

James pleaded guilty (a decision he later regretted and sought to retract, but the judge denied his motion) to two hundred and seventy-two violations of the Office of Price Administration regulations on maximum charges for meals. When the record fine was imposed—"Five grand! But your honor..."—James claimed not to have that kind of money. Ramsgate granted him five days in which to raise it, or serve one thousand three hundred and sixty days in jail, five days for each count. "In that case, your honorable honor, I'll do my best to come up with the dough." Still, James argued in his defense, he never reduced the size of the portions he served, as did so many of his competitors. That, Nate knew for a fact, was true. "And furthermore, I pay the best wages and buy the finest ingredients in town, so my expenses are high." As was that. Further furthermore, James went on, his costs had mounted sharply since war-time ceiling prices were imposed, making it impossible for him, much as he would like to, to exactly comply with OPA regulations.

The case against James Moore was one of several dozen on the docket that day involving restaurants charged with black marketing and violations of price regulations. When James's case was called, James's lawyer was present as was Nate ("You've always been so sweet to him," Sallie remarked upon hearing the story, "and he's old enough to be your father."), but James himself was nowhere to be seen. His lawyer asked for an adjournment. Ramsgate denied the request. Gesturing purposefully toward a long row of defendants still waiting to be heard, the judge declared: "He's no better than these other men here, and if he doesn't show up by one o'clock, I will order his arrest." When the designated hour arrived and James still had not appeared, having instructed his daughter, Anna, to say he was out of town on business, Ramsgate did just that.

To the best of Nate's recollection, James had been charged with raising his price on corned beef and cabbage from \$1.50 to \$1.75 for lunch, and from \$1.75 to \$2.25 for dinner. Among other increases the OPA deemed illegal were hamburger steak from \$1.25 to \$2.00; frankfurters and sauerkraut from 75 cents to \$1.00; and a 50-cent hike on Sallie's favorite, the chicken fricassee, taking it from \$2.50 to an even \$3.00. Scotch whiskey (a thing of particular import to Nate) and old-fashioned cocktails went from 60 cents to 75 cents. All proper and necessary increases, James insisted. "How else I'm gonna stay in business?" But when he failed to appear as ordered, the bench warrant was issued nonetheless.

"Oh, poor James," Sallie groaned.

All turned out well, however, with the jail term mercifully rescinded and the fine anonymously paid. "A grand thing to have unknown young friends of means," James observed with a glint in his eye. So the Old Man decided to celebrate that night with two hundred or so of his closest friends, including the unknown young woman of means who

had paid his fine and turned out to be not so unknown after all, at least not to James, to whom on the contrary she was rather intimately known, even at his age, a thing Anna added to the long list of grievances she had against her father.

It was in the midst of the raucous goings-on at Dinty Moore's that Wednesday evening in November 1945 that Nate heard that laugh sweeping across the room that seemed to seek him out. He'd glanced in the direction of the sound, and his eye was caught and thenceforth forever held by the beauty of the tall young woman standing at the front doors surrounded by sailors seeking to join the party. James saw them, too, and patriotically waved them in. Later that evening Nate made his way to their table, pulled up a chair by the beauty's side, took her velvet hand in his, and picked up the tab for the lot of them.

"My, what a gentleman."

But good to her, he wondered.

And could such a gorgeous dame be interested in him?

"Why, sure, honey. You're my fellow, aren't you?"

The age difference was another thing.

Again, he looks toward the front door, straining for a glimpse, and there at last he sees her, and himself as well. He's at her side, holding the door, ushering her through. Following just behind, he unobtrusively runs his fingers over the spot in the door where the Old Man's initials are etched deep in the glass. Meeting up with Sallie again on the far side, he executes a little bow. "Oh, what a surprise," she says, and laughs her radiant laugh. He holds

out his arm and enters the room. Nothing ever beat stepping into a room with Sallie on his arm.

He catches the signal that Clancy the bartender throws them (or really just him, for he's been coming in for a meal a good many years longer than Sallie). A subtle high sign it is, thrown from deep left field and easily missed if you weren't on the alert. A quick lifting of Clancy's long right arm, which appears longer even than nature made it, thanks to the pinstripes on his sleeve, a touch of his third finger to his forehead like a catcher indicating a play, or in Clancy's case not a play but a highball, and Nate knows his Dewar's and water is coming right up. He returns the signal with a nearly imperceptible nod of his head, while it goes determinedly unacknowledged, though scarcely unnoticed, by Sallie.

"He makes such a fuss," she whispers as they continue on into the room, the long mahogany bar sliding past on their left. Like a ship, Nate thinks it, its railing not fixed at waist-height where you'd expect it to be, but down near the floor, highly polished brass segments peeking out at intervals like footlights through the tall bar stools.

But it wasn't that Clancy made a fuss that bothered Sallie, for that the man clearly did not do, but that he was who he was—a man who tended bar—so publicly if subtly acknowledging them (or really just him). Clancy make a fuss? That was a laugh. And hearing Sallie utter the absurd accusation under her breath told him how little she understood of the character of James's joint, despite the countless dinners she'd had with him there (some over vociferous protest) through the years. "Honey, must we go there *all* the time?" For what Clancy made was not a fuss. It was a slight of hand, a shadow play, an elegant, ephemeral, personal, and practically invisible communication between himself and his customer. A move in a magic-lantern show. An arrow shot from one mind to another. A

desire acknowledged. A promise made. And the swiftness and economy of gesture with which Clancy indicated Nate's pre-dinner drink would be on his table and in his hand in no time flat paralleled other classy moves Clancy made from behind his bar as he slid gracefully up and down on his side of that dark, shining ship. Grabbing glasses off the backlit shelves in windmill-like motions, tipping and righting bottles, opening and shutting valves, rigorously agitating ice-cold aluminum cocktail shakers, pouring streams of variously colored liquids from substantial heights into glasses held well below and exactly reaching the rims each time, slicing limes and lemons into perfect wedges, popping corks, sliding small, peanut-filled glass dishes from whichever end of the bar he happened to be and causing them to stop with remarkable precision directly before their intended recipients—that was a fuss. But not that quick touch of his third finger to his forehead.

And what James Moore did in rushing to welcome them and show them to the table at which Nate sits tonight, tacitly reserved for them (or really just him) every night until nine, that truly was a fuss, and Sallie never minded that. Arms opened wide, chins cascading, voice reverberating through the room, James comes hurtling toward them, calling out: "My friends, my friends! Welcome, welcome!" even though they (or certainly he) might have been in only a night or two before.

James would take Sallie by the waist and twirl her around in full view of all assembled. And none of that ever bothered her, for such a scene, which caused every head in the place to turn, was created by the proprietor himself, and the heads that turned turned toward her. There they stopped. All eyes stared. And Sallie never minded that. To be fetched by the owner and shown straight to a table, no waiting at the door, no looking up names in a book, suited her just fine, for unconditionally Sallie loves the public embrace,

the heads turned, the mirrors all around, herself center-stage, the undisputed and perfect focus of attention.

Again, red silk flies before him. "Like it, honey? It's new." Outfitted on Nate's nickel in the best Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue, Lord and Taylor, and Tiffany's has to offer, captured on all sides by standing mirrored pillars and walls of glittering glass, she reverberates off herself like a star shining to infinity. No, Sallie never minded that.

"I'm so happy it hurts," she tells him.

Nate gave her that.

But good to her, he wondered.

And now, tonight, the Old Man gone twelve years, having dropped dead of a pulmonary embolism in the kitchen of his own establishment on Christmas Day 1952, at the age of eighty-three. And Sallie gone too, as of the last Thursday in May of this year, at a much more tender age but no less definitively. Almost a month to the day it was, and Nate wakes every morning to the loss, since she'd been suddenly, violently, stupidly hit by a New Jersey driver going through the light on Lexington Avenue and 59th Street at five o'clock in the afternoon. Sallie had just come out of Bloomingdale's (again, Nate's hand goes to his breast pocket, again, he fingers the outline of the bill). She'd been struck as she stood in the street, the light in her favor, attempting to hail a cab, her single purchase under one arm. She never knew what hit her. A blessing, his friends at Dinty Moore's declared it.

Sallie gone. Might as well be the light from the world. The Old Man gone. The landscape of his life diminishes. Himself gone, too, any day now. It was not impossible. His table cleared, prepared for the next in line. Nate understood that at the age of sixty-five,

being a sometimes smoker with a preference for good cigars, a lover of his friend's famous corned beef, and a person constitutionally opposed to exercise other than the occasional game of golf, his days might very well be numbered. Gone from the world. No great loss. Only marriage tied him to it.

"Marriage is a tricky business," James frequently proclaimed. This from a man who rarely spoke to his wife and for decades lived in the adjacent five-story building at 218 West 46th Street on a floor separate from hers. A man who in his will cut off two children with one dollar apiece, left a third fifty dollars a week for as long as his restaurant continued to operate and, if sold, twenty-five percent of the proceeds. A man who provided Annie, his widow, also now deceased, with the minimum required by law. "What did you mean by that, James?" Nate might have asked his friend, were he still around to be asked, not that he would have expected an answer. "And what were those single dollar legacies about?" One had been left to his son, William, the other to his daughter, Cora. They were cryptically explained, if explanation it could be called, by a single reference in his will: "For reasons best known to me, I am intentionally not making any further provision for them." What those reasons were, Nate never knew, for in the manner of the times, as public a life as James lived in his restaurant of gleaming glass and polished brass, he was an intensely private person.

James left the restaurant to his daughter, Anna, having named her executor and trustee of his estate. "That's as it should be," Nate said to Sallie. But only days after inheriting the place, Anna committed an act, presumably settling in her favor another of the grievances she held against her father, for which Nate never fully forgave her. "To this day

it gets me," he once admitted to Sallie. He'd been coming around the corner from Broadway onto 46th Street the day she did it, a breezy day it was, and the sign swinging over his friend's restaurant was creaking loudly in the wind. Nate had looked up and had been stopped dead in his tracks. *Moore's* the sign read. Not *Dinty Moore's*. What the hell? he'd said to himself. Anna changed the name? And then to James across the divide: "Why the hell would she do a thing like that?" She changed the name on the menus, too, so when customers held the bill of fare before them, only the surname greeted them.

She left the matchbooks alone, however, and Nate thanked her for that. Moving aside his pile of newspapers now, he picked up a matchbook and flipped it over. There, across the green and white stripes, "Dinty" still was prominently displayed. And every night of the last twelve years since her father's death, six nights a week, fifty-two weeks a year, Anna has sat in the back of this room near the open kitchen, the chefs' tall white hats tilting behind her, just as she sits tonight, hunched over a table considerably smaller than those out on the floor, little more than a card table, in fact, every night wearing, as she wears tonight, a dress of dark material. "She hardly spoke to him while he was alive," Sallie once observed. "Now she acts like she's still in mourning." Night after night Anna Moore, seeming destined never to marry, sits at her little table in her dowdy dress, gravely totaling receipts, taking cash from the waiters as they carry it up to her, silently separating denominations, flattening the corners on bills and slipping them into their appointed slots in the cash register, kept, urbanely, in the rear.

But Sallie gone? Her blood spilled on the streets of his city? James wasn't around to help him mourn. The children had flown in for the funeral and returned to their lives. In the

devastation of his disbelief when first he'd been told the details of the accident—the car going through the light, the Jersey plates, Sallie struck, the parcel flying—the only feeling Nate had been conscious of was gratitude it hadn't been a New Yorker who had hit her.

Now he sits at a table that feels too large, staring at the restaurant's front doors and reflecting on the difference he had seen in her eyes the last time he saw her alive. In the weeks since it had happened he hadn't been able to get it out of his mind. What was that difference about her eyes? Certainly not their color or shape, not anything he could identify on their surface. But something way down deep inside them. Some different way in which they looked out at him. "What is it?" he had asked. "What's different?"

"I'll tell you tonight," she had promised.

His second Dewar's and water arrived. That was new. Two before dinner, when one had always been his limit.

"Thanks, Red." Years ago, the waiter's natural hair color had earned him the name. Today, monthly applications of self-anointed chemicals allow him to retain it.

"You're welcome, sir."

Red didn't need to wait around to take his order, for no matter what day of the week Nate came in, he'd have the daily special. Today being Saturday and the Saturday special being the Irish stew, Red simply positioned a fresh white paper napkin on top of the linen napkin, centered the second Dewar's and water on the paper napkin, took up the empty glass and used napkin beneath it, and walked away.

Nate sipped his drink and looked down again at the *Telegram*. There were still the *Herald Tribune*, the *Journal American*, the *Daily News*, and the *Post* to get through. He had read the *Wall Street Journal* over coffee at home that morning. He would have glanced at

the *New York Daily Mirror* on the train going to work, dissected the *Times* later in the day, and left both for his secretary to take home, except the *Mirror* hadn't survived last year's one-hundred-and-fourteen-day newspaper strike, so only the *Times* remained at his office for Mildred to take with her when she left that evening.

A flash of light catches on the silver-plated handle of a knife raised at a table across the way. The light bounces off a mirror and back into his eye. Again, Sallie's hand is on her dinner knife, her forefinger pressing down for leverage. Again, he thinks her delicate wrist and long slender fingers are no match for the heft of the cutlery at Dinty Moore's. Again, the light pools in the tiny moons of her perfectly manicured nails. Again, the over-turned prongs of her fork are poised to impale a stray string bean. Her band of wedding diamonds sparkles above the prongs, and on the hand holding the knife, she wears the topaz he'd given her in December for the last birthday she would ever have.

What was different about her eyes?

"I'll tell you tonight," she promised.

Robbing the cradle was what he thought he was doing, and not a few of his friends, James among them, most likely, thought the same. He'd married Sallie exactly one month and three days after having seen her standing there at the door in the company of sailors. She was twenty to his forty-six. (Almost the same age span, the thought popped irreverently into his head, between Cassius Clay and Archie Moore when the two met in the ring in Los Angeles in 1962.)

Robbing the cradle, he thought on every one of Sallie's birthdays. Nineteen in all he'd had the good fortune to celebrate with her before the New Jersey driver found her.

"Years don't matter, Nate," she told him. "What we have is ageless."

“There’s Joltin’ Joe.” Again, he’s saying it. Again, it’s 1954 and he spots Joe DiMaggio, briefly married to Marilyn at the time, walking into Dinty Moore’s with the actress on his arm. Again, he’s leaning over, whispering a few of the man’s major accomplishments in Sallie’s ear: “Fifty-six game hitting streak. Longest in baseball history. Named American League’s Most Valuable Player three times. Played on nine World Series champion teams.”

Sallie’s eyes went wide. He saw how deeply she was impressed. More by Marilyn, he now suspects, than by his puny store of baseball facts. Yet Sallie bowed to the facts.

“I wish I knew things like you,” she said.

“You know things,” he told her.

“Not real things,” she protested. “Not like about the stock market and when wars started and ended and what caused them and who won. Not like about the people who come in here. Their nicknames and hitting streaks and where they’re from and what they do.”

“What do you need to know that for?”

“For you. So you wouldn’t always have to be explaining things.”

But explaining things to Sallie was one of the great pleasures of his life.

“The things you know are significant and real,” she continued solemnly. In contrast, she claimed, to the merely trivial bits of information she had at her disposal such as what colors went with what and how to make a man like him look good in clothes, if only he’d let her.

“I let you.”

“But not with shirts. Honestly, Nate, they don’t always have to be white.” She was firm on that point. “You’re an important man.” Not so, he countered. “Yes, you are,” she maintained. “And important men can wear any color shirt they like. Black shirts, blue shirts. Shirts with patterns, even.” He must have recoiled at the mention of patterns, for she hastily added: “Nothing wild. Maybe a subtle plaid. Would you consider that? A short-sleeved, summer shirt in a subtle plaid?”

Emphatically not. He remembered shaking his head. “I’ve never worn plaid in my life. And the only people who wear black shirts are gangsters.”

It was raining that night, he remembered that too, and he was sitting exactly where he was sitting now. “There’s one right over there,” he told her. “No, don’t turn around.” He directed her eyes to the mirrors. “The guy in the black shirt and pink tie.”

“For real, Nate?” The rosebud lips parted and a little gust of air came through. “A gangster?”

“For real,” he replied.

It took her a moment to recover. “Well, I’m not recommending pink ties. Maybe no tie at all. Just a black shirt with an open collar. You’d look great in that.”

But it wasn’t a black shirt she had bought him at Bloomingdale’s. He knew what it was. One of the two policemen who had come to inform him of the accident had handed him the box, reporting it had flown out of her hands upon impact. It was hardly damaged. A slight dent on one end. No blood anywhere. He assumed it was something she had bought for herself. But when he finally brought himself to open it, it turned out to be a gift for him. Sallie had bought him a gift. The bill for it lay there in his inside jacket pocket, unopened, unpaid. Never before had he been so delinquent in paying one of Sallie’s bills. It had arrived

on the seventh of June and would reflect her purchases for the month of May. For nearly three weeks now, it had lain undisturbed on the hallway table at home. He could not have touched it before tonight. His fingers would have bled or burned.

Again, he hears her voice. "You know, I've never seen you in a shirt with an open-collar in my life, not my whole life." Again, he hears the correction mid-sentence. "My life since I've known you. Which is my true life now." He had reached over and squeezed her hand. "You make me feel important. Not important like you with an office and a secretary who does what you tell her, but like I matter, you know? Honey, that hurts." She had pulled her hand away. "Sometimes I wish I was somebody else. Another person altogether. But when people feel they matter they have a life they never had before. So maybe this other person I sometimes want to be is here already, being the person I've become since I met you. You're so good to me, Nate."

Good to her? Was he really?