



Death Comes for Peter Pan by JOAN BRADY

Chapter One

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The dogs lay in the laundry room. Alice Kessler had to go past them because the laundry room was the only way out of the apartment--a funny way to construct an apartment.

There were only four dogs left, the huge yellow one, the shapeless white one, the nondescript one and the little yappy one with a scraggled coat. The black dog was dead. Mud stuck in clots beneath the little one's belly. Was it a terrier? She didn't know; she didn't care. She hated the four of them equally, impartially--no favoritism--and each time she passed them the nausea in her spread out and deepened. Nausea is a finely-tuned gauge of fear; you can use it to calculate the subtlest changes in the substrate. They say dogs can smell such things. Maybe so. If these did, they never let on, although their eyes swiveled in their eye sockets, marking her progress across the room from inside door to outside door.

The dogs ran as a pack. This was supposed to be a secret, but in a moment of weakness Cordelia Macher-Daly had told her about it. Cordelia was her landlady. The dogs attacked a neighbor not all that long ago, and Cordelia had to bribe an official to keep them out of the dog crematorium, which puffed smoke from a vast, red chimney out on the

edge of this ugly Middle Western town. In the end, only the black dog ended up there. The chimney was the centerpiece of the room Peter lay in.

But it wasn't dogs that scared Alice. After all, if they tore her to pieces, the whole mess would become somebody else's responsibility. For some time now, a year maybe, she'd wakened in the night with a start, her hands suspended above the sheets like some retired gunfighter snapping to attention even in the safety of his bed, unable to let go of a past that had long since let go of him. But she was no retired gunfighter: she was only thirty-five years old. Even so, each waking was the same. What was that? Hear it? Hold still. Don't breathe. Then recognition comes flooding in. Oh, what the hell, it's just yesterday's tedium clamoring to get itself born again today.

So she figured it was the tedium of crossing the laundry room, dogs or no dogs--the grinding boredom of it--that intensified the nausea in her. Black porthole-face of washing machine and faceless drier (both humming with homely warmth and efficiency), high window, dirty panes of glass, dog bowls, dog blankets, smell of dog hair and dog saliva. Why does this getting from one place to the next have to be gone through again and again? forward and back this morning. Twice yesterday. Twice the day before. Twice every day for weeks. Why not edit it out this last time? Just clip a meaningless frame from the picture? Isn't enough ever enough?

Unlock the outside door, open it, walk through, shut the dogs in.

"They're sneaky," Cordelia had said. "They don't really want to get out, but they'll try to fool you, just for the fun of it. They have a sense of humor, these dogs do. They'll never let you win."

The cold outside was fierce. Alice's feet crunched on the salt that covered the path from the back door of the house to the stone-paved turnaround where the rented car stood. In Russian winters, when a man pees in the snow, it's so cold that his pee freezes from the ground up--shoots towards him in a frozen arc. "The Middle West is Dostoevsky

country,” Peter used to say. There were twenty-three steps between house and car. Her mouth moved as she counted them off. Seventeen to go. Despite the cold, the palms of her hands were greasy with sweat.

If only I didn’t blabber on like this, she said to herself. Other people have silence in their heads. Why can’t I? Same thoughts today as yesterday. Same thoughts yesterday as the day before. Wouldn’t you think there’d be some variation? Maybe not other days--who would ask it?--but today? For God’s sake, today?

Because today was different.

This day, at this very moment, she was on her way to kill Peter Kessler, who was dying anyway. Which she knew. Could anything be more absurd?

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Peter Kessler had been a beautiful man to look at once--not the kind of looks that diminish with age, either. Some people are disgustingly lucky. I’m talking about him as of a few years before all this happened, you understand, although fewer than you might guess. Sometimes when he was asleep, Alice had stared down at him and

wondered how anybody so beautiful could be real--and this despite the fact that he was thirty years older than she.

But it’s queer how you remember people, snapshot-like, out of context, a sideways glance or a sudden movement, a quirk here, a detail there. For her it was the tension in him. He’d always been tense, always uncomfortable as he sat or stood or walked, somehow unresolved, as though there were some dissonance deep inside: an elegant awkwardness of the hands, long, slender fingers that clenched and unclenched like a child’s even while he slept.

This tawdry Middle Western town in this dreary Midwestern winter: what a place for such a man to die. She concentrated on maneuvering the rented car along the frozen streets and through the dirty snow in shallow ridges along both sides of the tarmac. It was a large, soft car--too soft, no feel of the road. At night, towns like Overton glow under arc lights, an eerie, ugly orange, thicker in this town on this night because of the burning fields on all sides; this was the Night of the Corn Scorch.

Less than an hour ago, the good burghers here had torn themselves away from their television screens and started off the ceremony by setting alight a fifteen-foot-tall Corn King made of papier mache. At least he was supposed to be papier mache; Alice knew for a fact that his right hand was only chicken wire. This late November funeral pyre was old as Middle Western customs go, more than a hundred years old, once a rag-tag affair, now gaudily and seamlessly packaged for the tourist trade: the celebrating, as you'd expect, took place in the business district of town, well away from Alice's route. She drove from the best residential section of town through the poorest, where there was a deep sense of quiet. Only the occasional neon splutter of a supermarket sign or a gas station punctuated the haze.

Neon's no good unless it's frenzied. It needs to burst and spume, and yet she didn't really like big city lights either. The first time she saw Broadway at night, she'd stared at it aghast and said, "My God, I had no idea. It's hideous."

She'd been with Peter at the time. "I love it," he'd said with that quick smile of his. For all the time she knew him the speed and depth of his smile took her by surprise.

"I mean the lights."

"So do I."

"But all these colors--they're--" She hadn't found any word other than "hideous" and so let her sentence trail off. Then she said, "You're teasing me, aren't you? You don't mean it. You can't. Nobody could love these things."

“I do. I think--”

“It isn’t fair. You’re bigger than I am.”

Then he’d said with that self-conscious wonderment so characteristic of him, “They could be in Chinese or Greek or Russian. You don’t have to know what they mean or what they’re for or even if they have meaning. Just look at them, Allie. It’s exciting just to look at them.”

What was it about his voice? The unexpected stops and starts in it? Or was it the way his sentences ran? Trying then to figure out this now familiar mystery, straining to see as he saw and still finding the lights hideous, she caught the edge of his excitement and laughed with the simple pleasure of it.

But that was long ago.

In Overton--in this suffocating present--she found a parking place in the lot nearest the entrance to the hospital annex that housed Overton’s only hospice, a squat pile of bricks, square, raw, desolate, unadorned by trees or grass.

She’d counted the number of steps from the doorway of the annex to the elevator just as she’d counted the steps along the frozen path outside the apartment she rented from Cordelia. This number was eighty-nine. Eighty-nine is prime, she said to herself, as she’d said every day for the past few weeks while she walked this walk. Eight is two cubed and nine is three squared. Such a neat exchange of information. But eighty-nine is prime. How can such things be? She pressed the up button, hoping the elevator was stuck somewhere else on some remote floor, but the doors opened at once. The damned thing had been waiting for her. Look at it, she went on to herself, riding out her contempt on another wave of nausea: linoleum on the floor as worn and pitted as an old subway floor from the days when women wore stiletto heels. A stiletto heel comes down with a pressure of a ton per square inch. That’s a scientific fact. No kidding.

An ancient, weary mechanism, this Otis elevator, that clanked in its shaft as she rode. Her heart clanked with it, so loud that when she stepped out on the fifth floor, the hospice floor, she was half afraid the nurse who faced her could hear it too.

“Hello again, Mrs. Kessler,” the nurse said. “I didn’t expect you back until tomorrow morning.”

“No, I-- They’re still coming for him at ten?”

The nurse nodded. “Best to get here a little before that, though. They tend to come early.”

“Eager, aren’t they?”

“I expect it’s just the traffic.”

“On the day after the Corn Scorch? Isn’t that supposed to be a day of rest?”

“You ought to get some sleep.”

“I wanted to be here for this last--” Alice began and then stopped, disconcerted as she had been before by the nurse’s hugely pregnant belly. All the nurses in this hospice were pregnant: all the patients dying, all the nurses pregnant. She’d meant to ask why, but had never quite figured out how to phrase the question. Did they get pregnant the moment they arrived? Was it a way of coping with death? A defense against it? Or were they just transferred because of their condition from more desirable jobs in the hospital proper?

“I understand,” the nurse said.

“Is he awake?”

“I can’t tell. Not really. Does it matter?”

Alice shook her head.

When she was a child she’d been in an explosion once. Somebody (they never knew who or why) had planted a bomb in the school she went to; she was eight years old, and three of her classmates had been killed, even little Dickie Lepplevine. Afterwards, she’d rocked back and forth on the floor of the hospital emergency ward, her arms clasped

around her knees, and tried to explain to her mother--to Angela--what it had been like. She'd heard no noise. How could that be? An explosion and no noise? None at all? Angela had always said she was a liar. But it was true even so. All of a sudden the air had just swollen and burst. Just like that. All of a sudden she'd been lying curled up in the field behind the school.

This time the moment of swelling was drawn out; the field in which she'd be lying only a few minutes hence was wholly visible to her. After all, this time she had a choice. She could stop right here. Right now. Who would blame her? Who

would even know? It wasn't a long hallway. Peter's room was the third room down. Her steps dragged some, but when the moment came she crossed the threshold without hesitation and shut the door behind her.