

Wild Dreams of Reality,

Chapter 15

by Jerry Ratch

In the morning the fog hung like thin gauze under the trees, wafting slowly to the side as though a large hand were passing through. When I peered out the window, the red Saab was still there. It was the morning of my brother's birthday. What a bad joke it would be, I thought, what a terrible Faustian joke on this day especially, if Darrell were to wake up and find the car of his enemy still parked in his own driveway. Just getting Darrell out of the ditch had been hard enough, without having to deal with the fact of his wife's adultery — and on his birthday no less.

I had called to remind Vivian that today was the day. But now the prospect of a party didn't look so good. She either didn't care or hadn't been expecting us to show up the night before, with such a dense fog. And maybe she and Jeff had gotten careless about leaving his car in the driveway. Possibly they had forgotten about it completely in the heat of their passion, or else she simply no longer cared that much about Darrell. I'd been careful enough not to let it slip out about the party, so that there might be some small chance of a surprise for Darrell. But when I glanced out the window of the shop and saw the red Saab still parked in the driveway, my hopes for everything fell away.

Darrell lay sleeping under a couple of blankets on a couch in the corner of his shop. I walked over to nudge him awake. Deep wrinkles seemed to have been carved permanently into his forehead now, under the dense whiteness in his hair. The skin under his jaw had gone slack, and suddenly I was shocked to recognize how much he had taken on the appearance of our father.

I tried shaking him, but he waved me away. He rolled over with a groan and kept on sleeping. There was still a whiteness in the air outside as well. A sun somewhere above, trying to penetrate

through the fog, made the air so bright that I had to squint. When I poked my head out the window to take a good look, I could see the convertible top of the Saab hanging in black shreds inside the car. Then I recalled everything that happened the previous night — and I resolved to tell Darrell that I was going to get the hell out of there. He could take care of things with his own life. I had enough to take care of now with myself, and wanted desperately to get back to some of the routines of life that I enjoyed.

Then I remembered that I was no longer able to go back to my usual routines, because I was no longer living in my big old comfortable house. Really my own situation wasn't that different from my brother's. There was a certain irony in this, I thought, although in my case I had gotten where I found myself by my own choice. That was certainly a change for me.

I had never really made a choice *for myself* before, not like this. When it came to something of this magnitude, I'd always gone along with the flow. But that wasn't at all what happened this time. I could feel the difference, the power of actually going ahead in the direction of my inner will.

Suddenly inside me there was the fear of the unknown — something I could feel in the pit of my stomach. It would be so easy, I reasoned, to just pick up the phone and beg Elizabeth to let me come back. Right now would be a good time — this minute, right now. No, I panicked: *Don't do that!*

Then I started wondering where Parker was right this minute, and if she was thinking at all about what I was doing. I pictured her deep sensual brown eyes and the auburn locks of hair that would lie softly against her neck, and I remembered the cool feel of her skin on my fingers, the scent of lilac that always trailed after her.

I hurried out of Darrell's shop into the white air outdoors. There was nothing but spooky silence around me. This wasn't like the background din and turmoil I always heard in the city, the ever-present noise of cars, always a horn honking or occasionally the sound of gunshots. Now and then the belligerent chopping

annoyance of a helicopter circling overhead, at times a voice shouting out some madness. Here in Half Moon Bay, only an hour away from the city, was the kind of silence I had forgotten even existed anymore. I could understand a little better now what had drawn my brother to this place.

When I walked past the Saab, I saw the rat dead in its trap. Had I forgotten? Or didn't I want to remember? Even so, there was the actuality of the rat in its trap, with some of its dried blood on the leather bucket seat on the driver's side.

I don't know why, but I couldn't stand the sight of it. I picked up the trap with its dead cargo and carried it over to the garbage can. I shivered. I thought about Darrell sitting in that ditch filled with black water up to his neck, dreaming of building a city in one hand and frying chicken in the other. It was funny now in the daylight, but I'd been afraid that I was never going to get him out of there. And yet I think I was more frightened than he was. I thought he was going to die in that water, although he seemed to be in ecstasy.

Now — what sounded like large occasional raindrops kept falling onto the leaves on the ground under the trees, as though onto leather. The leaves above collected the fog and the dampness, so that there was a kind of light rainfall happening underneath. I could smell salt in the air from the sea, and today was my brother's forty-fourth birthday.

I couldn't help but focus on what that meant. Not that many people were overjoyed when they got to their forties. Probably Darrell was no different. But remembering his birthday, and that Vivian *should* remember it — that meant something to him.

Still, I myself had not yet reached this invisible age barrier that he seemed to have hit up against so hard on the inside, and was reacting against almost violently. It was something inside of him that he'd apparently burst through, finding himself on the other side, irretrievably ten years older than Vivian no matter how hard he fought against his age. He dressed in tennis shoes and funky

orange-framed sunglasses. Sometimes it seemed like he wasn't so much in love with Vivian as trying to compete with her, or maybe he was just in love with an old image of her that he still held onto, when they had first met on the beach.

Vivian had a thin nose and long flaxen hair that dropped straight down to her waist. Her two front teeth protruded slightly. Her mouth seemed to always remain open. And that was how she appeared to be — Open. Open to everything. She came out of the house, yawning and stretching in a pink bathrobe. She tried to look surprised when she noticed me. "Hi, Philip," she said. "Did you just get in? Where's Darrell?"

"He's in the shop."

"Uh-huh." She scratched at herself under one breast. "Now what do you suppose happened here?" she asked, pointing at the Saab.

I shrugged.

"We usually don't have vandals here," she said.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what Darrell wanted known, and what he would want left unknown. But I grew curious how she would handle the bright red car being there at all.

"Whose Saab?" I asked.

"Why honey, this belongs to Jeff, my jewelry supplier from Berkeley," she said, smiling. "He was making a delivery, and it just broke down." Again she filled her chest and let out a breathy smile, but the skin around her eyes was beginning to draw tight.

Vivian really was a beauty still. I could see why my brother was so obsessed with her. She took very good care of herself. But she was after all ten years younger than Darrell, and a minor generation existed between them mentally. Maybe a good part of their problem was that Darrell couldn't let go of the image he had *of himself* when he'd first met her. He was still accustomed to wearing surfer tank tops, for God's sake.

Vivian went over to the Saab. "Boy, they really did a job on this, didn't they?"

Then she took in her breath, letting out a huge yelp.

"*What's this* here on the seat? Philip, come here! *What is that?*"

A shiver ran through her entire body, and she leaped back away from the car. "Is . . . *is that blood* there on the seat? See it?"

She stared wide-eyed at me, like she wasn't acting at all. I thought, '*Yeah, okay!*' I knew she was lying, but then I realized she had no way of knowing about the dead animal.

"That was the blood of a rat Darrell caught last night."

"No!"

"It's true. I can show you the dead rat."

"Your ass is a dead rat!" Vivian exploded. "Darrell tore up this car, didn't he?"

I didn't respond.

"A dead rat! — what was it doing on the seat? Driving the car?"

I had to laugh. "You are very funny. Very funny."

Vivian walked around in a tight little circle, holding her robe closed at the neck. After some time she calmed herself down, peering all around toward the shop, then back at the house.

"So, where's Jeff now?" I asked her.

"Who?"

"Jeff. You know, your jewelry supplier?"

She looked annoyed all of a sudden. "I don't know," she said.

The phone rang inside the house, and Vivian jumped. "I've got to get that," she said. "I'm expecting a call." The screen door slammed shut behind her.

I went up to the porch. "Vivian?"

"Yes," she sang musically from behind the door.

"Did you remember about the party tonight?"

"Of course," she sang.

"I have to take a piss," I sang back. "Can I come in and use the bathroom?" I was being a smart-ass.

"There are plenty of trees out there," she sang back again. "Just pick one."

A little while later I was standing at the window of my brother's shop looking out, when I saw Vivian go up the driveway dragging a small luggage cart. In the other hand she lugged a miniature card table, on her way to set up for the crafts fair in the middle of town. Darrell was just starting to wake up. I stuck my head out the door and yelled, "Vivian! Do you want some help?"

She looked over her shoulder at me anxiously. "There's *something strange* going on here!" she shouted. She looked toward the road, thrust her neck out, and kept on going up the drive.

"Mommy, wait for me!" Leslie leaped off the front porch, the screen door slamming behind her, and tore over the stones of the driveway. Long thin flaxen hair just like her mother's, trailed after her.

Vivian spun around. "I told you to stay glued to that telephone, little missy," she said. "And don't you leave the house until that phone call comes either. Hear me?"

Their little girl stamped her foot in the stones.

Vivian said, "Leslie-e-e. . . ." There was an element of warning as well as a note of pleading in her voice. My niece turned and traipsed back toward the house. "Hi, Unca Philip," she said as she went past the garage. She gave me a brave little wave and kept on marching.

"Okay, okay," Vivian said. "I'll go get my car and be right back to get you, sweetie. Just see if that call doesn't come now, okay?"

Vivian continued on up the gravel driveway to the road. There was still enough white mist in the air for her to disappear rapidly, followed only by the squeak of the little cart wheels.

That was when I realized there was no way Vivian and Jeff *would not* have heard all the commotion Darrell and I made the night before. And those weird moaning and wailing noises he made while sitting in that black ditch water up to his neck, dreaming what he was dreaming.

"Okay," I thought, "she's going to meet her lover in town. Jeff must have lit out the back way after we surprised them last night."

It wasn't very long before I heard the squeaky wheels again, except this time the squeaking sounded more desperate. I saw Vivian enter the stones of the driveway practically on the run, the little cart careening through the stones behind her, tipping one way and the other. She let go of the cart, dropping the card table, and ran up the steps into the house. I knew she'd found out that her car was never going to start.

Darrell sat up on the couch rubbing his eyes, blinking. I couldn't believe it when I took a look at him. His eyes were tomato-paste red.

"Is that you, Philip?" He squinted, shading his eyes against the brightness. It had gotten very bright outside. There were real shadows now under the trees.

"It's me, Darrell. Happy birthday, older and wiser brother. Happy birthday."

"I'm forty-four today, and nothing has changed." He swung his head back and forth. He massaged the back of his neck. "Did we do some serious drinking last night or what?"

I shook my head. I wanted to say something about those mushrooms, but it was his birthday. What could I say? I couldn't lecture Darrell about anything. Anyway, how well had I run my own life up to now? I had a failed marriage on my hands, and a sinking real estate business. I had just quit drinking after twenty steady years of clubbing my brains with alcohol.

It was my brother's forty-fourth birthday. Maybe, I reasoned, I should let him have some fun with his mushrooms if that was what he wanted. I decided to leave well enough alone. Let Darrell enjoy his day in the sun, or fog, either way.

Darrell was looking at me in a funny way. "You know, I had the weirdest dream. You know what I dreamt?"

I shook my head.

"I had a strange dream, and you were in it. We were both Peeping Toms at my bedroom window while we watched Vivian making love to . . . to another man . . . it was *Jeff* for Chrissake! My worst enemy! Isn't that incredible? And it was *both you and me* watching. We were right there at my lace curtains, they seemed so close, so real — at my own window. Isn't that weird?"

Darrell looked at me, then down at himself. He was still in his wet underwear. "What is this?" he said, looking up again. "Where in the hell was I?" He shook his head. "It was weird, Philip. Boy, that was one wild dream."

"That was no dream," I said. "It was real. I was there." His jaw dropped. "That was one of those wild dreams of reality."

