

Now you see him.

Now you don't.

Or was he really there?



For nigh on thirty years he's had his way with women,
doing what any cold-blooded, egomaniacal man would do
given half a chance. He's never been caught,
never been profiled, never even been suspected.

The uncontested master of a world
where personal property is up for grabs,
privacy is reserved for the departed,
and breathtaking women
are just plums for the plucking.

Until right now.

The following was committed to print with painstaking accuracy. Every attempt has been made to portray the particulars in a fair and objective light.

While the structures and citizens of Venice Beach are true to life, the locations of certain establishments, and the identities of several persons, have been altered for the sake of the community, and for the privacy of those individuals whose lives were so brutally disrupted.

This said, the author cannot guarantee that events drawn from memory are one hundred percent accurate, for, as this account will amply reveal, eyewitness memory is never one hundred percent reliable.

Freak

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Chapter One

Purly

The vanity mirror's dozen rose bulbs flickered every time a neighbor switched on a major appliance. This flickering, barely perceptible under hard white light, was a dramatic event in Marilyn Purly's perfectly dark bedroom.

Her ceiling and walls were papered black, her furniture ebony-stained. Carpet, bedspread, pillowcase and sheets: all were dyed *Midnight*, the deepest black available. Floor-length black velvet curtains hung in her windows and doorway.

But for Purly, the little black room could never be dark enough. That reflection belonged to a golden touch-me-not goddess; on the inside sick and dying, on the surface uniquely and breathtakingly attractive. Purly's uniqueness, in heavily cosmeticized Southern California, came partly from being damaged goods, and partly from being an unadorned natural beauty surrounded by gaggles of underdressed posers. Through no fault of her own, this *wounded nymph* quality came off as a direct challenge to men, and as a slap in the face to women.

In one of nature's crueller little ironies, Marilyn Jayne Purly had been cursed with a pathological aversion to attention. She'd tried hoods and bonnets, scarves and veils, bangs and dark glasses; nothing could conceal her sexual charisma. Even the suffocating wraps she wore outdoors seemed only to cling and entice. Though countless young women would have killed for her looks, Purly's deepening depression inevitably drove her

to the opposite idea. It took eleven suicide attempts and half a dozen complete nervous breakdowns, but in the end the most aggressive men withered and ran. Her fiercely protective landlady took care of the rest.

The hospitals and courts agreed: whether institutionalized or subsidized in the real world, Purly would not survive outside her bubble. Only a steady stream of S.S.I. checks kept her safely sealed in this crypt.

All her life she'd dreamt *plain*; Marilyn's make-believe self was a wisp of a woman, daintily dancing for gentlemen in denim. One, the nicest one, would sweep her off her feet to a land of coffee mugs and white picket fences. The mirror was her window into this secret world. Purly began reliving her tortured adolescence in that little window; initially as a distraction, then in direct competition with the fantasy. In time the delicate dream dissolved completely, leaving her addicted to a masochistic morning ritual.

Looking into that swirling glass pool was like watching a movie on a flat oval screen. She could see the halls, could hear the whistles and shouts, could almost smell the hormones as the boys of high school came stampeding; hurling themselves against her, squeezing frantically, blocking her progress as she struggled to make class. Right behind were the average girls, egging the bug-eyed boys on, slapping her too-pretty face until she ran the gauntlet screaming like a banshee. Alone in the dark, Purly still felt the boys' horny paws, still felt the normal girls beating her into hysterics.

Closing her eyes, she reached into her makeup box, picked out an unused razor blade, and guided it to her face. The jerking blade never touched flesh, but she felt every imaginary slice before lowering it to poise, for the thousandth time, above an upturned wrist.

Purly opened her eyes, neatly returned the blade, and for the thousandth time watched the ghosts of adolescence drift to the mirror's periphery.

Fresher, sharper images rose in their place. First up was her landlady's toad-like face, her fat eyes burning through the shadow of a straw hat's brim. Next appeared the probing face of a serious man, a kind of senior policeman. Lastly came the

crouching form of a muscular man facing away, the back of his jumpsuit lettered, enigmatically, HARBOR TV & VCR. These images also drifted and passed. The mirror clouded.

Out of the fog rose an angular face with gray, very penetrating eyes. The eyes had a way of locking onto your movements without shifting, as on one of those imposing portraits with eyes that appear to pursue you regardless of where you stand. Immediately behind the face came a dully resonating sound, like a buoy's bell in choppy waters. The sound produced a conditioned response: Purly placed a hand in her makeup box and extracted a tiny vial of perfume. She twisted off the cap. The ringing grew insistent. She let a few drops fall into her cleavage before loosening the big satin bow on her sweet little babydoll.

Now the doorbell was clanging urgently in her skull. In a dream, she pushed herself to her feet, pulled aside the curtain, and staggered around the jamb. The bell had her by the pulse. She almost fainted when she reached the door.

Daylight was a vertical splash of acid. Purly clung to the knob while the man outside cursed her up and down; first with gentle urgency, then with real invective. Once she'd freed the chain he forced the door with a foot and forearm, steadily bumping her back until he could squeeze inside. Juggling a sloppily stuffed black plastic bag, he slammed the door, shoved the chain back in its catch, and firmly turned the knob's heavy new, deadbolt-style lock. Vilenov dropped the bag on a coffee table and peeked between the curtain and window frame. Yes, there she was, right on cue. That fat nosy witch with the humongous straw hat, sneaking out of her apartment to pace the drive. He let the curtain fall.

An edgy, lean little man, Vilenov moved in fluid spurts. In another unbroken sweep, he switched on the ceiling light with his left hand, scooped Purly by the waist in his right arm, and eased her onto the couch under the high wide mirror in the chipped plaster frame. He plopped down beside her excitedly,

ripping open the knotted bag with his teeth. Inside were a fifth of Jack Daniels, a few hundred dollars in tens and twenties, and a number of hardcore pornographic magazines. He spun off the cap and swallowed greedily before tearing away a handful of cellophane. "Gifts," he mumbled, his eyes gleaming. "I come bearing gifts." For a while there was nothing to be heard but the rustle of thumbed pages and an occasional swallow. At last he sighed and fell against her, a forearm balanced on her shoulder. The hand dangled only a moment. As it began its slow descent he dropped back his head.

"Oh, Marilyn, Marilyn, Marilyn; oh sweet, sweet *sweet* Mary Jayne. How I've missed you, sugar pie. And you never even knew I was gone, did you?" He eased down the babydoll. "But I told you I'd be back. Just like always."

Purly stared ahead without expression. Hugging her in his left arm, Vilenov bent forward to peel off his shoes and socks. "*Mary Jayne!*" he hissed, pulling her back with him. "It's on fire in here, don't you think?" It was like talking to a rubber doll. "But that's August for you. Even the ocean air doesn't help much." He lifted her hand and placed it on his thigh. The hand was cold as putty. "Why, I remember walking barefoot on the beach as a kid, and the sand would be so hot I'd come home with blisters on my feet. That kind of heat—August heat—gets sucked into anything that's holding still." Vilenov rocked against her playfully. "But enough about me. I know you must be sick of hearing about my crummy childhood." He peeled off his shirt, spat out, "*Damn*, it's hot!" and grabbed a handful of golden hair. Vilenov yanked her head around, his bitter gray eyes narrowing. "You've never *told* me, sweetheart. Just what are you hiding from, anyway? You think you're too good-looking for the rest of us? Is that it? You think we common folk will just catch fire and explode if we have to endure even one *teensy* peek at your precious, intoxicating beauty?" He shoved her head so hard the cartilage in her neck popped. Purly's chin rolled shoulder to shoulder, at last coming to rest buried in her chest. Vilenov ran his tongue through her long damp hair, grimacing at its sweetness. "Honey Blonde," he mumbled. He pulled her head back up, but this time with tenderness. "Listen, *lover*, before I started doing you I had 'em all,

and like any sane male I went for the youngest and prettiest, the dumbest and blondest tail I could find—models, beach bunnies, playgirls; you name it. Not so very PC you think? Not *sensitive* enough? But that’s how we men are. We’re hardwired for action, not for airs.” He turned her drooping head to face him and spoke like a confident suitor about to pop the question. “Well now, Mary Jayne, let me tell you. For twenty years I’ve been peeling back the primest poon this county has to offer. But you know what? Sooner or later a man grows up. Sooner or later he realizes that all those snotty plastic bimbos out there are purely superficial, and finds himself going after...strange fruit.” He released her head and shifted tighter against her, whispering in her ear while his hands roamed. “You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you? You don’t know who I am, or how many nights we’ve spent together, or just how crazy I am about you. Or how happy it makes us both when your pretty little nightie comes sliding down...it’s so pretty...*so* pretty.” Vilenov shuddered as Purly’s babydoll dropped to her waist. He moaned, pressed down her hand and slid it up his thigh.

The hand resisted.

Vilenov froze, every sense questing. For half a minute he didn’t even breathe. Then, very slowly, he reached over, gently pinched her chin in his fingers and turned her head. Purly responded with a petite cough, flecks of froth emerging at the corners of her mouth. In Vilenov’s pale gray eyes a pair of red blazes appeared and passed. He carefully studied the slack, heartbreakingly lovely face. “That chest cold of yours is getting worse, Mary. We’ll have to do something about it. Now you just sit here like a good girl while I go get the medicine. Don’t make a move.” Vilenov rose and stood absolutely still, feeling the room. He listened closely, studied every object visually, sniffed the air for unfamiliar scents. Sweat was building round his hairline, rolling down his chest and back. The place was a freaking sauna. He took another long look around and tiptoed into the bathroom.

Purly sat in a slump, staring at nothing. She thought she could hear voices outside, very much subdued. Whispers. There were also a few miscellaneous sounds: the soft turning of gravel underfoot, what might have been a radio chattering in the

distance, a familiar creaking of floorboards in the apartment above. Then, except for the tiny squeaking of the medicine cabinet's hinges, complete silence. Without knowing why, Marilyn Purly wobbled to her feet. She walked to the front door in a trance, noiselessly unlocked the knob, and returned to her place on the couch. Her eyes fell on the black oblong box of the VCR, squatting atop her television's dull maple cabinet. *Hello*, she wanted to say.

Vilenov walked back in; a jar of Mentholatum in his left hand, his trousers and briefs in his right. He tossed the clothes on the coffee table, liberally lathered his hands with the mentholated goop, and turned to face the hunched woman. Their knees locked. Vilenov reached down, got his hands full and began to massage. "That's my baby," he breathed. "That's the girl I love." He let go reluctantly, placed Purly's palms on the backs of his thighs, and walked his left hand down her chest while his right hand gently pulled her head forward.

Nicolas Vilenov admired his reflection. Sweat was rolling all down his body. His eyes were glazing. After a minute his right knee began to tremble. He smiled, let his head fall back, and closed his eyes.

Carre placed all his weight on the edge of his left foot, keeping his balance using only two fingertips pressed lightly against the apartment's outer wall. He'd held his breath so long his eyes were popping. Muted, oddly rhythmic sounds came from inside; the sounds of hogs in a dream. He delicately rested his ear on the door, and the hogs took on a distinctly human quality. Except for those muffled grunts and sighs, Purly's apartment was dead quiet. Carre soundlessly exhaled.

His eyes met Vincent Beasely's, raging just across the doorway. Carre's head cocked warningly. He could see Beasely was ready to blow; the man's body language was all profanities—brows knit, nostrils flared, lips drawn back in a snarl. Carre had watched these symptoms grow more pronounced with each passing day, beginning with Beasely's first good long look

at a surveillance photo of the suspect, culminating in his yearning, embarrassingly anxious comments about the Purly woman. Now, thanks to their shared hot and cold emotions, the relationship between these officers couldn't have been more electric. Both men were comfortably married, both were immovably principled, and both were irresistibly drawn to Marilyn Jayne Purly. Beasely had it worse: he'd always been, if anything, dedicated to the letter of the law; a soft-spoken cop with a good record. Not the sort of man to lose his head or his heart. Carre was by nature on a tighter rein; stiff, pressed, and polished, and notorious for his ability to take drastic disciplinary measures without a trace of sympathy. Yet, despite Beasely's steady and very unprofessional change, Carre had refused to have him reassigned, had instead become his staunchest supporter. For, from somewhere in his midbrain, Roland Carre hated, hated, *hated* Nicolas Vilenov almost as much as did Vince Beasely.

Carre flicked his head and looked back at the drive. Most of the buildings' tenants were standing in a broad crescent facing Purly's apartment, restrained by three uniformed officers. A man in a white shirt and tie waited at midpoint, staring at an upstairs window. The rest of the tenants were leaning on the twin building's upper rail, watching intently.

All this crowd control should have been unnecessary. The buildings' occupants had proved quite compliant, even shy, timidly filing into their units to peep from windows and cracked doors. There they had remained until only a few minutes ago, when their massive manager began sucking officers into a whispered shouting match over rights and procedures. One by one they had reopened their doors to mill uncertainly between the buildings. The woman became more unruly in their presence, as though readying a charge, but backed off grudgingly when officers threatened her with obstruction. She returned to pacing her assigned perimeter, only to subtly work her way back in as the raid neared the moment of truth.

Carre lowered his left hand until the fingers just graced the doorknob. He pinched it lightly, turned it centimeter by centimeter. The knob was unlocked. He turned it back just as slowly. The chain might be up, but it wouldn't stand against his and Beasely's shoulders.

The coordinating officer's full attention was on the apartment directly above Purly's. In that unit the drapes parted to reveal a dark standing figure. This man turned his head to look back into the room. After a tense half-minute he dropped his arm in a chopping motion, copied instantly by the man on the ground. Carre gently turned the knob. He and Beasely, with a quick exchange of glances, hit the door as one.

What Carre saw stopped him dead. He barely budged when Beasely slammed into him from behind.

Seated at opposite ends of the couch were a clothed man and woman. A tall glass of iced tea stood on a coffee table at their knees. Scattered about this glass were maybe two dozen supermarket coupons and a number of magazines. Carre automatically sampled titles: SAILBOATING NOW. KITTENS & PUPPIES. POETRY FOR BEGINNERS. His eyes were drawn to an old black and white TV across the room. On the screen a cartoon whirlwind raced across a cartoon desert.

"Beep beep!" the whirlwind cried.

A black videocassette recorder was perched on the set's console. Carre walked over and stared into the VCR's remote control sensor. For a weird moment he was totally in the dark. He straightened and found himself studying the faded print of a skinny, homely ballerina. As he turned back to face the room his attention seemed to drift along behind.

The suspect was on his feet; every aspect of his expression and posture consistent with surprise and indignation. A cussing Beasely had one arm around his neck, the other twisting his wrist up behind his back. Marilyn Purly, dressed in happy-face muumuu and fuzzy pink slippers, was screaming out of her mind. On an end table were a green rotary telephone and a carefully folded tablecloth. Carre overcame a ridiculous urge to drape this cloth around the screaming woman.

There came a repeated, dreamlike stomping above. The concussions staggered Carre. One moment he thought he would faint, the next his consciousness was struggling with two separate perceptions of a single event: he could have sworn he saw his transparent mirror image reach into a fanny pack to extract something pallid and flaccid. Carre watched dumbstruck as the apparition placed an evidence bag under Purly's chin, signed a

document on a clipboard from forensic officer Beloe, and helped the woman undersign. The hallucination blurred, shivered, and passed.

“Marilyn?” Carre managed.

Purly peeked between her fingers and nodded frantically.

“I wonder,” Carre’s voice said, “if we could step into the kitchen for a minute. You remember me, don’t you, Ms. Purly?” She nodded again, languidly now. Carre was absolutely blown away, as though for the first time, by the woman’s terrible beauty. A tiny voice in the back of his head begged him not to stare, but he couldn’t help it. He took a couple of deep breaths and forced himself to relax. “I’m officer Roland Carre,” he said clearly, and with authority. He was back on track. “We had an arrangement to spring a sort of trap on a man suspected of being a serial rapist in the South Bay. You were very cooperative. Does any of this ring a bell with you?”

Purly’s head bobbed resignedly. She extended a shaking hand. Carre helped her to her feet and quietly led her into the tiny kitchen, sat her down on one of the cheap little chairs around the cheap little table. He used a thumb to gently peel back an eyelid. Carre saw a red, but otherwise perfectly clear, eyeball.

“Ms. Purly, can you tell me what was taking place before we came in? If you’re up to it, that is.”

She sobbed and nodded, shivered up and down. “We were having tea. Iced. Nicky and I were discussing catamarans and the migratory patterns of blue whales.”

“Nicky?”

Purly giggled spasmodically. “Nicolas,” she gushed. “It’s my pet name for him.” Her expression collapsed, and Carre found himself staring into the flickering baby-blue eyes of an unspeakably frightened woman. His fists clenched. “He...he calls me *Mary Jayne*. No one has ever called me ‘Mary Jayne’ before.”

Carre grasped her shoulders and felt her flesh melt in his hands. He went down on one knee to be face to face. Exercising great control, he said with exaggerated clarity, “Ms. Purly, right before we came in, was this man Nicolas taking advantage of

you sexually, or in any manner making you feel afraid for your safety?"

Her reaction was so dramatic Carre had to recoil. Purly tensed up and glared, a lioness protecting her cub. "Certainly not! Nicky is a perfect gentleman!" Plush tears rose under the lids. Suddenly her eyes were rolling in her skull. "What's going on here, officer? What are you doing in my house? Why are you asking these disgusting questions?"

Carre stepped back, his cheeks and ears burning. "I'm very sorry, ma'am. And I deeply appreciate your cooperation."

He stomped into the front room and stood nose-to-nose with Vilenov. Carre's expression underwent a complete transformation, from lovingly sympathetic to jungle-pissed. The breath hissed between his teeth as he fought to retain his professionalism. "One question," he said icily. "Just what the fuck was going on before we blew in here?"

Vilenov winced. Beasely twisted harder.

"Nothing, sir," Vilenov gasped. "Oh, please...nothing! We were talking about boats!" His whole face became contorted. "We were talking about whales, for Christ's sake!"

Slowly the blood drained from Carre's face. When he turned back around, Marilyn Purly was slumped in the kitchen doorway, shivering; a wounded doe in headlights. "Ms. Purly," he said crisply, "I'd like to use your phone, if I may." Without waiting for a reply, he picked up the receiver and dialed Pacific Division. Carre stood facing the wall for a few minutes, his jaw hanging. At last he looked straight up and shook his head in disbelief. He nodded at Beasely.

Beasely cruelly jammed the suspect's arm while whipping out a pair of handcuffs. Vilenov cried out and dropped to his knees. Beasely slapped on the cuffs even as a trio of officers dragged the man back to his feet. "Now pay real close attention," Beasely snarled, his lips right up against Vilenov's ear. "I'm gonna introduce you to Miranda. Oh, I just know you're gonna love meeting her, prick, because we've all seen how interested you are in rights. First off, you've got the right to remain silent. But I've got the right to make you squeal like a pig." Beasely twisted even harder as he shouldered him out the door. Vilenov, protesting all the way, was bullied through a scattering

fence of tenants.

Carre turned to face the kitchen doorway. Even bundled in her floppy terrycloth muumuu, Marilyn Purly was the classic damsel in distress, reanimating every guilty fantasy he'd died through since that first interview just outside the black little room. "My work is done here," he said softly. "An officer will arrive shortly to help you get everything sorted out and back to normal. Because of certain inconsistencies, Ms. Purly, I'm requested to assign a crew of specialists. They'll be gathering evidence for a very short while, and I promise you the absolute minimum of inconvenience. It's just that something doesn't make sense here." He ran out of words. Carre dropped back his head and blew out a sigh. "Have a nice day," he whispered, "Mary Jayne," and turned on his heel.

In the apartment directly above, three men were stationed before a long folding table. On this table rested a daisy chain of patched boxes, a computer keyboard, and a large video monitor. The man in charge was seated, his two partners standing close behind his chair. The men were watching the real-time image of Purly sitting topless on the couch, apparently in a trance.

"She looks gone," said the seated man.

"Jesus," whispered the man to his right. "Would you get an eyeful of those! Oh, mama!" Sweat was trickling around his collar. He traded a nervous grin with the man on his left.

It was terribly hot and stuffy in the small apartment. Windows and drapes were sealed for secrecy's sake, fan and air conditioner shut down to preserve the integrity of electronic readings. The sitting man wiped sweat from his eyes and leaned closer to the monitor. He watched Purly step offscreen and return to the couch. Almost as if reading his mind, she slowly turned her head to face the camera. The seated man saw what appeared to be a spark of emotional pain. He tapped a finger repeatedly on a key. The image on the monitor zoomed in to feature Purly's flawless face. He made a quick note on a pad to his

right, zoomed the image back to full room.

“Oh, Lord,” a voice whispered, as a naked Nicolas Vilenov walked in from the bathroom. Vilenov squeezed between Purly and the coffee table, his back to the camera. The seated man tapped rapidly on the keyboard. A bordered image appeared around the naked man’s left arm. A few more taps, and features within the border enlarged. He returned the image to normal. “Menthol something,” he said.

“Mentholatum,” came a voice behind him.

“Oh...*mama!*”

They watched the man throw his clothes on the table and lather his hands. As he pulled her face forward, the seated man barked, “*Davis!*”

Immediately the man to his left stepped to the window and parted the drapes. He raised his arm and looked back into the room. The two men at the monitor leaned even closer, their heads almost touching. The camera zoomed in, showing only a buttock and most of Purly’s face. Her eyes appeared to be made of glass.

“Go!” said the seated man.

The man at the window dropped his arm. When the officer below copied his gesture he released the drapes and crept back to the chair. The three men huddled around the monitor expectantly.

Daylight burst in on the screen’s left side. The naked man whirled. One hand covered his eyes, the other his genitals. He tripped backward over the coffee table, but didn’t lose his feet.

The two crouching men laughed excitedly, pounding on the chair like a couple of drunken lugs watching the Super Bowl. The long days of whispering and tiptoeing were over. Gone were the endless hours in front of a featureless screen, waiting for Purly to turn on a light...to do *anything*. The men saw Carre and Beasely lunge into the picture. Beasely threw a vicious chokehold on the naked man, while Carre stood watching Purly going through the motions; arms embracing an invisible man, head rolling back and forth. They saw Carre bend down, saw his round brown eye look directly into the camera. Carre turned and walked over to an end table, picked up a

folded tablecloth, spread it wide and draped it around the nude woman. The surveillance men groaned.

“No, Rollin’!” cried one of the crouching men, stamping his foot repeatedly. “You’re covering up the wrong one!” The man beside him giggled.

Carre pulled a pair of latex gloves from a fanny pack and tugged them on. He then extracted a plastic bag with a gummed label across its face, held this bag under Purly’s chin, put an arm over her shoulders, and spoke in her ear. Purly obediently leaned forward and spat. Carre sealed the evidence bag and handed it to Beloe. Beloe produced a clipboard. Carre signed, Beloe countersigned. Carre placed the pen in Purly’s cold hand and coached her signature. Beloe took the clipboard and moved out of the picture. Carre helped Purly offscreen into the kitchen. In a minute he reappeared alone. He strode up to the naked man writhing in Beasely’s grip.

Carre snarled something and stepped back. The man was forced to put on his clothes, even as Beasely maintained his chokehold. Beasely twisted the man’s arm until he lashed back his head to meet his tormentor’s eyes, but Beasely, muttering rapidly, kept his cheek pressed right up against his ear. Carre looked to the kitchen and spoke a few words, then stepped to the end table, hesitated. He turned to glare at the suspect.

A black cloud passed over the restrained man’s expression. His eyes swept all around the room, out the apartment’s doorway and back inside. For just a second they seemed to look straight into the camera’s lens. All three surveillance men shuddered involuntarily.

Carre, facing away from the camera, dialed a number and spoke to the wall. He replaced the receiver, stared hard at the ceiling and shook his head incredulously. He looked to his left and nodded.

Vincent Beasely savagely twisted Vilenov’s arm while whipping out handcuffs. Vilenov went straight down. Three officers swarmed onscreen and roughly hauled him to his feet. The knot of prisoner and officers moved offscreen into the wall of light. Roland Carre stepped out of the picture.

“Okay,” said the seated man. “Show’s over.” With nervous exchanges, the two standing agents signed out on a clip-

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