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Ross Macdonald

The Chill



A LEW ARCHER NOVEL

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THE CHILL

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To R. W. Lid

*The people and institutions in this novel
are all imaginary, and do not refer to any
actual people or institutions.*

R. M.

chapter 1

THE HEAVY RED-FIGURED DRAPES over the courtroom windows were incompletely closed against the sun. Yellow daylight leaked in and dimmed the electric bulbs in the high ceiling. It picked out random details in the room: the glass water cooler standing against the paneled wall opposite the jury box, the court reporter's carmine-tipped fingers playing over her stenotype machine, Mrs. Perrine's experienced eyes watching me across the defense table.

It was nearly noon on the second and last day of her trial. I was the final witness for the defense. Her attorney had finished questioning me. The deputy D.A. waived cross-examination, and several of the jurors looked at him with puzzled frowns. The judge said I could go.

From my place on the witness stand I'd noticed the young man sitting in the front row of spectators. He wasn't one of the regular trial-watchers, housewives and pensioners filling an empty morning with other people's troubles. This one had troubles of his own. His brooding blue gaze stayed on my face, and I had the uncomfortable feeling that he might be willing to share his troubles with me.

He rose from his seat as I stepped down and intercepted me at the door. "Mr. Archer, may I talk to you?"

"All right."

The bailiff opened the door and gestured urgently. "Outside, gentlemen. Court is still in session."

We moved out into the corridor. The young man scowled at the automatically closing door. "I don't like being pushed around."

"I'd hardly describe that as being pushed around. What's eating you, friend?"

I shouldn't have asked him. I should have walked briskly out to my car and driven back to Los Angeles. But he had that clean, crewcut All-American look, and that blur of pain in his eyes.

"I just got thrown out of the Sheriff's office. It came on top

of a couple of other brushoffs from the local authorities, and I'm not used to that kind of treatment."

"They don't mean it personally."

"You've had a lot of detective experience, haven't you? I gathered that from what you said on the witness stand. Incidentally, you did a wonderful job for Mrs. Perrine. I'm sure the jury will acquit her."

"We'll see. Never bet on a jury." I distrusted his compliment, which probably meant he wanted something more substantial from me. The trial in which I had just testified marked the end of a long uninteresting case, and I was planning a fishing trip to La Paz. "Is that all you wanted to say to me?"

"I have a lot to say, if you'll only listen. I mean, I've got this problem about my wife. She left me."

"I don't ordinarily do divorce work, if that's what you have in mind."

"Divorce?" Without making a sound, he went through the motions of laughing hollowly, once. "I was only married one day—less than one day. Everybody including my father keeps telling me I should get an annulment. But I don't want an annulment or a divorce. I want her back."

"Where is your wife now?"

"I don't know." He lit a cigarette with unsteady hands. "Dolly left in the middle of our honeymoon weekend, the day after we were married. She may have met with foul play."

"Or she may have decided she didn't want to be married, or not to you. It happens all the time."

"That's what the police keep saying: it happens all the time. As if that's any comfort! Anyway, I know that wasn't the case. Dolly loved me, and I loved—I love her."

He said this very intensely, with the entire force of his nature behind the words. I didn't know his nature but there was sensitivity and feeling there, more feeling than he could handle easily.

"You haven't told me your name."

"I'm sorry. My name is Kincaid. Alex Kincaid."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I haven't been doing much lately, since Dolly—since this thing happened. Theoretically I work for the Channel Oil Corporation. My father is in charge of their Long Beach office. You may have heard of him. Frederick Kincaid?"

I hadn't. The bailiff opened the door of the courtroom, and held it open. Court had adjourned for lunch, and the jurors filed out past him. Their movements were solemn, part of the

ritual of the trial. Alex Kincaid watched them as if they were going out to sit in judgment on him.

"We can't talk here," he said. "Let me buy you lunch."

"I'll have lunch with you. Dutch." I didn't want to owe him anything, at least till I'd heard his story.

There was a restaurant across the street. Its main room was filled with smoke and the roar of conversation. The red-checkered tables were all occupied, mainly with the courthouse people, lawyers and sheriff's men and probation officers. Though Pacific Point was fifty miles south of my normal beat, I recognized ten or a dozen of them.

Alex and I went into the bar and found a couple of stools in a dim corner. He ordered a double scotch on the rocks. I went along with it. He drank his down like medicine and tried to order a second round immediately.

"You set quite a pace. Slow down."

"Are you telling me what to do?" he said distinctly and unpleasantly.

"I'm willing to listen to your story. I want you to be able to tell it."

"You think I'm an alcoholic or something?"

"I think you're a bundle of nerves. Pour alcohol on a bundle of nerves and it generally turns into a can of worms. While I'm making suggestions you might as well get rid of those chips you're wearing on both shoulders. Somebody's liable to knock them off and take a piece of you with them."

He sat for a while with his head down. His face had an almost fluorescent pallor, and a faint humming tremor went through him.

"I'm not my usual self, I admit that. I didn't know things like this could happen to people."

"It's about time you told me what did happen. Why not start at the beginning?"

"You mean when she left the hotel?"

"All right. Start with the hotel."

"We were staying at the Surf House," he said, "right here in Pacific Point. I couldn't really afford it but Dolly wanted the experience of staying there—she never had. I figured a three-day weekend wouldn't break me. It was the Labor Day weekend. I'd already used my vacation time, and we got married that Saturday so that we could have at least a three-day honeymoon."

"Where were you married?"

"In Long Beach, by a judge."

"It sounds like one of these spur-of-the-moment weddings."

"I suppose it was, in a way. We hadn't known each other too long. Dolly was the one, really, who wanted to get married right now. Don't think I wasn't eager. I was. But my parents thought we should wait a bit, until we could find a house and have it furnished and so on. They would have liked a church wedding. But Dolly wanted to be married by a judge."

"What about her parents?"

"They're dead. She has no living relatives." He turned his head slowly and met my eyes. "Or so she claims."

"You seem to have your doubts about it."

"Not really. It's just that she got so upset when I asked her about her parents. I naturally wanted to meet them, but she treated my request as though I was prying. Finally she told me her entire family was dead, wiped out in an auto accident."

"Where?"

"I don't know where. When it comes right down to it, I don't know too much about my wife. Except that she's a wonderful girl," he added in a rush of loyal feeling slightly flavored with whisky. "She's beautiful and intelligent and good and I know she loves me." He was almost chanting, as though by wishful thinking or sheer incantation he could bend reality back into shape around him.

"What was her maiden name?"

"Dolly McGee. Her name is really Dorothy. She was working in the university library and I was taking a summer course in Business Ad—"

"Just this summer?"

"That's correct." He swallowed, and his adam's apple throbbed like a grief in his throat. "We only knew each other for six week—six-and-a-half weeks—before we were married. But we saw each other every day of those six-and-a-half weeks."

"What did you do together?"

"I don't see that it matters."

"It could. I'm trying to get a line on her personal habits."

"She had no *bad* habits, if that's what you're looking for. She never let me drink when we were out together. She wasn't very keen on the coffee houses, either, or the movies. She was—she's a very serious girl. Most of our time we talked—we talked and walked. We must have covered most of West Los Angeles."

"What did you talk about?"

"The meaning of life," he said, as if this went without saying. "We were trying to work out a plan to live by, a set of rules for our marriage and our children. The main thing for Dolly was the children. She wanted to bring them up to be

real people. She thought it was more important to be an honest individual than to have security and worldly possessions and so on. I don't want to bore you with all this."

"You're not. I take it she was completely sincere?"

"Nobody was ever more sincere. I mean it. She actually wanted me to give up my job and go back and finish my M.A. She didn't think I should take money from my family. She was willing to go on working to help me through. But we decided against that plan, when we made up our minds to get married."

"It wasn't a forced marriage?"

He looked at me stonily. "There was nothing like that between us. As a matter of fact we didn't even—I mean, I didn't touch her on our wedding night. The Surf House and Pacific Point seemed to get on her nerves, even though she was the one who wanted to come here. So we decided to postpone the physical bit. A lot of couples do that nowadays."

"How does Dolly feel about sex?"

"Fine. We talked about it very frankly. If you think she left me because she's afraid of it, you're way off the beam. She's a warm person."

"Why did she leave you, Alex?"

His eyes clouded with pain, which had scarcely left them. "I haven't been able to figure it out. It wasn't anything between me and Dolly, I'm sure of that. The man with the beard must have had something to do with it."

"How does he get into the picture?"

"He came to the hotel that afternoon—the day she left. I was down on the beach having a swim, and afterward I went to sleep in the sun. I must have been away from the room for a couple of hours. She was gone, bag and baggage, when I got back. The desk clerk told me she had this visitor before she left, a man with a short gray beard who stayed in the room about an hour."

"No name?"

"He didn't mention his name."

"Did he and your wife leave together?"

"The desk clerk said they didn't. The man left first. Then Dolly took a taxi to the bus station, but so far as I could find out she didn't buy a ticket. She didn't buy a railroad ticket or an airline ticket, either. She had no car. So I've been going on the assumption that she's still here in Pacific Point. She couldn't walk down the freeway."

"She could hitchhike."

"Not Dolly."

"Where did she live before you were married?"

"In Westwood, in a furnished apartment. She gave it up and we moved her typewriter and things into my apartment on Saturday morning just before the ceremony. All the stuff is still there, and it's one of the things that worry me. I've been over it with a fine-toothed comb for clues, but she didn't leave any behind—nothing really personal at all."

"Do you think she planned to marry you and leave you?"

"No, I don't. What would be the point?"

"I can think of several possibilities. Do you carry much insurance, for example?"

"A fair amount. Dad insured me when I was born. But he's still the beneficiary."

"Does your family have money?"

"Not that much. Dad makes a good living, but he works for it. Anyway, what you're hinting at is out of the question. Dolly's completely honest, and she doesn't even care about money."

"What does she care about?"

"I thought she cared about me," he said with his head down. "I still believe she does. Something must have happened to her. She may have gone out of her mind."

"Is she mentally unstable?"

He considered the question, and his answer to it. "I don't think so. She had her black spells. I guess most people do. I was talking loosely."

"Keep on talking loosely. You can't tell what may be important. You've been making a search for her, of course?"

"As much of a search as I could. But I can't do it all by myself, without any cooperation from the police. They write down what I say on little pieces of paper and put them away in a drawer and give me pitying looks. They seem to think Dolly found out something shameful about me on our wedding night."

"Could there be any truth in that?"

"No! We're crazy about each other. I tried to tell that to the Sheriff this morning. He gave me one of those knowing leers and said he couldn't act unless there was some indication of a breach of the peace. I asked him if a missing woman wasn't some indication, and he said no. She was free and twenty-one and she left under her own power and I had no legal right to force her to come back. He advised me to get an annulment. I told him what he could do with his advice, and he ordered two of his men to throw me out of his office. I found out where the deputy D.A. was, in court, and I was waiting to put in a complaint when I saw you on the stand."

"Nobody sent you to me, then?"

"No, but I can give you references. My father—"

"You told me about your father. He thinks you should get an annulment, too."

Alex nodded dolefully. "Dad thinks I'm wasting my time, on a girl who isn't worth it."

"He could be right."

"He couldn't be more wrong. Dolly is the only one I've ever loved and the only one I ever will love. If you won't help me, I'll find somebody who will!"

I liked his insistence. "My rates are high. A hundred a day and expenses."

"I've got enough to pay you for at least a week." He reached for his billfold and slammed it down on the bar, so hard that the bartender looked at him suspiciously. "Do you want a cash advance?"

"There's no hurry," I said. "Do you have a picture of Dolly?"

He removed a folded piece of newspaper from the billfold and handed it to me with a certain reluctance, as if it was more valuable than money. It was a reproduction of a photograph which had been unfolded and refolded many times.

"Among happy honeymooners at the Surf House," the caption said, "are Mr. and Mrs. Alex Kincaid of Long Beach." Alex and his bride smiled up at me through the murky light. Her face was oval and lovely in a way of its own, with a kind of hooded intelligence in the eyes and humor like a bittersweet taste on the mouth.

"When was this taken?"

"Three weeks ago Saturday, when we arrived at the Surf House. They do it for everybody. They printed it in the Sunday morning paper, and I clipped it. I'm glad I did. It's the only picture I have of her."

"You could get copies."

"Where?"

"From whoever took it."

"I never thought of that. I'll see the photographer at the hotel about it. How many pictures do you think I should ask him for?"

"Two or three dozen, anyway. It's better to have too many than too few."

"That will run into money."

"I know, and so will I."

"Are you trying to talk yourself out of a job?"

"I don't need the work, and I could use a rest."

"To hell with you then."

He snatched at the flimsy picture between my fingers. It

tore across the middle. We faced each other like enemies, each of us holding a piece of the happy honeymooners.

Alex burst into tears.

chapter 2

I AGREED over lunch to help him find his wife. That and the chicken pot pie calmed him down. He couldn't remember when he had eaten last, and he ate ravenously.

We drove out to the Surf House in separate cars. It was on the sea at the good end of town: a pueblo hotel whose Spanish gardens were dotted with hundred-dollar-a-day cottages. The terraces in front of the main building descended in wide green steps to its own marina. Yachts and launches were bobbing at the slips. Further out on the water, beyond the curving promontory that gave Pacific Point its name, white sails leaned against a low gray wall of fog.

The desk clerk in the Ivy League suit was very polite, but he wasn't the one who had been on duty on the Sunday I was interested in. That one had been a summer replacement, a college boy who had gone back to school in the East. He himself, he regretted to say, knew nothing about Mrs. Kincaid's bearded visitor or her departure.

"I'd like to talk to the hotel photographer. Is he around today?"

"Yes, sir. I believe he's out by the swimming pool."

We found him, a thin spry man wearing a heavy camera like an albatross around his neck. Among the colored beach clothes and bathing costumes, his dark business suit made him look like an undertaker. He was taking some very candid pictures of a middle-aged woman in a Bikini who didn't belong in one. Her umbilicus glared at the camera like an eyeless socket.

When he had done his dreadful work, the photographer turned to Alex with a smile. "Hi. How's the wife?"

"I haven't seen her recently," Alex said glumly.

"Weren't you on your honeymoon a couple of weeks ago? Didn't I take your picture?"

Alex didn't answer him. He was peering around at the pool-

side loungers like a ghost trying to remember how it felt to be human. I said:

"We'd like to get some copies made of that picture you took. Mrs. Kincaid is on the missing list, and I'm a private detective. My name is Archer."

"Fargo. Simmy Fargo." He gave me a quick handshake, and the kind of glance a camera gives you when it records you for posterity. "In what sense on the missing list?"

"We don't know. She left here in a taxi on the afternoon of September the second. Kincaid has been looking for her ever since."

"That's tough," Fargo said. "I suppose you want the prints for circularization. How many do you think you'll be needing?"

"Three dozen?"

He whistled, and slapped himself on his narrow wrinkled forehead. "I've got a busy weekend coming up, and it's already started. This is Friday. I could let you have them by Monday. But I suppose you want them yesterday?"

"Today will do."

"Sorry." He shrugged loosely, making his camera bob against his chest.

"It could be important, Fargo. What do you say we settle for a dozen, in two hours?"

"I'd like to help you. But I've got a job." Slowly, almost against his will, he turned and looked at Alex. "Tell you what I'll do. I'll call the wife in, and you can have your pictures. Only don't stand me up, the way the other one did."

"What other one?" I said.

"Big guy with a beard. He ordered a print of the same picture and never came back for it. I can let you have that print now if you like."

Alex came out of his dark trance. He took hold of Fargo's arm with both hands and shook it. "You saw him then. Who is he?"

"I thought maybe you knew him." Fargo disengaged himself and stepped back. "As a matter of fact, I thought I knew him, too. I could have sworn I took his picture once. But I couldn't quite place the face. I see too many faces."

"Did he give you his name?"

"He must have. I don't take orders without a name. I'll see if I can find it for you, eh?"

We followed him into the hotel and through a maze of corridors to his small cluttered windowless office. He phoned his wife, then burrowed into the pile of papers on his desk and

came up with a photographer's envelope. Inside, between two sheets of corrugated paper, was a glossy print of the newly-weds. On the front of the envelope Fargo had written in pencil: "Chuck Begley, Wine Cellar."

"I remember now," he said. "He told me he was working at the Wine Cellar. That's a liquor store not too far from here. When Begley didn't claim his picture I called them. They said Begley wasn't working for them any more." Fargo looked from me to Alex. "Does the name Begley mean anything to you?"

We both said that it didn't. "Can you describe him, Mr. Fargo?"

"I can describe the part of him that wasn't covered with seaweed, I mean the beard. His hair is gray, like the beard, and very thick and wavy. Gray eyebrows and gray eyes, an ordinary kind of straight nose, I noticed it was peeling from the sun. He's not bad-looking for an older man, apart from his teeth, which aren't good. And he looks as though he's taken a beating or two in his time. Personally I wouldn't want to go up against him. He's a big man, and he looks pretty rough."

"How big?"

"Three or four inches taller than I am. That would make him six feet one or two. He was wearing a short-sleeve sport shirt, and I noticed the muscles in his arms."

"How did he talk?"

"Nothing special. He didn't have a Harvard accent, and he didn't say ain't."

"Did he give you any reason for wanting the picture?"

"He said he had a sentimental interest. He saw it in the paper, and it reminded him of somebody. I remember thinking he must have dashed right over. The paper with the picture in it came out Sunday morning, and he came in around Sunday noon."

"He must have gone to see your wife immediately afterward," I said to Alex. And to Fargo: "How did this particular picture happen to be used by the newspaper?"

"They picked it out of a batch I sent over. The *Press* often uses my pictures, as a matter of fact I used to work for them. Why they used this one instead of some of the others I couldn't say." He held up the print in the fluorescent light, then handed it to me. "It did turn out well, and Mr. Kincaid and his wife make an attractive couple."

"Thanks very much," Alex said sardonically.

"I was paying you a compliment, fellow."

"Sure you were."