

Richard Hudson sat in front of his computer staring at a blank screen. He was ready for the final dash to the climax for his latest Prince Ziad novel, but the words wouldn't come. He needed a hundred pages of manuscript to finish the thing. One hundred pages—twenty-five thousand words of deathless prose that would neatly solve all the prince's problems and give the gallant warrior time to recuperate for his next adventure.

But it wouldn't come. Richard Hudson's mind was as blank as the computer screen. Nothing. *Nada*. *Zilch*.

The cursor sat in the upper left corner of the screen blinking at him.

True, he hadn't been doing much thinking about Prince Ziad lately. A writer must think about his characters, must see and hear them on the stage of his mind. Only then can he write them. It's a very simple process; think about what's happening to them, watch them react, listen to what they say, then write it.

The only prerequisite is that you must clear your mind of extraneous matters.

Richard Hudson hunched his shoulders, stared at the blank computer screen, and thought about the Ice sisters. Two women—well, there was no other way to describe it—throwing themselves at him. How on earth had this happened? To him, of all people, the last man on earth interested in a breeding partner? Or partners. Who would have predicted that the liberation of women would lead to predatory females stalking harmless, balding, fat male writers?

He was pondering the perverse ways of fate when he heard knocking on the front door.

He panicked. He had managed to run them off only an hour ago. Made them take Goofy home, insisted rather rudely that they must both leave.

His first impulse was to ignore the knocking. Maybe they would think he'd gone somewhere. Drat, his car was still in the driveway.

“Go away,” he shouted from the safety of the living room.

“I need to talk to you, Mr. Hudson.” A man’s voice.

Hudson scuttled to a window and peeked around the curtain. By putting his face almost against the glass he could just see the figure standing at the front door. That state policeman. Neely. Alone. No women in sight. Perhaps they were hiding in the bushes.

Aaagh, the paranoia has begun. Next will come madness, then jibbering fits, a complete separation from reality.

Steeling himself, he went to the door, unlocked it and pulled it open.

“I need a few minutes of your time.”

“What about?” Hudson was in no mood for chitchat. Unable to help himself, he scanned the yard to ensure the women weren’t rushing the open door.

“It’s personal, not official.”

He gave in and took the trooper to the living room. Then he went back to the door and locked it, just in case.

“I’m sorry to bother you this evening, Mr. Hudson, but I wanted to stop by and talk to you about Crystal.”

“I asked you to remove her from this house, and you refused.”

“I remember. But there was no way to do it unless I physically carried her out. You saw that, didn’t you?”

“Now it’s Crystal *and* her sister. I don’t know what I am going to do.”

“They’re both in love with you.”

Richard Hudson goggled. “Oh, my God,” he moaned. “What *am* I going to do?”

Perhaps he could sell the house, move someplace else. Tell no one where he was going. Slip out in the dead of night and drive away, write to the real estate agent later listing the house. Have his agent mail the letter from New York. He could change his name. He could—

“I don’t know just how to say this, Mr. Hudson, but I was wondering, since there are two of them, could you...?”

“What?”

“Could you... tell Crystal that there is no way, that you aren't interested in her?”

“You idiot! I've told her that. Over and over. It's like talking to a stump.”

“You should not have led her on,” Sam Neely said, “given her encouragement at the beginning of your relationship. Obviously she doesn't believe you now.” His tone implied that he didn't either.

“I didn't encourage either of them,” Richard Hudson wailed, deeply offended. “And I don't know how I could make my feelings any plainer. I used English, no big words, spoke slowly in simple, declarative sentences. They won't listen. They *refuse* to listen.”

Neely twisted his hat in his hands. “But you must be giving Crystal some reason to hope, Mr. Hudson, or she would have gone away. Heartbroken, of course—that's unavoidable. Perhaps—“

The writer scowled. This simple fool thought he, Richard Hudson, had some control over this mess. “Perhaps what?” he demanded.

“Perhaps if you told her than Diamond is... your choice. That Diamond is more suited to your—“

“Are you crazy?” Hudson raved. He jabbed his fist into the air. “Are you out of your mind? I was happy with my life as it was. What's so bad about that? Happy! Do you understand, you hormone=drenched nincompoop? I don't want either of those oversexed women! I am not about to encourage one to discourage the other. Not in a million years—“

A knock on the door interrupted this tirade.

“See who it is,” Hudson snarled at the trooper. “Don't let those women in! No women at all.” He scampered for the study.

When he heard male voices, he peeked into the living room. Junior Grimes was standing there looking about suspiciously. Neely was still twisting his hat.

“Hey there, Hudson,” Junior said, and took a seat.

“Hello.”

“Whatcha doin’?”

“Discussing the state of the universe with Trooper Neely,”

“I came over to have a private chat with you about a personal matter,”

Junior said, looking pointedly at Neely. “Are you leaving soon?” he asked the cop.

“If the personal matter is one of the Ice girls, or both of them, the answer is no,” Hudson said. “I am not about to pick one in order to get rid of the other.”

“You want them both? Like Hayden Elkins?”

Richard Hudson couldn’t believe this was happening in his own house. Before he could reply to that outrage, Junior continued, “There’s only so many women hereabouts. I don’t think it’s right for a fella to go hoggin’ more than his share. Now if we had a lot of extras—“

“I don’t want either of the Ice sisters,” Hudson explained with as much patience as he could muster. “I have been trying to explain that basic fact to Mr. Neely. I want rid of both of them.”

“Oh.”

“Which one are you interested in anyway?”

“Diamond.”

“If you two weren’t such dismally poor suitors, I wouldn’t be plagued by these women. You are miserable specimens of the male gender, but better women have accepted worse. You could have tried a little harder. It’s outrageous that your innocent neighbors have to bear the burdens caused by your romantic failures. Outrageous!”

“I did try, Mr. Hudson,” Junior assured him warmly. “The very best I know how. Diamond is a tough woman to please, and—“

“Excuses,” was Hudson’s bitter retort. He collapsed into a chair.

“What am I to do?”

A heavy silence descended upon the room.

“Maybe you should talk to Mrs. Carcano,” Junior finally suggested.

“The new minister?”

“Why not? She’s mighty sharp. What do you think, Neely?”

“Couldn’t hurt,” the state trooper admitted.

The conversation petered out there. No one had any other ideas. After a while Sam Neely and Junior Grimes left. Hudson locked the door behind them.

They stood in the yard and argued a bit, but the conversation stayed on a high, intellectual plane; neither threw a punch. Then they got into their separate vehicles and went their separate ways.

Richard Hudson returned to his study and sat staring morosely at the blinking cursor on the black computer screen.