

ace
book

G-514
50c

CHARLOTTE
ARMSTRONG

SOMETHING BLUE

A new novel of mystery and suspense
by the author of **THE UNSUSPECTED**, etc.



FIRST BOOK PUBLICATION OF AN UNFORGETTABLE SUSPENSE NOVEL

Shy, retiring Nan Padgett had found love at last—love that rang bells and made stars shine—real love, not just the comfortable feeling she had experienced with John Sims, the boy next door.

But John, whom Nan was sure would be a good sport, was suddenly saying all sorts of terrible things about the man Nan loved. Jealousy was one thing, but to accuse someone of murder was more than Nan could hear said...

If love could blind a bride-to-be, what could it do to her rejected suitor?

"The festival of Halloween ten days ago was, I trust, celebrated with peculiarly fitting rites in Glendale, Calif.; for there dwells one of the few authentic spell-casting witches of modern times: Charlotte Armstrong . . .

"As you may have noticed, I tend to become inarticulate in reviewing Armstrong, largely because the method by which she achieves her magical effects defies critical analysis. You are simply caught up, as you might be by a collaboration of Cornell Woolrich and Shirley Jackson, with all the former's insistent terror of the everyday-gone-wrong and the latter's combination of fantastic imagination and realistic feminine insight."

—ANTHONY BOUCHER

New York Times, Nov. 10, 1957

Something Blue

by

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

ACE BOOKS, INC.

23 West 47th Street, New York 36, N.Y.

SOMETHING BLUE

Copyright, 1959, by Charlotte Armstrong Lewi

All Rights Reserved

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

CHAPTER 1

HE PUNCHED the bell. The door clicked. He heard Nan calling down his name.

("I've got so much to tell you," she had said on the phone just now.)

He bounded up the stairs, they slipped arms around each other's waists, and went through the little hall of the flat into what the girls' Aunt Emily called the back room—a big shabby room with a wide window, beyond which the city of San Francisco fell away.

Dorothy was there. "Hi, Johnny," she greeted him. "How was Columbia University? Did you learn *everything*?"

"Oh, pretty near," he said amiably. "How are you?" He looked down at Nan. His hand still held her lightly at the waist.

"Dear John," said Nan Padgett, articulating precisely, as if she had practiced this, "I'm in love!" Her brown eyes shone with the news. "I'm engaged to be married!"

Well, he gave her credit for being direct and for being prompt with this blow.

"You kinda look it, Nan," he said gravely, and took his hand slowly away. "Well! I want to hear . . ."

Dorothy said, "Don't worry. You're going to hear! She's got no more than her left toe on the ground. First, come help me mix you a drink."

"I sure will," said Johnny.

He saw Nan go waltzing away toward the big window. Maybe she felt relieved to have told him. He turned into the little closed-in pantry where Dorothy had assembled the makings. He literally couldn't see Dorothy. He dumped in-

gredients together, tasted. As he swallowed he said to himself, *O.K. swallow it. All right, you got it down.*

Now he could see Dorothy's blonde head and Dorothy's anxious blue eyes.

"I had a hunch, you know," he said cozily. (She didn't have to know how recent the hunch was.) "Don't you worry about me, Dot."

Dorothy said indignantly, "She's about wild. She's on Cloud Nine."

"As it should be." He patted Dorothy's shoulder to stop her. He wouldn't talk about Nan in a corner.

Dorothy was Nan's cousin, a little the older of the two—certainly the more worldly one. Dorothy had beaux by the dozen. Maybe Dorothy could never reach Cloud Nine any more.

He swallowed again, put the shaker on the tray and carried the tray into the big room. "Start at the beginning," he said cheerfully.

"His name is Richardson Bartee. I *wish* he were here. But he had to go back this week and tend to business. He's flying up on Friday." Nan tumbled all this out.

"From where is he flying up?" asked Johnny politely.

"Oh, *listen* . . ." Nan lit on the couch and patted an invitation. John sat down beside her, marveling. Nan was usually the shy one, the little one with the quaint defensive air of dignity. Now she seemed bursting with joyous energy. "How can I *tell* you about him! He's big and—and good-looking and—" Words wouldn't do what Nan's face was doing in the way of description. "He's got a vineyard. Or anyhow, his family has. And a winery. Imaginel And I'm going to live in the south—"

"With vine leaves in your hair." Johnny grinned across at Dorothy. "I see what you mean," he said. "This kid is off the ground all right."

Dorothy was sitting and sipping. Dorothy, usually so casual and gay, didn't smile.

Nan put her hand on the cushion between them. "Ah, Johnny, we've been awful fond of each other, you and I. And I always will be fond of you. But it never was like *this!* Do you believe me?"

He stiffened a little with the stab of this. He reminded himself how young she was. "I believe you." He went on

gallantly, "I won't say the old ticker isn't a little bent, honey, but it's still going."

Nan sighed.

Johnny put his nose in the glass. "When and where did you meet this fellow?" he asked her dreaming face.

"Two months ago. Mr. Copeland introduced us."

"Why wasn't I written? Never mind, don't answer that."

He knew the answer very well. How could she have written him, or anyone, a day-by-day description of falling in love. "What say we all go some very fancy place for dinner?" he asked restlessly. "On me. To celebrate."

"We can't budge," said Dorothy. "We've got a phone call in for Paris, France."

"For Aunt Emily? That where she is? I thought she and Hattie Cox were going around the world."

"They are," said Dorothy, "but Paris is the farthest they've got yet. They're on some kind of an expedition today, because we haven't been able to reach her. The hotel expects her back before midnight."

"Haven't we time for dinner?"

"Midnight in Paris, France," Dorothy reminded.

"You mean to tell me Aunt Emily doesn't even know about this?"

"Not yet."

"When did this engagement happen? Last night?"

"Since Sunday." Nan sighed, as if this had been a century.

"I suppose you'll have to let Emily get all the way around the world before the wedding," he said comfortably.

"No," said Nan. "That's just it. Dick and I want to be married right now. Why not? What have I got to wait for? My job? There are a million stenographers and every single one of them can spell better than I can. Mr. Copeland isn't going to care. I want to be married to Dick—and help him in the vineyards. And that's all on earth I want to do."

Johnny was astonished. This didn't sound like Nan. Shy Nan, hesitant Nan, Nan unsure of herself. "Won't that be a little rough on Emily?" he said gently, and knew that Dorothy stirred.

"I don't think so," cried Nan, "because listen! Dick says

we can get married and fly to Europe on our honeymoon. And *see* Aunt Emily. Wouldn't that please her?"

"Not as a surprise," said Dorothy quietly. Johnny was startled.

"Your fellow must be in the chips," he murmured.

"It will be *very* extravagant," said Nan serenely, "but Dick knows Aunt Emily is all I've got—except Dotty, of course. He understands. He's an orphan, too. I think . . ."

"I thought you mentioned his family."

"Oh, well, there's an uncle and a grandmother. And I guess the uncle's got a wife. I haven't met them yet. There hasn't been time."

He thought there should have been time. There should have been a lot more time. Nan was speeding and spinning. He wanted to put out both hands and hold her back and slow her down.

Now she said, all sparkling, "Johnny, you're going to have to stand up with us. You're *nearly* family, after all these years."

"I'm going to run this wedding," he heard Dorothy say loudly. "I'm your family, please remember. And we're going to talk to Emily before we plan how *or* when. So calm down."

"Oh, Dot! I'm *doing* what you want. I'm *calling* Aunt Emily."

Johnny perceived the conflict clearly now.

Dorothy changed the subject. "Going to be home all summer, Johnny? Summer school?"

"Nope. I'll get my doctorate in exactly one more year. Comes out nice and even. I'm stale on biology."

"Going to work this summer, then?"

"Don't know yet. Don't intend to work very hard," he grinned. "Maybe Roderick Grimes will have one of his projects for me. They're fun."

Nan frowned. "Don't you let him send you off some place," she said with that gay vehemence so unlike the old Nan. "At least not this weekend!"

"This weekend!"

"Well, I hope . . ."

"You mean to tell me you expect to be a married woman in a matter of *days*!" he exclaimed. "I don't believe it. How old are you, baby?"

"I'm twenty," Nan said defiantly.

"Actually," said Dorothy dryly, "she's young enough to wait, don't you think, 'til Emily gets around the world?"

Nan sighed the kind of sigh that announced an old argument come up again. "I'll just bet Aunt Emily won't make me wait," she said.

"Nobody would *make* you," Dorothy began, and the phone rang.

Nan snatched for it, pinning Johnny Sims in his corner of the couch because the long phone cord crossed his body.

He heard a voice say, "On your call to Paris, France . . ."

His eyes sought Dorothy's. Dorothy didn't like this speeding and spinning either. He said to Dorothy, "I hope this chap is over twenty-one."

"Oh, he is that," said Dorothy tartly. "*He's* thirty-two years old."

"Ssshhh—" said Nan.

Johnny swallowed shock. Yet he himself was twenty-eight. He could hear the operators' voices singsonging across the continent, across the ocean.

He heard Emily, herself, say, "Yes?"

"Aunt Emily! It's Nan!"

"Nan! Dear, is anything wrong?"

Johnny found he could visualize Aunt Emily Padgett's small face, with the sharp little nose, frosted with old-fashioned white powder, and her pale brown hair going up all around.

"Not a thing," cried Nan in the loud clear voice that had to go all the way to France. "Everything's wonderful! I have news!" Dorothy had risen and stood close by. Nan wasn't seeing Dorothy, or Johnny, either. "I'm in love," she shouted across the world. "I'm engaged, I'm going to be married!"

"Oh, Nan!"

"Listen, Aunt Emily, we want to get married right away and fly to Europe and meet you. We could meet you in Rome. Next week? Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Nan . . . it's Johnny, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Johnny Sims?"

Nan took in her breath. She didn't look down at Johnny, pinned there. "No, no, it *isn't*. It's somebody—you never met him but he's wonderful and I know you'll think so

too . . . and I'm so happy. Aunt Emily, we were going to surprise you—"

"Who?" The syllable crossed the ocean with a worried sound.

"His name is Richardson Bartee. *Not* Richard. *Richardson*. It's a family name."

Nobody spoke in Paris, France.

"Aunt Emily, can you hear me? His name is Richardson Bartee. He's from Hestia . . . And he's got a vineyard. Emily? . . ."

Now there was a sound on the wire. It might have been "Yes, dear." Or it might have been "Hestia."

"Emily, dear, we want to get married right away and fly to Rome. You *will* be there?"

"Don't . . ." A groan.

"What?"

"No."

"Emily?"

"Don't . . ."

"Emily, darling, we just *can't* wait seven whole months." Nan began to coax. "We thought . . ."

"*You must not marry this man!*" High and clear and shrill.

"Aunt Emily, what did you say?"

"I'm coming home. I'll fly. Quick as I can."

"Please, I don't understand. Emily, don't spoil your big trip. What's the *matter*?"

"Wait. *Promise* me you'll wait?"

"Of course, I—"

"What am I going to do?" said the agonized voice so far away.

Dorothy snatched the phone out of Nan's falling hand. "Aunt Emily? This is Dot. What's the matter?"

"No," the voice said. "Make her wait—I'm coming home."

"She hung up!" said Dorothy in amazement.

Nan's eyes shot tears like sparks. "What's the *matter* with her?" she cried. "You heard her?"

"I couldn't help it," Johnny confessed.

"Maybe," said Dorothy thoughtfully, "she was so sure it was going to be Johnny . . . (Look, we're *sorry*, Johnny.) Probably she's shocked. Wants to see Dick for herself."

Nan's mouth drooped. "Maybe," she said uncertainly.

"Of course, *I* don't think it's a bad idea," said Dorothy

lightly. "She'll be home in a couple of days—or do you want to call her back?"

"She hung up," Nan said angrily and shook away from Dorothy's arm. "It sounded as if she knows who Dick is and as if she knows something *bad* about him. Didn't it?" she challenged them. Dorothy was biting her lip.

"Yes, it kinda did," said Johnny honestly.

"Well, she couldn't," said Nan, "because there couldn't be anything . . ." She walked across the room and sat down by the window. Now the sparkle and the flying air were gone. Nan was her old self, dignified, lonely, just a bit forlorn.

The big room was still. Dorothy stood with her hands clasped. Johnny sat in his corner. Nan looked out over the city.

"She's made some kind of mistake," Nan said, in a moment. "Probably she couldn't hear me very well."

"That's possible," Dorothy said quietly.

"I'm sorry she didn't understand," Nan went on. "Dick and I are in love and going to be married. Nothing is going to change that." Her dark head came up.

"No use to worry," Dorothy said, "until you know what to worry about."

"Oh, I won't worry," Nan said remotely. "I'm not going to call Dick. I'm not going to upset *him*. Because nothing is going to be upset." The dream was sobered but it was back in her eyes. "Will you stay for dinner, Johnny?" she asked politely. "I don't feel like going out, but there's some cold beef." She was aloof. It was as if Cloud Nine had turned to a cold close fog and swallowed her from reach.

CHAPTER 2

JOHNNY DIDN'T STAY.

He came out into the street and wished that he still lived next door. But his mother and father had built a little house

out in Marin County last year, and that was Johnny's headquarters now.

He got into his four-year-old Plymouth and started for home. What was the matter with Emily Padgett? Or rather, what was the matter with Richardson Bartee? Johnny didn't believe that Emily had made a mistake. It was a sufficiently odd name. There was also the place—Hestia. Aunt Emily must know this man or know of him. Know a reason why Nan must not marry him? Johnny shook himself.

Looky here, he said to J. Sims, none of this dog-in-the-manger stuff! Nan's in love with this Bartee, remember? And whatever Emily's got on her mind, it is going to be rough on Nan.

Johnny respected Emily Padgett. Whatever it was, it would not turn out to be some female vapor.

Emily had been mother and father to the two little girls next door, whom he could remember since one wore a blue sash, the other a pink one, to Sunday school.

Emily Padgett's brother and sister, the story went, had perished, together with their spouses, all in one cruel sudden highway crash years ago. Emily had promptly canceled any other objective of her own, to take the two infant cousins in to raise. Dorothy was the child of the sister, Nan of the brother. Dorothy's last name, therefore, was not really Padgett but something else. Johnny couldn't remember what and he was not quite sure it wasn't the other way around. No matter. Emily had made them one family. Emily had joined all P.T.A.'s and Mother's Clubs, been active with Brownies and Girl Scouts and the works. She had been a fine parent.

She had also earned a living without leaving the flat. Emily wrote short stories and evidently managed very well on the proceeds. The flat was not luxurious, but it was certainly very comfortable. The little orphan girls had had security.

Johnny himself had gone all the way through high school without paying a lot of attention to the Padgett kids next door. Then he went to Stanford for four years and to Berkeley for another. Aged twenty-three, he'd got a job, teaching biology.

It was about then that Emily Padgett and Johnny's mother had put their heads together over a crisis. Big

dance at the high school. Nan had no date. Would Johnny take her?

Johnny had protested that this wasn't a good idea, but he had let himself be talked into it. Dorothy had whirled off in a gold-spangled dress with flowers on her shoulder. Dorothy, who was seventeen by then, had turned out tall and fair, surrounded by boys, picking and choosing among them gaily. But little Nan was different—sensitive, shy.

Nan had worn a pale green dress that night. Nan had looked ready to weep. Johnny remembered resolving that if he were going to do this, he'd do it right. He wasn't going to look dragooned, or superior, or bored. So he'd fed and encouraged her with attention. Made a fuss. Backed her up. He'd been touched by the slow blooming of Nan's confidence.

After that he'd kept an eye on her. Watched out for Nan. Seen to it that she got to go wherever it mattered that she went. In a way, she'd grown up with Johnny at her back. The first time Nan turned down a date for him, he'd tried to explain that she ought not to fend off other dates. But she'd been stubborn.

So they wrote letters back and forth when he spent his months in the service and all the first year he was in the east. Last summer, they were a pair. Johnny's tall form had backed up Nan's little figure at dances and parties.

A courtship, he thought now, is a tentative thing, an exploring, a growing thing. There should come a moment when you know. But Nan was so young. He'd looked out for her so long. Maybe he'd been a little thoughtless. He ought to be glad she'd fallen in love. He must be glad he had not thoughtlessly kept her from this experience.

There was no denying he felt his loss more bitterly than he had expected.

By the time Johnny got to his parents' house, he knew that for all he tried to knock out of himself a sense of injury, a sense of betrayal that he had no right to feel, he did feel injured, he did feel betrayed and, in fact, he was good and sore.

His mother and father perceived, at once, that all was not well. They were not, however, the kind to pry. They fed him the leavings of the meal they had just finished, and then all three settled down for television. Johnny could

sense their deep pleasure that he was home and in the room with them. But it wasn't necessary to pay attention.

Under cover of a commercial, he asked his mother whether Emily Padgett had ever mentioned a Richardson Bartee.

"I don't think so, dear. Emily's gone off around the world. I guess you know that."

"Um hum." He didn't feel like mentioning the possibility that Emily was turning back, for an unknown reason.

"Did you see the girls?" his mother asked. "I haven't seen them for ages. How are they?"

"All right."

His mother pulled her feelers in.

In the morning, Johnny went to see Roderick Grimes, who was a pink and hairless man of great wealth whose avocation it was to write semi-scholarly books about old murder mysteries. Sometimes he hired Johnny to do the research, scavenge around, interview people. Grimes was lazy. He fancied himself the Mycroft type and he was rather brilliant in the armchair. He said that Johnny had a flair.

This morning, Grimes was cordial but indecisive. He had a couple of things in mind, he said; he hadn't chosen between them. Perhaps in another week or so? Johnny was just as glad of a delay.

He called the girls at six, when they'd be home from work. Dorothy answered.

"We've had a cablegram," she told him. "Emily's flying in at noon on Friday."

"Anything I can do?"

"I don't think so, Johnny. We'll just have to wait. Maybe you'd like to go to the airport with us?"

"Of course. Pick you up downtown?" They made the date.

"One thing, Dot." Johnny felt miserable. He couldn't speak directly to Nan about this. "Nan said Mr. Copeland introduced them. Has she ever asked him what he knows about this . . . about Bartee?"

"Oh, but Mr. Copeland has been away," said Dorothy quickly. "He went to Honolulu with his fairly new wife. Although I think they are coming back—is it Monday? Nan?"

Silence on the wire.

"She asks no questions," said Dorothy in a low voice. (He

sensed that Nan had gone away, could no longer hear.)
 "She's not in a mood to be practical, Johnny."

He knew this was so. Who ever was? The sweet dizziness of love didn't wait for a dossier. When had it?

"Isn't this . . . Bartee coming up on Friday?" he asked.

"Yes, but not until the evening . . ."

He couldn't think of any more to say.

When they walked into the airport waiting room on Friday, shock exploded. The Miss Padgetts were being paged. The young man at the information desk said gingerly, "I'm sorry to have to tell you that Miss Emily Padgett has been taken ill on the airplane. The suggestion is that you might like to call her own doctor."

"Ill! How ill?"

"Her heart, they think. There's a nurse on the airplane. Don't worry too much." The young man was in duty bound to say this, but he didn't create a lot of reassurance.

Johnny whirled them into action, to call Dr. Kearns, to make arrangements at a hospital. Johnny held a frightened girl on each arm as they waited the last tense two minutes at the barrier.

Emily came off the plane on a stretcher and they ran to her. The small face was gray. The girls murmured and touched her with loving hands.

It was Johnny who said loudly, "Nobody got married, Emily." That was all the reference there was to Richardson Bartee before Emily vanished into the ambulance.

At the hospital they were delayed by the need to answer questions for admission. At last, they started down a corridor. It was a small private hospital, Dr. Kearns' favorite, all on one floor. They came upon the doctor around a corner.

"She ought to do, with a little sensible care," he told them cheerfully. "Now, don't excite her or upset her. Don't stay too long. Not now. Excuse me? Got a patient in the next wing. Cheer up, now."

The girls stepped softly into Emily's room with Johnny behind them. Emily, on the bed, looked old. More murmurs of love given, received.

"Don't worry about *anything*," Nan said uselessly. The whole room throbbed with unasked questions and unadmitted anxieties.

"Maybe she ought to be let alone," said Johnny loudly. "That's a brute of a trip she's just made, remember?" He was going to bully the girls out of here. This was no good. "You could come back tonight at visiting hours. Hm, Emily?"

Emily's sad eyes looked up at him and he knew they flickered. "Give me—until tomorrow . . ." she said weakly.

"Of course, darling." Dorothy kissed her hair.

Nan picked up her hand. "I wouldn't want to do anything—ever—to hurt you in any way," Nan said, asking for absolution.

"Darling, I know that," said Emily, her eyes aglow with love and a mysterious sorrow.

So they left her.

Johnny took them home to the flat. Scarcely a word was said on the way. Once in the mirror he saw Nan's silent tears. He wanted to say, "Don't blame yourself for Emily's heart!" but his tongue felt tied.

At the flat, Dorothy said there was nothing, really, that he could do and Nan said yearningly, "Dick will be here. Dick can take us to the hospital tomorrow."

So Johnny left them. He rode around aimlessly for a long time. Felt useless, worried. He decided, by some uneasiness in his bones, that he must stay in town overnight, so he found a phone to call his mother.

"John? Oh, good! We were about to go to the Miller's for dinner and there was an urgent message. The Schmidt Memorial Hospital wants you to call them, right away."

"Then I better do it," said Johnny, so surprised and frightened that he hung up without telling her anything.

The hospital said that Miss Emily Padgett urgently requested Mr. John Sims to come see her this evening. Visiting hours from seven to eight.

"Tell her I'll be there."

Johnny hung up, rubbed his face. Stood in the phone booth.

His mother and father would have gone out. Well, he'd tell them in the morning where Emily was and how. He would tell nobody anything tonight. He knew that when he, Johnny Sims, old friend and neighbor, got to the hospital at seven o'clock, he was going to be put right smack in the middle of whatever trouble there was going to be.

A little before seven, in Emily's flat, Nan flew to take the phone. "Dick! Where are you, darling?"

"Just off the plane, love. Shall I come right up?"

"Oh, please! Oh, Dick, Aunt Emily is in the hospital."

"Hospital! Where?"

"Right here! The Schmidt Memorial. She flew back. Oh, Dick, I didn't call you—but she was so upset . . ."

"Wait a minute. Your aunt is *back!* In *town!*"

"Yes. Yes, she is. I talked to her in Paris. When I told her about us, she said she'd fly home right away."

"But *why*, dearest? You say she was upset?"

"Yes, she was. She said I wasn't to m-marry you. I must wait . . . I don't *know* why. We can't talk to her now. It's her heart. We can't even see her again until tomorrow."

"Is it serious?"

"The doctor doesn't think so. But . . ."

"Well, then . . ." he said soothingly. "Nothing to worry about. I'll be there just as soon as I can."

Nan put the phone down. "You *see!*" she said to Dorothy. "*He* doesn't know why she should be upset!"

Dorothy said, in a moment, "Maybe we'll get it straightened out tomorrow."

CHAPTER 3

JOHNNY SIMS ENTERED the hospital on the stroke of seven; nobody asked him his business. He turned right on an inner corridor and walked as far as he could passing several wings, until he came to the last wing of all. He turned left, and then, looking ahead of him, realized that a door at the far end of this last wing stood open. He could have come in that way, directly from the parking lot. Well, he hadn't. No matter.

Emily's room was the second from the end of the wing.

She was sitting a little higher; she looked a little better.

"Johnny, dear, close the door." He closed it. "Sit down. I shouldn't talk too long."

He pulled the straight chair close to the bed and leaned his head into the light. "Take it easy. I've got good ears."

"You've known her so long. You're fond of Nan."

"True," he agreed.

"Will you help me, Johnny?"

"Certainly."

"I don't know what to do."

Now he thought he could see her heart struggling in her breast. He wanted to ease it. "Just tell me," he urged quietly.

"First, promise you won't tell Nan without permission."

He winced inside, but he had to agree. "I promise. Go ahead."

"You do keep your word." Emily made this a statement.

"I do," he agreed.

She smiled a little. The smile was for him, affectionate and trusting. And absolutely binding upon him. "I can't . . . go anywhere . . . just now . . ." she began again with difficulty. "And it can't be my decision. It must be his. So you must go."

Johnny said nothing. He couldn't yet understand.

"The very worst thing that could have happened . . ." Now her head began to turn to and fro upon the pillow. Her heart labored, as he thought he could tell. "How could I imagine!"

"Don't put any steam in it," said Johnny gently. "Just tell me what I must do and I will go and do it."

"Yes," said Emily gratefully. Her head stopped that desperate wagging motion. "But first you have to know. Nan isn't my brother Henry's child. I never had a brother Henry. She's the child of a brother of mine whose name she's never heard. You see, I changed all the names. I made up lies. I had to."

"Go ahead," said Johnny quietly.

"Nan's father is in prison. He was convicted of murder seventeen years ago."

Johnny kept smiling. He was surprised, but not too shocked. He had expected something as bad as this.

"They said he murdered Nan's mother . . ." Emily's voice sank to a whisper. "Poor Christy McCauley."

Johnny swallowed.

"My brother Clinto is in San Quentin, Johnny. I want you to see him. Ask him what we are to do. *He* must decide."

"I see. I will," Johnny said soothingly.

"No, you don't see," said Emily impatiently. "He did *not* kill Christy. He was convicted but he wasn't guilty. The baby . . . He and I didn't see why the baby should suffer at all. It was bad enough that he had to lose his wife and go to prison for what he hadn't done. Why should there be bad added to bad? Why should the baby grow up in the shadow of such a terrible thing? People believing that her father killed her mother. So I took the baby. I made them give me the baby. I had an agreement with the old man. And I changed my name and her name and Dorothy's name, too. And I was never going to tell her. And all these seventeen years she hasn't known and none of it has ever touched her or hurt her."

"She's had wonderful loving care," Johnny said softly.

"Yes," said Emily and plucked her sheet.

"Now, you feel—if she is to marry . . . ?" he began.

"No, no, no," Emily gasped. "Don't try to guess, Johnny. It only takes longer."

So he waited.

"My brother's name is Clinton McCauley," she said in a moment. "I've always gone to see him once every month. He . . . loves all the news of Nan. But now . . ." She gathered strength and went on. "Christy was killed in the Bartee's house in Hestia. You see, she was related."

Johnny took in air. "This Richardson Bartee is *related* to Nan?" he asked as calmly as he could. He thought, well, that's it, then, and it's bad, all right.

But Emily shook her head. "Don't guess," she said feebly. "It's worse than you can guess. Much worse. No, *not* related. The old man had two wives. There's nothing like that."

So Johnny just waited.

"For seventeen years," said Emily in a moment, "Clint has been sure . . ."

"Yes?"

"That the *boy* killed Christy. The wild kid—fifteen years old."

"What boy?"

"Richardson Bartee," said Emily, her eyes pits of sorrow. "Now do you see?"

All Johnny's nerves tingled. "You say your brother is *sure* of this? Couldn't you have . . . ?"

"Proved it?" said Emily with vigor. "No. I tried." Emily was up on her elbow and he was too shocked to press her back into a position of rest. "How can I let Nan *marry*," cried Emily, "the very one—the one rotten evil soul in all this world—who killed her mother and let her father go to prison for it?"

"You can't," said Johnny horrified. (Oh, Lord, it's bad, he thought. Poor Nan.) But he had to think of Emily just now. "Hush, lie back. You're not going to let her marry him. Just tell Nan all this. That's all you really need to do."

"And there goes," said Emily, "the meaning of my life and all of Clinton's sacrifice."

The room was quiet. He was vaguely aware of sounds out in the corridors, of lights and shadows in the windows of the next wing, across the narrow court between. He himself felt too shocked and sad to move or speak.

"But *I* can't tell her, Johnny," said Aunt Emily at last. "Not until Clinton knows. *He* must decide that she be told. You can see that?"

"Yes."

"So will you go to see him?"

"Yes."

"And will you help Nan, afterwards?"

"Yes."

"The one wrong man in all the world . . . the one wrong man for Nan."

She looked so exhausted that he was frightened. "Put it off your mind," he said gently. "I will go to the prison and see your brother. I will tell him. I will ask him what he wants you and me to do. And then I will do it. Don't you fret any more. Nan will be all right, you know," he went on confidently.

"You'll stand by her, Johnny?"

"You and I and Dorothy and my Ma, and all of us will stand by her," he promised warmly. "And it won't be as

terrible as you think. Listen . . .” He was frantic to comfort her. “She’s already had what you wanted for her. She didn’t grow up in any shadow at all, but in full sun. She’s been as well-raised as any child on earth. You’ve *done* the job, Emily. And *because* you’ve done it, she’s going to be able to take this. You’ll be proud of her.”

“Thank you, Johnny,” Emily said. Her face was relaxing. “God bless you, Johnny Sims. I hope you’re right. Yes, thank you.”

“You rest now,” Johnny kissed her fondly. “Leave everything to me.”

“I will,” said Emily. “Dear Johnny. I feel much better now.”

In a little while Johnny left her. His feet fell fatefully on the vinyl floor. In the corridor, he turned sharp and went out at the end of the wing. He was filled with dismay. Dismay.

He had no idea what the truth was about the old tragedy. It didn’t make a lot of difference what the truth was. Nan was going to be torn in bits, whatever it was. And he wasn’t at all sure how Nan could take it.

After Johnny had gone, Emily Padgett lay quietly. The storm in her heart and mind seemed to have died to a sad and yet rather a sweet calm.

He had left the door a trifle ajar and she could tell that the hospital was full of visitors. Feet came and went in the corridor. People laughed. The world had not come to an end, after all.

How right she had been to call on Johnny Sims. Dear reliable Johnny with the kind green eyes in the long-jawed face. Tall steady Johnny who had been brought up to do the one simple right and basic thing. To keep his word. Johnny would see Clinton. Tell him as gently as such things could be told. Johnny would look out for Nan. And there was truth in all he had said. To be tested as Nan would now be tested was not necessarily terrible.

If only Nan would turn to Johnny. Johnny had always been strength and shelter for her and all might be well at last. And the truth told. The long lie wrung out to all its useful purpose and discarded.

So she sighed deep, and rested.

The door moved. A man came in and pushed it shut

behind him. For a moment, she thought Johnny had returned. What time is it? she thought in confusion. Is it morning?

He came toward the bed, moving quietly. He wore a hat. So she saw that he was not Johnny.

He was tall and big and his eyes were a cool gray. His mouth was cut large and full and almost too well, carved and curved like the mouth on a statue. He came around the bed, his back to the window, his face to the door.

"I thought it was you, Miss McCauley," he said. "Do you remember me?"

In seventeen years, he was not bigger, but the flesh on his face was not as fresh as she remembered it. "You're making Nan mighty unhappy," he chided.

"If" Emily raised up. "You'll never marry Clinton's child," she defied him. "Not you."

"Why not? Who blames her for her father's crime?"

Emily's heart was jumping in anger. "*Your* crime!"

"You still insist?" He sounded sorry and even weary. He turned and touched a cord at the window that tripped the Venetian blinds. "Why haven't you told her, then, what you *think* I did?"

"I will. I will," she blustered. She knew this wasn't good for her heart.

He stood looking down. He had not taken off his hat.

"You think you'll marry Christy's child?" said Emily with bitter triumph. "You never will."

"Oh, I don't think you'll tell her very much now," he said pleasantly. "You've missed your chance." His hands took the pillow's edge. "You shouldn't have come back."

"My brother will tell her," Emily said sharply.

"Maybe he'll try," said the big blond dangerous man. "But it will be too late." He jerked at the pillow. Her head bounced.

"No," said Emily feebly. "No *use* . . ."

"She doesn't know her father," the man said, quite softly and reasonably. "Why will she believe what *he* tells her? If he can find her, to tell her anything. There isn't any proof, you know. There never will be."

"Then . . ."

"Oh, I can't afford to have you mixing her up before the wedding, Miss McCauley. There's a reason—"

Emily tried to reach the bell-push, but he didn't permit it. The pillow came down upon her face. The last thing she thought in triumph and also in defeat was: "This proves it! At last!"

Richardson Bartee watched the time on his wrist. He took plenty of time. When enough had gone by, he put the pillow back where it had been before.

He crossed the very silent, the breathless room and opened the door by the shank of the handle, smearing the place where his fingers had to touch it. People were standing in doorways, talking. He dodged a red-haired woman in a mink jacket, hand to his hat, obscuring his face. He got the thirty feet to the door at the end of the wing. Then he was in the parking lot.

His car was not in the parking lot, but around the corner, snug to a flowering bush. It was only a rented car, of course, but Dick Bartee hadn't risked more than he knew was necessary. He was older and wiser than he had been seventeen years ago.

Twenty minutes later, he parked the rented car, crossed the sidewalk, punched the bell.

"Dick? Darling?"

He ran up. He was still holding Nan when the phone rang.

Johnny went home after all, and the phone was ringing as he got there.

"She couldn't have died!" he exploded, when Dorothy's voice had told him.

"The doctor says—it sometimes happens—to a sick and tired heart." Dorothy was crying.

Johnny's mind was churning. Why, he had just seen Emily! Could not tell the girls what Emily had said to him. Wasn't free to tell them, yet. He didn't want to be a man keeping a stubborn secret and the girls trying to guess what it was. He wouldn't put them or himself in that position. Could not even say he'd seen her.

But how could she have *died*!

"Look, Dotty," he said, "would you like the loan of my mother?"

"Dick is here," Dorothy sobbed, "but I think . . . Oh, Johnny, we could use her."

So Johnny hung up, dashed out, roared down two blocks to the Miller's house, roused his parents out of their bridge game.

"I'll take you in, Barbara," his father said. "You go on home with John now. Pack. I'll explain to the Millers."

Johnny said, "Wait. I want you both to remember—you don't know a thing about the hospital calling me tonight."

"You *saw* Emily, Johnny?"

"Yes, but you mustn't say so. Mind, now."

"Why not?"

"Because Emily asked me to do something. Secretly."

"You are still going to do it?" his mother asked tearfully, "now that she . . . ?"

"Of course, I'm going to do it," said Johnny fiercely. "I said I would."

CHAPTER 4

JOHNNY WAS ACQUAINTED with one of the chaplains at the prison, a man they called Father Klein. Johnny had talked with him about a convict there, in the course of doing research for Roderick Grimes. So, by ten o'clock the next morning, Johnny was in the chaplain's little office, throwing himself upon the man's mercy.

"You'd like me to tell him about his sister's death?" asked Father Klein.

"I've got to see him myself," said Johnny. "She sent me on a—a mission. Can you help me?"

"Is it about his daughter?" asked the chaplain promptly.

"It is." Johnny felt surprise.

"Then I'll fetch him. Would it be better if I told him about Miss Edith?"

"Edith?"

"I believe she called herself Emily."

I changed all the names. I had to. Johnny remembered. "I wish you would," he said gratefully, and then he waited. For Nan's father.

Johnny had not seen the girls last evening. Had not met this Richardson Bartee. First he must find out what to do from Nan's father.

At last the chaplain returned with a small thin white-haired man, who looked very frail. He had a limp, Johnny saw. His skin was papery white. There was something uncanny about the face. It was serene.

"John Sims? I have heard of you," this man said in a soft cultivated voice. "From my sister. And now she's gone?"

"It was her heart. I'm sorry, sir."

"She was good," the man said. Johnny had not heard that word used just that way for a long, long time, if ever. "How is my Polly?" the man asked.

"I beg your pardon."

"Mary. I mean Nan. Her name is Mary. I used to call her Polly—when I was young and she was only one or two. 'Polly McCauley' I used to call her. Silly little rhyme. Christy never liked it."

"She's—she's sad, of course. My mother's with her." Johnny found himself floundering. The avalanche of unfamiliar designations confused him. Nor did he know this man or understand him or believe in him, one way or the other.

"Would you like me to leave you?" the chaplain asked, sensing some kind of hesitation.

"Just a minute, sir." Johnny grasped for help. "I think you'd better stay. He may need an older friend than I—"

"Please stay, Father Klein," said the prisoner mildly. "What is the trouble?"

Johnny didn't know how he was going to say what the trouble was. He began slowly. "You knew Miss Emily went off on a trip. I'm sorry, I can't call her . . ."

The little man smiled faintly. "Yes, I know," he said. "I was glad. She never did things for herself Dear, good Emily. Where was it that she died?"

"Why it was here." The little man did not react with surprise. He seemed detached, as if distances and places in the outside world were simply rumors to him. Johnny plunged ahead. "Emily did leave, some ten weeks ago, I

think. Took ship through the Panama Canal, spent time in New York, and then in London. She got as far as Paris. From there she flew back."

The prisoner was listening courteously.

"Nan had met a man and fallen in love and got engaged to be married," said Johnny in a rush.

A faint smile came to McCauley's lips.

"She phoned Emily to tell her. That's why Emily flew home. Mr. McCauley, please remember that I don't know anything about all this. Except what Emily told me and—asked me to do. The man," Johnny's voice almost stuck in his throat, "the man Nan wants to marry is named Richardson Bartee."

Clinton McCauley's face grew thinner. The cheeks hollowed. The lines tightened. The serenity was destroyed.

"He is from Hestia, California. He is thirty-two years old. His family has a vineyard. Miss Emily wanted *you* to say what is to be done."

The man's head was going forward and down. Father Klein sprang to get him a glass of water. The chaplain's lips were tight.

McCauley gulped water. He said in a whimper, "Must it be?" He turned his face up toward Johnny and whispered, "Must I stand for this too?" The prisoner, with white fingers clamped to the edge of Father Klein's desk began to talk. "Listen to me. I know many a man in prison will say he's innocent. I know it's so general a thing, it doesn't meet belief. But I never killed my own Christy! I was convicted. I *understand* that. I was convicted by society for other things society didn't like about me. And I have borne it. But how can I bear this! It was Dick Bartee who killed my wifel"

"So Emily said," Johnny croaked. The burst of pain from behind that mask was a shocking thing. "She said there was no way to prove it . . ."

"How can I let him have my little girl?"

Johnny leaned back and felt the sympathy leave him suddenly. "Don't let him have her," he said crisply. "Tell her about all of it. That will fix that."

"Yes," said Clinton McCauley. "Yes." He looked at the chaplain. "What will it do to her? To find out her mother was brutally killed. To find out her father's an old jailbird.

To find the man she . . .” He looked at Johnny. “She—cares for this man?”

“Yes,” said Johnny. “I doubt if she’d promise to marry him if she didn’t.” Johnny couldn’t analyze what made him so tart. Clinton McCauley made him uneasy. Johnny didn’t like a martyr-type.

The little man put his fingers to his temples. “What is right?”

“Listen,” said Johnny, “aren’t you missing the point here? If this Dick Bartee ever killed anybody then Nan mustn’t marry him. This has absolutely nothing to do with you or your conscience or what you have to bear.” He stopped, embarrassed. “I’m sorry . . .”

“The boy is right,” the chaplain said gravely.

“What can be the meaning of an accident like this?” McCauley half-whispered. “That she should meet this man—of all men—”

“What makes you think Bartee is guilty?” Johnny asked bluntly.

“He must have done it,” said McCauley. “For seventeen years I have believed . . .”

“And you may have been wrong for seventeen years,” said Johnny grimly. “But it’s up to you, sir. I promised Emily. It’s your decision.”

Clinton McCauley began to beat his hands softly on the desk and Johnny watched. Suspiciously.

“I’ve thought of something,” said the chaplain, suddenly. “And Sims here is qualified, too. Why don’t you ask him to check for you?”

“Check?” said McCauley.

“He’s done work for Roderick Grimes. Couldn’t *he* check the alibi?”

Johnny was listening with a sagging jawbone.

“Isn’t it true,” said the chaplain, “that you have always said the Bartee boy’s alibi was worthless? Now, suppose you are wrong and suppose it does hold? Why then, we would know that the boy had *not* done it. And your daughter could go on being happy. Just as you and Miss Edith planned for her to be.”

Johnny gaped at the chaplain’s kind, beaming, rugged face. He was appalled by the naivete of the whole conversation.

"Look," he said. "I'm not a detective. I'm not a police officer. I'm not qualified to check . . ."

"You say she loves him?" (Johnny looked at that white saintly face and it made him uneasy.) "If I have been *wrong*," said McCauley, "I pray the Lord to let me know it now."

Johnny was shocked. "But Nan has to be told," he said. "You can't let her marry into that family, not knowing. Emily only wanted you to be the one to—to tell me to tell her."

McCauley straightened his slight body. "She mustn't be told," he said, "and her heart broken with this old evil business, and my sister's whole life thrown away. Not if there is anything else at all that we can do. Not if you can prove that I've been wrong."

"I agree," said the chaplain.

"Oh, you do?" said Johnny angrily. He rose. "May I speak to you alone, Father Klein?"

"Surely."

The chaplain led Johnny into a kind of anteroom.

"Look here," said Johnny, "unless something pretty fishy has been going on, I don't agree, at all. Maybe you know what I don't know. Is that man guilty? Does he know, right now, and none better, that Dick Bartee didn't kill his wife? Because he did it himself, and all this seventeen years' innocence is just phony?"

"Sometimes," the chaplain said calmly, "a prisoner gets obsessed with a phony innocence, as I see you realize. I can only tell you that ever since I've been here McCauley has believed . . ."

"*Believed*," said Johnny.

"Exactly. He *believes* that he did not do it. He has *believed* that the Bartee boy did.

"But what gets me is now he's willing to change his mind and *believe* that Bartee is innocent! Which I can't swallow! How can *you* swallow that? What kind of man is this? Why hasn't he been out on parole?"

"Things happen," the chaplain said vaguely. "Whenever the Board gets around to his case . . ."

"What things?"

"Oh, twice he was involved with an escape attempt. At least sympathetically—"

"I don't get it."

"Not that he meant to escape. But that stops parole, you know. Things happen to—well, keep him here. You might say he has given up the world," the chaplain went on gently.

"Then he's not normal," snapped Johnny. "He's nuts or something. And you can't believe a word he says."

"It is hard to imagine," the chaplain said slowly, "what way a man can be changed in his soul if he has had to bear justice. Perhaps McCauley has made prison his home, confinement his cross. He assists me, you know."

"He's become something like a monk?" said Johnny. "That's what you are saying?"

The chaplain nodded.

"What about Bartee? What do you think? Is *he* guilty?"

"I don't know," the chaplain said, "That's why I suggested that you try to find out."

"What makes you think I *can* find out, after seventeen years? And tell me this, while you're at it. Why should I mix in this anyway?" Johnny felt wild.

"That I don't know either," the chaplain said. "I don't know why Miss Emily chose to send you, you see. If you could find out, of course, it would save this little girl heart-break."

Johnny looked into the chaplain's eyes and thought he was in a dream, a romantic dream of innocence and mercy.

"The police will hardly try," the chaplain said gently. "And there's no money to hire a detective. It would have to be a friend."

"A woman got killed," Johnny said harshly, hunting for something logical and hard and reliably true. "I suppose it wasn't suicide?"

"No."

"Now either her husband did it, *or* this Bartee did it, *or* a third party did it. Right?"

"Right." They were eye to eye.

"Since the husband was tried and convicted by law, this would seem the most probable. Only we don't like it much, do we? This makes the little girl's father a killer and that's unpleasant. Nicer to think of him as a saint." The chaplain's gaze did not falter. "But Bartee," Johnny went on, "now it seems we don't like *him* for the part either. Nan's in love

with *him*. It would break her heart. The really nice way for this to come out would be to find a third party. Somebody Nan doesn't give a whoop about. All right." Johnny made a furious gesture. "I don't want Nan's heart broken either, but can't you see how silly—?" Johnny felt stormy. "You can't rearrange what *happened*," he said, "to make it nicer for a sweet young girl."

"McCauley has no proof that Bartee did the killing," the chaplain said gravely and steadily. "Suppose you found proof that Bartee did not? Then, when we tell Nan the story of her father and mother, as I agree we should, she will at least have the strength and the refuge of the man she loves."

Courtesy of J. Sims, thought Johnny to himself wryly.

"As for McCauley," the chaplain went on, "you find it incredible that he wishes he needn't break her heart? But I can conceive that McCauley not only wishes this but also would rather be rid of the prejudice of an old hatred, of a possible injustice in his thoughts. I can imagine that Clinton McCauley wants to be good. That is a motive that does exist, in some human beings."

Johnny felt himself flushing. He thought, O.K. I guess I'll have to see if I can prove her darling dear's an upright man. He felt very strange, lightheaded, a little empty. He must have nodded or something because the chaplain opened the door to his office.

The small man sat where they had left him, his head bowed, his lips moving.

"... from evil..." Johnny thought he heard him say.

CHAPTER 5

JOHNNY WENT OVER to him. "I wish you would tell me about this whole case," Johnny said to him crisply, with neither sympathy nor hostility.

"Yes, I will do that," said McCauley.

The little lame man with the saint's face looked at the wall. "I went to the Spanish War," he began. "If you can remember it—we fought for an ideal. That's the kind of young man I was. I got hit in my right heel. Not important. Makes me limp. When I came home, Christy and the baby were living with the Barteys in the big old house in Hestia. The old lady was Christy's own grandmother by her first husband. The old lady married old man Bartee about 1917, I think. He'd had a wife before. Nathaniel was the first wife's son and Dick is Nathaniel's son. So Dick is the old man's grandson. Yet he and Christy shared no blood. Bart, Junior, now, he was in the middle. Half brother to Nathaniel, and half brother to Christy's mother. I don't know if that's clear."

"I think so," said Johnny. "His child. Her child. Their child."

"That's right. Well, they all made a big fuss over Christy and she liked it there. She liked the prestige of being a Bartee connection, you know, and the comfort. Christy couldn't understand why I wanted her to come away and live in poverty."

"I could have had a job up north, but it would have meant scraping along on a small income, Christy confined, taking care of the baby all alone."

"I can see Christy's point of view so clearly, *now*. Then I was a young man with a limp, a hero returned, ignored. I was frustrated and bitter. *I* wanted to be the head of my family. In that house, the old man was head, and the old lady ran the house and Nathaniel, pussyfooting around with his art and his elegant manners, was the Crown Prince. Or the old lady thought so."

McCauley's voice had changed. It was crisper and harsher. The face was harder. *Young* McCauley, Johnny perceived, had been no saint.

"The young boys, of course, were in and out," McCauley continued. "Young Bart had gone into the service. I couldn't, because of my foot. Or I think I would have gone. Young Dick they got rid of as best they could by sending him to a military school, not far away. He was hard to handle. His mother was dead. Nathaniel, his father, couldn't do a thing. The old man was the only one who could handle him at all."

"So, in that household Christy was everybody's pet. She was only twenty-two, pretty and gay. The place was full of servants, fussing over Christy's clothes and Christy's baby. *My* baby.

"I couldn't persuade Christy to leave there. She had such reasonable reasons why not. I couldn't say, 'Look, it's my *pride* for which you must give up all this.' Although it was true. So I took to drinking too much. Going out on the town. It's a small town. The whole town watched me. Sometimes I had to be carried home. I took to one particular bar, run by a woman whose reputation was not what the Barteys thought it should have been.

"She meant to be my friend," the prisoner said. "Kate had a kind heart. She'd listen to me curse the Barteys, complain of Christy, and pity myself."

"Then, the next morning, Christy would look at me with her clear sober eyes and I'd be ashamed and everything would be worse than before." He sighed deeply and clasped his hands.

"All right. *That* night, I had been with Kate. Alone. In her room. I'd had too much. I didn't want anybody called to come fetch me, and Kate understood my pride. So Kate was trying to sober me. I wasn't actually so very late getting back to the Bartee house. It was about midnight. I got off the bus and wobbled up the drive. Long drive. I had my key, opened the front door. Old-fashioned double doors. Night light in the hall. Old-fashioned wood-paneled hall."

The man was describing a vision now and Johnny began to see it too.

"I saw, right away, as soon as I was inside, that the light burned in the old man's study. A square little room across from the bottom of the stairs, about half-way back. I started down the hall and I saw a big iron candlestick lying on the red hall rug. This was strange. So I picked it up.

"I held it in my hand. I got opposite the study door. The candlestick belonged in there. I turned into the room and then I saw Christy. Lying on the floor. Her head was bloody. She was dead. I knew that, right away. There was paper money fallen all around her.

"I was numb and sick and I hoped it was a drunken nightmare. I stood there until I heard the old man saying, 'Don't move.' He was on the stairs and he had a gun.

"Christy was dead. The candlestick was the weapon. It was covered with her blood and I had it in my hand."

"Circumstantial," Johnny said. His mouth felt dry.

"That wasn't all," McCauley said. "The wall safe was open. That's where the money had come from. And now I must try to tell you about those pins." He sighed deeply once more. "The old lady had given Christy a jeweled pin on Christy's birthday. It was only about an inch in diameter, flat, made in the shape of a flower. Six petals. Covered with pearls. A diamond in the center. It was worth, I suppose, about two hundred dollars. Christy had asked the old man to keep it in the safe. Now, Kate . . ."

The little man wiped his forehead with his wrist. "Kate also had such a pin." He looked straight into Johnny's eyes with a curious compassion as if to say, 'I know, I know, you *cannot* believe this.'

"I was mooning over a glass, to Kate one night. 'Now we could sell my wife's valuable jeweled pin,' I said, 'and get the money to move us north.' Still she wouldn't go. Kate asked me to describe the pin and, when I did, she fetched one exactly like it from a box of trinkets she had. Kate told me that Nathaniel Bartee had given her this pin, years ago. Kate trusted me not to spread this around for a scandal. Kate was just surprised that Christy's pin was supposed to be valuable. If hers was its twin, perhaps hers was valuable too. So I took Kate's pin home with me. I showed it to Christy. She got hers from the safe one day. We compared them. They *were* twins. So we believed what Kate had said. Christy knew about Kate, you see, and she understood, in a way. But Christy didn't altogether understand." The man shook ghosts out of his head, and pain out of his eyes.

"The old lady told Christy that her first husband had bought the pin. We guessed he must have bought a pair. The old lady must have given the other one to Nathaniel, or Josephine, his wife that died—a long time ago. Anyway, it was, we thought, amusing. Because Nathaniel was such a pussycat. His father, the old man, was disappointed in him and harsh with him. The old lady was always on his side." McCauley brooded.

"Go on," the chaplain said.

"Yes. Well, Christy's pin was back in the safe that night. I had Kate's pin in my pocket to return to her. I'd had it

there for a week. That night, you see, I'd drunk too much again. I'd forgotten it again.

"So, that night, when the police came—the old man made Nathaniel call them—why, they searched me and they found Kate's pin. Then they found that Christy's pin *wasn't in the safe*. So they thought that proved I had opened the safe." McCauley's voice had gone flat and despairing.

"I see," said Johnny. "But are you positive your wife's pin *was* in there?"

"Oh, yes. She asked the old man to put it there just after dinner. And he was reading in the study all evening. *He wouldn't lie.*"

Johnny frowned. "Was there money missing too?"

"I don't know," McCauley said. "If so, not much. Sometimes the old man hadn't counted."

"Why did Christy go downstairs?"

"Possibly something for the baby." McCauley looked desolated. "We couldn't know."

"Go on."

"Yes. Now, the old lady said she had heard angry voices, which was what made her wake the old man. Nathaniel said he'd been awake, he'd heard them too. So the theory was that I had opened the safe to get the pin—to sell it for the money in it. Christy had discovered me. We'd quarreled. And I'd hit her.

"They conceded that I may not have meant to hit so hard. But I was drunk. I was opening a safe that was not my safe. You see?"

"I guess so," Johnny said.

"That was all the case there ever was."

"But what about this Kate?"

"The testimony on my side wasn't believed," said McCauley patiently. "Oh, Kate went on the stand and told about her pin. That Nathaniel had given it to her. But there was nobody who remembered seeing it in Kate's old box. And then Nathaniel swore that he'd given no pin. He produced the pin." Johnny blinked. The prisoner talked on. "So they said this was all a preposterous lie to save me. Nathaniel Bartee wouldn't have had any truck with a woman like Kate, they said. Well, nobody took the word of a 'woman like Kate' against the Bartecs. Nobody took the word of a man

like me, either, who had been drunk and with another woman, when he had a wife and child. And Christy, who could have told them I had one pin, Christy was dead."

"I see," said Johnny. He thought he saw. This man was crazy. The story had no logic. "Where does Dick Bartee come into it?"

"He was supposed to be locked up for the night in that military school. But he could get out. I'd seen him in the Bartee kitchen getting food after many a midnight."

Johnny lifted an eyebrow.

"The safe wasn't forced, Mr. Sims. It was opened by someone who knew how. One of the family."

Johnny just waited.

"Christy wouldn't have quarreled with a stranger or a burglar. She'd have screamed. So Christy knew whoever it was she found in there, by the open safe."

Johnny conceded a thoughtful nod.

"But Christy wouldn't have quarreled with Nathaniel, who was forty-one years old and the Crown Prince in that house. No more than she would have quarreled with the old man himself. But she certainly would have questioned fifteen-year-old Dick Bartee if she'd found *him* in his grandfather's study at midnight and the safe open. She'd have threatened to call out. He was rough and tough, that kid. He'd have hit her. I've thought about it all so long," said McCauley, "I can't tell you the feel—the fitting down—the clicking in."

"And how did Nathaniel get the pin?" snapped Johnny.

"Christy's pin?" said McCauley. "Dick gave it to him."

Johnny found himself shaking his head. "What is this alibi?" he asked, turning to something else for kindness' sake.

"Yes. Well the school—that's the Brownleaf School—says nobody leaves after lights out. Dick's roommate was a boy named George Rush, who said Dick was there. Edith-Emily tried to talk to *him* years ago, but he was just a kid and scared and she couldn't approach him in any way that would get him to tell her the truth."

"He lives in Oakland now," said the chaplain. "He has a radio-TV repair shop. If you could get this George Rush to say, without fear or pressure, whether Dick Bartee was really there in his room at the school that night . . ."

"I don't see how any roommate could guarantee . . ." Johnny felt sorry for both these men.

"He might," said the chaplain. "He might be able to convince us. It's worth trying. If he could, it would settle everything."

"If you can't find him," said McCauley anxiously, "ask Mr. Charles Copeland."

"Copeland, the lawyer? Nan's boss, you mean?"

"Yes. Yes. He knows. He was my sister's lawyer, and he was the go-between. He'll know where Kate is, too. Kate Callahan—if you wanted to talk to her."

"Go-between whom?" asked Johnny.

"Between Edith-Emily and the Barteys. He took care of the money."

"What money?"

"The money old man Bartee sent every year for the baby," McCauley said. "The old man insisted when he and Emily made the agreement. He felt responsible, I suppose."

"You mean old Bartee *supported* Emily?"

"No, no," said McCauley. "Emily never touched it."

"Then where is it now?"

"It's a fund," the prisoner said.

"A fund! For seventeen years!"

"I think it was five thousand dollars every year," McCauley said. "It belongs to my daughter."

"But . . ." Johnny got up. "Look," he said with a bursting feeling. "Emily is gone. What happens about that money? Won't Nan have to know now?"

"Oh, my sister had that all arranged," McCauley said. "Nobody will know where it really came from."

"I went to see Geroge Rush myself, five years ago," said Father Klein, "but he wouldn't talk at all. I approached him directly and it didn't work. I'm afraid I have no guile."

"Too right," muttered Johnny Sims. "No guile." He stared at them.

Then he said abruptly, "I'll see what I can do. I'll be in touch. I can call you on the phone, Father Klein?"

Johnny went away.

Five thousand a year for seventeen years, funded, perhaps invested, at least compounded! For heaven's sake, couldn't they see! When Dick Bartee met Nan Padgett and rushed her off her feet *while Emily was out of the way*

it might not have been a coincidence at all. It might have been a *plan*.

Johnny felt very grim and shaken. Lawyer Copeland ought to be shot. Copeland *knew*. But Copeland had introduced them. Was Copeland in on this?

On what?

CHAPTER 6

JOHNNY PULLED UP in front of the building where the girls lived, just as another car pulled up ahead of him. Dorothy, then Nan, and finally a big blond man got out. Dorothy saw him first and hurried toward him.

Johnny saw her face and quickly put both arms around her. "Been to see about the funeral," she said miserably against his coat.

"Dick," Nan said, "this is Johnny Sims." Her face was solemn and strained.

Johnny did not shake the blond man's hand because he was holding Dorothy. "Glad to meet you," Johnny said, "although not under these circumstances. Where's Ma?"

"Upstairs," murmured Dorothy. "She's been wonder . . ."

Nan broke in. "Johnny, will you please tell us something?"

Johnny marveled that Nan took the lead. It was usually Dorothy. He braced himself. He knew what was coming.

It crossed his mind that Dick Bartee could have inspired this attacking question. But Bartee was just waiting, just listening. He was good looking, all right, a man with a strong animal presence. His gray eyes watched, neither warm nor cold.

"The hospital says Aunt Emily called for you last night." Nan's brown eyes were cold. "Why haven't you told us?"

Johnny's arms tightened around Dorothy as his heart jumped. "I was ashamed to tell you," he said flatly, "because I'm sorry—I never did make it."

"Didn't make it! You mean you *didn't* go when she asked!" Nan flared.

"I haven't got an excuse, Nan. I am just ashamed," Johnny said. "Only that the doctor and the nurse seemed to think she needed a night of quiet and I guessed this morning would do."

Nan's chin lifted. "I thought you were so fond of Emily." She looked away from him. She started towards the door.

Dorothy was also drawing away from him. He looked down. "I sure wish I had gone," he murmured. Dorothy gave him a troubled, searching look. Then she followed Nan.

Johnny stood beside Dick Bartee. He was out to discover whether this blond man, now looking at him speculatively with those gray eyes, was or was not a wrong one, phony, murderer. Johnny couldn't handicap himself before he started by announcing what he was up to. (Also, he had promised.)

Johnny said, "What do *you* make of Emily's reaction to your name?" He made himself look with very blunt curiosity into those eyes.

Bartee smiled. His carved lips drew back from perfect teeth. "Misunderstanding is my guess," he said. "Over a transcontinental telephone, what else can you expect? I don't suppose we'll ever know what she *thought* Nan had said."

"Too bad," said Johnny Sims. "So you can't imagine what it might be, eh?"

Dick Bartee said easily, "Now see here. I've knocked around the world a bit and you know as well as I do *everything* I've done wouldn't necessarily delight a maiden aunt. There is, just the same, no reason I know why Nan shouldn't marry me." His gaze was perfectly open and direct.

"That's good," said Johnny glumly.

"I never heard of a woman named Emily Padgett," said Bartee, "until I met Nan, of course."

Johnny realized with a tiny shock that if the man was innocent this could be true. *I changed all the names—I had to*, Emily had said. Johnny turned for the door.

Bartee said, "I never met her. I'm afraid I can't be altogether sorry she's left Nan and me alone in the world together. There's a confession for you."

He clapped Johnny on the back and then he followed Johnny up the stairs.

Johnny went up, seething. Either the man *was* innocent and super-honest. Or he was bold. He was very bold.

Upstairs Johnny's mother had everything under control. Food was at hand for the condolers who were coming and going. At least four of these were Dorothy's young men. Nan was in the big back room and Bartee went to her. Something about the way she stood then, with the big blond man behind her, where Johnny had so often stood himself, made him feel angry.

In a little while he ambled through the dining room into the kitchen. "Ma, I'm leaving. You O.K.?"

His mother said, "Go about your business, do." She looked sharp. "You were born with brains, John Sims. Remember?"

"And thanky ma'am," said Johnny. "I try to use them."

He knew he'd just been scolded for evasion or, to put it bluntly, lying about having been to see Emily. He couldn't help it.

He went back through the little pantry and there was Dorothy fiercely spreading crackers. Something about the bend of her fair neck made a sudden lump come into Johnny's throat. "Ah, Dotty," he said, "couldn't you rest?"

"No," she said belligerently. "I'd rather do something."

"Me too," said Johnny sadly. He wasn't happy with his secret, that alienated him here. "You don't need me, I guess," he said gloomily.

"Nan's all right," she replied distantly.

Johnny went through to the big back room.

Nan said, "Wait, we'll come to the door. I want to say something . . ."

So Nan, with Dick Bartee at her back, stood in the little hall and said, "I'm sorry if I sounded too cross downstairs, Johnny. Dick says I did."

Johnny's eyes flicked up to the big man's face.

"I only said you undoubtedly felt pretty terrible about not going when Emily called. No use to hit a man when he's down." The big man was smiling.

"That's right," stammered Johnny. "I do . . . I do feel pretty terrible." He slid out of the door, got away awkwardly.

"So that's your old boy friend," said Dick Bartee. In the little passageway he put his arms around Nan from behind.

There was a mirror and he looked at her in it. "He never did shake my hand. Notice that?"

"Maybe it is hard for Johnny," Nan said.

"Lost you," he murmured. "Poor guy. It's not easy. Come home to Hestia with me, love? After Monday? *On Monday?*"

"Oh, I couldn't . . ."

"Yes, you could," he said softly. "You *could*, love." He watched her face in the mirror, saw the sadness changing to the dream.

"Perhaps I could," Nan said. "I've only got *you*, really. Except Dorothy."

"And I've got you," he murmured. "Let Johnny watch over Dorothy."

Dorothy, bringing a tray of crackers, came by. She heard her cousin Nan saying, "But he never did date Dorothy, you know. Johnny was mine." Dorothy turned around and went back into the kitchen.

"What is it?" said Johnny's mother sharply.

"It just—kind of hit me," said Dorothy thoughtfully. "*Nothing* is the way it used to be."

There was a George Rush in the Oakland book with two numbers listed, one a radio-TV Repair Shop, the other a residence. Johnny found the shop closed. He drove to the other address. This turned out to be shabby frame house which looked deserted.

The neighbor leaned over his fence. "Looking for Rush? He's gone down to the tavern. Two blocks east."

"Thanks."

"His TV's on the blink. Hee hee. Too lazy to fix his own, I guess. He's gone to catch the ball game. Hee hee."

Johnny perceived that he owed this helpful interference to the humor of it.

Johnny went into the tavern. Fortunately it was still so early in the afternoon that the bar, where the TV hung high, was nearly empty. Johnny had no trouble guessing, by age, which was his man. He took the bar stool next-but-one to the only thirty-ish looking customer.

Johnny intended to use guile. He began to watch the ball game, making sounds from time to time, until the other man through the back of his neck, seemed to accept him for a fellow fan.

"See that!" said Johnny, playing a deep finesse. "Same exact thing happened in a game we played 'way back in military school. St. Olaf's versus Brownleaf."

"St. Olaf's?" The man turned his head so that for the first time Johnny had a good look at his profile. "That's right. We used to play you."

"You did?"

"Brownleaf."

"Oh, for . . . ! When were you there?"

"Thirty-nine—forty-two."

"You were ahead of me," said Johnny, "but we lap. Forty—forty-four." (This was a lie.) "You ever know a Dick Bartee at Brownleaf?"

"Did I know him? I only roomed with him."

"Well, smaa-ll world."

They shook hands. Johnny said this called for a drink and he called for one.

"Where'd you run into Dick?" asked the man, who must surely be George Rush. His eyes were red-lined. His face was pale and morose.

"I wish I'd *never*," said Johnny, with a sudden change of manner.

Rush laughed. "A ring-tailed doozer, that one." He seemed pleased.

Johnny had his line now. "Listen, if you are a good friend of his, let's drop the subject right now," he said gloomily.

George Rush turned all the way around on his stool (since the game to all intents and purposes was over). "We better have another one." The man's red-rimmed eyes half closed. "What did Bartee do to you, stranger?"

"Double-crossing rat," said Johnny. "Got my girl behind my back." It was easy to sound convincing.

"Standard Bartee procedure," said Rush promptly. "Gets away with murder, that Bartee. Always did."

Johnny found himself holding his breath.

"Somebody else's girl, that *interests* him. He was always that way," Rush went on. "You make a kind of rule, Bartee's got to break it or get around it. So he proves something to himself. I dunno." He ran down.

"You know where he is now?" Johnny said bitterly.

"Nope."

"I'll tell you. He's messing around with the vineyard."

"Oh ho! Say, I read that the old man is dead. Well, believe me, Dick will freeze out the whole rest of the family and I don't care who they are. Look at that guy. End up with a million dollar property probably. It'll fall in his lap.

"Probably. Say, remember the murder?"

"What murder?"

"In the Bartee family? Dick was at Brownleaf then."

"Yeah."

"Somebody got into the safe?"

"Yeah." Rush was closing up.

But Johnny went on. "I'll bet you up to five bucks it was Dick Bartee who got into the family safe that night."

"You knew him that long ago?" said Rush suspiciously.

"I was born knowing him," said Johnny with gloom. "My mother was a friend of his mother. One of those damn things. The little kiddies should be pals."

Rush laughed. In a moment he asked curiously, "What makes *you* think Dick opened the safe?"

"I can't prove anything," said Johnny challengingly.

Rush turned his glass. "He knew *how* to get in. That I know," he said with pleasure.

"It figures," Johnny drained his glass. He ordered more. Rush volunteered nothing. "I sure wish I could fix his wagon," Johnny said viciously.

"Don't kid yourself," said Rush bitterly. "Some people are like that. Get away with murder, all their lives."

"You said that before," Johnny looked up—drunkenly, he hoped.

"O.K. I said it before."

"You mean . . . murder?"

"Do I?" Rush was smiling a rather nasty smile.

"We had a way of getting out of the school at night," Johnny said in a moment. "And nobody wiser. You probably did too."

"Could be," Rush admitted.

"You think he could have killed that woman?" demanded Johnny.

"What woman?" Rush stalled.

"In the Bartee house."

"If Dick had been there," said George Rush owlishly, "and she crossed him. This is a strictly unsentimental character. Wouldn't bother him, if he had, I'll tell you that." The

man shifted on the bar stool. "I'm just talking. Actually, they got the one who did it."

"Was Bartee *out*?" said Johnny urgently.

Rush didn't answer.

"You still afraid you'll be expelled?" sneered Johnny.

Rush said, "For all I know, he was in his bed, like the Colonel said." He raised his glass.

"For all you *know*," Johnny pounced. "You can't swear . . . ?"

"I'm swearing to nothing," said George Rush irritably, "and why don't you give up? Face it, this Bartee, he's got what it takes and poor slobs like you and me, we just haven't got what he's got. Just kiss her good-bye."

Johnny looked at the weak bitter face and wondered. He couldn't help remembering the big blond man smiling, saying the decent thing.

"How old was he? Fifteen? What would he do if he went out? Date? What girls did he know?"

"Try the phone book," said Rush. "He was six feet already, and big. He dated. He had a car. His father lied for him. You know that? The school didn't know about his car. That's what I mean, how he always got away with stuff. Catch my old man lying for me."

"Did *you* lie for him?" Johnny said.

George Rush slid off the stool. "Nope," he said. He swayed a little. "I lied for myself," he said. "My old man would have skinned me alive if I'd have been expelled."

Johnny said, "You were out that night! Wait . . . Listen . . ."

"I don't know you," Rush said. "But Dick Bartee, I know. So don't dream, brother." He leaned closer and his breath was bad. "If I could have *proved* he was out that night, his trouble *might* have been worth my trouble. See?" He showed his teeth. "Give up—that's my advice." He hiccupped. He went away.

Johnny sat in the bar a while longer. There *was* something wrong with Bartee's alibi? Or was there? This George Rush was malicious, envious, about as untrustworthy a witness as Johnny could imagine. One thing he'd said Johnny believed. If Rush could have made trouble for Dick Bartee—seventeen years ago or now—he would have enjoyed it.

CHAPTER 7

MONDAY, JUST AFTER NOON, they buried Emily Padgett.

After the ceremonies, Johnny followed Charles Copeland out to the curb. The lawyer was putting a slim blonde, sun-tanned woman into a car. She was rolling her eyes, seeming distressed, saying, "Please, Charles, don't be late tonight. Please?"

"I must go to the office," he told her. "Have a good lunch. Forget it."

Johnny said, as he turned, "May I come back to your office, sir?"

"You're John Sims, aren't you? Sad about Emily. Funerals upset my wife."

"I'll follow you, sir." The lawyer looked at Johnny's tight face and said no more.

In the office, the lawyer told his switchboard to hold all calls. "Well?"

"I've been to see Clinton McCauley."

"Ah . . ." The lawyer sagged. His gray hair was a little startling above a sun-browned face. "I've been worrying about that ever since the boat docked. Emily turned to you, then? What does McCauley say?"

"What do *you* say," asked Johnny, "about this engagement?"

"I am horrified," said Copeland quietly.

"You think Bartee is the killer? You think McCauley is *right*?"

"No, I do not. But that makes no difference. I am horrified, just the same."

Johnny felt a little surge of confidence in the man. Still, he said severely, "What were you thinking of when you introduced them?"

"I couldn't help that," Copeland said. "I'll tell you about it. Dick Bartee came up one day last fall, to deliver a letter from his grandfather by hand. First time I had met

him. He was pleasant. I was cordial. That was that.

"About two months ago, he popped in again. Wanted advice. What did I know about some business people around this town? While we were talking, right here, Nan Padgett happened to come in with some papers. You know she's in the stenographer's pool, but she is rather my protege. I believe she said, 'You wanted these, Mr. Copeland?' and I said, 'Thank you, Miss Padgett,' and that was absolutely all that was said. Oh, I suppose Nan smiled, as she naturally would, at the boss' guest. I did *not* introduce them to each other.

"Well, same day, Bartee asked me to lunch with him. I said I was rushed, but if he didn't mind eating in a hurry at my regular place . . . He said he didn't mind, so we went across the street. Now Nick's is mobbed but I have a table reserved every day, as I think I told him. We started past a long line of people waiting, and there, wedged in the crowd, were Nan and Dorothy Padgett. Bartee stopped in his tracks. He said something like, 'This young lady mustn't starve, must she? Isn't there room for her too?' And before I could open my mouth he'd yanked up the velvet rope and Nan and Dorothy had ducked under, laughing.

"Well, I'm kind of uncle to them, you know. They've eaten at my table often enough. What was I to do? Say 'No, you can't sit at my table today.' Could I explain why not? Could I say, 'Because I don't want you to meet this man.' And could I have said *why* I didn't? I was stuck, I tell you. It happened so fast. Scattered my wits. So I just put the best face I could on it. I introduced them and we had lunch, the four of us. Dick Bartee, it seemed to me, wasn't too much impressed. Anyhow, I suppose I assumed he'd go for Dorothy.

"Dorothy?"

"Why, yes. She gets the whistles."

"That's right. I guess she does."

"Nan's a sweet kid," Copeland said, "but Dorothy's a stunner. So we talked about everything *but* personalities. I saw to that. Then, it was over and everyone parted and I thought that was all. Had no idea he went on seeing Nan. I've been away over a month. Emily was gone, too, or she'd have stopped it. I wouldn't have had it happen."

Johnny chewed his lip.

The lawyer was staring at his polished desk. "Does McCauley want Nan told now? Does he want me to tell her?"

"What do you think of McCauley?" Johnny asked.

"I know the man's got this obsession . . ."

"Is it *just* an obsession?"

"I don't know. But if he says, 'Tell her' I will tell her. Does he say so?"

Johnny said, "Would you tell me about this money first? How much money is coming to Nan?"

"Plenty," Copeland said, and named a sum that made Johnny whistle. "It's supposed to be an inheritance from her dead parents—through Emily, handled by me. All fixed years ago."

"Then it just comes to her?"

"Yes. At Emily's death. Or Nan reaching twenty-one. Whichever's first. It is hers, right now."

"Do you think Dick Bartee knew about that money?" The lawyer blinked. "*Could* he have known?" Johnny pressed.

"The old man was supposed to keep the secret. I'm almost certain that he did."

"Why should Dick Bartee deliver a letter *by hand*? And what was in the letter? Was Nan's *name* in there?"

The lawyer stared. "I don't know why he brought it instead of mailing it. I don't think her name was there." The lawyer began to look startled. "I see what you mean. He did . . . yes, he *did* force that introduction. But the girls being in the restaurant—that was just coincidence."

"Was it?" said Johnny.

"Of course, it . . . Wait a minute. He could have set out to cultivate *me*. If he knew that Nan worked in my office, he could have figured to find an opportunity to force an introduction, sooner or later, somehow. That's the way your mind's working?"

"I'm wondering," Johnny admitted.

Copeland sent for the letter that Dick Bartee had delivered for his grandfather.

Dear Mr. Copeland: (it went)

Since you tell me Miss McCauley has not spent the the yearly allowance I've sent the child these seventeen years, and since you say it now amounts to a sizeable fortune, and since the child, now twenty years of age,

will come into this money in, at the least, another year, and is fully protected in the event of Miss McCauley's death by coming into the money at that time, if necessary—I write to announce that I have sent the last amount I shall send. The child is provided for. I am old. And failing.

Having, therefore, just drafted what I am quite sure will be my final will, I want you and Miss McCauley to know that neither she nor the child receive any bequest therein, nor are they mentioned therein by any name. This means that upon my death, no one need discover the name Miss McCauley and the child now use. And no one can connect the girl with the terrible and pitiable past.

I believe that my duty in the whole matter has been discharged to Miss McCauley's satisfaction. I will say to you, and to Miss McCauley, whom I admire, that I now agree her course has been most kind and wise. I wish the little girl all happiness.

Yours sincerely,
Bartholomew Bartee

"Decent letter," said Johnny. "And no Padgett named." Copeland said slowly, "The information about the money is there, isn't it?"

"Had the letter been tampered with?"

"I can't say." The lawyer thought of something that relaxed him. "But he would have no way to find out where Nan was or under what name she and Emily were living."

Johnny said pityingly, "I guess you don't have snooper's blood."

"What do you mean? How could he? There are no records he could get at. I'll swear to that. And I never told him."

"Nobody had to tell him. There is one person he could locate, all right."

"Who?"

"Clinton McCauley."

"Well . . . yes."

"Emily said she went to see her brother once a month."

"Yes."

"Didn't Emily fight for her brother at the time of that crime? Wasn't she *there*, in Hestia?"

"Yes, she was."

"So Dick Bartee had seen her? Might know her when he saw her again?"

"Possibly."

"What's to stop Dick Bartee from hanging around watching who visits the prison? He'd certainly have a clue as to what she'd look like. Then, when he spots Emily, following her home? Then he knows where she lives and under what name. Wait a minute. *Two* girls!" Johnny jerked upright. "How could he know *which* girl was going to get the money? The names were changed."

The lawyer sat still and closed his eyes. In a moment he opened them and said, "Maybe I can tell you how. Listen. When we had lunch that day I said we talked about impersonal stuff. One impersonal topic was politics. Dick Bartee said to the girls, 'I don't suppose you pretty young things can vote yet?' "

"And Dorothy said, 'I can; she can't.'"

"And Nan said, 'But in another year, I can.'"

"So he knew *which* girl by her age, of course."

"Uh huh," said Johnny.

"We will have to tell Nan right away," Copeland said anxiously.

"We haven't got McCauley's permission to tell her yet."

"What! He's the one who swears Dick Bartee killed his wifel"

"Now he wants to believe different," Johnny said. "To spare Nan. Not to break her heart. He wants to be shown that he has been wrong."

Copeland stared. "He's been wrong," he said shortly. "I never could believe the boy did it. But what does he mean?"

"I'm to check. I've already tested that alibi." Johnny told about George Rush. "Trouble is," Johnny confessed, "this Rush is very sour on Bartee. Could be just malice. And he won't swear. Doesn't mean much?" He looked at the man of law.

"No," said the lawyer. "Nothing."

"That's why I haven't called Father Klein. I don't have anything either way."

"We are going to have to do something about stopping this marriage," Copeland fumed. "Tell Nan he's after her money."

"We haven't a grain of proof that he *is*," said Johnny. "Look at the way it *seems*. Bartee meets you because his grandfather does business with you. He meets Nan through you. He falls for her. That's simple. Easy to grasp. Happens every day. What are we going to tell her? Something complicated. We say Bartee maneuvered the whole thing, ferreted her out, got himself introduced to her, because he knew she had money. Also, when we say he wants her money, we are saying he doesn't want her. And that is something Nan may not *want* to believe." Johnny knew this with a sickening certainty.

"What are you suggesting?" Copeland said rather angrily.

"I would like the *proof*," said Johnny. "If Clinton McCauley is sick and obsessed, I'd like to be sure of that. And if not, then I'd like to *get* Bartee for the murder of Christy McCauley, *if he did it*. And get Nan's father out of prison, by the way. It scarcely seems enough, just to break up a romance. Does it?"

"No," said Copeland. "Not if Bartee is guilty. But even if he isn't guilty of anything but fortune-hunting—I tell you I don't like this marriage."

"If Bartee is a killer and I can prove it, that will stop the marriage, *but good*," Johnny said. "I thought I could scavenge around. While there is time. I've done this, although never for real, in exactly the same way."

"You think you can turn up anything?"

"McCauley wants me to try."

"Let's talk to McCauley."

"O.K. I'll drive you over. Let me call Father Klein."

When Johnny got the chaplain on the line, Father Klein broke in. "McCauley is in the infirmary. He's gone about out of his mind. The dilemma . . ."

Johnny stiffened. "What am I going to do, then? I promised to wait for his permission. But a decision, about telling the girl, is going to have to be made pretty soon."

"McCauley does not want her told at all."

"What!"

"Last clear thing he said to me. He realizes that he has judged Dick Bartee without proof. And that is wrong."

"But, *listen* to me!" Johnny began to explain about the money.

The chaplain was not the man for understanding about

money. He broke in. "McCauley said that unless there is courtroom proof . . ."

"He must be out of his mind," snapped Johnny. "Doesn't he claim a court found *him* guilty?"

"Yes, but he understands . . ."

"Look here, sir. You say he's about out of his mind?"

"The man is trying to believe what he does not believe," said the chaplain severely.

"I have to do something," Johnny said. "Tell me what I am to do!"

The chaplain said, in a moment, "You care for this girl, his daughter? You have her welfare at heart?"

"I do. I have." Johnny's voice began to shake with foreboding.

"Yes, I thought so. I will say this to you. If you ever become *personally certain* that this man Dick Bartee is a murderer, then feel released from your promise. Make it your responsibility to decide."

"Mine?" said Johnny.

"Mr. Copeland may help you some. But I rather think the dead lady—the girl's aunt—gave it to *you*."

"I'll—do the best I can," choked Johnny.

He hung up. The lawyer, who had been listening in, said sympathetically, "I'll help you tell her."

But Johnny said angrily, "You heard? McCauley is out of his mind?"

"Yes. Sad."

"Did you hear Father Klein say *whether to tell her*? Yesterday he thought we *must*. How long do you think McCauley may have been out of his mind? We don't know," said Johnny. "We are basing an awful lot of theory on that man's integrity. If it weren't for McCauley, would it have crossed our minds that Bartee read a letter? Or plotted to meet Nan? Or *any* of it?"

"Why don't you—er—hunt around a little?" the lawyer said unhappily. "I guess it's true enough that we can always break her heart another day."

Johnny bought himself two sandwiches and a small carton of milk. He drove to the park where he sat on a bench, ate one-and-a-half sandwiches and fed the other half to some birds. During this time he tried not to think at all. At the

end of the time, a sentence came clear and cool into his head, and he knew exactly what he was going to do.

He drove to the fat-walled stucco fortress where Roderick Grimes lived.

"I've got an old murder case," Johnny told him, "that I am going to dig into for reasons of my own. I don't ask you to take an interest at all but I do ask you this: Would you be willing to say, to anyone who inquires, that I'm working on it for you?"

Roderick Grimes took him by his lapels. "Come in here. If you think you are going to say no more—Sit down. Expound."

Johnny sat down. "You can't use this," he warned. "Or even talk about it. I'll have to have your word. Any decision to talk has to be mine." Mine, his heart echoed.

"Granted."

So Johnny expounded.

"You're right," Grimes said at the end. "It's possible, and even probable, that this McCauley is slightly off his rocker. A guilty man who has made up a fantasy to bury the guilt under. Either so that he can see himself as a noble martyr, or because this makes the punishment he desperately *needs* all the more cruel."

John nodded unhappily.

"On the other hand, your Dick Bartee sounds like—what was that phrase?—a ring-tailed doozer, all right. According to Rush."

"Yeah," said Johnny miserably.

"I'll back you up," said Grimes. "I'll even—No, I won't either. I was going to say I might even come down and throw my weight around. But I can't offer. Know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I'm the armchair type," said Grimes, "creaking back, neither young nor spry, *nor* foolish. All's safe enough, if McCauley's a psycho. But hasn't it occurred to you that Dick Bartee, if he's a killer, may not sit still while you snoop among his little secrets?"

"He's not going to murder *me*," scoffed Johnny.

"My boy," said Roderick Grimes quaintly, "you could be murdered and you'd never know it. Well, report to me, mind. Of course, if I can't use it, I won't pay you."

"I realize that," Johnny grinned.

"Meanwhile," promised Roderick Grimes, "I'll do you another favor. I will sit here and think about it."

Johnny felt comforted, somehow.

CHAPTER 8

JOHNNY SPENT THE rest of the day hunting old newspapers and magazine indices for accounts of the murder of Christy McCauley, in Hestia, California, seventeen years ago. A no-good, drunken, womanizing bum had killed his young wife. Only the prominence of the Barte family gave the stale plot much news value. Nothing new.

He walked into his parents' house about eight o'clock in the evening and was shocked stock-still on the carpet by the sight of his father at the card table, playing a placid game of Russian Bank with a pretty girl named Dorothy Padgett.

"Where's Nan?" Johnny said.

Dorothy turned her head and smiled. "Surprise!" she said. "Your dear mama said I must come . . ."

"She certainly mustn't stay alone," said Barbara Sims, bustling in.

"Where's Nan?" Johnny repeated. His feet had not moved another inch.

"Oh, she flew home with Dick," said Dorothy cheerfully. "He had to go back and he didn't want to leave her and she's never met his folks, you know. He thought it would be good for her to get away."

"So I brought Dorothy home with me, of course," said his mother. "Where have you been all day? Have you had any food?"

"You say they flew?" Johnny almost could not get his next words out. "You don't think they went by way of Nevada?"

Dorothy looked shocked. His mother said reproachfully, "You can't think Nan would elope! The day Emily was *buried*? Nan wouldn't do that."

Dorothy said, "At least, she didn't. She called me and they're safe on the ground in Hestia." She watched him.

Johnny sat limply down. Maybe there wasn't as much time as he'd thought there would be. He was scared.

"Have they . . . set a date?" he asked painfully, looking at nothing but his mother's carpet.

"I'll be in charge of the wedding," Dorothy said, "when-ever it is."

"When will it be?" he insisted.

"Oh, I suppose soon. Nan won't want anything but a very simple wedding. No splash. Because of Emily . . ."

"Simple and soon, huh?" he murmured.

Dorothy turned and cards fell out of the pattern on the table and landed on the floor. "What's the matter, Johnny?"

Johnny's father began patiently to pick up the cards.

"I've been with Roderick Grimes," said Johnny, "and he gave me a job."

"Well?" said his mother impatiently. "You know, Johnny, you are going to have to get used to the idea that Nan is going to marry this man."

Johnny's green eyes flickered at her. "Grimes wants me to dig up the dope on another old case. Happened years ago. In Hestia."

"For goodness sakes!" his mother said.

His father stopped shuffling cards.

"A young woman named Christy McCauley was hit on the head one night—in the Bartee's house."

He heard them gasp.

"Her husband's in prison for doing the deed," Johnny tried to be light, "but Grimes thinks—oh, you know, the usual. More to it than meets the eye."

"Johnny, you can't do this," his mother said.

"Yes, I can, Ma," he replied gravely. "If I don't, somebody else will."

"You should *let* somebody else, then," his mother said severely. "You, of all people, as close as you've been to Nan, can't go down there and bother those Bartees about an old tragic thing they'd surely rather forget."

Dorothy had been sitting very still indeed. She said, "Was the murdered woman related to Dick?"

"No, not directly. She was related to old Mrs. Bartee."

"Is old Mrs. Bartee still alive?" asked his mother.

"Yes she is," said Dorothy. "Dick's grandmother."

"Then, Johnny, you absolutely cannot . . ."

But Dorothy said, "You don't want Nan to marry into that family, *do you*, Johnny?"

He opened his mouth, took air, closed it.

She said briskly, "How and when are you going down?"

"Driving. In the morning."

"I'll go, too."

Johnny didn't know what to say.

"What's going on?" said Barbara Sims, sharply.

Dorothy leaned forward. "It's just us, here, Johnny. We all know that you *did* go to see Emily in the hospital. At least I know it, and I think your folks do too. Was Emily worried about this old murder case? Is that why Emily didn't want Nan mixed up with that family? Is that what's the matter?"

Johnny felt the red in his face. He blew out his breath. "I guess," he said, "this is what you might call female intuition."

"You may as well give up," his father said, beginning to deal out a solitaire game.

"All right. O.K. I'll admit I took the job so I can get the rights of it."

"In what way?" his mother frowned.

Johnny searched for a stout lie to put in the path of his mother's intuition. "There's an idea," he said, "that the Bartee family kinda drove this poor husband to the killing, the way they froze him out. I mean, if that's the kind of people . . ."

"Ummm," said his mother. "It's true we don't know anything about them, do we?"

"It's too late," said Dorothy.

"Maybe and maybe not," flared Johnny. "Anyhow, I've got to try to look out for Nan. Even if it is embarrassing."

"Well, of course, I suppose you do," said his mother thoughtfully.

Dorothy said, "That's for *me* to do. Now that Aunt Emily's not here. I should have gone with them."

"Now Johnny," began his mother, crossing her ankles.

"Nope," said he. "I am not going to tell you all about the old murder case. Furthermore, I am getting up at four in the morning so this is where I say good-night."

He rose.

"That's awful early for you, Dotty," he went on, kindly. "Maybe you could write Nan and fix it up to go down in a day or so?"

Dorothy was looking up at him. She said simply, "I'd rather go with you, Johnny." The phrase rocked him. There was an echo in it somewhere.

His mother said, "Dorothy, you go right smack to bed *this minute*. I'll pack for you."

The women scurried.

"Do you give up?" his father said to Johnny, who just stood there. Johnny rubbed his head.

There must be such a thing as male intuition, he thought later. Because his father said to him quietly, "Watch your step, son."

In the old frame house that stood, smothered in the only big trees for miles around, the nurse was helping the old lady to bed in the front room downstairs.

"Such a sweet little girl, isn't she, Mrs. Bartee?"

The old lady's teeth were in the glass and she was reluctant to smile. She mumbled through her soft old lips, "I do admire to have a young and pretty face in the house. I always did. There was Josephine. There was Christy."

"And Miz Blanche."

(The old lady didn't include Miz Blanche.) "Now there is Nan. Nan. It doesn't suit her."

"Short names are all the rage," the nurse said.

In the huge parlor, the other side of the wide hall, Blanche Bartee said to her husband Bartholomew, Jr., "I can't imagine Dick married to that child. And settled down. I can't imagine . . ."

Bart was a smooth-faced, compact, smallish man. He said carelessly, "Can't you, dear?"

Blanche smoothed her bracelets up her arm. "She has money, it seems."

"They'll have mother's shares," Bart said in a moment. "Dick will have capital."

"Bart, did you agree?"

"It wasn't altogether up to me. Mother is terribly pleased with Nathaniel's son. I have agreed."

Blanche rattled the bracelets.

"You don't think he's changed? You don't think he's settled? Dick makes you nervous?"

The bracelets were still. "No, no," she murmured nervously.

Upstairs in the hall, at the door of the big back bedroom, Dick said to his fiancée, "You're tired. Been a long bad day. Sleep well."

"I think I will sleep," Nan said. "I feel at home here. Isn't that stranger?"

"No."

"Why not?" Nan spoke dreamily.

"Because wherever I am is your home, love." He was murmuring. "Marry me. Why must we wait?"

"Just a little while," Nan said. "Not too long, darling."

Dorothy wasn't a chatterer today. Mile after mile slipped under the car's wheels in the misty morning and she asked no questions, either. But she was a presence. Johnny couldn't forget that she was there. Finally he said, "What will you do if the Bartees won't take you in?"

"I'll stay in a motel."

Something about this stubbornness pleased him. "Then maybe you *don't* think it's too late."

"It's late," she said.

"What do *you* think of Dick Barteet?"

"I think he's—been around."

"Is he really in love with Nan?"

"*She's* in love," Dorothy said crisply. "He gave her an awful rush. She was too used to *you*, Johnny."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh . . . I don't know. He's too old for Nan."

"Thirty-two. I'm twenty-eight, of course."

"You're too old for her, too," said Dorothy tartly.

Johnny looked sideways. "You're on the warpath," he said.

"Oh, Johnny, don't—"

"Don't what?"

"Don't go round the mulberry bush. And don't ever take a lie-detector test, either."

"What!"

"How do you suppose I knew you were lying about not seeing Emily?" Johnny remembered her head on his breast when his heart had jumped. Dorothy now put her cool

fingers gently on his wrist. "You just made up this job with Roderick Grimes. Didn't you?"

He knew his heart jumped again. He took his hand off the wheel, turned it, and put her hand away. "I've got the job," he said sternly. "And none of your tricks."

She was contrite. "All right, Johnny. Don't tell me anything more, if you don't want to."

"Oh I want to," he said in a moment. "We're on the same side. Maybe I need you."

"Maybe," she murmured. Her head was turned away.

"This Christy McCauley was twenty-two years old," Johnny began. "She got killed by a blow, and her husband was caught with the weapon in his hand. I talked to him in prison."

"Oh?"

"I think I'll have to tell you this," Johnny went on judiciously. "*He* thinks Dick Bartee did it."

"I see," said Dorothy at last. "So *that's* it." She straightened. "Did Emily know that? How could she know that?"

"Don't know," he said quickly. "She wanted me to—try and find out—"

"Why didn't you tell us?" Dorothy demanded.

"Because look, Dot—there's a good possibility this man, McCauley, may be just psycho. There's no real reason to believe what he says."

"You should have told us," Dorothy said stonily.

"I . . . What about Nan?"

"What about her?" said Dorothy. "If anybody thought *my* fiancé had ever killed anybody, *I'd* want to know about it."

Johnny winced. But he could not tell her any more. He could not tell her who Nan was. He had promised.

Dorothy said, "I don't see what you think you're going to do. The Bartees aren't going to break down and tell *you* a lot of stuff that never came out before. Dick isn't going to admit it, if he ever killed anybody. You'll have to tell Nan the whole business, Johnny, because that is all you will be *able* to do."

Johnny said angrily, "I am not going to tell her unless I've got a lot more reason to think there's something to it. And you're not going to tell her until I say so."

Dorothy said nothing.

"Promise me that, Dot, or I'll—"

"You'll what?" she asked coolly.

They drove in silence a mile or two.

Johnny said at last, "Well, what *are* we going to do? In your independent judgment." He smiled at her. "You've got rights, Dot. I'm sorry."

She said, surprising him, "I can see how hard it is—for *you*. You are going to look pretty jealous and mean, aren't you?"

"That's right," he said grimly, in a moment.

"How long ago was this murder?" she asked.

"Seventeen years," he snapped. Dorothy had made him smart and sting.

"But Dick was just a kid!"

"Fifteen years old."

"But that's impossible!"

"Nope, not impossible. I haven't told you about another talk I had . . ." So now he gave her the George Rush eye-view of Dick Bartee.

"Anything else you haven't told me?" she asked him mildly when he had finished.

He reflected. Couldn't talk about the money. That would come too close to connecting Nan with the Barteys. He said, "Something else, one way or the other, is what I'm after."

Dorothy was silent a long time. Then she said, "I wonder why you don't trust me."

"I still don't know what you're going to do," he said in exasperation. "Look, if I were positive . . . but I'm not, Dotty. I just don't *know*. I want to protect Nan from *any* kind of hurt, and it's hard for me. You're right, I'm going to look jealous and mean if I tell all this. Yet I've got to *know*. Why can't you see that?"

"I see that," said Dorothy in a moment, gravely. "I'll be quiet, Johnny. Not that I *agree*, but because I'd be a fool to do what you don't want me to do, when I know there's *something* more you haven't told me."

He didn't speak.

"I will trust *you*," she said. "I know you always have looked out for Nan."

He felt relieved. He picked up her left hand. He wanted to make her know he was grateful, so he started to raise it to his lips. Dorothy snatched it away. "The Barteys might

throw you out," she said brightly, "but if they let me in, I'll be your inside spy."

"It's not a very pretty job," he said ruefully.

"What do we care about that," she said, "if Nan's engaged to a murderer?"

He couldn't answer.

Five times it was on the end of Johnny's tongue to tell her the rest of it. Five times he stopped before he told.

Aunt Emily's face. *There goes the meaning of my life.* The face of McCauley. *If I have been wrong, I pray the Lord.* Dick Bartee's face. *No reason that I know . . .* The old man's letter, *kind and wise . . . the little girl all happiness.*

Who was Johnny Sims to decide against them all?

CHAPTER 9

IT WAS ALMOST five o'clock in the afternoon by the time they turned into a road that ran between vast flats of what seemed to be pure sand. Johnny had seen this country when rows of twisted sticks stretched across as desolate and unproductive-looking a landscape as one would see this side of the moon. At this season the sticks were hidden in green.

This private road, thought Johnny, was the 'long, long driveway' that Clinton McCauley had walked on a midnight, long years ago. It made a loop around a knoll with a tuft of trees upon it that stood up like a hairy wart on the smooth face of the land. Johnny noted another road leading away to the back.

He took the narrow turn-off into the thicket of trees that curved up to the door of a huge wooden house of Victorian design which was painted, gingerbread and all, a soft pale purplish color. The effect was rather pleasing.

They parked and went up the steps. Double wooden doors with old-fashioned etched glass in their upper portions. The doors to which Clinton McCauley had fitted his key? Johnny punched a bell-button.

A neat maid opened the doors. Dorothy asked for Nan. They were let in.

They stepped upon a red carpet. Surely, thought Johnny, not the same red carpet upon which Clinton McCauley had found the candlestick lying. But, if not, it was a replacement that repeated. There was a lot of red carpet. The hall was fifteen feet wide and it went far and deep into the old mansion. He thought he could tell, by an alteration in the light, where the stairs went up, on the left, about half-way back.

To their immediate right, an arch was shut off by two tightly closed sliding doors. To their left an arch had no doors at all and from this room, as if she came around the corner somehow, Nan appeared.

She moved lightly. Johnny saw that she had regained that dancing air, the effect of some inner joy that he, J. Sims might have to destroy. Behind her loomed Dick Bartee, the tall blond man, easy in his own place, not a type who showed surprise. Then the two girls were exchanging little jabberings of surprise and explanation.

Johnny said to Dick in the proper undertone, "I wonder if I could wash?"

Bartee nodded. "Under the stairs. Just go on down the hall."

So Johnny set off upon the red carpet. He knew very well that he might not be within these walls but this once, and he wanted to look at the study. It lay across from the bottom of the stairs that wound up in a square pattern to the left. Johnny went into the little lavatory, remained a judicious time. When he opened its door he did not step out. He stood and inspected, across the fifteen feet of the hall, the old man's study where Christy McCauley had been beaten to death with an iron candlestick seventeen years ago.

The small square room was wide open. Sliding doors here, too, but not shut. There was a mantel piece directly opposite, in the outside wall. There were glass-covered bookcases, a library table. The safe, he thought, was probably behind the picture, a rustic scene that hung over the mantel. At least he couldn't spot it, elsewhere. Then, with shock, his exploring eyes perceived that *he* was being watched by a lizard gaze from the wrinkled old face of an ancient woman in a wheel chair.

Johnny was nobody to skulk sheepishly away. He moved out of the lavatory, closed its door, marched across the red carpet, entered the study. "Ma'am," he addressed her, "my name is John Sims. I am a friend of Nan Padgett."

The old lady regarded him with some interest.

"How do you do?" he said.

"They haven't come to take me to my tea," she said. "So I don't do very well."

"Then I'll take you," he said, "if you'll tell me where."

The old lady let out a rusty chuckle. "To the parlor," she said. "I want my tea."

Johnny saw how to release the brake on the wheelchair. Then he got behind it and pushed it out into the hall. He turned to his left and the old lady did not object. So Johnny pushed on towards the front doors and then he turned her into the big room from which Nan had come.

"Mother!" said a man's voice. "Oh, I see!"

The old lady was chortling with delight. "Young man's name is John Sims," she said triumphantly. "Well? Tea?"

The man who had spoken held out his hand. "Thanks for bringing my mother in, Mr. Sims," he said pleasantly. "I'm Bart Bartee."

A thin woman with bronze hair, a sharp prow of a nose and a small chin hurried to take his place at the pushing-bar of the chair. "I'm Blanche Bartee. You surprised us."

"Surprised you, didn't I?" said the old lady with relish. "Miss Adams makes me wait."

"No reason why you should wait," said Blanche soothingly. She pushed the old lady to a position down the huge room.

"I should think not. In my house," the old lady said.

Bart spoke. "Come in. Come in. Sit down. Mother has tea, but the rest of us have something a little more stimulating. Join us?"

"Thanks."

Then Johnny was seated with a glass in his hand and he was assembling his impressions. The big room was charming. The furnishings were old but stately and attractively well cared for. It was the room of a moneyed family, who did not need nor wish to be up-to-the-minute in fashion. The things they'd had for years were precious and significant. He was within the stronghold of the Bartees. Young Bart

was master here. His wife was not the mistress. The old lady was the mistress of the house.

A woman in a white uniform came pushing a teacart, apologizing. The old lady nibbled and sipped and twinkled at Johnny. He seemed to have taken her fancy.

Bart, Jr., was a man about forty, Johnny surmised. Not tall, not big, but well made. He had an air of competent authority. Blanche's age he could not guess, except that she was not a young girl and not an old lady. She struggled to say what a gracious hostess ought to say while the old lady waited to pounce rudely. Johnny could sense strain.

Blanche was saying now, to Dorothy, "You must stay with us, of course. There is plenty of room."

"Who is *she*?" said the old lady crossly.

"I am Dorothy Padgett, Nan's cousin," said Dorothy promptly. "I should have phoned, I know, but I caught a ride with Johnny at the last minute. It's very kind of you," said Dorothy directly to the old lady, "to ask me to stay."

The old lady nodded. "Not at all," she said, looking pleased with herself.

Dorothy sent a smile of apology to Blanche, who merely looked patient. Bart was watching Dorothy with pleasure—and, perhaps, surprise.

"How nice," said Blanche to Johnny, "that business brought you down."

"I'd better tell you what my business is." Johnny put the glass, whose contents he had not tasted, carefully down on the little table beside his chair.

"Matter of fact," interrupted Dick Bartee, "it is a good thing you two are here. There may be a wedding soon. You'll want to attend." He cast a lover's look at Nan, beside him. Nan was demure, tucked in, belonging.

"Nan isn't," said Dorothy, "going to get married without me around. We are all the Padgetts left."

Blanche began to make sympathetic sounds. It was all pleasant, polite, genteel. And Johnny was here to destroy this mood.

He broke in again as soon as he could. "Have you ever heard of Roderick Grimes?"

Blanche's face, a paler bronze than her hair, put on a frown. "It does sound familiar."

"He writes books," Johnny told them.

"That's right, he does," said Dick. "About murder."

The Bartee heads turned. Johnny knew one word had destroyed the mood.

"Right. I do some leg-work for him on occasion. He's given me a chore, this time, that brought me here. I am to talk to a few people about the McCauley case."

Johnny heard Blanche's breath catch. If Bart's smooth face gave any sign, Johnny missed it. He was noticing the twitch of Dick Bartee's full mouth. The glance of those gray eyes seemed to rest on Johnny's face, not probing, but coolly resting.

"You can't mean Christy!" said Blanche with dismay.

"I'm afraid I do, Mrs. Bartee," said Johnny. "You see, Grimes . . ."

"I know about him. He writes up those things," said Dick in a pleasantly informative voice. "Puts them in books."

Nan said from her snug place next to Dick, "Who is Christy?"

"Christy McCauley," said the old lady. Crumbs fell from the corner of her mouth. "Poor Christy McCauley."

"Christy," said Blanche in an aside to Nan, "was Mother Bartee's granddaughter."

"Nelly's little girl," said the old lady. "My only daughter's only daughter, I used to say."

Blanche looked at her with alarm. Johnny thought he could read the thought in her bronze head. The old lady ought to be gotten out of the room. It was so vivid an impression that Johnny found himself waiting for this to be accomplished.

But Bart said sharply, "This man Grimes wants to write up *that* story?"

"It depends on what I can report to him," said Johnny. "He is interested in old cases that lend themselves to his kind of recapitulation."

"And what is that?" asked Bart sternly.

Johnny said gently, "If it makes an interesting story, sir."

"I don't think," said Blanche, "that it is anything we want at all. How can he do this without having consulted the family?" Blanche flicked a nervous look at the old lady who, still as a lizard, was watching her balefully.

Dick said, "It was news. As such, I guess it belongs to the public. Am I right, John?"

He was easy. He spoke sensibly. Johnny thought that if he *had* killed Christy McCauley, this was as nerveless a killer as ever was.

Johnny said, "Whatever wasn't in the newspapers, Grimes handles very carefully." He took up the glass. It had become a kind of symbol. If they reacted with any kind of permission, Johnny would become their guest. Then he could drink it.

Nan said wonderingly to Dorothy, "Did you know about this?"

Dorothy said softly, "It's just Johnny's job."

"Do you propose to talk to *us*?" asked Bart.

"I had hoped to." The drink remained untouched.

"About Christy!" Blanche ran her tongue along her lip. "You don't seem to realize, Mr. Sims, just what you are asking. You came here . . ."

Nan looked from face to face. Bart exuded silent chill.

Johnny put his drink down again. "I beg your pardon," he said, "if I have seemed to come into the house under false pretenses. It is just a job I have to do." He got up. "I'll say good-night then."

Nan said, "Oh," as if to protest something, but not sure what.

"Where's he going?" the old lady said. "He hasn't had his tea. Did you know Christy, young man?"

"No, ma'am," said Johnny gently. "I only wanted to know *about* her."

"Then sit down," she said. "I'll tell you about her."

"Mother," said Blanche.

"Oh, be still," said the old lady promptly. It was obvious that she liked to be opposed to Blanche. "I haven't thought of Christy . . . Yes, I did. I thought of Christy only last night. Poor child. She was killed in this house." Her face had no horror in it. Not any more, at least. "Right here in this house," she said.

"I know," said Johnny swiftly. He could tell that Nan shrank closer to Dick. He could tell that Blanche was sending eye-beams to her husband. Blanche twisted her hands. Dick Bartee neither moved nor spoke.

"It was that husband of hers that did it," said the old lady vigorously. "That awful man. I never liked him, from the first. I said to Bart—my husband, I mean—that I

couldn't think of letting Christy go off with that awful man. And Nathaniel agreed with me." Her head nodded. The soft flesh of her face shook.

"What was wrong with him?" Johnny asked.

Dick Bartee sat quietly. But he was alert, Johnny thought. Perhaps he always was. Perhaps he had the animal quality of alertness to danger at all times.

"Oh, that McCauley was a drunkard, you know," said the old lady, "and he was always out 'til all hours of the night, drinking, you know. And then he used to see that dreadful woman. He wasn't the kind of man for Christy at all."

Bart spoke. "Mother, do you realize this man wants material for a book?"

"A book about Christy?" The old lady's face lit. "Well, somebody should put in a book how sweet and pretty she was and what that awful man did to her." The old lady was waxing garrulous. "I remember all about it and, if he wants to know, I am the one to tell him. Not another one of you was here."

"I wish you would tell me," Johnny dared murmur.

Blanche said, in a kind of moan, "Bart, please don't let her . . ."

"Let me?" The old lady bristled. "Christy was *my* granddaughter. Not another one of you is related to her. You come over here. What's your name, young man?"

Dick Bartee said mildly, "He's going to get all this somewhere, Blanche. Let Grandma have the fun." He put his arm around Nan where they sat, side by side, and seemed to work himself more comfortably into the upholstery. Nan looked into his face with trust and pleasure.

Johnny moved to another chair.

The old lady began to talk. The past was far more vivid to her than the present. She was enjoying this. "Christy was a dear, dear girl, you see, and we all loved her. But when that man came, he was so surly about everything. He behaved so badly. Well, we had gone to bed, you see, and I woke. I could hear them quarreling. Downstairs. Christy and Clinton. I could hear him growling and muttering. I woke my husband. By the time he was fully awake the voices had stopped. But I made him get up. Bart had a gun and he took that . . ."

"Why?" said Johnny.

"Why? Why, because there were people quarreling."

"A man and his wife?"

"It was the middle of the night," she said. "And Bart was quite right to take the gun. You'll see. He went down and there she was. That McCauley—Clinton was his name—I never liked him. He had hit her with a big heavy candlestick. Oh, it was wicked! And he was drunk. He had opened the safe. He had stolen her pretty pin. He was a wicked man!"

"The pins had been yours, ma'am?" asked Johnny.

"Yes, Francis gave them to me before we were married and that was surely a long time ago. I haven't thought of Frank—"

"Your first husband?"

"Yes. He was my first husband."

"And you gave the other pin to your stepson Nathaniel?"

"To Josephine. Nathaniel didn't realize . . ."

"Realize what, ma'am?"

The old lady's face sagged. Her lids drooped. She seemed to have suddenly gone to sleep.

"What are you trying to do, Sims?" said Bart quietly. "It was all gone into thoroughly at the time. As you should know. You've evidently read up on it. I think you've got what you came for, haven't you? Thanks to my seventy-nine-year-old mother." His voice was cold.

"I'm tired," said the old lady crossly.

"Of course you are," said Blanche and sprang up to the handles of the chair.

Nathaniel didn't realize," Johnny said, rising, "but you . . . ?"

"I understood," the old lady said, opening her eyes. "You come see me again, young man."

"I will."

Blanche's eyes said to him hostilely, *No, you won't.*

"Realize?" said Bart, after they had gone. "What was that?"

Johnny answered honestly, "I don't know."

"Tricks?"

The room was silent. Nan's eyes were round. "Years ago," said Dick to her comfortingly.

"But, really?" Nan said. "Killed in this house?"

"Poor Christy McCauley," Dick said. "I barely remember her."

Bart rose. "I don't like puzzles and tricks. I don't think you can expect any more, Sims."

Johnny rose also. "No, not here, sir."

"You are going to poke around this town?" Bart's voice was light, yet hostile.

"Yes, sir."

Dick had risen too. Nan said nervously, "Johnny, do you have to do this? If—if Bart doesn't want you to . . . and Blanche doesn't . . . ?"

Johnny said, "It's my job."

"But, I told them you were a friend."

"I'm that, too," Johnny said with a grin. "I understand," he said to Bart, "better than you think I do. I've done such jobs before."

Bart gave him a crisp nod of dismissal.

"Good-night, Nan."

Nan's lips were pouting disapproval and did not say good-night.

Dick said, in a friendly way, "I'll see you to the door."

So they went together out into the red-floored hall and Dick opened a leaf of the front door. He stepped outside, himself, and Johnny followed.

"Are you really going to stir up this old dust?" Dick asked him.

The light was going and, with the trees so close, the porch was dim.

"A job," said Johnny. "I'm supposed to talk to people, get the local color, atmosphere, all that."

"I suppose you've heard," Dick said, "that there once was a flurry of suspicion that I had killed Christy McCauley? Or haven't you heard that?"

"I've heard that," Johnny said quietly.

"From McCauley himself?"

"No. Grimes told me." Johnny lied. His heart raced. He had almost made the mistake of admitting he'd seen McCauley. This man would then know—or would he?—that Johnny must have found out from McCauley *who Nan was*.

"Going to see McCauley, I suppose?" Dick asked. "Strange to think that he is still alive."

"After I'm through here," Johnny said. (His thoughts raced. Was the man probing?) "I understand he's sick, right now. In the prison hospital," Johnny said carelessly.

The man beside him was looking off into the trees. "Are you thinking," said Dick in a moment, "that Nan ought to know about those suspicions of me?"

"What do you think?" said Johnny stiffly.

There was a little silence. "They wouldn't make an awfully pleasant wedding present," Dick said softly.

"No." Johnny's head jerked up. "I agree with you on that."

"It was all checked into at the time, you know."

"I presumed so," Johnny shrugged.

"But you'll check again?"

"I've already checked, a little. I saw George Rush."

"Really? Old George? How is he?"

"He's fine. He—was out that night."

"I know." Bartee looked away. "Of course, I understand you," he said.

"Understand?" Johnny's reason sank under the flooding of emotion.

"I got your girl, eh?" said Dick. "Well, have a go at it. I don't suppose I can stop you." The man was smiling.

Johnny conquered anger because one shouldn't be angry at what was true. He said, "Did *you* think McCauley was a no-good bum?"

"That was the consensus around here," said Dick. "I was just a kid." Then he added. "You put me in a spot. I don't know what to do."

"To do?"

"About telling Nan." The eyes came back. In the dusk Johnny seemed to feel them resting on him. "I suppose I must."

"Why don't you wait?" said Johnny, feeling sudden dismay. He made himself smile. "I won't tell her, if I don't have to. I can probably make it sound too dull for Grimes."

"It *is* quite dull, as a matter of fact," said Dick Bartee in a moment. He sighed. "Maybe I've got you wrong. Maybe I do you an injustice."

"Injustice?"

"Nan's told me all about you. I've been assuming you—resent me."

"Naturally," said Johnny with his best rueful grin. "I resent you."

The gray eyes smiled back. "Well, good hunting." Dick Bartee held out his hand. "Convince yourself."

Johnny took it. Couldn't stand on niceties. (He could hear Dorothy saying, "What do they matter, if Nan's engaged to a murderer?")

He heard himself say, "Thanks a lot," in a voice that sounded weak and confused. Then Johnny set out in his car, trying to *think*.

The old lady. Maybe Clinton McCauley was an awful man who only dreamed that he was a saint. Maybe Dick Bartee was a killer and a fortune-hunter. Maybe not.

The man had charm. He seemed straightforward. Johnny tried to imagine what he, himself, would say if he were Dick Bartee and innocent. It came out a lot like Dick Bartee.

He drove in and found a room at the first motel he came upon. Responsibility and doubt were hanging heavily upon him.

What was it that Nathaniel Bartee had not realized? What was it Dick Bartee admitted when he said he knew that George Rush had been out? Why was Blanche Bartee so very eager to stop Johnny's inquiries?

How could he, J. Sims, discover the truth about a killing seventeen years old? How objectively could *he* judge? And by what right?

CHAPTER 10

IN THE PARLOR, Bart said, "I wonder why my father took his gun that night. Do you know I never questioned that before?"

"If someone were in the house," began Dorothy.

Bart said, "If my mother woke him to say she heard Christy *and* Clint—The point is, Miss Dorothy, Clinton McCauley *lived* in the house."

"Oh?"

"I'm just ashamed of Johnny," Nan said in a low voice. "I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Bartee."

Dorothy said, "Probably Johnny thinks he can—well, protect everyone."

She faltered and looked up. Bart's smooth face was turned upon her. "Perhaps that's it," he said.

Blanche hustled in. She wore very high heels. Her legs were thin and sinewy, not pretty. "Has he gone?" she asked. "Bart, can't you *stop* this?"

Bart said, "No, I don't think so," not vehemently, but thoughtfully. Blanche, looking troubled, said no more. Dorothy perceived that Bart was the head of this house.

There was dinner. There was the evening. Dorothy was the gay girl guest. Dick was the happy lover. Nan the petted bride-to-be. Nothing was said about murder.

Finally, Dorothy and Nan were alone in the big back bedroom.

"Isn't it heavenly here?" Nan said. "Don't you like them?"

"Very nice." Dorothy began to whack light into her hair with the stiff brush.

"I'm glad you came. But I wish to goodness Johnny hadn't talked the way he did."

"A job," murmured Dorothy.

"I don't believe it," Nan cried suddenly. "I suppose he thinks I shouldn't be in a house where they once had a murder. As if it had anything to do with me." She shook her head as if to shake this off. "Isn't old Mrs. Bartee cute, Dotty?" Nan hugged her knees. "Blanche is so nice. Dick's Uncle Bart is just a lamb."

Dorothy whacked with the brush. (But a man who lets his mother persecute his wife, she thought, is no lamb. No use for her to speak flash judgments about the Barteys. Nan was in the dream. These were going to be her people. She had dreamed they would be wonderful and so she saw them, in the dream.)

"What's this about a wedding?" she asked.

"Oh, Blanche just insists we have it here."

"I think a bride should be married in her own place," said Dorothy slowly.

"Oh, now, Dotty, don't be offended. It won't be much of a fuss. Only the family. Very quiet." Nan squirmed. "Dot . . . ?"

"Yes?"

"Couldn't *you* do something about Johnny?"

"Me?"

"Well, you always liked him."

(Johnny's for me? thought Dorothy. Now that you don't want him any more. Now that I don't have to let you have him, because he really was the only beau you had.) Dorothy bent her blonde head, and brushed the back of it violently upwards.

She heard Nan say shyly, dreamily, "Dick and I had our blood tests made this morning."

"This morning!"

"He said we might as well get that out of the way. You have to do it before you can get a marriage license."

"I know," said Dorothy numbly. Then she pushed all her hair back with both hands. "Don't *rush*, hon," she pleaded.

"I'm not," said Nan rebelliously.

"What are you going to wear?" said Dorothy with inspiration. And saw Nan's face change. "That'll take time," pronounced Dorothy grimly.

Lying abed in the dark, Dorothy felt twenty years older than her little cousin. It wasn't fair to be angry with Nan, when Nan hadn't been told what she ought to know. It wasn't kind to break the dream, but it wasn't kind to leave her in it, either. Dorothy did not believe that Dick Bartee had ever killed anyone. But there were other things about him . . .

Next morning, Johnny Sims was talking to a country lawyer named Marshall who had defended Clinton McCauley, seventeen years ago.

"I think I mishandled the business of those pins," the man said. "Grimes is going to write it up, eh? From what point of view?"

"I don't know yet," Johnny said. "McCauley *says* he is innocent."

"Maybe he is," the lawyer sighed. "Maybe he is. At least, I'm convinced that Kate Callahan had one of the pins, all right."

"How come you couldn't make the jury believe that?"

"Because I was a fool."

"How so, sir?" Johnny asked gently. The man before him had a head of hair that was streaked and rusty red and white. The flesh of his face hung in heavy folds. His hands were square, wide palms, short fingers.

"Well," the lawyer leaned back, "Kate Callahan convinced *me* that Nathaniel Bartee had given her a pin. I was surprised. You'd have thought the sight of a woman like Kate Callahan, in full health, would have withered Nathaniel. Well, I thought I was being foxy. I went to the Bartees about Kate's pin."

"Why?"

"Well, I was going to make a kind of deal. I knew the family might fight admitting that Nathaniel had ever been—less than a Bartee ought to be. So I figured that rather than let the story about Nathaniel and Kate get out—when they realized the pin in his pocket was no evidence against McCauley, they'd be for truth and justice. I wanted the family on McCauley's side. I was going to propose that Kate's possession of that pin would not be explained or we could hint at some other explanation. Something like that. And they would stick up for McCauley, which would have mattered. So there I went, mealy-mouthed, doing them a favor. And I ran into a thorn bush."

"How so?"

"Saw Nathaniel first. He froze. Wouldn't even speak. I went to the old man and he took fire. Mad as a hornet. Ready to disown Nathaniel, then and there. But the old lady jumped in. She swore this was a made-up story, to embarrass the Bartees. She said Kate was willing to lie, for the very purpose of making this deal of mine. It was a plot, she said. So old Bartee got his back up. Nobody was going to pressure him. I'd made a bad mistake. Took away surprise. They were all set for the business of the pin. It went smoothly for them. Nathaniel pulled the second pin out of his pocket at the inquest."

Johnny said, "Now, listen to me. If you *believe* this Kate, then tell me how Nathaniel *could* pull a pin out of his pocket? Did *he* take Christy's out of the safe, then?"

"No, no. Nathaniel was covered by a perfect alibi."

"Is that so?" said Johnny wonderingly.

"Right. The gardener, sleeping in the grounds—I forget just how it went, but it was perfect."

"But if Kate's pin was in McCauley's pocket, the one Nathaniel had *must* have come from the safe," cried Johnny.

"How?"

"A good question," sighed the lawyer. "I've wondered myself if the old lady could have picked it off the floor."

"And *framed* McCauley!"

"Protected Nathaniel. She's—autocratic. And Nathaniel was her pet. His father couldn't abide him. But she—she mothered him to pieces. Sometimes I think she cared more for her stepson than she ever did for Bart, Jr., after he got born. A funny thing. Nathaniel was a strange bird. He always was a liar."

"Liar?"

"Scared to death of the old man. So he'd lie. In a way, he had to. The old man would have eaten him alive. The only way a soft-shelled creature like Nathaniel could breathe was to lie."

"So McCauley was framed by a coincidence and some lies?"

"I think somebody lied. But I don't say that McCauley was innocent. I don't know."

"What about the boy? Dick?"

"Oh that," said Marshall. "That was McCauley's sister's theory. Pretty hard to believe such a thing of a fifteen-year-old boy."

"What kind of boy was he?"

"A wild one. Not that all wild kids turn out so bad. I remember I had to forbid my daughter seeing him."

"Why did you do that, sir?"

"Because he was wild. Ran around in a car as he shouldn't have been doing, at his age. Only time I ever did put a parental foot down. But Blanche was good about it."

"Blanchel" Johnny was startled.

"My daughter married Bart, Jr.," the lawyer said. "Didn't you know?"

"No, sir, I didn't."

"Bart, Jr., is O.K., you know." The lawyer drummed his fingers. "I wish Dick had stayed away."

"Why, sir?"

"I don't exactly know."

"Where had he been?"

"After they kicked him out of college—some escapade, I forget what—why, he roamed around the country. In and out of the Navy. All kinds of jobs. He tried some white-collar job on a big liner. Never stuck to anything very long.

Turned up here about a year and a half ago. Made up to the old man. But the old man left him out of his will. Nathaniel's proper share went to the old lady."

"Was Dick disappointed?"

"He took it very well, as far as I know."

"Is he a partner or what?"

"He's a hired hand, as far as I know. If he had money, I'm sure Bart could use it. I understand the old man didn't keep the place up. Bart's got a lot of modernizing to do. But where would Dick get any capital?"

Johnny didn't explain where.

"Bart will pull it out in time. Knows his business."

"You don't think Dick had anything to do with Christy's death?"

"I doubt it," the lawyer said. "I think McCauley's stuck with it. A jury convicted him. You won't overturn that in a hurry." His eyes were tired.

Johnny rose.

"Bart and Dick are coming in this morning. Papers to draw up."

"Thanks and excuse me," said Johnny hastily.

No, he wouldn't overturn anything in a hurry, but he was in a hurry, just the same.

CHAPTER 11

OUT ON THE sidewalk of the dusty little town that strung out along the highway, Johnny stood in thought.

What could he do or find that would mean anything? Doubt did not help. Doubt was seventeen years too late. Yet, it wasn't Johnny's immediate business to convince a jury, but to convince *himself*. Resolve his own doubt. He must go to see this Kate.

Then he saw the green convertible, a dark head in the driver's seat, a blonde head riding beside. Nan pulled up to

the curb; Dorothy said, "What are you up to, Johnny? Come on to Riverside with us. You can buy us lunch."

"I've got a little chore . . ." he began.

"Oh, pooh! You've got to eat your lunch." Dorothy very much wanted him to come along.

Nan said mildly, "We're going to the Mission Inn. It's supposed to be nice. Why don't you come along, Johnny? Move in, Dotty. Let Johnny sit on the outside."

Johnny looked at Dorothy. The blue eyes seemed to say, "I need to talk to you."

"Why don't you two come with me? Take fifteen minutes? Then I'll treat you to a fancy lunch, sky's the limit. A deal?"

"Where are you going?" asked Dorothy.

"To see a woman. Talk a minute."

"About that old murder?" Nan pouted.

"Oh, come on," said Dorothy. "Fifteen minutes can't hurt. More fun lunching with a man."

"We were going shopping," Nan began. But Dorothy was out of the car.

Nan took the keys out of the ignition and slid along the seat. "I'll just tag along behind you two," Nan said, most transparently throwing them together.

Kate's place seemed to have a Mexican clientele. The bar was not doing a lot of business; two dark-skinned men leaned there. Dark eyes inspected the girls.

The place was not elegant. Poverty came here. Poverty felt at home here. Poverty wouldn't notice the holes in the plaster, the stained ceiling.

The dark-haired, dark-eyed man behind the bar, when asked for Miss Callahan, simply shouted where he stood. She peered through a pair of dirty pink curtains at the back. "Yeah?"

"Miss Callahan, may we talk to you?"

"Why not?" she said. "Come on back here, why don't you?"

So they went through the pink curtains and here was a small square back room, a round table, perhaps for cards, a gas-heater, calendar art on the walls. A nest for Kate herself in the corner, consisting of a shapeless easy chair, a basket of magazines, a radio, a manicure set.

"Sit down," said Kate cordially. She was fat. She wore a

rusty black dress and a long string of bright green beads. Her hair was dyed, black as a raven's wing. Her aging face was laden with peach-colored make-up. Her lids were painted blue. But her mouth was a wide curly mouth, and it smiled as if it were used to smiling. The eyes under the blue lids were placid and kind.

"I came to ask you questions about Clinton McCauley?"

"Yeah?"

Johnny gave their names. They all sat down around the table. Kate said, "Will you take something? Go ahead. On me."

The girls declined with thanks. But Johnny said, "A beer? Thank you."

"Sure thing. Hey, Jaimel"

Kate would have a beer to keep him company. She moved the glass on the table. "Clinton McCauley," she said. "That poor guy." Her voice was pleasing. Husky and yet kind. "He never did no murder, you know. He got it, though. He's up at Q."

"I know," said Johnny. "I work for a writer, Miss Callahan. I'm looking for material."

"Well," Kate said, "it's a long time. But I'll tell you what I know about it. I knew Clint pretty well. Family man. Wanted to take care of his family. That Christy, though, that he was married to, *she* don't want to leave a nice cozy spot. She don't mind sponging on the Bartees."

"How did they get *into* the Barte house?" asked Dorothy. "I want to understand."

"Oh, Dot," Nan murmured.

"Well, he went to Spain. Fought in that war," Kate said. "Christy, she didn't hold out long after he was gone. She coulda stayed where he put her. Decent apartment, Clint said, and enough money in the bank to last her, if she'd just go easy. But no, she spent it up and then she moves in with her rich relatives."

"Did you know Christy?" Johnny asked.

"Nope, I never even saw her. I don't get out much." Kate touched her hair. It seemed obvious that she was an indoor plant. "Well," she continued, "after Clint got out of Spain—he's wounded and out—lessee—in 1938, would it be? Well, Clint comes in here a lot. I felt sorry for him. He'd drink a few too many. Listen, who could blame him?" Kate paused.

" 'Course what he ought to have done, he oughta have gone and taken a job and said the—said *she* could fly a kite. But he didn't. Easy to say what he oughta have done."

"Easy, now," Johnny agreed.

"He was just a kid, practically." Kate was tolerant to the bottom of her heart. This was plain. "Well, I guess you want to hear about the night she got killed. He was here, all right, that night. Finally left about 20 of 12 so as he could catch the last bus, see? He woulda got out there around midnight. I don't think he had *time* to kill anybody. That's what I say. Nobody listens to me, though."

Johnny was struck with this. Time to kill? First, to quarrel and to be heard quarreling. Time to wake the old lady.

"You'd swear to the time he left here?"

"I did swear," Kate said. "The bus driver wouldn't swear, though. He left all kinds of leeway."

(All gone into, years go.)

"Anyhow, fat lot of good, me swearing." The wide mouth curled.

Dorothy was listening hard. Nan sat round-eyed, listening in spite of herself.

(Johnny thought, This is good. Let her begin to get the idea McCauley didn't do it. *Her father*.) "Go on," he said aloud.

"Well, so the next day, all I know is what I hear. She gets hit with a big old candlestick, and they catch Clint standing over her body with the thing that hit her in his hand."

Dorothy gasped.

"He says he found it lying on the red carpet in the hall," said Johnny.

"Yeah, I know. But they didn't believe him," Kate sighed. "Well, so they got Clint in jail. I don't go to see him. Didn't think they'd let me in. For all I knew then, he *did* do it. I felt bad, you know. But I couldn't help feeling this Christy brought it on herself."

(Johnny winced. *Her mother*, he thought.)

"Well," Kate continued, "pretty soon, Mr. Marshall, that's Clint's lawyer, he comes around. What about this pin they found in Clint's pocket? O.K. *Now*—" Kate beat upon the table top with the back of her open hand. "I gave him that pin two weeks before. I didn't give it to him to keep, see? But he had it and it was mine. I'd had that pin a million

years. Nathaniel Bartee gave it to me. Of course nobody believed that, either."

Nan said with a fastidious mouth, "Nathaniel Bartee?"

"Who *was* he?" asked Dorothy brightly. Dorothy had her hands clasped under her chin, elbows on the table.

"Dick's father, I believe," said Nan distantly.

"I don't understand about the pin," said Dorothy.

Nan folded her hands and looked cool and detached.

"There were two pins alike," said Johnny rapidly. "Old Mrs. Bartee gave Christy one. Nathaniel's wife, the other. Christy's was in the safe, that evening. The safe was found open, at midnight. Christy's pin was gone. But Nathaniel's pin was in McCauley's pocket."

Dorothy blinked. "You mean they thought this McCauley took the pin out of the safe? Is that it?"

"That's it," said Johnny. "Nobody believed that Miss Callahan, here, ever had one."

"Why didn't they?" asked Dorothy.

"Because Nathaniel Bartee produced a second pin."

"I don't understand . . ."

"Do *you*?" Johnny asked Kate Callahan.

"I expect it was on the floor, in there," said Kate, "and the old lady or, either, Nathaniel, one of them picked it up."

"And lied?" gasped Dorothy. "But why would Miss Callahan *say* she had one, if that wasn't true?"

Kate's mouth curled. "For heaven's sakes, call me Kate, dear."

"But you told about it—the police and all?" Dorothy demanded.

"Sure, I told. Got on the witness chair or whatever they call it. Told the truth." Kate's fat shoulders moved as it to say that truth had no chance in this seamy world. "Them Bartees lied."

Nan said, "Please, Johnny . . ." She looked distressed.

"A minute. Why did they lie, Kate? Were they trying to hurt McCauley?"

"I don't think so," the fat woman said, "I think it was just because the old man would have kicked Nathaniel out of the house for ever being near me." She spoke without resentment. "See, Nathaniel, he was afraid. You take a man who's afraid—" Kate looked sad, paint and all.

"What was he afraid of?"

"His old man. The old lady. The world."

"I thought the old lady—"

"Oh, *she* stuck up for him. But she bossed him," Kate said. "That was the price of it. Nathaniel shoulda had a woman who'd let *him* be the boss. If he hadn't *wanted* to be the boss, Nathaniel would have got along a lot better."

"You are talking about Dick's father?" said Nan in a tight voice.

"That's right," Kate nodded. "I didn't know him long. It was one time the old man went away for about six weeks and Nathaniel was worse off than ever. See, he was left in charge. He had his chance. He found out he just didn't have the guts to be the boss—or the nerve, or what it takes. He wasn't up to it. This hit him. Well, I was younger then. That must be 1930 or '31—a million years ago.

"People come in here. Well, I'm friendly. They like to talk, you know. I guess it helps if you find a place where you say what's on your mind. Anyhow, he gave me that pin, last time I saw him, I think it was. He didn't say it was real jewels. I didn't think anything of it. He wanted to do something nice. There was no harm in that. But when it comes to the trial Nathaniel gets up and lies about it. Well, probably he had to." Kate understood, forgave.

"*Why* should he lie?" said Dorothy fiercely.

"I told you. The old man would have kicked him out."

"Well, then, he should have got out—"

"It would have been rough on him," Kate said.

"Or good for him," said Dorothy angrily.

"Maybe so, dear. But things don't always happen the way they should, I guess." (*Almost never*, Kate's tone implied.) "When I couldn't help poor Clinton McCauley out of that mess, believe me, I felt bad. Still, I think now he would have been miserable, anyhow. With Christy gone. He was too crazy about her. Well, I dunno . . ." Kate seemed to be accepting, digesting, almost bringing herself around to the point of agreeing with an old evil. Then she said, "One person I felt real sorry for, and that's the little baby. Poor little thing. Her mama killed, her papa sent up, and not true either."

"You think," said Johnny quickly, "that Clinton McCauley did not do it?"

"I said so, didn't I? I *know* this much. He never took

any pin out of that safe, see? The one he had in his pocket was mine. That's what I *know*. And if they'd believed me, I don't think they could have put him away."

Dorothy said, with vigor, "If Clinton McCauley didn't kill her, who could have done it?"

Johnny, paralyzed, couldn't speak, couldn't stop an answer. Wasn't sure whether he ought . . .

"Who did kill Christy McCauley?" said Kate. "Well, dear, I got an awful good guess. The crazy kid did it. You know, Nathaniel's kid. Richardson Bartee?"

Chair legs scraped. Nan rose. Her face was white. "You horrible woman!" she said. She got around the table.

Johnny was up and took her shoulders. Nan said furiously, "Let me go." Her eyes were hard and bright. "Now, I see what you're trying to do! Behind Dick's back! I despise you!" She shook away from his touch.

Johnny felt sad. A great empty pit yawned open in the dark of his mind.

Dorothy was up, too. "I'll go with her," Dorothy said, catching his arm as if to hold him back. Johnny, who had not moved, looked down at her. "They had their blood tests made yesterday," she told him. Then Dorothy began to run after Nan.

Johnny followed to the door. Nan was down the block. He saw Dorothy catch up. He stood still. Blood tests! *Yesterday!*

Kate's voice said behind him, "Say, who are they?"

"That's Dick Bartee's fiancée," he told her painfully.

"Yeah? Who's the little dark one?"

"His fiancée," Johnny repeated impatiently.

"The *little* one? Well! I'd have thought he'd go for the snazzy blonde."

Johnny hardly heard. He didn't know whether to go after Nan or not. He decided not. Turning, took Kate's fat forearm in his fingers. "Isn't there anybody who could swear you ever had that pin?" he demanded. "*Anybody?*"

"A million years ago," she said sadly. "Nobody. See, I put it away. It didn't look like much. I never wore it. Wasn't my type of—" Kate grinned, "junk. But it was mine. And I never got it back either," she added. "What are you trying to do, anyhow? You're no writer, my friend."

"I'm trying to find some evidence."

"Listen, there isn't any evidence."

"Tell me this, will you? What makes *you* think the boy did it?"

"I don't know," said Kate.

"You don't know!" Johnny felt despair.

"Them Barteess sure tried to get something on me," Kate said plaintively. "My stuff was searched."

"Searched? What do you mean?"

"Christy was killed the Friday night. Sunday, well, I'm closed, see? In the evening, I go to church." Kate's eyes didn't expect him to believe her. "I sit in the back," she added apologetically, (and Johnny believed her). "Somebody busted in here."

"What for?"

"I don't know," Kate said. "Nothing was taken. But whoever got in that night and looked around, it wasn't Nathaniel, I'll tell you that."

"You think it was Dick Bartee?"

"Who else?" Kate shrugged. "He had the crust, that kid." Johnny, thoroughly puzzled, chewed on his mouth.

"I guess you don't want her to marry him," Kate said. He looked at her and her eyes were kind.

"No," said Johnny hoarsely, "I don't want her to marry him."

"Can't blame you," she soothed. "It's a shame. But you can't find no evidence, especially now. See, Clint's sister, she tried. Every way in the world, she tried. And that was seventeen years ago. So see, there ain't a lot you can do. With the time gone by and all. You don't want to blame yourself."

Johnny could feel the steam leaking out of him.

"She's crazy about this Dick, eh? Well, she wouldn't listen. Look, for her, it is right to get mad like she did just now. You can see that." (Understand, Kate soothed. Just understand). "Come on back, have another beer. Listen, people bring things on themselves. Sometimes you just got to let them go."

Johnny knew a sinking, softening feeling. Temptation. Sit in the back room; let it go. Give up and be comforted. You've done all you could. This was Kate's charm, he realized. Kate was on the side of the weak. Kate would sit with him in a sad and seamy world and comfort helplessly.

ness. McCauley's frustration. Nathaniel's. *Not mine*, he thought grimly.

He said crisply, "Do you know any of the servants at the Bartee place?"

"No. No, dear."

"Anybody who worked there seventeen years ago?"

"Aw, no," Kate soothed.

Johnny whirled around. He said to the men at the bar, "Any of you know anybody who worked for the Barteys seventeen years ago?"

"No," they said. "No," and shifted weight.

Johnny stood thinking.

One man said suddenly, "My uncle's best friend, I used to hear him say he seen the kid's car on the upper road that night."

"The night of the murder? Where is the upper road?"

Both men told him with gestures.

"Where can I find this man? What's his name?"

"Name was Ruiz. He moved away. He's not around any more. We don't know where he went," they said.

CHAPTER 12

NAN DROVE FAST. Wind whipped their hair.

Dorothy said, "Aren't we going to Riverside?"

"We are not."

"Calm down, hon."

"You *listened* to that horrible creature!"

"If Clinton McCauley didn't kill his wife," began Dorothy mildly.

"I don't care who killed his wife!" cried Nan. "*Dick didn't!*"

"Good idea to be sure," said Dorothy cheerfully.

"You can stop talking like that," Nan said, "Or you can get out of this car. And go home."

Dorothy looked at her white profile.

"I'm going right straight to Dick and tell him what that sickening woman is saying," Nan cried.

"Good idea," said Dorothy gently.

Nan roared up the Bartee's private road and into the half-circle among the trees. Brakes screamed. Nan tumbled out.

Dick Bartee popped out of the front door. "What's the matter?" Nan raced up the wooden steps into his arms. "Now, hush." He held her and stroked her hair, and looked at Dorothy.

As Dorothy came slowly up, Blanche came out of the house. "What is it?" Blanche asked nervously.

Nan was sobbing. "Johnny and some horrible woman—saying you killed Christy."

"I knew this would happen," said Dick with a heavy sigh, "I wanted to tell you last night but your boy friend talked me out of it. Love, love, this is an old story." He held her a little away smiling down.

"You—you knew about it?"

"Of course, I knew about it. People on McCauley's side, fighting to save him. Love, this was said about me, tested and settled, years ago."

"Oh," said Nan weakly.

Blanche said tensely, "We just must forget the whole thing."

But Dorothy said, "If there's a man in prison who says he didn't do it . . ."

"All men in prison say they didn't do it," snapped Blanche. "But he *did*. For heaven's sakes, come inside."

They went in as far as the hall.

Dick still held Nan in his arms. "I asked John Sims, last night, if he had heard this story about me. He said he had. I wish I'd done what I wanted to do. Told you about it. Don't be upset, love."

Nan wept, and it seemed as if she wept for herself, now. Dick, over her head, smiled at Dorothy.

"They proved you didn't do it, eh?" asked Dorothy brightly.

Blanche said stiffly, "Clinton McCauley did it. Will you please—"

"There must have been a to-do about you, though," said Dorothy to Dick. "Aunt Emily had heard this story."

Nan half turned; Dick shifted her within his arms. His gray eyes rested on Dorothy's face.

Dorothy said boldly, "Johnny did go to the hospital, the night he was called."

Nan took her head from Dick's breast.

"What did Aunt Emily tell him?" Dick asked in a cool, light voice.

"Why, I suppose she remembered from the newspapers. She certainly knew your name had been connected with a murder. That's why she flew home. She really didn't like the idea of Nan marrying a murder suspect." Dorothy smiled. "You can't exactly blame her."

He didn't move. He just looked at her.

"Why didn't Johnny say so!" Nan stormed. "Why is Johnny acting the way he is! I despise it!"

"Johnny got this job," said Dorothy, "to—well, naturally, since it isn't Dick who went to jail, I mean, Johnny isn't saying Dick is *guilty*—"

"Damned white of him," Dick said dryly.

"It was," said Dorothy staunchly, "white of him to try and see how much there was to the story before he spilled it out and upset Nan."

Nan wept.

Dick said, "Don't cry, love." He looked at Dorothy. "Somebody upset her. It wasn't I."

Blanche made an abrupt gesture. "The Callahan woman—completely bad. A liar. You can't believe a thing she'd say. You shouldn't have been taken anywhere *near* her." Blanche was furious.

"Now, Blanche," said Dick soothingly, "no harm." He kissed Nan's hair. "I only wish I'd saved you the shock." Then he said to Dorothy, in that cool light voice, "What did Aunt Emily say to Sims in the hospital?"

"I told you," said Dorothy shortly. "Aunt Emily loved Nan. Didn't want her hurt. And Johnny feels the same."

"Does he, though?" said Dick, with a suggestion of a smile. (Nan raised her head.) "I think he wouldn't mind getting rid of me, if he could. Don't blame him too much, love. Fact, he admitted as much last night. I told him to go ahead and have a try."

Nan's eyes began to shine. "Oh, Dick!" she said.

"I'm going to change," he said, "and take you girls to

lunch. Wash your face, sweetheart. I have a thought, Blanche. Ask John Sims to come to dinner."

"No," said Blanche flatly.

"What's this?" Bart Bartee had come into the wide hall from the back of the house. "We're due in the village, Dick. We're late."

"It's Sims checking whether *I* killed Christy," said Dick easily.

"Why do you want to ask him to dinner?" Bart said.

"Look," said Dick, "the poor guy's in love with my girl. So he's all over town. Better *we* talk to him."

Blanche said, "Please, Bart, I don't like this. Stop this Sims. Tell him to go away."

"I can't do that, Blanche," Bart said almost absentmindedly.

"Of course not," joined Dick. "But I agree with Blanche that it's nothing to like—all over town. Best we talk to him ourselves. Tell him everything we know and straighten him out."

Blanche stared at him.

Nan said primly, "If I could only make Johnny realize that I am going to marry you."

Dorothy felt an impulse to hit her.

Dick laughed. "He'll catch on." He started Nan toward the stairs.

"What about our appointment?" Bart said.

"Another day. You don't mind?" Dick kept walking.

Bart twitched his shoulders. A sardonic expression crossed his smooth face. Blanche's hands were twisting. Blanche's eyes seemed sunk deep into her head.

"Bart, he cannot come to dinner! I won't call him!"

"I think it's not a bad idea." Bart's voice was quiet. "I'll call him."

Blanche winced as if he had whipped her. "No, I will—" she murmured. She turned to go.

Bart said, "You're not upset, Miss Dorothy?"

Dorothy said slowly, "No, although I am beginning to think that Clinton McCauley may be innocent."

"Are you?" said Bart with interest.

"He was guilty!" cried Blanche. "Everyone knows! And anyway, it was seventeen years ago."

"I don't see," said Dorothy, "what difference the years make."

"Neither do I," said Bart.

Blanche put her head down and hurried away.

Johnny Sims got back to his motel about five P.M. His legs were weary. He had been everywhere in the town of Hestia. Hunting for the bus driver. Gone. Trying to find out where the uncle's best friend, one Ruiz, was now. Nobody knew. Looking for Bartee servants. Somebody said the Bartees' old yardman now lived in a little crossroads settlement about eight miles to the south. This was all he had gleaned. Almost nothing. He had run into more doubt.

Society, he reflected, punishes a man. The climate is against him. But after seventeen years, the climate has changed. Society wonders. Only evidence can stand up. Evidence is that which remains. In this case, there had not been enough, either way.

He kicked off his shoes, and sat down by the phone. Called San Francisco. Copeland. Reported.

"She knows, at least, that rumor was Dick Bartee did it," Johnny finished forlornly.

"How did she react?" the lawyer asked.

"She was angry."

"McCauley's still in the hospital," the lawyer said gloomily.

"No better?"

"Not much. What's your opinion now on Dick Bartee?"

"I'm getting the feeling he did it," said Johnny and exploded, "I've absolutely got to have more than just a feeling . . ." (He didn't trust his feelings.)

"You tell Nan the rest of it," Copeland said severely. "Or I will. Have you talked to Grimes?"

"Not today."

"You talk to him yourself," said Copeland, "and tell that girl the whole business. Quick."

"You're right," said Johnny. "I'll tell her. No later than tomorrow."

Johnny hung up, called Roderick Grimes.

Grimes was annoyed by Kate's story about housebreaking.

"No sense to it," he fumed. "If Dick Bartee killed Christy, then Dick Bartee got Christy's pin then and there out of the safe."

"Supplied Nathaniel with it?"

"Right. So why the housebreaking? What would he or anybody else be looking for in Kate's house?"

"Nothing taken."

"And that's helpful," Grimes snapped. "Well, I'll ponder it. Blood tests, eh? You watch the timing, lad. Looks like he'll rush the wedding. You don't want to prove he did it, *afterwards*."

"Prove—" Johnny sent a groan the five-hundred-odd miles.

"You been shot at or anything?" Grimes asked curiously.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"You think a killer won't kill twice?"

"In my case, he doesn't need to bother," said Johnny savagely. "I'm not getting anywhere."

Grimes was silent.

"Copeland said to call you," Johnny remembered. "What's up? Any ideas?"

"A few," Grimes said. "By the way, do you own a hat?"

"A what!"

"Hat, I said."

"I don't wear a hat," said Johnny. "What's that got to do with . . . ?" He was in a state of sputtering frustration.

"I brood," said Grimes. "I brood, you know. I got an idea."

"What?" barked Johnny.

Grimes said, after hesitating, "For a title."

"Title!"

"Yep. Pretty tricky. 'A Life for Two Pins.' How's that?"

"Just ducky," said Johnny bitterly and slammed down the phone.

Grimes in his armchair with his fiction-oriented mind! Johnny felt lonely and futile. Maybe he ought to take Kate Callahan's advice. Let people go. Nan was in love and that was her fate, her folly, or her privilege, and there wouldn't ever be a way to prove that Dick Bartee had killed poor Christy. If he had. Too long ago. Too many people dead, or gone. If Nan did marry Dick Bartee, McCauley would just have to bear it. Well? He was a saint, wasn't he?

Johnny Sims would have to bear it, too.

In San Francisco, Copeland was saying on the telephone

to Roderick Grimes, "You didn't tell him, then? Well, it's hopeless, anyhow."

"Who says it's hopeless?" Grimes protested. "Sims doesn't wear a hat. I didn't think so."

"Evidence," said Copeland. "What are you going to take to court? Six flower petals?"

"You are confused," said Grimes cosily, "between evidence and clue. Six petals of ceanothus, caught in the trunk seam of a rented car—that is a clue. Who said it was evidence?"

Copeland groaned.

"Let me outline it for you," Grimes continued. "I sit and think. Occurs to me, a killer will kill again. I note that Dick Bartee was here, in this city, the night that Emily Padgett died. With—if he *is* the ring-tailed doozer we suspect—a fine fat motive to get rid of *her*. So, I query the good doctor. He turns out to be uneasy about that heart. Also, a patient of his across the court from Padgett's room saw a man in there. Doc thinks it was Johnny Sims. Man wore a hat, however. Did not take it off. Discourteous, you see? Sims has good manners, as we know."

"That's evidence?" said Copeland bitterly.

"That's a clue," said Grimes. "Who was the man with a hat on? Tripped the blinds, he did. Well, I go poke around the airport on hypothesis. Very scientific. Bartee got off a plane close to seven that night, rented a car. Returned it on the Monday. Tuesday, I get there, and the car is in. Six flower petals in the trunk seam. Ceanothus. Even I can recognize. What else is blue?"

"You couldn't count the ceanothus in California," the lawyer said. "It's second name is California lilac."

"Something blue, see?" Grimes went right on, "and tall enough to shed on the trunk of a car. I went—personally, mind you—to snoop around that hospital. Looking for a ceanothus in bloom, along the curb. Sure enough, there was one."

"I can see the jury."

"I can, too," said Grimes cheerfully, "when we produce this old chap, walking his dog last Friday night, who gets amused when the three letters on a license plate spell a word. He gives us the same three letters on that rented car, under the ceanothus bush. Coincidence? Yahl!"

"Not proof."

"Sometimes the human mind will jump the proof and reckon up the probability. Just as humans did when McCauley was convicted. You don't think this human world goes by logic, do you?"

The lawyer was silenced.

"Now, Grimes went on, "we've got Bartee's car near the hospital."

"He wouldn't know that Emily was there."

"I don't care about that," said Grimes blithely. "If we can put him there, then we know that he knew. We'll find out *how* he knew some other time. You absolutely cannot prove that a man *doesn't* know something. So don't worry about it. Now, for the leg-work. I've stirred up the police. Their legs are legion. Checking every patient in that wing. Who visited?"

"Take weeks," groaned Copeland.

"I don't think so. Two rooms to worry about."

"Two rooms?"

"Padgett's room was second from the end of the wing. Nobody in the end room on her side. So, the two rooms on the opposite side of the corridor, between her and the door. Bartee wouldn't walk through the hospital."

"Listen," said Copeland, "I am willing to suspect . . . But even if he knew which hospital, how could he know which room?"

"I'll tell you," said Grimes. "What about the florist who called and asked if Emily Padgett was in there and if so *in which room?* And what about nurses who say, 'No flowers for Padgett,' ever?"

"Somebody goofed," said Copeland feebly.

"You don't believe that," said Grimes. "You're just as human as I am. We both know Bartee killed Emily Padgett."

"If he did . . ." Copeland raved.

"The rest is leg-work. Find some witnesses. If any visitor saw him and can identify. Let's short-cut this thing. You take room 409. I'll take 411. Believe me, they are the ones that count."

"Why didn't you tell John Sims?" asked the lawyer.

"Because," said Grimes, "better he get nowhere. Bartee must be pretty confident that nobody will ever prove he killed a woman seventeen years ago. But if he killed a woman

last Friday night, that's different. Sims knew the Padgett woman well. He couldn't hide that suspicion. Bartee could get nervous. And a killer may as well kill three times as twice."

"Poor Emily," mourned Copeland. "Poor Nan. Poor little Nan."

"Everybody's going to be safer," said Grimes, "if we assume this Dick Bartee is mighty dangerous."

The phone rang in Johnny's room in the motel. Blanche Bartee seemed to be inviting him to dinner.

"I'd like very much to come, Mrs. Bartee," Johnny's manners concealed his astonishment. "Thank you."

"Seven o'clock, Mr. Sims?" Blanche said in a hostess' voice, with no human warmth in it.

He agreed, hung up, breathed deeply in.

Maybe Nan needed him! He could see a vision of her in his mind. Nan subdued, shrunk back into her shy shell, forlorn, lost, wondering, feeling the doubt. The Bartees would be concerned about her. They would ask him to come to the house and they would want things clarified. They would want to know what Johnny had done to her.

Poor little Nan.

CHAPTER 13

THE DINING ROOM, which lay back of the long parlor, was red and white. There was a red carpet and red damask hangings at the several long windows. The walls were white. The chandelier was crystal. At the oval table, Johnny sat on the left of his hostess, who, in white with peals, was discoursing on the subject of the climate here.

To his left sat the old lady, in black, attacking with greed and relish her cake.

Bart, at the head of the table, bent to Dorothy on his left.

Dorothy wore a soft apricot-colored dress and had her blonde hair swept high.

Nan (poor little Nan!) was wearing red. A red velvet band held her dark hair back from her sparkling face. Bonds, spun in the air, but almost visible, held Nan hugged close, allied in loving faith, to Dick Bartee, who sat between the two pretty girls, being charming.

In the parlor, before dinner, under the shock of finding his vision of Nan to have been about as inaccurate as it could be, Johnny had rallied. Well, then? Here he was. What was to be accomplished?

The old lady had not been in the parlor and he had been afraid she would not appear. For, he reflected, the old lady liked him. Maybe he could try again with her. Glean all he could before the politeness and the charm broke open and he was told why he had been asked. Or asked what he had been told. Or told to stop asking.

Now the old lady was here. But Blanche did the talking.

Bart was telling Dorothy something about the process of turning grapes to wine, as was done in a complex of buildings about two miles from the house.

"Some of our mechanical equipment is pretty old," he said. "We are going to have to replace it."

Nan said brightly, "Dick and I are going to replace it. We want to, don't we, Dick?" We. We—showing Johnny for the hundredth time that she was part of this family, belonged here, was gone from Johnny's reach.

Dick said, "Right. I seem to be marrying a peck of money. We could do the whole thing at one whack. Grandma is going to sell us her interest, cheap. Aren't you, Grandma?"

The old lady sucked coffee. "It would have gone to your papa," she said. "I'll give it to you."

"I never did see," said Dick, "why a wife shouldn't put her money into her husband's business."

He didn't send this as a question to Johnny directly. But Johnny answered.

"I don't either," he said amiably. "That is, of course, if the business has been impartially analyzed by some reliable party. As an investment." Johnny smiled.

Johnny had charm, if that was what was wanted.

"Naturally," Dick said. "And of course, the investment safeguarded with the usual rights."

"Of course," Bart said somewhat dryly.

But Johnny saw a look of desolation cross his face.

He turned to Blanche, "Before I forget," he said suddenly, "could you and would you tell me, Mrs. Bartee, the names of the servants here seventeen years ago?"

Blanche brought her wits slowly to his question. She said, "I can't tell you. I wasn't living here, then."

"Mr. Bartee?" Johnny leaned to ask his host.

"I was stationed East at that time," said Bart, "in the army." His reply was mild, unresentful.

So Johnny looked into the gray eyes across the table. "Dick?" he said easily.

"I doubt if I can remember," Dick said. "They came and went."

So Johnny turned upon the old lady. "Then you are the one to ask, I guess," he smiled. "You'll tell me, won't you?"

"Tell you what?" She was munching the last bite. For the first time in all the dinner time, she looked at him.

"The names of your servants, seventeen years ago?"

Nothing seemed to occur to the old lady. Her face was blank. Bart said gently, "Mother forgets. Perhaps there are some records in my father's papers. Is there anything else?"

The tone of the question betrayed no sarcasm. But Johnny wasn't sure it held none. He thought, *O.K. I'll be charming.*

So he leaned back and he said pleasantly, "I'm sorry to talk my shop. But I wonder whether you understand. My job, you see, is to pick up descriptive bits, atmosphere, trifles that make a story more vivid and interesting. And it is a story. None of you, I suppose are, in any sense, writers? If you were, you'd understand. The sort of thing that Grimes turns out, you know, is closely allied to fiction. I am a picker-up of color."

"The servants could give you color?" asked Dick.

"I would think so. Perhaps you don't realize," said Johnny, "what an unusual old house this is, for instance. Or how romantic your very business sounds to the ordinary reader. Or what a glamorous figure the old gentleman must have been."

They were listening. One pair of eyes disapproved of his blarney. Dorothy Padgett's blue eyes.

But Johnny went on, "Or how interesting a character you still are, Mrs. Bartee."

The old lady bridled. "I've had a life," she said. "I sit in the corner, nowadays. But I've had a life."

"I would think so," purred Johnny.

"Two husbands. Dead now. My daughter Nelly, dead. Nathaniel—all gone. Christy, too."

"Christy," said Johnny softly, "dead the way she died. The murder of a beautiful young woman in such a house as this. I wish I could make you see how fascinating . . ."

"You're not likely to do that," said Bart dryly.

"I don't think we should talk your shop any more, Mr. Sims," said Blanche. "Can't we discuss more cheerful . . . ?"

The old lady said, "Bart gone. Nathaniel, too."

Bart, Jr., said to his wife, "On the contrary, my dear." (She looked white.) Bart turned courteously. "Mr. Sims, you were asked tonight so that we could talk your shop, as you put it. We are interested in your project to the extent that we would like to put you straight. Isn't that what you said, Dick?"

"Right," said Dick smiling.

"I wish for nothing better," said Johnny promptly.

"Then, tell me," said Dick easily, "do you conclude that, in my youth, I killed Christy?"

"Clinton McCauley killed Christy," the old lady said promptly.

"To whom had you spoken, Sims?" asked Bart, ignoring his mother, "besides Kate Callahan?"

"I had a very nice chat with your father, Mrs. Bartee," said Johnny to Blanche.

"How is Dad?"

"I stumble on things," said Johnny. "Forgive me. But you and Dick used to date?"

"Once or twice," she said. Her eyes were not focused on anything.

"I never stumbled on that," said Bart Bartee mildly.

Nan sat still and looked at the dishes. The disapproval had gone from Dorothy's eyes. They were alert.

"That's right, we did date once or twice," said Dick.

"A million years ago?" said Johnny genially. "As Miss Callahan would say. Fact is, this roommate of yours, Dick, told me you dated practically everybody."

"Roommate? Oh, yes. Old George. That's a trifle, all right." Dick laughed.

"He got out nights from that school," said Johnny. "Fact, he was out that night. As you said you knew."

Blanche leaned back and hit the chairback with a thump.

Bart said, "Mr. Sims, you want to make out that McCauley is innocent?"

"I believe that McCauley is innocent," said Johnny.

Dick spoke. "Too bad that so many people are dead and gone and can't be talked to. You think McCauley is innocent? But you didn't answer my question. Am I guilty?"

Bart said, "Dick's alibi won't hold? What about that, Dick?"

"Ah, well," sighed Dick, "George didn't want to admit being out. No more did I."

Nan looked as if she didn't know what anyone was talking about.

Bart said sharply, "Where were you, then?"

Dick said, "We were young. It mattered, we thought. Nobody wanted to be expelled from school or get into trouble with our elders." He looked at Blanche who had no color supporting her make-up. "Fact is, I had a better alibi."

"I asked you not to rake this up," said Blanche to her husband in a flat voice. "But you wouldn't stop. Dick was with me that night, while Christy was being killed."

"Where?" Bart said icily.

"At my house."

"Midnight?" Husband and wife spoke down the table's length.

"Yes. He threw sand at my window and I went downstairs. We talked on the side porch. He wanted me to sneak out and go dancing. It was too late, I told him. It was midnight."

Dick sighed. "A crazy kid. Old George got out and I . . . Well, seemed to be a point of pride there. Bartee wasn't going to stay in like a good little boy, if the likes of George Rush had gone out."

This rang perfectly true to Johnny's ear.

"But I'd made no plans, no date." Dick shrugged. "Well, I tried to talk Blanche into a date. And no luck." He smiled at her.

"Why didn't all this come out at the time?" Bart spoke

to his wife alone. "A murder case! Your own father was counsel for the defense."

"Dad had forbidden me to see Dick any more," Blanche said. "I'd promised. Dad was in bed and the house dark—and I took care not to wake him." She looked angry. "The school gave Dick an alibi. Why should I?"

"Not to tell the whole truth," said Bart coldly, "is the same as lying."

Blanche winced. The old lady was eyeing her. Johnny turned suddenly upon the old lady. "Did *you* pick the pin off the floor of the study and give it to Nathaniel?" he said boldly.

Bart's eyes flashed anger.

But the old lady answered quickly, pulling in her chin, "Of course not. That woman had it."

"What woman? Kate Callahan?" Bart stared at his mother. "You *knew* that, Mother? But you swore . . ."

"Nathaniel didn't realize it was an heirloom," said the old lady. "I understood. I wasn't angry. I simply told him he had better get it back before his father found out. His father never understood Nathaniel. Nathaniel is gone," she added.

"Got it back!" Bart's voice was edgy. "How and when did Nathaniel get the pin *back*?"

Blanche said, "Oh, we got it back for him. Dick and I." Her face was bitter. "We broke the law. I've been afraid of that old foolishness for too long. I may as well stop 'lying' altogether."

The old lady giggled.

"You broke into Kate's?" said Johnny alertly.

"I have always known," said Blanche drearily, "that Dick could never have done that thing, because he was with me. And I have always known that McCauley *did* do it. Because he was lying about the pin. I could have proved it. I asked you not to rake this up."

"Will you prove it, now, please?" asked Johnny.

"Why, the pin wasn't in McCauley's pocket. It was in Kate Callahan's dresser drawer."

"My father," said Dick, "wasn't made of the stuff for intrigue. He was in a panic. Grandfather would have been rough on him. He begged me. Well, at the time, it was quite a challenge. Nothing loathe, Blanche and I did a

spot of burglary. In a good cause." He was smiling. "Crazy kids."

"You found that pin in Kate Callahan's room *after* the killing?" Johnny was brisk. "On the *Sunday* night?"

Dick's eyes shifted to his face. Dick said softly, "Yes, the Sunday night. You do get around."

"I found it," Blanche said.

"Took it?"

"Of course," said Dick. "Saved my father's life, you might say." Now, he sounded amused.

Bart said, "Blanche, you let *your* father go to court to defend this man, while you had this kind of knowledge secretly?"

"I was young," she stammered. "I'd disobeyed to go with Dick at all. And what we did was illegal. And anyhow I had gone away to school before the trial. I wasn't here." She raised her head. "And what difference would it have made?" she cried. "It simply proved that Kate Callahan was lying. That McCauley *had* taken Christy's pin. Everything I knew only proved what the jury believed, anyhow."

"You weren't the jury," said Dorothy Padgett intensely. "You weren't the judge . . ."

"Kids," said Dick sighing. "Kids don't snitch on each other. We had an adventure. And of course, it was for my father."

Nan said, "He did it for his father's sake . . ."

Johnny felt the hole in his mind, the sinking again.

"Foolish," said Dick. "Oh, well, at least everything is clear, now. Not so?"

Johnny said, "Clear?"

Dorothy said, "Lies and secrets and the poor man in prison . . ."

Blanche said to her pityingly, "But he did the killing, Dorothy. There was no injustice."

Bart said, "You come with me, Sims." He rose.

"Bart?" Blanche's voice trembled after him, but her husband did not stop or turn.

Johnny followed him into the wide hall, past the stairs, into the study. Johnny's thoughts whirled.

In the dark, he was thinking. A young girl, sneaking downstairs in a dark house. A young girl, breaking and entering, excited—thrilled as they say—in a strange room

and surely almost in the dark. Whatever Blanche thought she knew, Johnny did not *know* it. Did not know it, at all!

The square study was dark, Bart turned up a light.

He began to rummage in a low drawer under one of the glass-doored bookcases. "I've kept a lot of stuff," he muttered. He pulled out manila folders. He rose from the squatting position. "The servants' names, maybe."

"It was so long ago," said Johnny slowly. "I didn't know the people."

"Neither did I, it seems," snapped Bart.

"Tell me about Nathaniel," Johnny said. "An artist, was he?"

"He used to paint," Bart said dryly.

"I don't know what to think," said Johnny rubbing his head. "Do you?"

Bart stood still. "No, I don't. My mother was fantastically devoted to Nathaniel. He took shelter in her, and that flattered her, I suppose. Whereas I struck away on my own. But I am the son who takes care of her, as my father did." Johnny suddenly saw this to be a tenet of his pride.

Bart had paused. Then he said, "Nathaniel was a liar. He lied when he claimed he'd had nothing to do with Kate Callahan. My mother *knew* that much. But he got my mother to cover for him—and lie." Bart's mouth was a little bitter. "He got his son to cover for him—and steal. I am as anxious as you are to get to the bottom of this, now." Then he was blunt. "You *want* to think Dick had done it?"

Johnny said, "What I want is outside this matter, I hope. Did Dick get your wife to cover for him, too?"

Bart said, "In the dark?"

"Who told her what time it was?" Johnny said gently.

Nervously, Bart opened a folder. "What about this money?" He raised his head. "Dick claims not to have known that Nan was any kind of an heiress. But did he know?"

"He may have," said Johnny cautiously. "I've thought of that, too."

"The reason I ask—" Bart said. "Has it ever struck you that Dick is attracted to Miss Dorothy?"

"No," said Johnny with shock.

"Watch him," said Bart grimly. "She is a beautiful girl and a most magnetic one. A plum, that Dorothy! Why is a man like Dick attracted to the littler one? Littler, in every sense."

Johnny said stiffly, "Nan was always shy."

"I'd like you to understand about the business," Bart said, verraing. "There are replacements to be made. We need bottling machines, crushers, tractors. I'm into the bank already. Now my mother will give her interests to Dick. I have no right to stop her. They amount to a small percentage. Now, if Dick produces a hunk of capital immediately, I ought to take his money, count him a full partner. My mother expects it." Bart's face was hard. "I have been in this business for years. Dick has been what they call 'around.' He's done the so-called adventuresome stuff. He is tough, you'd think?"

Johnny murmured, "Hadn't thought . . ."

"Dick is the weak one," Bart said. "He never, in his life, stuck to a thing and pulled it through. I am the stronger man."

"I believe you," said Johnny softly.

Bart turned his eyes. "I am committed, of course," he said. "Now, let's see. Account book. Household. Yes, here's the year."

Johnny copied names in his notebook. Bart had no idea where the cook was nor the upstairs maid or the weekly cleaning woman. The yardman's name was Delevan.

"But would he have been here at night?" asked Johnny.

"As a matter of fact, he was here that night. I know the police heard his testimony. But he was never called."

"What was his testimony?"

"That I don't know."

"How come he was here?"

"Why he—There used to be a hammock slung between two trees in the grove out at the front. It seems when he had worked late, and wanted to be here early the next day, he'd sometimes beg a meal in the kitchen and sleep in the hammock. My father discharged him when this came out. The hammock was supposed to be exclusively for the family." Bart seemed to stand, with the family's pride falling raggedly across his shoulders.

"He was never put on the stand at the trial?"

"No."

"I wonder why not."

"Must be that he saw absolutely nothing," said Bart Bartec.

"Is there any kind of address? Wait . . ." Johnny snapped

his fingers. "I know where *he* is. Somebody told me he lives in some little settlement. Twomey? His testimony alibied Nathaniel!"

"Nathaniel," said Bart contemptuously, "couldn't kill spiders. My mother used to do it for him."

CHAPTER 14

JOHNNY FOLLOWED Bart along the red carpet. In the parlor, Nan was tucked close to Dick on a pale yellow sofa. Dorothy and Blanche were seated apart. The old lady had vanished.

As Bart strode in, Blanche sent him a begging smile. Her thin face, upon which the high-bridged nose seemed so prominent, became pathetic.

"Any luck?" asked Dick.

"Not much," said Johnny, when Bart did not answer. Steam had gone out of Bart. Whatever he had intended to do or say, he now hesitated.

"Well, do you give up?" Dick said impudently.

Dorothy said, as if she could hold this in no longer, "It's just incredible to me! People mustn't *do* that!"

"Do what?" asked Dick alertly.

"Conceal things. Make private judgments about the truth in a—in a public matter. A matter of murder! I'm sorry, but I think it's frightening."

No Bartee spoke. Nan said, "But, Dotty, when Dick's *father* asked for help, Dick wanted to protect him."

"You mustn't protect," cried Dorothy fiercely. "You must have the faith *not* to protect. I think there has been a terrible wrong done somewhere."

Dick said, "Kids, Dotty." His eyes rested on her.

"I *understand*," said Dorothy. "But that doesn't excuse. You can understand all you want to and all you ought to, but that doesn't mean you approve. Or that wrong is not wrong."

"She is right," said Bart firmly. "Too many people didn't tell all they knew. Mother. Nathaniel. You, Dick. Blanche."

"Oh, Bart, please," Blanche began to cry.

Dick said to Johnny with an air of anger suppressed, "Now that you've got Blanche in tears and the whole house unhappy, do you think you have proved McCauley innocent? Or me guilty?"

"No," said Johnny.

Nan raised her lashes. Her brown eyes were somber. "Johnny, you have done enough damage, really you have. Now, that you understand it all, please, will you just stop?" He didn't speak and the eyes began to glisten with tears. "Do you like making me unhappy? The past is past. I thought you . . ."

Johnny looked at her. Doubt was not for Nan. To tell her who she was would make no difference. It would only be unkind.

"I had better go," he said.

His hostess in tears, his host distracted, Dick unanswerable, Nan unhappy. And Christy McCauley dead these seventeen years. Yes, he had better go.

Dorothy went with him to the door. Johnny had nothing for her but a sad shake of his head. No proof. Nothing, in all that had come out, proved McCauley innocent. Must Nan, then, ever know who she was?

Dorothy, of course, did not know who Nan was.

Dorothy said furiously, "There is too darn much that never was told straight. Johnny, what is the meaning of it? Who did kill Christy?"

"How do I know?" said Johnny gloomily. "How can I find out who killed Christy? It was seventeen years ago."

In the parlor, Dick said into Nan's ear, "You are right, love. Past is past. If we were only married, we could go away—go somewhere and just be happy."

"—just be happy," she echoed in a whisper.

"Let's," he breathed. "Those tests should be ready on Friday, at the latest. Maybe even on Thursday. I can put some Bartee pressure on."

"How long must we wait, then?"

"Why, not at all."

"Tomorrow is Thursday."

"Let's not wait at all. Friday?"

"I haven't anything to wear," Nan said foolishly.

"Wear red," he said. "My darling, you look so beautiful in red."

"A bride doesn't wear red, silly!"

"Wear white," he said. "Wear blue."

"Dotty has a white dress. We could turn up the hem."

"Turn up the hem," he whispered, "love, if you love me."

Johnny said to Dorothy, by the door, "Good night, Dotty. Be kind to Nan. She needs somebody—" He went out and the night air was chilly. The fields were dark. *What must I do for Nan's sake*, he kept asking himself. He kept seeing Dorothy's eyes.

In the big back bedroom at the Bartee house, the cousins quarreled that night. Nan did not think Dorothy was kind.

Dorothy began it by another spirited denunciation of people who withheld information for any reason.

"But *Dick* didn't do anything really wrong," flamed Nan. "He just wasn't a tattler. And he helped his father. What's wrong with that? Everybody doesn't have to start telling all about absolutely everything he ever knew, just because somebody gets murdered." Nan was trembling. "Dick had absolutely nothing to do with the killing, no matter what anybody else ever said or did. And we are just tired. We are going to be married as soon as those tests are ready. Any day."

Dorothy said, "Honey, don't . . ."

"Then we are going away. We may get the license tomorrow. So Friday—"

"Oh, no!"

"Yes," said Nan. "Dick is asking Blanche about it. If she doesn't want to go to the trouble—well, then, we'll go to some minister's house, Dick knows about."

Dorothy was in her nightgown. She had begun to pull off her robe. Now she began, without thinking what she was doing, to pull it on again.

Nan said, "Dot, you are going to *be* at my wedding, aren't you?"

"Certainly," Dorothy said without spirit. She felt stunned.

"Dot, Blanche wants it to be here . . ." Nan looked happier now. "Just a quiet ceremony with nobody but fam-

ily—and that wouldn't take much getting up. If she does, could I wear your white silk?"

Dorothy said, "Wait." She sat down and they were knee to knee. "Nan, this is just not very smart. Why can't you wait?"

"I can be married in red," said Nan proudly. "Dick doesn't care. I can certainly wear my blue."

"I'm not talking about clothes. I'm talking about marrying into this family."

"I'm marrying *Dick*," Nan's eyes were dark and stubborn.

"Nan, don't you care that there was a murder?" said Dorothy quietly. "That a young woman was beaten to death in this house?"

"Nothing to do with me," said Nan.

"But, there's all that about Nathaniel. Honey, he had the reputation of being a liar. A coward—"

"He's dead. It's all *past*."

"He's going to make a swell ancestor for your kids," said Dorothy brutally. She got up and began to walk around.

Nan was in tears, but sitting stiffly on the edge of her bed, not succumbing to them.

"And old Mrs. Bartee, their great-grandmother? She's *cute*, all right," Dorothy said. "Judge and jury. Blanche, too."

Nan said, sobbing and choking, "Why are you against me?"

"I'm *for* you," Dorothy said.

"No, you're not. You know I love Dick with all my heart. And he loves me. And we are *going* to be married. So why can't we—"

"But Nan, don't you want to see this straightened out? That poor man in prison all these years . . ."

"But he *did* it!" Nan said. "And he ought to be in prison and I don't see—"

"But if he didn't do it," Dorothy said slowly, "then he's in prison because *somebody in this family lied*."

"You don't know that," sobbed Nan. "There's no reason to believe that. And anyhow, I didn't kill Christy. I didn't put the man in prison. I just want to marry the man I love."

"Honey," Dorothy sat down beside her and put her arm around the tense shoulders. "Just listen a minute, please. Johnny and I do care. And the one we care about the most is you. Now you know that."

Nan's head went down.

"Aunt Emily, too. Remember?" said Dorothy gently. "Honey, you had a wonderful dream. A wonderful man from a wonderful background came out of the blue and you fell in love. You did just exactly that. You fell. You were going to be married and live happily ever after. Now, you are fighting to keep that dream just as it was. But you shouldn't. Really, you shouldn't. There are some strange things about the Bartee family . . ."

"I don't care," sobbed Nan. "There probably are strange things about everybody's family. But people get married, when they're in love."

Dorothy said, "True."

"I think it is too wonderful and *rare*," Nan said. "You just can't believe it."

Dorothy looked stern and sad. "I guess I'll have to tell you something."

"What now?" Nan sighed.

"Dick's awfully interested in your money."

Nan's body stiffened. It wrenched itself from Dorothy's grasp.

"I'm going to tell you," Dorothy continued grimly, "no matter how it sounds, that if it weren't for your money, Dick would have fallen for me."

Nan said in a hushed voice, "You must be out of your mind! You *can't* say such a thing to me!"

"I guess you can't hear it, when I do," said Dorothy sadly.

Nan jumped up, vibrating. "Of all the conceited! Why, he didn't *know* about the money. *I* didn't even know about the money . . . You're just—you're just crazy!"

Dorothy sat on the edge of the bed, looking down at her feet. Now, she began to slip out of her robe.

"Are you *jealous*?" Nan cried. "Of *me*? You've always had all the boy friends. You've always been the popular one. Just because I found Dick! Dotty, please! How can you say a thing like that? You *must* be jealous!"

"I guess so," said Dorothy stolidly.

"But I'm going to marry Dick! I love him! You can't stop that!"

"I guess not," Dorothy said.

She had the robe off. She stepped, then, from Nan's bed

to the edge of her own. She put her knee on the bed. She said, "Good night."

"And Johnny's jealous, too!" Nan raged. "Both of you want to spoil things! Well, you won't—!"

Nan flew into the bathroom, sobbing.

Dorothy lay in the cold sheets' embrace.

In a little while, Nan came out of the bathroom, switched off the light, got into her bed.

Dorothy said into the dark, "You can have my white dress, hon. Or anything else of mine. Except a lie."

CHAPTER 15

JOHNNY SIMS, UNABLE to sleep, ordered himself to think.

Very well. Two jeweled pins. Call one Nathaniel's, because it had been given to Nathaniel's wife and he had it after her death. Call the other one Christy's.

Take Nathaniel's first. Nathaniel gave it to Kate.

Did Johnny believe this? Kate said so. Now, after seventeen years, old Mrs. Bartee also said so. And Dick said so. Blanche said so. Yes, Johnny believed it and had believed it when Kate Callahan first told him. He thought she was too soft, too tolerant and yielding to have told a hard lie and stuck to it for seventeen years.

So Kate had Nathaniel's pin. But this was just exactly what the jury had *not* believed, seventeen years ago.

Did it make any difference to McCauley?

That depended. There were two alternative careers for Nathaniel's pin, after Kate got it. First, it had been loaned to McCauley and was innocently in McCauley's pocket, the night of the murder. If this were the truth, a big hunk of evidence against McCauley disappeaped. A difference was made. Who said this? Kate said it. McCauley said it.

But, second, Nathaniel's pin had been in Kate's drawer that night, (or, at least, two nights later.) Who said this? Dick said it. Blanche said it. If true, McCauley was guilty.

What began to worry Johnny was the thought that Kate could not be sure that it wasn't in her drawer. Even McCauley might not be sure. Suppose McCauley, in his cups that night, having the pin in his pocket, intending to return it, had actually slipped it into Kate's drawer. Suppose he had wiped out the memory, an impression already fogged by alcohol, and built up his martyr role on this forgetting? (He must also have forgotten that he opened the safe, took Christy's pin, quarreled with her, hit her. But all this was psychologically possible.)

So, which alternative career of Nathaniel's pin did Johnny believe?

His mind veered. He tried to imagine the scene between a weak frightened man and his bold rough-and-tough fifteen-year-old son. The man begged the boy to save him from banishment? Or did the bold son offer to go steal back a pin, partly for the hell of it? Whose idea was this housebreaking? Nathaniel was dead and could not say, and was a liar, anyhow.

Johnny could not help wondering whether the bold son was craftier than Nathaniel could have known. To take with him a scared young girl, and involve her in doing what was forbidden, doing what was illegal, and fearfully exciting, and done in the night and in the dark.

Why did Dick take Blanche at all? Johnny started up from the mattress. Unless it were *for the purpose* of fooling her in the dark! So easy to do!

Again, there was a choice of what to believe about this Dick Bartee. Believe a tangle of craft and deceit, deep plotting, improvisation at that, a quick snatching at opportunity. Or, believe something much simpler—just a wild kid who didn't see why a spot of burglary wouldn't be fun, in a good cause.

(Take care, J. Sims, which way your own prejudice and your desire is going to point you.)

He tossed. Try the other pin, then. Christy's pin. It had been in the safe. Agreed. Taken out at the time of the killing. Agreed. By whom?

If by McCauley, then McCauley put it in his pocket where the police found it. Simple. Believable. And believed for seventeen years.

But if by Dick, then Dick not only took it away with him

but had had the incredible nerve to keep it handy. Then, in a day or so, Dick had seen the wonderful opportunity to get rid of it and in so doing, 'prove' his own innocence, with Blanche for witness, and also frame McCauley—in depth and in secret. For protection. The protection of whom? Of Dick Bartee.

Doubt. Johnny could not help doubt. On both sides. What nerveless crust to keep that pin handy!

Johnny didn't know who had killed Christy.

In their big front bedroom, Blanche and Bart were not asleep, either. They faced each other in anger.

"You are a grown man," she said, "and honest. Maybe you can't understand a child who was afraid and wasn't altogether honest. Although it made no difference!"

"If he fooled you—"

"How could he fool me? You are the one he fools," Blanche said, "right now. How is it that you permit your mother to give Dick her bit of stock in the vineyard? How is it you permit Dick to put up Nan's capital and come out with half of your rightful business? Where you've put your life. That's just your pride!" she cried furiously. "Your *mother* would like it."

Bart tightened his lips.

"And you fooled me," she cried with no restraint. "I thought I was going to be your partner. I thought this was going to be my house. I am not your partner but your servant. And this is your mother's house. All right, I understand. I know she is old and it was her house and you didn't want to dethrone her. Because of your pride, Bart. She never preferred you. So you proudly will defer to her. It's coals of fire."

"Be quiet," he ordered.

"I could have waited," Blanche sobbed, beyond obedience. "I *was* waiting. I thought it was generous of me. But now, you've given my share, here, to your mother all these years. If you now give your share to Dick Bartee, Bart, I won't stay—"

"Be quiet," Bart said and it was not a command. "Please, Blanche," he begged her. "I am committed. I can't help it, now! If Sims can ever *prove*—" Bart said. "I must be careful. It's too easy to believe what you'd like to believe."

She was quiet and in a moment he said painfully, "My mother hasn't been generous toward you."

"No," Blanche said.

"Nor have I," he said. "But I want you to stay. This is your house."

Johnny woke late to the ringing of his phone.

Bart Bartee was calling him. He was taking the girls on a tour of the winery this morning. Would Johnny like to join them? For color? For atmosphere?

Johnny sensed something changed in Bart. He accepted.

It was nearly eleven o'clock, before the tour shook itself together and began. Johnny, the two girls and Dick, Bart led to the spot where the wine-making process normally began. (All of them were passive under Bart's guidance as if, by sheer fatigue, hostilities were in abeyance.) The grapes were harvested, Bart explained, in the fall. Trucks brought them in and dumped them upon a water-washed sunken platform, from which they were sluiced into a slot and conveyed to the crushing machine.

The machines were silent now. Bart did not linger here. Johnny received the impression that here was one place where money was needed.

They followed the pipes through which the juice of the grapes would run and came into the building where, in huge uncovered vats, it was left to ferment. They were shown the sumps in the floor, filled with cooling apparatus, used Bart said, to control the fermentation, especially in the making of sweet wines. Johnny learned about the natural yeast on the grape, the killing of it, the substitution of the vintner's own strain.

Bart knew what he was talking about.

Nan was being brightly attentive. This was her future. Dorothy was relishing the sights and smells. It was Dorothy who perceived the nature of this business. "The grapes do it by themselves," she exclaimed.

Bart smiled. "Nature, given conditions that are just so, makes a fine wine," he told them. "If the conditions are not just so, nature makes a fine vinegar. We watch. We test. We try to control. Sometimes we alter the timing. But you are right, Miss Dorothy. The grapes really do it themselves. Now, here is one of our storage or aging cellars."

He led them into a building, not a cellar in any sense of being below the surface of the ground. It was a room filled, packed, with huge redwood tanks that were nothing in the world but mammoth barrels.

Sudden pygmies, Johnny and the girls looked about them. Each tank held something like 20,000 gallons. A tank was made of staves—staves that were almost 3 inches thick. It was hooped with metal hoops. These monsters stood in the dimness they created, haunch to haunch, and all around them rose the acid-tinged smell of the wine.

Bart began to point out the two valves at the bottom of each tank, to explain how the wine was pumped in, pumped out. Portable pumps were used, he said.

In each huge curving side, low down, there was an oval—marked by a seam, a possible crack—to the center of which oval a handle seemed attached. The oval looked to be no more than 14 or 15 inches at its widest. When Bart explained that after a tank had been emptied, and its inside needed cleaning, this oval piece could be removed to admit a living man, the girls murmured astonishment.

Bart found one of the big buxom barrels even then being pumped out. He promised them that, in a few minutes, they would see for themselves how the oval was tapped with a rubber mallet, pushed inward, and then removed.

At the other end of the place, a steep flight of wooden steps went up to a catwalk. Bart said there were bungs above, which must be removed when the wine was being drawn out at the bottom, lest the top of the tank be sucked inward. The girls followed him up the steps. Dick and Johnny climbed behind.

From above the sight was very strange. The walks had handrails, but one could see straight down into the dizzy depths of the narrow spaces, between the barrels, to the distant floor. Bart leaned upon the rail, talking, talking.

Johnny found it all mildly interesting. But not especially colorful. The old romantic image of laughing peasants with their bare empurpled feet faded reluctantly from the furniture of his mind.

Johnny began to think about other things. Bart had the girls' attention. Johnny said to Dick, "Did Nathaniel Bartee have much to do with the business?"

"My father?" Dick looked sideways. "He painted."

"Did he sell his paintings?"

Dick said amiably, "Not many. Why?"

Johnny answered only with a shrug. He walked away from the group, along the narrow boards, gazing absent-mindedly downward. He saw a man come into the building. He recognized Blanche's father, the lawyer, Marshall.

Marshall spoke to the worker at the tank. Bart saw him and called down.

"No hurry, Bart," Marshall called back. "I'll wait."

Bart turned back to his audience. "A European," he was saying, "doesn't mind lees in the bottle. He knows they signify age, which is good. But Americans want a wine that is perfectly clear. So we have what we call a polishing filter."

Johnny, hands in his pockets, strolled farther, gazing down. The workman was moving away. He had, indeed, opened that oval place. Marshall stood waiting, looking curiously about him. Johnny could see, on the top of his head, where the hair thinned.

Dick Bartee came up behind Johnny. "What was in your mind," Dick asked softly, "about my father?"

Johnny didn't look at him. "Oh, that safe. The money. I understand *you* knew how to open the safe?"

"The combination wasn't much of a secret within the family," Dick answered, rather casually.

"I understand your grandfather didn't always count his money?"

"He had a kind of petty cash. Where do you pick up this stuff?" Dick was friendly, easy.

Johnny was straining to see back seventeen years. He could see Dick, in the school, getting out for no better reason than that his roommate had gone out. Dick, needing cash. Could enter the house. Could open the safe. Christy, awake, perhaps on account of her baby, hearing something. Christy downstairs, to protest. To threaten to call the old man. Dick angry. And one blow with a candlestick. Then, what?

What about the pin? Had it fallen, having been somehow on top of things? Had Dick put it in his pocket? Then, fading silently away from crime and punishment, forgotten he had it?

Then, when Nathaniel's pin had miraculously put Mc-

Cauley on the spot, Dick keeping thankfully still. And using Christy's pin . . .

Johnny said aloud, "You stole from Kate, you admit. It came natural, did it? I have one question. Why the devil did you *keep* Christy's pin? How could you have known you could use it later?"

Dick didn't reply. His face looked hard.

Johnny paid vague attention to Marshall below, who now crouched to peer curiously into the egg-shaped hole in the side of the great cask. It would be black dark inside. Mr. Marshall took a packet of matches from his pocket. Johnny, his mind misty with imagining the past, yet knew that Dick Bartee stiffened, and did so too late for this to have been a reaction to Johnny's question. Dick Bartee had both hands on the rail and they tightened.

It was Bart who shouted from the far end of the walk. "Drop it! Marshall! Don't light that match!"

"What?" Marshall looked up.

"Drop it!" Bart shouted.

"O.K., O.K." the lawyer said in the huff of the startled who had meant no harm.

Johnny watched Dick Bartee's hands relax.

Bart raced towards them, leaned and spoke down. "Why do you think we put up No Smoking signs?" he barked. "That tank has just been emptied. It's full of fumes. You could blow the top off!"

"Say, I . . ."

Johnny turned his head slowly and looked at Dick.

"Close," said Dick sighing.

"Blow the top off?" said Johnny in a slightly high voice.

"You'd have had it, Sims," said Bart. "You see that, Dick?"

Dick said, "We'd both have had it! Whew!"

"Come along," barked Bart, "and get on with this tour. 'Whew' is right!"

"I'm sorry," Marshall said below. "I didn't know . . ."

"No harm," said Bart. "Just close."

Johnny looked at Dick Bartee. "Wasn't it?" he said, with satisfaction. *Because he knew!*

Marshall sitting in Bart's office a little later said, "Say, I nearly goofed with that match, eh? I guess it would have been serious?"

"You bet," said Bart crisply. "A fool thing to do. Well, you didn't know any better. What can I do for you?"

It took Marshall a moment to remember. Finally he snapped his fingers. "You and Dick never got down to draw up the papers on the business. Occurred to me I'd better tell you. Fellow in L.A., name of Harris, called me a month ago. Asked me what I knew about Dick. References, character."

"Why?"

"This Harris lends money. Said Dick was in to see him a month ago. Well, I kinda stalled on Dick. Talked *you* up pretty good."

"Me?" said Bart a trifle tartly. "Am I Dick's security?"

"This is what I—Harris didn't say what security he was being offered."

"What security could Dick offer a month ago?" Bart frowned.

"His fiancée's money? I just felt I should mention . . . Since Sims got here and stirred up some doubts."

Bart looked cold and stiff. "Quite a few things have been stirred up," he said, "since Sims got here."

"What things?"

Bart said, "Doubt. Not proof."

"Where's Sims now?"

Bart glanced out the window. "His car is gone. I think you ought to talk to him." Bart drummed on his desk. He looked so grim and withdrawn that the lawyer went away.

CHAPTER 16

JOHNNY KNEW!

Reason had nothing to do with it. It was experience. He knew, clear and plain, that Dick Bartee would just as soon have seen Johnny seriously injured, *hors de combat*, or even dead, by accident, in the winery. He would have taken the

risk to himself to be rid, and innocently rid, of Johnny Sims and Johnny's questions. Not too much risk, actually. Dick would have saved himself, since he *was* warned; he knew what to expect if Marshall lit a match. But he had made no warning sound for Johnny's sake.

The tour speeded up and became a perfunctory walk through various rooms. It ended in a reception hall where a young woman was ready to pour the guests some samples of the product. At this point, Bart excused himself and took Marshall off to his office.

So the girls and Johnny and Dick, waited at the counter for the young woman to pour them sherry.

"Better give John Sims a double dose," said Dick. "His nerves are shot. Cheer up," he said to Johnny. "A miss is as good as a mile."

The man was made of brass!

Nan turned, "Oh, Johnny, too bad! The wine might help." She was sorry for him and his weakness.

Johnny, standing there, knew that his conviction had shaken him. To his surprise, it was worse than the doubt. Now that he knew, he looked like a man who had had a bad shock. He said, "Nan, I want to talk to you alone."

"Oh, not now, Johnny . . ."

"Now," he said.

Nan took a wine glass and turned it in her fingers. She lifted her chin. "Johnny, I don't think we will ever talk alone again," she said gently. "You must understand. I am going to be married. Won't you drink to that?"

(What is known as a "winning smile," said something cynical in Johnny's head.)

"All right," said Johnny. "I'll drink to that, if you want. Then, will you listen to me?"

Dick's arm came around her. "What do you want to say?" he inquired. "The same old pitch? I killed Christy McCauley?"

"Oh, Johnny," said Nan, in a voice of impatience and disappointment.

Dorothy said, bright-eyed, "You see, we can't believe that, Johnny."

"Then, please, excuse me," Johnny said tightly. He felt alone in the world. Let down. Ineffectual.

What had he not done? Where had he not looked yet

for the evidence? The proof, damn it! He had no proof and the law would want it. He must get proof for the law because the law could take Bartee away from Nan.

An hour later, he eased his old Plymouth into the cross-roads settlement called Twomey.

It didn't take long to locate the Bartees' old yardman, whose name was Delevan. Johnny caught him in his back-yard. "I'm hunting up people to talk to," said Johnny, "about the McCauley murder, seventeen years ago."

Delevan was about fifty, strong of limb, with a crooked nose on a pushed-in face. He leaned on his spade.

"I understand you were there. In a hammock, or so I heard." Johnny liked this man at once and grinned at him companionably.

"That's right," said Delevan. "I was in the hammock. So the old man fired me. That was a long time ago. I used to sleep up there more times than the old man heard of. Hadn't been for the cops—" Delevan leaned on the spade handle and took out cigarettes. "Why do *you* want to talk about it?"

Johnny made his speech about Roderick Grimes.

"But you weren't called as a witness, I understand?" he finished.

"Nope. They didn't bother." Delevan looked up at the sunny skies. "A nice night, that was. I was swinging and having a smoke . . ."

"When?"

"Around midnight. Around the time. Somebody killed a woman in the house and there I was, swinging and smoking and thinking."

"This hammock was among the trees at the front of the house?"

"Right."

"Then you must have heard Clinton McCauley."

"Heard him and saw him, too."

"Start from the beginning."

"Where does it begin?" Delevan grinned. "I was swinging and thinking. I heard just what you hear in the night. Little crickets. Wind blowing. I hear cars."

"Cars?"

"Sure. Planes, too. You know what you hear in the night."

"The boy, Dick Bartee, had some kind of car, didn't he?"

"Yup. *Some* kind of car."

"Did you hear *that* car, that night?"

"Buddy, this was seventeen years ago," said Delevan tolerantly. "I tell you, I hear cars. On the roads."

Johnny said, "The Upper Road is the one that goes by in back of the Bartee house?"

"Right."

"Could a car come in from that Upper Road and get to the back of the house?"

"Why not? Only I'd have heard a car come that close."

"You couldn't have *seen*?"

"Couldn't see through the house."

"He could have walked—You tell it." Johnny subsided.

"O.K. So I'm swinging there. I heard the bus. You can tell a bus. They got a woosh to their doors. So I know who this is coming. Clinton McCauley."

"You know him?"

"I knew everybody in the house. This McCauley's got no car. If anybody's getting off the bus in the night, why it's him."

"Well?"

"I douse my cigarette. He doesn't have to know I'm there. Takes a long time before I hear him on the road. So pretty soon I can see him weaving up the front steps. So he unlocks the door and he goes in."

"Then what?"

"Nothing. For a while."

"You couldn't see the side of the house?"

"Nope."

"Where the study is? No lights?"

"Sure, I could see lights."

"What lights?"

"Well, like I told the police, there was always a light in the hall downstairs. And I can see that, kinda dim, through the glass in the front doors. I can't tell from where I was, whether the study's got a light or not. I can only see the light upstairs."

"What light upstairs?"

"Nathaniel's room."

"Which was that?"

"Front and to the right when you're facing like I was. I could see him plain."

"You mean, he was up and around?"

"Sure he was. He was painting a picture."

"When could you see Nathaniel. Before or after McCauley got there?"

"Both," said Delevan. "I told you, I was swinging and enjoying the night. Fact, I was thinking about Nathaniel Bartee and me. There he had the big house, the money behind him. But I was thinking I'd rather be free and swinging out there in the hammock with practically nothing to my name but the clothes I had on—than I'd be Nathaniel who wants to paint pictures and has to do it in the night when the house is sleeping and the old man can't catch him."

"How long were you watching Nathaniel?"

"Oh, a long time. He had on some kind of funny shirt. He's standing up in front of this picture. I'm smoking—oh, two or three cigarettes. Then, I hear the bus. I put my cigarette out. I can hear McCauley on the road after a while, but I can't see him yet, account of the trees, so I don't bother looking. I'm watching Nathaniel.

"So, as I say, McCauley goes inside. Few minutes later, the light goes on in the old man's room."

"Where is that?"

"Front. On the left. Old lady turned it on. Nathaniel heard something when the light went up. He stopped painting."

"Now, wait a minute. You are telling me that you had your eyes on Nathaniel for quite some time *before* McCauley got there, up to and *after* the lights went on in the old man's room?"

"Yup. That's what I'm telling you."

"You told the police this?"

"I did. Listen, I was Nathaniel's alibi. He never left that painting 'til—oh, I'd say quite a while after the lights were on in the old man's room. Then he heard *something*, because he takes off that crazy shirt, quick, and gets into his bathrobe. Then, I can't see him no more.

"Then the lights go on downstairs, front right. And lights start popping all over the house. Well, I don't know what's going on. I just lie there. The police showed up, maybe fifteen minutes later."

"What did you do?"

"I went and talked to them."

Johnny looked at him with respect. "I see. You went and told all that you knew?"

"Right."

"You heard no quarreling, no voices?"

"Didn't. Couldn't have."

"Why didn't they call you at the trial, I wonder?"

"Listen, nobody was trying to prove Nathaniel did anything," Delevan said. "They didn't need *me* to say that McCauley walked into that house."

"Could she had been dead when he walked in?"

"How could she been? Nathaniel was painting his picture. He didn't hit her. The old man didn't hit her. I *saw* him getting up out of his bed before the old lady pulls the shade. The cook and the maid, they're sleeping downstairs in the back wing. Why would they hit her? McCauley was the only one who woulda hit her."

"And you heard no car?"

"I told you I heard plenty cars. Loud at night. Up and down the roads."

"Somebody could have got into the house at the back, on foot, without you seeing?"

"You're pushing," Delevan said. "Sure. They could, all right."

"Do you think it's possible that the boy, Dick, might have got into the house at the back?"

"Mister," said Delevan patiently, "it's possible. A whole platoon coulda got in at the back. Anything's possible."

"You think it *was* McCauley?"

Delevan shrugged. "It wasn't Nathaniel. That I know. He was a sad kind of guy." Delevan frowned. "Well, see, it was pretty quiet. Now, I'd have heard a window breaking—not that one broke. I'd have heard a screen being cut—not that one was cut. One thing I might not have heard. That's somebody with a key, sneaking in at the back door. But this is nothing."

"Nothing," agreed Johnny. "Can you tell me exactly how long it was between McCauley's entering the house and the lights going up?"

"Few minutes," Delevan shrugged. "I was swinging and thinking. And time, you know—unless you go by the watch—it don't always seem to take the same time for a certain time to go by." Delevan kept frowning.

Johnny perceived that there was doubt. But doubt wasn't enough.

He went back to his motel in Hestia. Tried to call Grimes. No answer. Tried Copeland. He meant to beg the lawyer to come down. Nan would talk to *him*, alone. But neither of Copeland's phones answered.

I need help, thought Johnny in panic. She's going to marry a killer and I can't stop it! I am the last one who can stop it!

CHAPTER 17

THAT THURSDAY afternoon, the old lady was pleased as punch that there was going to be a wedding in the house tomorrow. She talked about weddings she had known and her nurse, Miss Adams, sat by, making dull agreeable, nurse-like remarks whenever the old lady lost the thread of her recollections. Nan seemed to be listening to them placidly while she, slowly, with the daintiest care, put tiny stitches in a new hem on Dorothy's white silk dress.

Dorothy, following a busy Blanche around the house, helping where she could, thought Nan looked like a little girl, curled up in the chair, her dark hair hanging around her cheeks, the wide silk skirt spread over her lap. A little girl in a dream. Dorothy had not argued with the dream today.

The Bartee men had not been about since the winery tour. A house preparing for a sudden wedding, Blanche said, was no place for a man. Blanche, in some different way, was in charge of the house.

Blanche had made a very short list. ". . . just one or two couples, very close friends." She had said to Nan, "And your Mr. Sims, of course."

But Johnny was not to be found. Dorothy had called the motel three times during the afternoon. No answer. Wherever Johnny was, he did not know yet that the wedding was being arranged. Dorothy worried.

Nan sewed peacefully. Nan pressed the new hem, tried the dress on, with Blanche present. Then Nan said she would wash her hair, would pack, would nap. Dick was coming for her very late in the afternoon, when they would go for their license.

By four o'clock, the clergyman was promised, the guests bidden, food planned, marketing accomplished, the big parlor polished. Blanche sent the old lady out of the parlor. Blanche was mistress of the house today; the old lady went meekly. The old lady had retreated to a position of being the ancient pet, there—but not in charge.

"We'll do more flowers in the morning," Blanche said to Dorothy. "I'd better order the corsages. What are you wearing?"

"A pink dress," said Dorothy. "Nearest I have to looking like a bridesmaid."

"Then I'll wear pink, too. That might look nice. Let's see how well we match."

Dorothy went softly into the back bedroom. Nan, on the bed, slept, or played possum. Her hair in pins. Face innocent and fair. Dreaming. No use to try to wake her. Dorothy took her pink dress into Blanche's bedroom.

"What a huge room!"

"Isn't it glorious? This used to be the older Bartee's, 'til we had to move mother downstairs. This dress might do."

Her pink matched Dorothy's well enough. "So that's that," sighed Blanche.

"You must be tired."

"Sit down, shall we? I'll have a cigarette. No, I'm not tired. I think the house will look well."

"Will Nan and Dick live in the house?" Dorothy asked.

"Oh, I don't know," said Blanche, "whether they will at all."

"You'd rather they didn't?"

Blanche lifted her chin. "This place is Bart's. I'd rather Bart—we—didn't give up any part of it." Blanche was not meek today.

"I can understand that," Dorothy said.

"You're not awfully pleased about this wedding, are you?" asked Blanche. (They were two females with their hair down.)

"No, I just wish they had waited."

"But you do know Dick never killed anybody?" Blanche sighed. "I'm so glad all that is out in the open."

"Were you fond of Dick? Ever?" Dorothy asked.

"Fond?" frowned Blanche. "I was fifteen years old."

Dorothy said sagely, "I guess there is no such word as 'fond' when you're fifteen years old. You can be awfully flattered if a famous wolf pays any attention."

"I think that's exactly so." They smiled at each other. "I just love Bart," Blanche said like a child. "I think I was afraid of Dick, really."

"You're not afraid of him now?"

Blanche didn't answer. Dorothy was sitting on the edge of a big four-poster. She put her cheek against the tall mahogany post. "But McCauley is innocent, so Johnny says."

"Surely he doesn't say so, *now*?" Blanche showed surprise.

"The man must be obsessed then," Dorothy said, sadly.

"Obsessed?"

"McCauley himself, I mean. You know, Johnny talked to him."

"Oh, did he? In the prison?"

"Yes."

"It's sad," Blanche said.

Dorothy felt nervous and restless suddenly. "The McCauley's lived here? Where did they stay?" she asked.

"The room you girls are in. Mother Bartee once told me. All three of them, I believe."

"Three? That's right, there was a baby."

"Yes."

"Kate said she felt sorry for the baby." ("Her mama killed, her papa sent up, and not true, either." Dorothy remembered what Kate had said.)

"I'm sure," said Blanche, "that was very kind of Kate."

"What became of the baby?"

"We don't know."

"Don't *know*!"

"The aunt took her."

"Aunt?"

"His sister. What was her name? She was a little tiger, Dad says. I never saw her. I was away at boardingschool by the time she came back and raised all the fuss. They say she fought and fought. Oh yes, *she* took the baby. Can't think of her name. I know it began with an E."

Dorothy's hand squeaked on the mahogany post. "What was the baby's name?" she asked.

Blanche concentrated. "Mary."

Dorothy relaxed. "Why didn't the baby stay here?"

"Well, I believe Mother Bartee thought in terms of bad blood. Father a criminal, you know? Then, of course, the aunt was so determined. She was going to take the baby away and keep the whole thing from her."

"What do you mean?"

"The child wasn't ever to know what really happened to her parents. That's why we don't know where she is or anything about her."

"I see," said Dorothy. She felt another wave of nervousness. "Look, you must want to rest a while . . ."

"The truth is," said Blanche smiling, "I had better wash some stockings. Thanks for all your help, Dorothy."

Dorothy hurried downstairs. Her breathing was upset. She tried Johnny's number again. *Still* no answer.

The house was very quiet. Ready. Waiting for a wedding.

Dorothy had forgotten Blanche, Bart, Dick, every Bartee. "Emily—" she whispered to the empty hall.

She snatched the phone book to hunt for a number.

"Miss Callahan? Do you remember two girls who came with Johnny Sims?"

"You must be the blonde." Kate recognized her voice.

"Yes. Please tell me. Do you remember Clinton McCauley's sister's *name*?"

"First name? Edith, I think it was."

"Oh. Well, can you remember what she looked like?"

"That's kinda hard. She was shorter than me. Kinda thin. I can't see her face no more."

"Then—tell me, how old was the baby?"

"About three. Clint was sure crazy about that baby."

"After the trial, the aunt took her?"

"She sure did."

"Do you know where?"

"No, dear, I don't. Nobody does. See, she was going to change their names . . ."

"Oh, she was?"

"And, you know, disappear? Give the little kid a chance, she said. Poor little thing. Of course," Kate said, "I guess Clint would know where she is. The baby's own *father*."

Dorothy saw movement through the glass of the front doors. "Thank you very much," she said and hung up quickly. She moved away from the phone. She didn't know what to think—

Dick Bartee came in. "Hi, beautiful! Where's Nan?"

"Asleep."

"Blanche?"

"Blanche is upstairs, too. Your grandmother is resting."

"Kind of the Enchanted Castle," he said, standing close. In the quiet of the big house, intuitions of many things began to pulse between them. Dorothy closed her eyes. "Dick," she said faintly, "please don't marry Nan tomorrow."

"Dear Dorothy," he said caressingly, in a moment. "But it is all arranged."

Her eyes flew open. She tested this man with every tendril for understanding she could send out of her brain or her heart. "Do you love Nan?"

His eyes shone. But they had no depth. "Sweet Dorothy." He touched her cheek with his forefinger, the lightest tap. "Of course, I do. Why else would I be marrying her tomorrow?"

Dorothy, from some deep interior caution, now, willed her face to change, to seem to awaken to a new thought. She put hands to her head. "Oh! Dick, will you lend me your car?"

"But how can I?" he said. "Nan and I must go to the doctor's office and then to the license place."

"Would Blanche? Would anybody?" Dorothy danced away.

"Why?" He pursued her.

Dorothy was into the guest-closet to snatch her coat.

"Where do you want to go?" he persisted.

She danced away and started for the stairs. "I'll ask Blanche. Oh, wait, here's Bart."

"What's up?" Bart said in his pleasant way. He smiled up at her where she stood on the third step.

"She wants a car," Dick said, "but she won't tell why."

"Take mine," Bart said, pulled out keys so promptly that it made a vote of confidence.

"I don't know what I've been thinking of all day," Dorothy cried. "Nan *can't* get married tomorrow." (She paused, on purpose. Without eyes, but with all her other senses, Dorothy inquired of Dick Bartee, his true reaction.) "I'm not

going to let her get married," cried Dorothy girlishly, "without a wedding present from me!"

She knew Dick Bartee now breathed, who had not been breathing.

"My purse," muttered Dorothy and flew up the stairs. (Now she knew there must be a terrible secret! She had to get to Johnny!)

Below, Bart turned. "That's right. Weddings mean presents. What would you like?"

Dick let out his breath in a sigh. "Oh, half the business will do."

"A bit difficult to tie in ribbons," Bart said genially. He went into the study. He sat down at his father's desk. When he was alone, his head bent into his hands.

Dorothy came flashing down again. "Oh, Dick, tell Blanche, will you please? If I don't make it back by dinner time, nobody worry?"

He didn't answer.

When she had gone, he went upstairs. Blanche was standing near the back bedroom door. "Who ran downstairs?"

"Dorothy."

"Everything is ready for tomorrow, I think." Blanche's manner was polite but not afraid. "Shall I call Nan for you?"

"What's wrong with Dorothy?" he asked her. Some animal sense had been touched to alarm.

"Nothing." Blanche was surprised.

"Yes, there is something."

"I suppose she thinks the wedding is happening too soon. That's all I can imagine . . ."

"That's all?"

"Of course, Dorothy's confused about McCauley. That John Sims, you know. *He* believed some sob story McCauley told him. Of course, Dorothy did say—"

"McCauley *told* him?" Dick repeated.

"When John went to talk to him, I suppose John *believed* the man. That's been the whole trouble."

"Talked to him? To McCauley?"

"So Dorothy said. In the prison, of course."

Dick turned away.

"Nan may be napping," Blanche said. "Shall I see?"

"I'll wake her," Dick said.

"It seems a shame to wake her."

"It will have to be done," he said, rather grimly.

Downstairs, Bart was on the telephone. "Mr. Harris? I believe my nephew was in to see you last week? About a rather large loan? Could you tell me what security he was offering?"

"I don't think I can," said the voice. "Sorry. Ask *him*."

"I only wondered," said Bart smoothly, "whether he was proposing to raise money against his fiancée's inheritance, a month ago?"

Silence on the other end. The voice said finally, "Sorry, Mr. Bartee, but if I tell my client's business I'd soon have no clients. You know that."

"Thank you," Bart said.

Late afternoon, Johnny's phone rang. It was Marshall. "Like to talk to you," the lawyer said.

So Johnny went out to his car and drove to the lawyer's office.

First, Marshall apologized again for nearly blowing Johnny up."

Johnny brushed this off. He had thought of one more check to make. He said, "The night that Christy was killed, you were at home, weren't you?"

"Right. Until McCauley called me from the jail."

"He called you?" Johnny sat up. "When was that?"

"Oh, one-thirty. Close to. I went right down."

"Got up, did you? Went to see him?"

"Of course," said Marshall. "Although, I hadn't been to bed so I didn't have to get up."

"Wait," said Johnny. "Now, *slowly*. One-thirty A.M., and you were not in bed?"

"I'd got involved in a book," Marshall said. "My wife died many years ago. I sometimes don't sleep too well."

"You were reading?" gasped Johnny. "Not in the dark, then?"

"Hardly. What's the matter?"

"Where were you reading?"

"In my den."

"With the light on?"

"Of course."

"The door closed?"

"Door of my den? That's never closed."

Johnny said, "You'll swear to that?"

"Yes, I will. What's the matter?"

"I think you just broke Dick Bartee's second-string alibi and broke it good."

So Johnny talked. A girl is awakened by sand on her windowpane. She sneaks downstairs in a dark house. Her father mustn't be aroused. She creeps out to the back porch. The boy shows her his watch. "Midnight," he says. Perhaps he says, "Only midnight, see?"

"But Blanche would have known if your den lights were on?" Johnny demanded.

"She couldn't have missed them," Marshall said soberly. "Blanche—and quiet all these years."

"So Dick Bartee was not there at midnight!"

"My house wasn't dark until after one that night," said Marshall, "and I can swear to it."

So Johnny said, "He fooled her. If once, then possibly, twice." He talked about the breaking in to Kate's place.

Marshall said, "This . . . What are you going to do?"

"Call San Francisco."

Johnny called Copeland's house. Mr. Copeland, a woman's voice told him, was not in and could not be reached, and the woman didn't like it, at all, because they had a social engagement.

Johnny eased himself off the phone.

Marshall said, "Come home with me now, and we'll eat and kick it around. The legal side. What can you take to a judge? You've got no proof!"

In San Francisco in a bar, Grimes said, "So! She saw a man with a hat on, coming out of Padgett's room. Fine! Good!"

Copeland said, "She saw that. We've got that. And the time, seven-thirty or close to. Trouble is, she did not see the man's face. She can't identify."

"Listen," Grimes said, "I'll get together with the police. You get down to Hestia."

"Me?"

"Right. Whatever sheriff is going to have to move on a Bartee to arrest him, may need his hand held."

"Listen, you haven't got him. You've got six blue petals,

three letters on a license plate, a hat, and a red-haired woman who didn't see his face."

"Well, it piles up," said Grimes cheerfully. "You get down there."

"I'll either fly first thing in the morning or drive tonight. What about you coming along?"

"I am a coward," Grimes said. "I don't want to be anywhere near this killer."

"What about Sims?"

"He's too close. Makes me nervous."

"You don't care how close I get?" grumbled Copeland. "I'd better call home."

"Oh, Charles," his young wife wailed, "you are not going off anywhere tonight. We have a bridge date."

"I can fly first thing in the morning, then," he said.

"Oh, why?" she pouted. "Why must you leave me? What's happened?"

He had never told her much. She was sensitive and so young and so excitable. He felt he should keep the seamy side away from her—so young, so fair. If she were to get the notion that he was going near a dangerous killer—Charles Copeland would protect her. "Some sad news to break," he said. "About a death. I must, dear. I'm sorry."

"Anyone I know?" she gasped. Her voice pleaded for it not to be anyone she knew, because death upset her.

Copeland didn't see why she must be told that Emily Padgett had been murdered. So he said truthfully, and yet deceptively, "The name is McCauley. Just don't think about it, dearest. I'll come right home. I won't leave until morning."

CHAPTER 18

JOHNNY CAME DRAGGING into the motel at about 8 P.M. He and Marshall had found no solace in the story of the two pins. Marshall had told Johnny about the man Harris and

the loan. "Nan wasn't to get the money 'til she was twenty-one," Johnny said. "But I suppose her prospects . . ."

"I suppose so, too," Marshall had said.

Neither of them had any doubt that Dick was not only a killer but a fortune-hunter. They had no proof.

Johnny was unlocking the door of his room when Dorothy Padgett materialized suddenly at his side. "I've been waiting for hours!"

"Where did you come from?" he said wearily. "Wait, 'til I try a phone call, can you? Then, I've got things to tell you."

"I have things to ask," said Dorothy ominously. "Do you realize the *wedding* is tomorrow morning at eleven?"

"Oh no, it's not." Johnny strode into the room, grasped the phone, put in a call for Roderick Grimes again. Dorothy had followed him. She stood with her hands in the pockets of her soft gray ulster, staring at his tired face.

The operator began to singsong up the coast.

Johnny said, "He did it, Dot. Dick Bartee killed Christy. I know it in my bones, as they say. I don't know how I'm going to prove it."

Dorothy said quietly, "Was our Aunt Emily's real name Edith McCauley?"

Johnny reached out with his right arm and gathered her close to him. "Now you know," he sighed.

Grimes was saying, "Hello? Hello?"

Johnny began to tell him about the winery incident, the alibi broken, the loan application. "So now I am convinced," he wound up, "and I am going to Nan, and make her listen. Where is Copeland? I want him down here."

"He's coming down," Grimes said. "What do you mean, *make* her listen? You haven't told her!"

"I am about to tell her."

"You better," said Grimes sharply, "and quick. If you don't want that girl to marry a lousy murderer. You go stop it. Work on the girl. That's *all* for you to do."

"Can you put any pressure on this man, Harris," said Johnny, "and find out what security?"

"Yes, yes," said Grimes impatiently. "Listen, don't worry what you have to do to make her stop this wedding. Say you'll kill yourself or something. There's a time for scruples but this isn't it." Grimes hung up.

Johnny turned to Dorothy. Grimes had sounded frantic.

Johnny's own mind was dark and his heart was heavy. "How did you know who Nan is?"

"How did you?" she countered. "Did Emily tell you?" "Yes."

Dorothy began to draw away.

"Ah, Dotty, Emily gave up her identity to keep that secret," he said tiredly. "McCauley gave up the acquaintance of his own and only child. An awful lot was sacrificed, for seventeen years, to keep that secret and to keep it from Nan. How could I blurt it out in five minutes? McCauley, himself, asked me to make sure . . ."

"Sure of what?"

"Whether Dick killed Christy. He was willing to believe he might have been mistaken—for Nan's sake."

"For Nan's sake," Dorothy repeated slowly.

"How did you find out?"

"Oh, Blanche said there was an aunt. Then I talked to Kate. Kate says he was crazy about the baby." Dorothy was looking at events past with troubled eyes.

"McCauley? Yes, 'Polly McCauley' he used to call her. Silly pet rhyme."

"Polly McCauley." Dorothy tried to smile because she was beginning to feel like crying.

"McCauley isn't psycho," Johnny said sadly. "He is saintly. What a comment on the times, that I couldn't tell the difference! He's worried himself sick over the whole thing. Knowing he didn't do it. Believing Dick did. And yet," Johnny hit one hand with the edge of his other palm, "having the incredible charity to remember about being in love, when you are young."

"Oh, poor man! Poor Emily! Johnny, you ought to have told us."

"I wasn't sure."

"It wasn't necessary to be sure," she flamed. "Who elected you the judge? You *can't* be the judge! Johnny, she *can't* marry Dick, not knowing all of this. You must not let her break her father's heart all over again in *ignorance!*" cried Dorothy. "Johnny, that's *wrong!*"

He said grimly, "Poor Nan."

"Poor Clinton McCauley," said Dorothy, blazing.

Because Dorothy must return Bart's car, they went in it

together. On the way, Johnny told her about the old man having sent money for the baby, and the possibility that Dick had hunted Nan out.

Dorothy was neither surprised nor impressed. "I knew there must be something," was all she said.

"So he went for the money," Johnny said, "from the beginning. I think he must have been furious that the old man left him no part of the family business. If we could make Nan see that."

Dorothy shivered. "Johnny, Dick is a monster, isn't he?"

"A ring-tailed doozer," Johnny muttered. "And not a drop of proof. The secret alibi was faked. We can't prove why. But I can't imagine why, unless he knew when Christy died. Can you?"

Dorothy said, "Didn't they put McCauley in prison without a lot of real proof, Johnny?"

"Seems so, now. Now, that the climate has changed."

"Poor Clinton McCauley."

Johnny started to say, "Poor Nan" again, but he did not.

Bart himself opened the door. "Come in," he said cordially. "I hope you've had dinner? We are all sitting meekly in the study, because the parlor is not to be contaminated. Seems it is ready for a wedding. Come on back."

Dorothy slipped off her coat and dropped it on a hall chair. They followed Bart. Neither had done more than make a polite sound in the throat.

In the small square room a fire was burning, for other pleasure than its heat. The old lady was still up, stationed in the corner where Johnny had first laid eyes on her. She looked disgruntled. (She had been ordered out of the living room by Blanche *and* Bart.) Blanche was the hostess here. She greeted them with smiles. "Everything is ready as it can be. The corsages are coming early."

"Mayest hear the merry din," said Dorothy, in a strange voice.

There was a black leather chair to the left of the fire. In it, sat Dick Bartee and, on the black leather footstool, close to his knee, sat Nan. She hardly seemed to notice the newcomers. Her face wore a look of dreaming wonder.

"The guests are met, the feast is set, mayest hear the merry din," Bart quoted. "Held off, unhand me gray-

beard loon . . I' Sit down, Miss Dorothy. I'll fetch another chair."

"Don't bother," said Johnny. "I'd as soon stand for what I've got to say." Dick Bartee put his head back sharply. Nan didn't even seem to hear.

"I am the 'graybeard loon,' I guess," said Johnny. "Something has to be told, right now." He felt tense and determined. "Emily Padgett told me a secret."

"What's he saying?" the old lady mumbled. "What are you saying, young man?"

"You must listen to me carefully," Johnny said to her. "Clinton McCauley and his wife Christy had a baby girl."

"Yes," said the old lady. "Little girl. Mary was her name. Mary Christine."

"Nan is that baby girl."

Bart who had been leaning on the wall bent forward in surprise. Blanche bridled.

"Who?" said the old lady.

"This girl," said Johnny loudly and distinctly. "Nan is your great-granddaughter. Her real name is Mary McCauley."

The pair in the black leather corner had not moved at all.

"The man in prison is your father, Nan," Johnny said, trying for a gentle voice. "He didn't kill your mother. He believes that Dick did. Do you understand?"

"I know," said Nan dreamily. She leaned backward and Dick's torso came forward, and they were close.

"We figured that out this afternoon," Dick said, amiably. "It's the only explanation. Why Aunt Emily flew home, why Sims has been acting this way. As soon as I found out he had been to see McCauley, it all came to me." He kissed Nan's hair. "Well?" he inquired.

Johnny was absolutely stunned.

Dorothy said, "Nan, that is why Aunt Emily flew back. She had kept this secret since—since you were three. Then you gave her *Dick's* name, of all names, on the telephone. Do you understand?"

"Of course, I do," said Nan. Her face kept the wondering glow. "I felt it, anyhow. I could tell that I belonged here."

Bart said briskly, "Now, you are sure of this, Sims? You aren't inventing?"

"I am not inventing," Johnny said wearily. "Ask Charles

Copeland, in San Francisco. Emily's lawyer. Or ask Clinton McCauley, who is alive, who is suffering . . ."

Nan's face had not changed. It did not change now. (She is lost, thought Johnny with a terrible pang. Lost to Emily, who trusted me. Lost to McCauley who trusted me, too.)

The old lady said, "Christy's little girl? Why then, she is my daughter's daughter's daughter!" She began to beam, pleased as punch. "Why, my dearie!"

"Great-grandmama?" said Nan shyly. "And I suppose my uncle Bart?"

Bart said, "Dick, how long have you known this?"

"I guessed it, this afternoon," Dick said.

Nan leaned back against him. "Now we understand . . ."

"Understand what?" said Dorothy bluntly.

"Why it was that we fell in love, so suddenly, so—so deeply." Nan looked shyly aglow. "It was because we had known each other already—years ago. Dick knew me when I was only three and I—I adored him. There was an old groove in our hearts." (Johnny felt sick!) "We aren't related at all," said Nan, "but we belong! And we sensed that."

Dick's arm came around her waist.

Johnny felt sick, heart and soul. He knew now that he had been fighting with the wrong weapons. He had been using time to track down trifles—alibis and pins. Evidence, he had been after. Reasonable proof. But Dick Bartee had used *his* time to deal with more potent things. Dick had got into Nan's heart and mind—and got there first. Dick had seen to the climate there. Dick had taken the edge off this news. Transformed it. Put it *inside* the dream.

Stupid, stupid, Johnny accused himself. The very idea that Dick was a killer—Dick had taken all the sting out of that. Nan had been soothed and satisfied. And a tenuous collection of wispy facts—Dick's car rumored to have been on the Upper Road, Dick fooling a girl in the dark, a man reading a book with his lights on. Nothing there with any *power*.

God help me, thought Johnny, if I am relying on *reason*.

But he must reach her. "Your own living father thinks Dick killed your mother," he said flatly. "Your father is alive, Nan. Won't you go to see him?"

"Of course," she said. "Some day."

"Some day!" Dorothy exploded. "What's the matter with you?"

"But I'm being married tomorrow," Nan said patiently.

Johnny said, "You can't be married tomorrow, Nan. Listen to me. Your father has loved you, all the years of your life . . ."

"I don't remember him," she said. "I've never seen him, since I can remember . . ."

"—loved you *enough*, never to see you since you can remember. Sacrificed . . ."

"But Dick *didn't* kill Christy," Nan said earnestly. "And I didn't know my father was in prison. It's not *my* fault that I never knew, is it? I don't *know* whether he killed my mother. He says he didn't. I'm—I'm sorry. But I do know that Dick didn't do it and Dick loves me—whatever, wherever my father is."

"Your father is sick over you," cried Johnny. "In anguish, Nan."

Her dark eyes looked into his. They were honest, according to her lights. "But he doesn't *need* to be in such anguish," she explained. "Don't you see? I'm sorry he has made himself sick and for what he thinks, but that isn't *Dick's* or *my* fault."

The whole room was listening, except possibly, the old lady who was staring at Nan and moving her lips, soundlessly.

Finally, Dorothy said, "Nan, don't you *care*?"

"I only care for the truth," Nan said, flinging up her head.

"The truth is," said Johnny calmly, "your father is right."

Now Dick put Nan to one side and rose from the chair. "Say that once more."

"Gladly," said Johnny. "McCauley is right. You killed Christy."

Dick's muscles prepared to deliver a blow.

Bart said, "Just a minute. None of that." He was between them. "Why," he demanded of Johnny, "do you say so?"

"For one thing," said Johnny, "he faked the alibi with Blanche. I can prove that. He wasn't with her at midnight."

"So I must have been *here*, murdering Christy?" said Dick, sounding dangerous. "Because *you* would like to think so?" Dick loomed.

Nan jumped up. "Dick, please! Johnny, please!" She

clasped her hands together. "Johnny, if you will just listen and believe me. No matter what happens, ever—I would never, never marry you."

Johnny looked at her. She was so young. If she was just a tinge pleased, he would try to forgive her. "I know that," he said solemnly.

Dick used both hands to put Nan gently back upon the leather stool. Bart had paid no attention to her. "Anything else, that makes you think Dick killed Christy?"

"The fact that he would have liked to see me blown up this morning," said Johnny.

Dick Bartee said, "And been blown up, too? You don't seem to understand what is going on at all, Sims. I'm being married tomorrow. I then, take my bride on our honeymoon. I've got more important things to do than argue with you about an old story, seventeen years behind us." He loomed, big, dangerous, clever. "Do you really think we will put off our wedding?" he scoffed. "Because you keep insisting that I am some kind of villain? I am one kind of villain in your eyes, Sims. I stole your girl! And that is the bottom and the essence of what ails you."

"Oh, Johnny, you mustn't be so wicked!" wailed Nan. She believed it.

The old lady stirred. "Blanche, go, please get Christy's picture?"

Blanche got up, dazed, "Mother, hadn't I better take you away . . . ?"

"No, no," said the old lady, "not a bit of it. I want the child to see her mother's picture."

"Oh yes, please," breathed Nan. "Great-grandmother?"

Bart had his hand on Johnny's sleeve. He said, "I don't see that you've proved anything, Sims."

"There's been enough trouble," Blanche said pathetically. She went out into the hall.

Dorothy had her arms crossed, hands on her own shoulders, head bent.

Dick Bartee said, "One more word about that killing, Sims, and I will throw you out bodily. In fact, I think we would all like it very much if you would go."

Johnny said rapidly, "Old Mr. Bartee sent Emily five thousand dollars, every year, for the baby." He saw Bart's

face react. "It was put into a fund by Mr. Copeland. The money you have, Nan, is Bartee money."

Nan's eyes went to Dick and she smiled.

"Listen to me," pleaded Johnny. "Dick *knew* you were an heiress. He needed money to buy into this place. He wants this place."

"Of course, he wants to buy in and be Bart's partner. It's all family," Nan said. "It's wonderful!"

Bart's eyes were narrow. "Nan's money came from my father?"

"That is so," said Johnny. "Check it. Ask Copeland. And tell me this. Why would Dick take a letter to San Francisco by hand?"

"Because I was asked to," said Dick, "and I don't think you heard what I said . . ."

Bart moved between them again. Blanche came hurrying back with a small canvas, about a foot square. A painting of a woman's head. "This is Christy," she said. "Nathaniel Bartee did this." She looked at their faces nervously.

Dorothy rose slowly and looked at it from one side. Johnny looked from the other. A young face, laughing. The cheek bones a trifle high. Hair a light brown, curling away from the fair brow. Eyes a brilliant blue. Delicate brows. (Johnny swallowed. He had not questioned the climate of opinion about Nathaniel Bartee and his painting. But the man had been talented. He had been among Philistines.)

"Give it to me," commanded the old lady. "Now, child, come see your mother. Wasn't she a pretty little dear?"

Nan moved.

Johnny said hoarsely, "She was beaten to death where you are standing, Nan."

Nan said, with the quick tears of old sparking from her eyes, "Johnny, don't be horrible! Go away!" She dropped to her knees beside the old lady. "She *was* pretty . . ."

"Dick wants the money, Nan," Johnny said loudly. He felt as if he were shouting from a far, far place. She knelt, her back to him. She did not even turn her head.

Dick said, "Get out of the way, Bart."

"You are not going to hit anyone in my house," Bart said. "Sims, I think you'd better go."

"It doesn't matter, Johnny," he heard Dorothy say. He

looked at her. "They are going to be married tomorrow," she went on calmly. "There is nothing we can do about it."

So Johnny turned and walked out of the study and along the red carpet of the hall, Bart was walking close behind him. Bart reached ahead and opened a leaf of the front door. "Sorry," Bart said.

"What about?" said Johnny bitterly. "That he gets away with murder?" Their eyes met and Bart's were troubled. Johnny said, "Good-bye."

"Good-night." The door closed.

Johnny stood on the porch. Had no car. He plunged into the drive, emerged from the trees. The landscape, carpeted with the low green, was yet as desolate as the moon.

CHAPTER 19

THE PHONE RANG in Johnny's room about half past nine in the morning. Friday.

Nan's voice. Hope jumped.

"Johnny, I'm sorry for anything *I* said last night or if I sounded mean."

". . . all right."

"I *will* go to see my father, of course. Dick and I will do all we can to make him feel—all right about us. So everything is going to work out."

He got out the necessary word, ". . . glad."

"But, Johnny, I don't want you and me to be fighting. And on my wedding day."

Now, he felt very cold. "I'll stay away," he promised quickly. "Don't worry about that."

"But, Johnny, that isn't . . . I wish you'd understand. These are my mother's people. But I don't mean to . . . I wouldn't offend you or Aunt Barbara . . ."

"You're not asking me to be there, Nan?"

"Well . . ."

"Did Dorothy talk you into this?"

"No, she didn't. We didn't even stay in the same room last night. Everybody thought . . . Well, I wanted to be alone. But *she's* going to stand up with me. So I should think . . ."

"You want me to—?"

"Oh, not to stand up or . . . You see, Uncle Bart is my very own uncle and he ought to be the one to give me away." Nan's voice was gayer; it was losing its trouble. This was her wedding day. "Only Blanche and Bart think *we* should be at peace, Johnny, or—it's not lucky."

"What about Dick?"

"Oh, Dick says that if you promise not to talk the way you've been . . . Dick says *he* hasn't anything against *you*. Just if you'd stop, oh—busybodying." Her voice trailed off. It came back, coaxing. "So, Johnny? Won't you come to my wedding and wish me happiness?"

He didn't know whether he could. He couldn't speak.

"For Aunt Emily's sake, then?"

The flash of rage that had been ready and waiting, went through him now. But he said quietly, "All right, Nan."

"About a quarter of eleven? It won't take long. And afterwards, I suppose, you'll be driving Dotty home."

"All right, Nan," he said, keeping control.

Grimes had told him that Copeland was coming down. But Copeland hadn't come, nor had Johnny's call to Roderick Grimes, this morning, been completed, when the hour was upon him and he must go to Nan's wedding.

The maid let him in. Four or five strange people were standing in the parlor. Flowers everywhere. A little lectern before the mantel. The old lady, with a soft pink shawl around her shoulders, held court. A man said, "I'm Dr. Jenson. We are groom's. You must be bride's, I guess."

Johnny didn't say which he was. More names were given. Hands shaken. He nodded toward but did not go near the old lady.

Bart came in through the doors from the dining room. "Sims?"

"Morning."

Bart looked him over with deliberate care. "You haven't changed your mind," he pronounced quietly.

"I am a symbol of something," Johnny's face felt as if it were splitting and tearing, as he grinned.

Bart said, "Nan has one of the pins now."

Johnny pressed his lips very tightly closed.

"The one supposed to be Christy's," Bart said. "The one from McCauleys' pocket. *Kate's* pin."

Johnny's lips opened.

"I don't know what can be done," said Bart quickly. "You have no proof."

"What makes *you* change your mind?"

"I believe Dick sounded out the chance of a loan on Nan's prospects too soon. I can't prove it."

"You lend your house for this wedding? You give the bride away?" Johnny felt sick.

Bart said, "How will it help if they elope?" He was stiff, proud, helpless. "To make a scene?"

They stared at each other sadly for a moment. Then Bart said, "Miss Dorothy is in the dining room. Go on in."

Dorothy was wearing a pink dress and a pink and white corsage. She was standing very straight beside one of the heavy old carved chairs. "Oh, Johnny," she said warmly. "You didn't have to come! You don't have to watch this, feeling the way you do. You go away! She can't have everything."

"I don't know how I feel, Dot," Johnny said heavily. "Are you all right?"

"I'm O.K." She seemed surprised. "Wondering who I am, of course."

"Who you *are*?"

"Nan is Mary McCauley. Am I Dorothy O'Hara, I wonder?"

"O'Hara?" he said absently. "Dot, did you know Bart believes me now?"

"I believe you, too," she said. "But Nan has been told and told—and if she believes in Dick, instead . . ."

"It's going to be a tragedy."

"You mean, you will prove it, sooner or later? And then?"

"Then Nan will have a husband in prison for murder."

Dorothy said, "Johnny, maybe she will. But that's not the tragedy." He stared. Her blue eyes were clear and steady. "The tragedy happened when she fell in love with a monster."

"Yes, that's right," he said. "The dream. That's how he's beaten me all along the line. Do *you* believe a rough tough

fifteen-year-old boy ever looked twice at a three-year-old baby girl?"

Dorothy moved her head sadly.

"Grooves in their hearts." Johnny clenched his teeth, in a bitter grimace. "But she believes it! If we ever could have broken the spell, made her believe—"

"That he wants the money?" Dorothy understood at once. "I tried to tell her that."

"You know that? How come *you* are convinced?"

"I am convinced because the first time we met him, there was some reason—a reason for his choosing Nan. Oh, Johnny, I could tell. I had caught his eye. He just deliberately . . . The truth is, I *still* attract him and I've told Nan so."

"People keep saying . . ." Johnny looked at this plum. This Dorothy. "Dotty, *you know* when a man is attracted, don't you?"

"And when he isn't," she said, blinking her tears. "Of course, I do."

"Then why doesn't Nan know that he isn't?"

"Because she was always built up," said Dorothy, "artificially. She's been told and told to assume she'll have romance, as if it's automatically her due. But that's not so, Johnny. Don't you know, Aunt Emily and your dear mother, too, they gave her you, Johnny, for a gift? For free. So she never scuffled for a boy's attention. She never had any practice. She never learned that it is not absolutely inevitable for a girl to be loved or even popular. That you have to achieve this. You have to think how. You don't get attention for nothing—or affection, either. You have to deserve it. You have to pay attention to what other people like. But Nan was protected. She was too easy for Dick to deceive. Oh, what am I saying?"

She spoke to his stricken face. "What good is it to blame old times? I'm sorry, I don't mean to blame you as much as I sound. I blame myself, too. Everybody ought to stop and think before he makes a sacrifice. Please, Johnny, don't feel bad. If you spoiled her, it's because you're kind and responsible."

"Don't spoil your face," he said, to her tears that would spill any moment. "I guess people ought to stop and think—"

(People ought to stop and think before they proudly keep a stupid promise, Johnny mused.)

"I hope there are no ghosts," Dorothy shivered, turning away. "I don't want Christy's ghost to watch this wedding." She turned back. "Oh, what can we do? I wish we could kidnap her! Do something smashing and yet—" Dorothy looked and sounded so very humanly confused that Johnny's sore heart warmed.

"And yet, Nan is choosing," he said, "I can't think what to do, Dot. I'm no detective, no psychologist. I teach biology. I don't know anything to do."

"There's nothing!" Dorothy's hands fell. "I'd better go. They were almost ready. Do you know what the 'something old' is, Johnny?" Dorothy was fierce again. "It's that pin! The old lady got it out and gave it to her. Nan has it pinned on!"

"Something old?"

"Oh, they were all ready except for that superstitious rhyme. 'Something old, something new.' Blanche loaned her a brand new hanky, so they are counting it for 'something borrowed,' too. They are running around up there looking for 'something blue.' If they've found it, she is ready."

She looked up into his face yearningly.

Johnny looked down. "Something blue?"

(I am a biology teacher, he thought, suddenly.)

"You know, the silly old rhyme," Dorothy closed her eyes despairingly. "It's too late. I know. We'll have to let her go. It will serve her right," said Dorothy woefully, "and I won't like it at all."

"I want to see Nan," said Johnny. "Right now."

"Johnny, they won't let you see the bride."

"Yes, they will." He caught her by the hand and pulled her through the door to the hall. (It's not Nan, he thought. I could let her go. It's not Emily, either. Emily is dead. But I am not going to let this happen to Clinton McCauley!)

"Johnny, what . . . ?"

"Follow me. Listen to me. Believe me, Dotty."

He started up the stairs, dragging her. There was nobody below the stairs to stop them but Blanche stood at the top.

"Dorothy, dear? We are ready. Mr. Sims, please . . ."

"I've got to see Nan."

"But you can't."

"Yes, I can," said Johnny loudly. "I am bringing her a wedding present."

"Not now, Mr. Sims." Blanche was propriety outraged. "Please go downstairs at once."

"No, Mrs. Bartee." Johnny stood his ground. "I have something to tell her."

Dick Bartee came out of a door up the hall. Big. Thunderous. "What's this?"

Dorothy said feebly, "I don't know."

Johnny swung around. "Bartee. I came up with a wedding present. Let me give it to you both at once. Where is Nan?"

"We don't need anything from you," Dick said truculently.

The door of the back bedroom shook. Then it opened. There was Nan, in white, without a veil, her bridehood in her face. Young and fair and solemn—in the dream.

Johnny didn't move toward her but he sent his voice. "Nan, please let me tell you both something? Something to make you glad."

Nan said in a low voice, "I don't need to be told. I know Dick is innocent."

Dick moved and put his frame between her and the others. "If you are still trying to mess up this wedding, Sims, I can throw you down the stairs and that right quick."

Johnny said, "For Nan's sake, let me explain." He looked earnestly into the gray eyes, which were hot and suspicious. "Then I will dance at your wedding," Johnny said. "Believe me."

Bart came up the stairs. "What's holding . . .? What's this?" Blanche made a nerve-wracked sound.

Dick said to Nan tenderly, "You don't have to listen to him, love. Shall I take him away?"

"If Johnny wants to apologize," she said, with the little prim dignity of old, "I think we should let him do it, Dick. We all want to be happy."

Dorothy wailed suddenly, "Johnny! Dancel!"

Blanche said, "The guests will hear."

Bart said, "Get into a room. We'll have this out."

Johnny said, "Where is Christy's picture?"

"I have it," Nan said.

Bart brushed off the pawing appeal of Blanche's nervous hand. "Whatever this is, we can't just say hush-hush," he

told her sternly. "Now, get in here, all of us and let me close the door."

Bart closed the door and stood against it. His smooth face was inscrutable. But Johnny knew Bart was on his side.

So they were all in the back bedroom, closed in. The room was not neat. A girl, getting ready for her wedding, had left her fragrant traces. There on the dresser, propped against the wall, was Christy's picture.

Johnny seized it with both hands. "And me the young scientist!" he said. "Me, the biology professor! *Look at this!*"

Christy's young face laughed out at them all. "Nan, dear, here is 'something blue' for the bride. Do you see her blue eyes?" Johnny had taken the floor. He commanded all the attention. He had to do it with a certain overbearing flamboyance. "Now look at *Dorothy!*" he cried.

"But why should I look at Dorothy?" said Nan, bewildered.

"Because," said Johnny, "*Aunt Emily changed you two around!* You are *not* Christy and Clinton McCauley's child. You *cannot be*. So Dorothy is."

Dorothy said faintly, "What?"

"Science." Johnny put the picture down. "I don't care what anyone says. You can't get away from discovered laws. Don't forget, I saw Clinton McCauley in prison. And his eyes are *blue, blue, blue.*" He hammered it at them. This was the touchy moment. (Johnny gave thanks that Bart was on his side.)

"Well?" said Dick Bartee distastefully.

Inside Johnny, something relaxed. He didn't let it show. "Don't you know what that means?" he cried. "It means that Nan *cannot* be their child. Dorothy is. Emily protected Nan in depth, I guess. Don't ask me why she did it. But it has absolutely got to be so. Your eyes are brown, Nan."

"Well, I—know they are," Nan said in confusion.

Bart stirred, "That's true," he said flatly, "two blue-eyed people—"

"Cannot have a brown-eyed child," finished Johnny, in almost a shout. "Of course, it's true!"

Dick Bartee said, still with that air of distaste, "What are you trying to do, now?"

"I am only trying to show Nan," Johnny turned to her. "See what this means? What is Clinton McCauley to you?"

An uncle you never knew. I am setting *you* free of the whole ancient history. It wasn't *your* mother."

"You mean I'm not . . .? You mean . . .?"

"Clinton McCauley never mentioned to you which girl was his daughter?" asked Dick scornfully.

"Clinton McCauley used her right name," snapped Johnny. "Mary," he used."

"Miss McCauley? In the hospital? On her death bed?"

"Kept up her deep defense, yes. But she didn't know she was on her death bed. Emily didn't expect to die."

Johnny thought the gray eyes reacted. (He had already noted the easy use of the right name for Emily.) Dick said, a trifle stiffly, "And why didn't you think of this before?"

"Because I'm stupid," said Johnny promptly. "Because I first saw Christy's picture under conditions of stress."

"This means you are willing, *now*, to concede that I never killed anybody?" Dick's voice was loud and a little angry. "How is that?"

"Perhaps I was reaching," Johnny said. "I had a reason."

"You sure had," said Dick angrily.

"I don't know what to think," gasped Blanche. "How could—?"

Bart's hand tightened on her arm and she was still.

"Yes, hold on a minute," Dick said. "You mean to tell me the lawyer who handled the money? Come off it, Sims," Dick smiled. But he wasn't easy. The big animal was wary.

Johnny said, "Look, I don't legislate the laws of nature. But I teach this stuff. I know what they are."

(It wasn't going to work. Yes, it must. Johnny had a desperate idea.)

"Listen, please, all be quiet. Try an experiment. Be quiet, everyone." He still held them. Nan's face was puzzled. Dorothy looked dazed. Dick was listening, watching, taut as an animal in the woods. Johnny looked at no one person, said into the silence, softly, "Polly? Polly McCauley?"

Nan stared at him as if he had surely lost his mind. But Dorothy lifted her face. Her blue eyes softened. "Polly McCauley," she repeated, just as softly.

"You've heard that before?"

"Yes." She looked at him, trustfully.

"Who was it," Johnny said, in the deepening hush, "used to call you 'Polly McCauley'?"

"My—my father?" Then Dorothy looked around as if she woke, and burst into tears.

Johnny reached out to hold her. He blessed her in his heart. He held her tightly.

Bart said, "I remember that. He did call the baby 'Polly McCauley.' *You* remember that, Dick."

"Yes, I do," said Dick Bartee in a colorless voice. He had gone within, remembering.

(He had things to remember. Emily, on her death bed, crying, "You'll never marry Clinton's child!" Damn the woman! He'd gone too fast. He ought to have made sure what she meant.)

Nan said, "But don't cry, Dotty? Why should she cry?"

Dorothy's head was pressed to Johnny's shoulder.

Bart said aloud and clearly, "But then, the money must belong to Miss Dorothy?"

Deep silence enclosed the sound of Dorothy's small sobbing.

Nan said, "I guess—Does it, Johnny?"

Johnny said impatiently, "The point is, Nan, *you* are clear of it. So there's my wedding gift. And I hope we are friends."

"Oh yes!" said Nan radiantly. "And everything is better! Dick?"

Dick said in a warm thrilling voice, "Darling!"

Bart said, "I can't help it. I am somewhat concerned—what *about* the money?"

"No doubt about the money. At least one letter exists," said Johnny confidently, "to show that your father meant the money for *McCauley's* child."

Dick was listening; he was alert; he said nothing.

"And we can *prove* that Nan is not McCauley's child," Johnny went on. "In court. Any time."

"You and Dorothy can prove it?" said Dick, in malicious innuendo.

"That's right—" said Johnny. His grin was triumph. Antagonism was raw.

"I begin to understand your reasons better," Dick purred. "Fancy? I thought they were sentimental."

"That's that," said Bart, with finality, as if he punctuated thoughts of his own about the money.

"But what shall we do?" quavered Blanche. "The people downstairs? Shall I go tell them the ceremony is postponed?"

Nan said, "No, no. Not at all. Dotty will be all right, in

a minute. Dotty, don't cry any more. We'll be right down, tell them." Nan was pumping up the dream. "Johnny, thank you. But you go downstairs now. And, Dick, darling, go down and wait for me?"

Dick seemed to hesitate. Johnny said to him, mockingly, "Why don't you call Copeland long distance? Check up on the matter? *Before* the ceremony?" Johnny's green eyes met the gray eyes.

"What is there to check?" Dick said easily. "Nan is still Nan. Is Dorothy surely all right?" he added.

Dorothy straightened her back and lifted her head. "A little powder and paint," she said in her normal voice. The blue eyes were wet.

Johnny kissed her. Dick Bartee was there to see. Then Johnny went out of the back bedroom. Blanche followed, and passed him, scurrying down the stairs to her social responsibilities.

Dick Bartee came out. Johnny turned his head. Johnny could read nothing in the eyes. "Well," Johnny said with his own face a blank, "wish you luck."

"Luck to you too." The lips drew back from the perfect teeth. "When and if we meet in court."

"You are sure you want to meet me in a court?" asked Johnny.

Dick's eyes lost any look of seeing. They went dead. They blotted Johnny out. Dick turned away.

Johnny started down, hunting back for the exact flavor of the exchange. Bart caught him up. Their eyes slid sideways to each other's.

"Science is a wonderful thing," said Bart dryly.

CHAPTER 20

DICK BARTEE WENT along the upstairs hall toward the front of the house. He stopped before a door on the right and listened. Blanche and Bart were hosts, downstairs. So he

swung boldly into their bedroom, where there was a telephone.

Waiting for the long distance call to go through, he held his jaw clenched. It was the only sign of his anger.

Mr. Copeland's office regretted that Mr. Copeland was not in today.

"Try his home," Dick said. The operator got the home number.

A woman's voice answered there.

"Long distance, calling Mr. Charles Copeland."

"He's away. This is Mrs. Copeland. Who . . .?"

"I'll talk to Mrs. Copeland," Dick broke in.

The operator retreated.

"Can you tell me where I can reach your husband?" He sent his voice purring north. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but it's rather important."

"Well, he flew down to Hestia," the voice said. "I don't know exactly where. I'm sorry."

"Can you tell me how long he'll be there?" Dick said in a moment.

"Oh, I should think not very long." The voice was responding to his purr. It wanted to please. "He only had to break the news of a—a death, you see. I'm hoping he will be home this evening, since he flew."

"I see. That's sad."

"Yes, it is," she said plaintively. "Of course, I suppose it was his duty." The voice was brave and lonely.

"You wouldn't know the name of the people, Mrs. Copeland, where I might call?"

"The name. Yes, he did tell me. It's McCauley." She went on when she heard no reaction. "That's all I know. I don't suppose that helps . . ."

"It may help," said Dick softly. "Thank you very much."

"Not at all. Whom shall I say . . .?"

But he had hung up.

His eyes flickered; the lids came down. He took two strides out the door. In the hall he patted his tie. He was frowning. Then he walked, and his feet dragged, toward the stairs.

Johnny went into the parlor, became a wedding guest. Marshall was there. They nodded but did not speak. The

minister was waiting in the study, for a signal. The parlor waited. Johnny waited.

(Would it work? Science is the bugaboo today. People, believing in nothing else, believe in science. Let him believe it, Johnny prayed. Let him think he isn't marrying the money. Keep him unable to remember that McCauley's eyes are brown. As Bart remembers. Let him betray that it's the money.)

Upstairs, Nan said, "Can you fix your face, Dotty? Don't spoil my wedding."

Dorothy was holding a cold, wet cloth to her eyes. "I'll be all right."

"I wonder," Nan wandered on the rug, "which of us is the older, then?"

"I don't know. Not much difference. Doesn't matter." Dorothy inspected her eyes, picked up a cake of make-up.

Nan, waiting, fingered the small jeweled pin on her shoulder. "I guess you should have this," she said, in rather a wistful voice. "It's not mine, at all. It's *your* mother's pin."

"I wouldn't touch it!" said Dorothy violently. "*Kate's pin!*"

Nan seemed to stagger and step back.

"When my father's been locked up, away from me, for seventeen years, because of it? When I could have had a father, all this time! I wouldn't touch it—I'm going to see him tomorrow."

Nan said, "Tomorrow?" Her eyes were wide and solemn.

"The quickest I can."

"Johnny will take you, I guess," Nan said remotely. She looked as if she were tasting and examining this emotion. This reaction.

"I look all right," sighed Dorothy. "Come on. Let's get you married to this Dick, since you insist. Johnny and I can start north by noon."

"Bart is your uncle, Dot. Old Mrs. Bartee is your great-grandmother. These are your own people."

"They never gave up things for me," said Dorothy. "They thought my blood was bad. Emily is *my* people. I don't forget the years of Emily. But I wish she'd told me, from the beginning. I could have taken it." Dorothy looked tall, vibrant and strong.

"I—I could have taken it, too," said Nan weakly. "I mean, if it had been me. Dick and I were going to see—Mr.

McCauley, of course. I just put Dick first, because I'm in love." It was as if Nan saw the reaction one ought to have had, a little too late.

"So am I," said Dorothy. "I've been in love with Johnny Sims these three years gone. I just adore him."

The cousins stood still, facing each other.

Nan said, in a moment, "Well, I suppose you can have Johnny. And you'll have the money and all. I'm glad."

Dorothy said contemptuously, "I don't need the money. I wouldn't bother with it. Johnny half loves me already and I'll study to please him with all my heart. *You* take the money."

Nan blinked.

"You can call it my wedding present," said Dorothy recklessly. "All I can think, is that I've got a father! And Johnny, to help me find out the truth about my mother's murder."

"But if your father—did it?" Nan was looking for absolution.

"I'm not afraid of the truth," Dorothy said. "But if he *didn't* do it, Nan. I won't make any sacrifices or keep any secrets, for anyone's sake."

Nan knew what was meant.

"What would *you* f-feel," quavered Nan, "if Johnny were accused? You'd believe in him." Nan's eyes were clouded.

"Ah, but Johnny," said Dorothy, "I *know*. Also, I know and I like his ancestors. That's a little different. Come on. Ready?"

The bride's throat moved. She looked into the glass. "Ready," she said.

Johnny stood in the parlor. Someone had put a record on the player. The people hushed. Blanche moved in to stand beside the old lady's chair. Everyone stood quietly waiting.

The minister came, wearing a robe, carrying his book. He put it on the lectern. He stood quietly.

Dick Bartee and one of the men (Johnny didn't know him) came in together. Stood to the minister's left. Dick was composed, at least on the surface. The gray eyes rested on the minister—cold and even faintly hostile.

Dorothy came in, walking gracefully, her head up. Her

eyes were brilliant and met nobody's eyes. She went to stand at the minister's right.

The groom looked at the bridesmaid. His throat moved.

Then, Bart came in, with Nan on his arm. Here came the bride, in white, head down, dark eyes shy. Walking with that funny little dignity which was a defensive vanity. Johnny knew she wasn't sure of herself. Somebody should back her up, he thought with an old pang.

The music was the only sound.

Bart brought the bride to the groom. The groom did not look at her, looked over her head, at the bridesmaid.

The minister began the familiar phrases. "Dearly beloved . . ."

He came to "Who gives this woman to be married?"

Bart drew away. Nan looked very small. Now nobody backed her up.

There was an extraordinary tension in the room. The bride swayed. The minister stopped speaking. His eyes were full of doubt and question. For just a moment the ceremony seemed to have frozen, to have come to a stop upon a point where the equilibrium was perfect, between yes and no. Then decision rippled across the group like fire in grass.

The groom's hand came under the bride's elbow. The groom's head bent, sollicitously. The bride's head came up. She smiled. The minister cleared his throat.

The ceremony continued. Until it was over.

They were married.

The wedding guests closed upon the couple with little coos. But Johnny Sims moved disconsolately away into the hall, out through the double doors, to stand upon the porch, to look into the thicket of trees, seeing nothing but defeat. So much for tricks, he thought.

Someone came out behind him after a while and it was Marshall. "Too bad."

Johnny couldn't lift his tongue to make an agreeing sound.

The bride cut the cake. For some reason, the wedding guests were more comfortable making a fuss of the old lady. The old lady rather expected it. So the groom said into the bride's ear, "Change, love? Let's get away soon."

"Should we?"

"Who cares whether we should? Hurry. Do you want Dorothy?" He looked impatient. "You girls will talk."

Nan picked up the white skirt in her two hands and turned her foot. "No, we won't. I don't want to talk. I want us to get away. I don't need Dorothy. I'll change."

"Do, love," he approved softly.

The bride slipped out of the dining room and up the stairs. The groom drifted past the bridesmaid.

"Help Nan?" he whispered in her ear.

Dorothy turned brilliant eyes. "Of course," she said graciously.

But when Dorothy got up to Nan's door and opened it, Nan said coolly, "Don't bother, Dotty. I can manage. You go back down."

"All right," said Dorothy placidly. She withdrew, closing the door.

Nobody was in the upstairs hall—except the bridegroom. He came to her before she reached the top of the stairs. "Dear Dorothy," he said and put one arm hard and tight around her shoulders. His other hand came cruelly to her face. It held her jaws and the pain shocked her. The violence shocked her.

Then he put her on his hip and more or less carried her down the deserted hall to the front bedroom that used to be Nathaniel's. He stood her on her feet inside the room. He was able to manage her with one hand, one arm, because her bones were so softened, her muscles so flaccid, her flesh so sagging with shock and fear. He closed and locked the door behind them.

Downstairs, Johnny Sims re-entered the house. He strode down the wide re-carpeted hall to the study, the room where Christy had died. He found the phone and dialed long distance. He had failed and Grimes, Copeland, Father Klein . . . You stood up to failure. He had failed, and Clinton McCauley would have to be told.

Dorothy could not speak. The big man's big hand would not permit it. His eyes were not such as to be spoken to. "Dear Dorothy," he said, "a rotten error. I would rather have had you my living bride."

Her feet could not resist against the floor, could not even touch the floor, as he swung her toward the side of the room. "But I'll hang you in my closet," said Dick Bartee,

"like an old suit I don't bother to take. Hang you by your pretty neck . . ."

His lips came and kissed her neck. Her flesh crawled. She arched and struggled to no avail.

"You'll be a suicide," Dick said, "Lovely Dorothy. So young. But I'll have the Bartee money."

She tried desperately to wag her head, no.

"Nan's your only family," Dick said. "McCauley is dead. Never mind how I know."

He had the closet door open now. "You don't think I'll do this?" He was amused. "You don't think I dare? I'll do it and no one will believe I did it. They'll all say I wouldn't have dared." He chuckled. "People have always been saying I wouldn't have dared. But, you see, I do dare."

He had a flannel sash from a bathrobe in his free hand.

"It takes so little time to kill," he told her. "You'll be surprised."

She knew he was beyond the reach of any word, even if she could have spoken. She couldn't speak, or cry out—couldn't fight his bulk and strength. She was helpless.

"One blow for Christy," he said. "Took one moment. It did surprise me. Took longer for Miss McCauley."

The sash was coming around her neck but Dorothy did not even feel it. Her heart was sinking in such horror and such sorrow. "Five minutes," Dick said, "which is a long time. I wanted to be sure. And I couldn't leave a mark. It won't be so long for you. The time you take to die in the closet," he said, "I can use to change my coat."

The sash tightened. His one hand had two ends of it at the back of her neck and were twisting. When the sash was effectively choking off her breath and speech he used both hands to make the knot.

"I'll rush Nan out of here," he told her. He was smiling confidently. "Nobody will find you, for quite some time. We'll be far away. Honeymoons are spent in secret places. Take time to find us. They won't imagine. If you are just bold enough—Did you know this, Dotty? You are practically invisible. You can do whatever you want."

Now he had her by the waist in one hard arm, lifting her. The other hand was fixing the sash somewhere high.

He finished the task. He looked into her eyes. "I wish I had known" he said a little regretfully. "I wish I'd paid at-

tention." His voice went into exasperation. "I never bothered about the color of people's eyes."

Then he let go at her waist and her weight came down. Her head went tight and then light. She writhed. She vaguely knew he was fixing an old suitcase near her feet, but she lost the ability to hear or to see . . .

Dick closed the closet door.

Into the phone downstairs Johnny said, "Emily! *Emily!*"

"Warrant out for him," Grimes was barking on the far end of the line. "Sheriff's office. Copeland ought to be there, by now. Listen, we haven't *got* him, Johnny. We haven't absolutely got the proof."

"What have you got?" Johnny gasped.

"Got his rented car near the Schmidt Memorial, right time. Got a man with a hat on, *in* the room. Got a red-headed woman saw the man with the hat come out. But she didn't see the face. Can't identify. Don't you admit that, mind."

Johnny said, "Emily!" once more, and then, although he made no further sound, he thought that he was cursing in a loud voice.

Grimes said, "Wait for the law. Then try to rattle him. Get an admission. Trick him, if you can."

Johnny hung up. Then, he was in the hall and he saw Copeland there, with Marshall and Bart Bartee.

Copeland said, "I took a cab. Deputy's slow. Close behind me, though. I *hope*."

Johnny said, "Where—?"

Bart Bartee answered, divining the real question. "Gone up to change. Nan and Dorothy, too. He's upstairs."

Johnny thought he was raging, shouting. Actually he made no sound with his mouth but his feet pounded on the Bartee's stairs.

The three men followed after, exchanging panted bits of information.

Johnny banged open Nan's door. She was in her slip, alone. She squealed, "Johneee . . . !"

"Where is Dick Bartee?"

"You stop!" she wailed. "You leave us alone!"

"Where is he?"

"I won't tell you." She stamped her foot—a child in temper.

Johnny turned and went down the hall slamming doors open. A place of deep shelves, a bathroom, an empty bedroom, Dorothy's perfume . . .

He came to the door to the front bedroom that used to be Nathaniel's. This door was locked.

"Barteel" he shouted.

No answer.

"Water's running someplace in there," puffed Marshall.

Bart said, "His bathroom. He can't hear."

Johnny lifted up his foot and began to kick at the lock of the door. Loud, hard blows.

Blanche came hurrying up the stairs.

Dick's voice said, inside the room, "What the? Come in, why don't you?"

"Unlock the door!" bawled Johnny.

"It's not locked."

Johnny kicked it again.

Then the key began to work inside, at the lock. Dick opened the door. "Who locked my door?" he said, looking astonished. "What's going on?"

Johnny raged through, feeling nine feet tall.

"Now, just a minute," said Dick Bartee and his fists curled, his shoulders tightened for the giving of blows.

Johnny knew about foot-fighting. Johnny's long right leg swung up and Johnny's shoe caught Dick Bartee on the side of the jaw. He staggered back and fell.

Marshall and Copeland and Bart Bartee had come into the room.

Johnny stood, dead white with fury, and he thought he was shouting curses, looking down.

Dick Bartee, on the floor, presented a face of astonishment and even respect. Violence impressed him?

Then Nan was screaming. Nan, in her slip, pushed through the men, screaming, and flung herself down upon Dick.

"Shut up, Nan," said Johnny in a voice of thunder. "Shut up! Be quiet!"

He wanted the noise to stop, the noise of the curses in his brain, the thundering and roaring of his own blood. He was almost deaf with the noises, but not quite.

His brain was getting a little signal.

And Johnny, with a mighty effort of his will, began to

listen to the brain. There was tapping somewhere in this room—a rat-a-tat. What? Where? Inside this door?

Johnny yanked open the closet door and there was Dorothy hanging in the closet, her pink dress flowing downward, her toes chattering on the wall, her body turned and swayed and turned around, from where it was hanging by the neck.

Nan screamed again on a pitch of terror.

Johnny stepped into the closet and grabbed the swaying body in both his arms. He lifted. He held it with one arm. His other hand fumbled and tugged to try to loosen the terrible tightness of the cloth around the neck.

Marshall's hands came, helping to tear the sash, away from the high hook.

Johnny staggered and went down on one knee with Dorothy's body across the other.

Nan was screaming, "Dotty! Dotty." She had turned her face into Dick Bartee's shoulder and he said loudly, "What's going on here! Dorothy!"

Then Bart Bartee was saying to Johnny, "Doctor Jenson is downstairs. Give her to me."

CHAPTER 21

JOHNNY LOOKED UP from the wreck of beauty, the havoc of Dorothy's face. He looked up at Bart and their eyes held.

"Too late," said Johnny.

"I'll take her. Try . . ." So Bart took her up in his arms and Copeland helped. They carried the limp pink thing out of the bedroom and Bart was shouting, "Doctor Jenson"—and then the door closed. Johnny turned to face Dick Bartee.

Dick had scrambled to his feet by now and Nan was on her feet, too, held up in his arm.

"Dorothy!" said Dick with bulging eyes. "How the devil did she get in there?"

"What is it?" wailed Nan. "Oh, what is it? What happened?"

Johnny was taking a deep, deep breath and resolution was pouring through him. "Sit down on the bed, Nan," he said in a voice of command, "and if I hear one more girlish shriek from you, I will throw you out of this room."

"Oh, no, you won't," said Dick angrily. "My wife—" But he had let her go and Nan was staggering toward the bed. She sank upon it.

Johnny said, "Going to get this plain. Here and now. First, you killed Christy. We broke your alibi."

"That's right," said Marshall heavily.

"Don't be silly," said Dick Bartee. "For God's sake, what happened to Dorothy?"

"You killed Emily Padgett," said Johnny. "In the hospital. Your car was seen there. You were seen in the room. Seen in the corridor. A woman can identify—"

"Ridiculous," said Dick. "Nan, pay no attention. This man is obsessed . . ."

"Dick was with me," said Nan. "Johnny, you're crazy."

"Shut up, you little fool," said Johnny coldly. "His specialty is fooling young girls. You're not the first one."

The door opened and Copeland came in. He shook his head. "The sheriff's deputy is on the way. Should be here. With the warrant." He looked nervous.

"Warrant? For what?" snapped Dick.

"For you. Murder of Emily Padgett."

Nan didn't scream. Nan leaned on both arms; her dark eyes were bewildered. "Mr. Copeland?" she said feebly.

Copeland said, "Did Dick Bartee know Emily was in that hospital? Did you tell him?"

Nan said, "But he *wouldn't*—"

The door opened once more. Outside, somewhere in the house, a woman was weeping, loud, shuddering sobs. Blanche? Bart closed the door behind himself, shutting off the sound. He looked at Johnny and said tensely, "The doctor can't get a reaction. Sorry—"

"Now, you've killed Dorothy," Johnny shouted. "You lousy murderer!"

"I! Killed *Dorothy*! Look here!"

Nan said, "Johnny, *why* do you say Dick's a murderer?"

"Because that's what he is," said Johnny.

"Dorothy? How?" Dick said. "But she must have got in, locked the door. I was in the bathroom. You think I hung up Dorothy in the closet and then calmly went to wash my face! You're crazy! She did it to herself. Must have!"

"Suicide?" said Bart sharply. "Why would she do that?"

Dick mopped his face. "How do I know? Oh, Lord, poor Dorothy. The disgrace, maybe. Her father? Her mother . . . ?"

Nan said slowly, "But Dotty didn't . . . feel disgraced." Her dark eyes were open very wide. She stared at Dick.

Johnny said, "Are you waking up? It was the money."

"What money?" Dick exploded. "Now, listen and I'll have to be ungentlemanly because this man is obsessed. I happen to know Dorothy—thought about me—too much. Nevertheless, I married Nan."

"A broken heart?" said Bart Bartee and his voice was thin with contempt and disbelief.

Nan said, "But Dorothy—Dorothy's been in love with Johnny these three years gone, she said."

"Ah, little Nan," said Dick Bartee, with pity. "So innocent . . . What Dorothy said."

"He wants the money," shouted Johnny. "Can't you get that into your innocent little head. He has always wanted the money and nothing but the money—unless it was Dorothy."

Dick Bartee's eyes flashed. "And how will this get me any money?"

"I don't know," said Johnny to himself.

Nan sat straighter. "No," she said primly. "No, it isn't the money and I've proved it. I didn't tell Dick what Dorothy said. Dorothy said she didn't want the money, I could have it. But I thought if he married me, just me, then that would prove."

She looked around at the stony faces and her chin began to shake. "Prove . . ." Her voice went up. "Prove!" She looked as if she'd fly to pieces. "Dotty?"

Charles Copeland went to her, sat down beside her, held her.

Marshall said, "But it's incredible! That he could do such a thing! Hang a girl! Here! Now!"

"Preposterous," said Dick. "Whatever happened to poor Dorothy, you will never prove that I had anything to do with it."

"You don't give up yet?" said Johnny softly.

"Give up? Give up what! What do you think you can do to me? Where is your proof?" The splendid animal was fierce and brave.

Johnny stepped backwards, took the door knob, opened the door to the hall.

"Here I am," said Dorothy Padgett in a tortured voice that had to come from a mangled throat.

Something behind Dick Bartee's eyes gave up—and Johnny saw it. But Dick's body sat down and crossed its legs.

"He told me how long it took to kill the others," croaked Dorothy. "Emily!" Her face was no longer that terrible color but it was terrible.

Johnny had her cold fingers in his own. "All right, we've got him," he said in a shaking voice. "Will somebody keep me from killing him, here and now, before the law comes?"

Johnny could feel how Dorothy was trembling. Dorothy's fingers clutched his and she said hoarsely, yet clearly, "I would like to be the one to tell him."

"Yes," said Johnny.

". . . that my Uncle Clinton McCauley's eyes are brown," said the blue-eyed girl.

Johnny watched Dick's eyes with bitter pleasure.

Bart said, "You bit, Dick. You never paid any attention. You didn't even remember the baby's eyes. Sims rattled you."

Dick rose. "McCauley is dead," he said stiffly.

"What gave you that idea?" said Charles Copeland. "And what's the difference! Nan's his daughter. The money has nothing to do with Dorothy."

"I?" Nan said.

"You had married the money," Johnny said to Dick Bartee, "all cosy. You were home safe. You bet you were. Not now."

From Nathaniel's front windows they could all tell that a car was coming in.

"There's the law, thank God," gasped Copeland.

"Dick?" said Nan. "You didn't? It isn't true?"

Dick Bartee didn't even look at her. "Sorry to skip out on my honeymoon," he said jauntily, "but I don't think I'll wait for the law."

He turned to the side window. He wagged his hips and

crashed the glass out. He put one knee on the sill and his head and shoulders through before anyone could move.

Nan screamed. "No, Dick, no! Don't leave me! I believe in you! I *do*! I know it isn't true!"

She was away from Copeland, off the bed, crawling and scrambling after her dream. She caught at Dick's leg. He lifted it to kick her off. But Nan had it embraced, clutched fiercely. She was on her knees and she fainted backward. Dick had no balance, now. His other knee slipped off the sill. His body came in and downward. Upon the jagged shard, left in the lower sash, his naked throat came down.

Four days later, Johnny pulled his car up at the prison, got out and helped the girls out.

Nan whimpered. "I'm afraid."

"Don't be afraid," Johnny said mechanically.

Nan was so small, so forlorn. Although she was better. Johnny and Copeland had got Nan away from the law, (although there would be ordeals, inquiries, suspicion of manslaughter—before they could get her altogether free.) Dick Bartee was dead and gone. So they'd got Nan back north, and into the strong hands of Johnny's mother. Barbara Sims had pumped courage into her, helped her, got her in some measure, together again.

Now, of course, this was going to be an ordeal.

Johnny helped her to walk. Dorothy walked by herself. It was Dorothy who had stayed behind, two days, in Hestia and stood up to all the questioning.

Father Klein welcomed them. "He is waiting, my dear. He has been waiting for this a very long time."

McCauley was better. The resolution of the dilemma had put him back together again, rather swiftly. He'd be out on parole soon.

"We won't go in," said Johnny. "You go, Nan."

"No, Johnny, Dotty, please? Come with me?" Nan was shivering.

"He wants to see all three of you," the chaplain said.

The frail little man was waiting in the chaplain's office, white head bent down.

McCauley said, "I am a little afraid. Is it really she?"

Nan's face began to change. "Don't be afraid," she said. "Father?"

"This is your daughter, sir. And this is her cousin, Dorothy," Johnny spoke up. He had to be very cheerful, loud, and hearty. Somebody had to be.

"Thank you for all you have done," McCauley's brown eyes sent up to him a look of piercing gratitude.

"Thank Dorothy, too."

"I do thank Dorothy."

Dorothy said, with that sturdy sweetness, "I'm glad to meet you at last, Uncle Clinton."

"That's right," he mused. "You are Essie McCauley and Gordon O'Hara's child."

Nan's face had color. "I am Polly McCauley," she said shyly.

The man looked at her directly for the first time. "Oh, my poor Polly McCauley. My dear little one." The heart seemed to rush out of the frail body toward her. "What a terrible bad time you must have had!"

Nan was very still. Everyone was still.

Then Nan said, "You've had the bad time. Oh, tell me." She sat down. She put out her hands. "What shall I call you? Father? Dad? I'll take care of you now, and you'll help me?"

She had said the exact right thing. McCauley wept for joy.

Johnny touched Dorothy's arm. They slipped away. They went out into the air. They stood, leaning against a little parapet. They wept for McCauley, and neither let the other see.

After a while Dorothy sighed, "I'm glad I am Miss O'Hara-Padgett. I thought I might have to . . ."

"Hire an experienced snooper?" Johnny watched a gull. The gull was free.

Dorothy didn't answer.

"Dot, do you know what color a ceanothus petal is?"

"I . . ." She looked started. "Blue," she said.

Johnny leaned and saw the world fresh and beautiful and steady. Dorothy fidgeted.

"They'll be all right, I suppose?" she blurted.

"Sure. All right now."

"Johnny, they won't. He is not of this world and Nan's going to be utter devotion or something impractical. *Somebody* will have to look after them."

"Not me," said Johnny.

"No?" Dorothy was surprised.

"Well, not excessively. I've figured it out—watching over people," Johnny told her, rather harshly. "Keeping secrets to 'protect' them. Look at the whole list. George Rush protected Dick. Why? To protect himself from being expelled. Blanche protected Dick. Why? To protect herself from punishment, for disobedience and for burglarizing. Old Mrs. Bartee protected Nathaniel from being thrown out on the world. Why? For love, maybe. And that was wrong, too. All of them wrong. Because Rush wasn't innocent, Blanche wasn't innocent, Nathaniel wasn't innocent and Dick Bartee, Lord knows, wasn't innocent. Only one person protected someone rightfully. That was Emily. She protected the truly innocent—the little baby. Everyone else should have faced the consequences of what he himself had done. Otherwise, it's no good. It's not even kind."

"I know," said Dorothy.

"I should have given Nan the whole truth as soon as I knew it."

"Me, too," said Dorothy softly. "But we didn't. And now it isn't her fault, really, that she never learned. She . . . Johnny, it won't be easy for her for a long time."

"Who says," drawled Johnny, "that things have got to be easy? That is a dream."

Dorothy sighed.

"You know what's a better dream? To want the truth, have the truth and take the truth, and learn and be . . ."

"Yes," said Dorothy, "that's a better dream, all right."

"I want to tell *you* something true," said Johnny abruptly. "When I got my arms around you in that closet and felt your heart beating . . ." His own heart stopped, for the memory.

"Bart said he *thought* . . ." Dorothy was a bit breathless. "He *thought* you wanted to fool Dick for a little while. When he told me about that blue-eyed bluff, he guessed you wanted to try another. Johnny, did it help, that Dick thought he *had* killed me?"

"Not much," said Johnny. "Tricks. I'm off of tricks, Dot. I want things plain. I hadn't finished a sentence." He looked at a gull. "Maybe I don't need to. Once you said that you could tell—"

She let him see, as he turned, miles deep into her blue eyes, clear and true. His breath caught.

"Yes, I can tell," said Dorothy gravely. Then, "Johnny, do you think we can possibly be happy?"

He knew what she meant. The ghost of Emily, the blood of Dick Bartee the tragedy of Nan—these memories were hovering and might always hover over the two of them when they were together.

This was going to be no romantic dream. This would not be Cloud Nine or any numbered cloud.

Here was J. Sims, just as he really was—sick and sore sad—and not much, in his own estimation. Here was also this lovely lively girl, so *real*, that he could hardly breathe.

"Dotty," he said soberly, "I'll tell you the truth. I could live—although I can't imagine how—without you."

Then she was in his arms, warm and fragrant and he felt her heart beating.

Now, surely, sweetly, they were mending, their wounds were closing, they were being healed and they could tell.

ACE BOOKS

are the publishers of the following novels by

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

G-501 THE UNSUSPECTED

"Extra suspenseful and satisfactorily shivery."

—*Saturday Review*

with **INCIDENT AT A CORNER**

"A grand short novel of intimate tension."

—*New York Times*

G-510 THE CASE OF THE WEIRD SISTERS

"Pleasantly creepy, excellently written, filled with fascinating characters, suspense and honest detecting."

—*Boston Globe*

G-511 THE CHOCOLATE COBWEB

"The narrative skill is considerable and the tale a tense performance."

—*Chicago Sun*

with **WHO'S BEEN SITTING IN MY CHAIR?**

First book publication of an intricately exciting novel.

50¢

Ask your newsdealer, or order directly from Ace Books, Inc. (Sales Dept.), 23 West 47th St., New York 36, N.Y. Enclose 50¢ per book, plus 5¢ handling fee.

"Something old, something new,
Something borrowed, SOMETHING BLUE!"

SOMETHING
OLD a story of murder and punishment
and changed identities—dead, bur-
ied and forgotten, until . . .

SOMETHING
NEW when romance came to an in-
nocent young girl who, without
knowing it, was living on . . .

SOMETHING
BORROWED
time! Until the very day of the wedding when . . .

SOMETHING
BLUE revealed as true that which
was untrue and presented
the bride with murder!

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

in a new novel of suspense