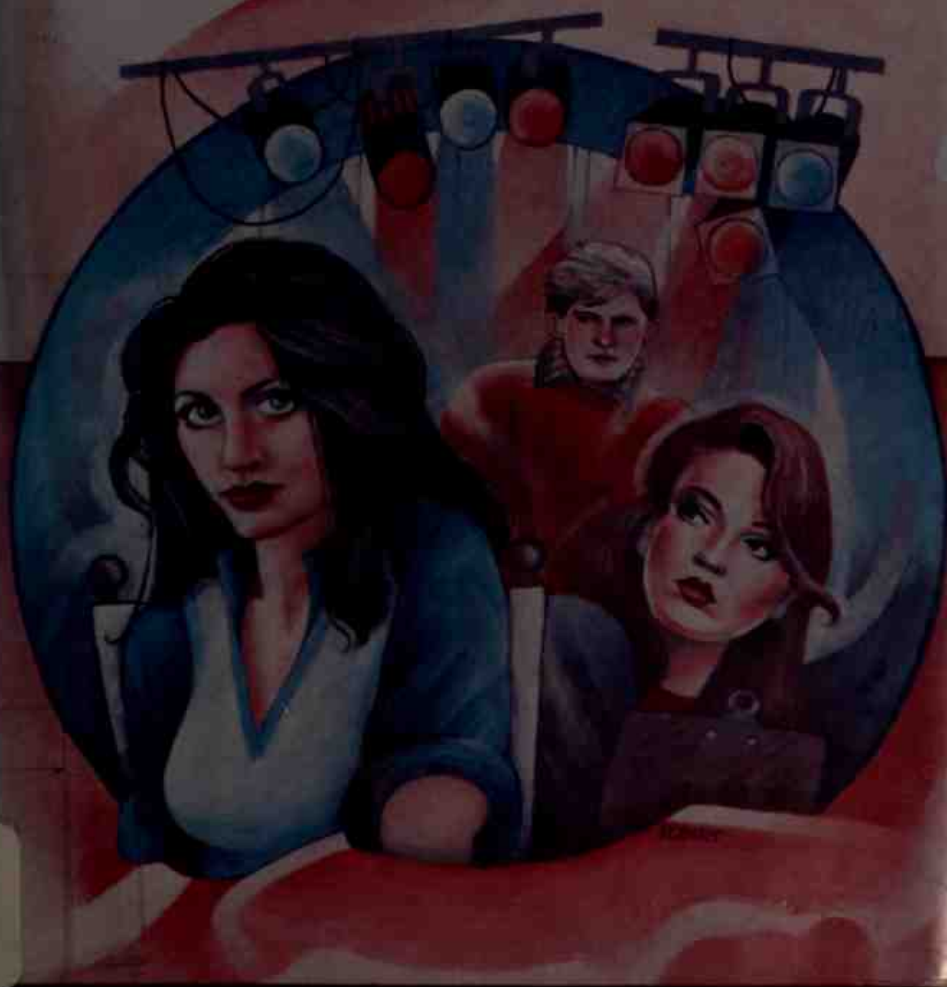


Onstage for Love

W.E.D. ROSS



ONSTAGE FOR LOVE
W.E.D. Ross

Beautiful. Talented. Lucky. That describes young Helen Green, the leading lady of Porthaven's regional theater. Not only is her career moving surely and swiftly, but she and Jim Prentiss, the theater's gifted set designer, share a very special closeness.

Then Alan Brown, the charismatic TV actor, comes to town to appear opposite Helen, and her whole world spins into a dizzying new orbit. She knows Alan has his faults, his moods—what dynamic, creative man doesn't?—but she can't help falling madly in love with him. And Helen is beside herself with joy when the glamorous Alan wants to join their lives both professionally and in marriage. Yet why does an inner voice warn her something is wrong?

Jacket design by Terrance Rogers

UN 19

SECRET OF MONTOYA MISSION

Dorothy Baughman

To her great surprise, Luci Whitney, with flaming red hair and a temperament to match, suddenly inherits a huge ranch. Little does she know, as she flies to New Mexico to claim her inheritance, that a ghost is said to live at the crumbling old Montoya Mission located on her property. Little does she dream of the treasure also reputed to be buried there, and the trouble it will cause her. Little does she imagine the turmoil she will soon find as she falls in love with two men—one blond and laughing, the other dark and brooding.

And little does Luci suspect how dangerous one, or both of them, can be. . .

Jacket design by Michele Maldeau

Onstage for Love

W.E.D. 1909

APALON BOOKS

ONSTAGE FOR LOVE

W.E.D. Ross

ARKANSAS CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY

AVALON BOOKS

THOMAS BOUREGY AND COMPANY, INC.
22 EAST 60TH STREET • NEW YORK 10022

© Copyright 1981 by W.E.D. Ross

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY HADDON CRAFTSMEN, SCRANTON, PENNSYLVANIA

To the Rev. James Bennett, CSSR, my editor for many years, whom I greatly respect and admire. His excellent advice and friendship meant a great deal to me in most difficult days.

CHAPTER ONE

It was a pleasant September afternoon in 1911 when I came from the Parsonage to the office of the renovated church building that served as the Methodist Episcopal Church. The town was quiet on the day that Sunday school was held, and the church was closed. It had only a small congregation, the theater was on the warpath, and the city was in a state of confusion.

The stately old building on Main Street had been in operation as the theater for many years. New officers and a new management had been elected, and the theater was now open. The first of the year, with a new company and a new management.

Twenty years earlier it had begun under the name of the "Theater" and had been a success.

CHAPTER ONE

It was a pleasant September afternoon as Helen Green drove from the Porthaven post office to the renovated church building that served as the Porthaven Regional Theater. The town was located on the New Hampshire coast just sixty miles from Boston and although it had only a small population, the theater drew on the surrounding territory for its support.

The stately old building on Shore Road had been in operation as the theater for nearly ten years. New offices and a lobby had been added to it, and the theater was now open eleven months of the year, with a resident company and occasional visiting stars.

Twenty years earlier it had begun quite modestly in a loft over a hardware store. But

for the last ten years of its existence the Porthaven Regional Theater had been a fairly successful operation.

It had been the natural place for Helen Green to pursue her acting career. Her mother, who had died in a car accident five years back, had been one of those who had started the theater. She had worked in the business office and contributed greatly to its success.

Helen had grown up in a theater atmosphere and while in high school in Porthaven had played numerous small parts, and on every such occasion had drawn praise for her performance. It was natural that she should go to Emerson College in Boston and major in dramatics. Now she was back at the Porthaven Theater and had worked her way up to leading roles.

In addition to being talented, Helen was beautiful. She was blessed with fine, perfect features, glossy black hair she wore at shoulder length, expressive green eyes, lovely olive skin, and a warm, throaty speaking voice.

Mason Trent, the producer and director of the group, had predicted, "You won't be with us here in Porthaven too long, Helen. You have the good looks and the talent. You're bound to go further!"

Helen was in a radiant mood at the moment. As she drove from the post office, the large envelope of mail addressed to the theater was on the seat of the station wagon beside her.

In regional theater even the leading ladies had extra jobs, and hers was to assist in the office and go for the mail every day. For they found it more convenient to pick up their own mail.

The battered station wagon bore the name of the theater in yellow letters on a wide black stripe. Under it was a notice about eight inches high by four feet wide with the words printed on it in red letters: NEXT PLAY: "A DOLL'S HOUSE."

And this was the source of her special delight. Helen had wanted to play Nora for a long time and had almost given up hope when Mason Trent all at once announced plans for the production. It would run for the last week in September to mid-November.

Line rehearsals had already started, and one of the apprentices read the part of Torvald, her husband in the play. The star that Mason Trent hoped to get to play the part had not yet given a positive answer. But they had to know within a few days. Because the regular rehearsals would soon be starting.

Shore Road was north of the post office, and upon reaching the theater, Helen turned the wagon into the asphalt parking lot next to it.

She picked up the envelope of mail, hurriedly got out of the station wagon, and made her way to the main theater office.

In early September, on a sunny day such as this, Porthaven was a magnet for tourists

from the Boston area and other places both south and north. Helen had spent most of her life in the town and had come to love it. In her blue jeans and white blouse, with her dark hair floating slightly in the wind, she made a pretty figure as she entered the side office door.

Her best friend, Irma Bruce, was busy at one of the several desks in the room addressing brochure envelopes on a typewriter. The pert red-haired girl, whose oval face was delicately freckled, looked up from her task with a smile, her gray eyes bright.

"Back so soon?" Irma asked. She was the ingenue of the company as well as being a typist.

Helen stopped by her desk. "Yes. Traffic was very light."

"Good," the other girl said. "Mason wants to see you. So you can take the mail right in."

"Ha!" Helen said, looking at her friend knowingly. "Is there some word?"

"I think so." Irma smiled. "Go in and find out."

Helen turned and made her way to the door marked PRIVATE at the other end of the fairly large office. She knocked on the door and heard the deep, friendly voice of Mason Trent invite her to come in.

She opened the door and with a smile put the envelope of mail on his desk. "I hear you have some news," she said.

Mason Trent nodded and stood up from behind the cluttered desk. He was a tall, lanky man with a shrewd smile and a long New England face. He was bald, with a fringe of gray hair, and had been an actor in summer stock and on Broadway for a number of years, not to mention his experience in touring companies, before he had come to produce and direct at Porthaven four years earlier—the year following Helen's mother's tragic death in the collision of her tiny car with a huge truck on the main highway.

Mason had taken a special interest in Helen since her coming from college to the theater three years earlier. He knew her mother had worked energetically at the playhouse up to the time of her death.

Now he smiled and, looking ruffled as usual, he walked around and placed a hand on her arm. "It's settled," he said. "He'll be here on Monday! Just three days away! I've got him! Alan Brown!"

She gasped. "Alan Brown!" She had known Trent was looking for a major name and had contacted three or four top stars. But she had not expected Alan Brown to accept. Not the well-known New York and Hollywood star, who had also made a reputation as the producer of a number of successful television shows via his company, All Star Productions.

Most interesting of all, he had been a member of the Porthaven Theater company in its

old loft days but had left years ago to seek the fame and fortune which had subsequently come to him. He was a legendary figure in Porthaven and especially to Helen, who regarded Alan Brown as something of an idol.

Mason Trent was studying her and smiling. "What do you think?"

"Wow!" she said. "I'm overwhelmed. Imagine me playing opposite Alan Brown! It's so—so fantastic, I'm scared stiff! I never really thought you'd get someone like him to come here."

"Don't underestimate me, my dear," Mason Trent said. "I've been working on this for months. He's a hard man to pin down, very busy. I finally got word he'd come only today. He's just asking a regular Equity salary for the deal. His way of helping us. Just his coming to appear with us is help enough!"

Helen was picturing the handsome, debonair Brown, whom she'd seen across the footlights and on movie or television screens. She had always found him to be extremely charming, with his infectious smile, wavy auburn hair, and poised manner. And, of course, he was a very fine actor. In fact, she had to admit to herself that she had a little crush on him, though she felt a bit foolish about it. For he was only an actor to her, not someone she knew. Oh, she did have a vague memory of him during his Porthaven years, but that was all very fuzzy.

She sighed. "I hope he'll be satisfied with me after all the famous leading ladies he's worked with."

Mason Trent chuckled. "Don't worry. I've told him you're going to be great as Nora. And he seemed very interested in having an unknown play opposite him. He'll arrive Monday and stay at the Wentworth House."

"Is his wife coming with him?" she said.

"Didn't you hear?" Trent asked. "He's divorced again. Broke up with his third wife about last December. The divorce just came through. He'll be alone."

"Do the others know?" she asked. "I mean, that he's coming here?"

"I'm posting it on the bulletin board tonight," the director said.

"We'll be finishing our run of *Chapter Two* while he's here rehearsing *Doll's House*," she said. "So he'll get an idea of our abilities."

"I'm sure he'll be satisfied," Mason Trent said. "And by the way, I'm having Denison Abbot back to play the blackmailer, Krogstad."

Helen showed surprise. "But the last I heard he had a heart attack while playing in summer stock."

"He did, but he's recovered," the director said. "I know he needs the work, so I've decided to take a chance on him. He's a fine actor, but he's elderly and, not being too well, a lot of directors might shy away from him."

"So if you give him this job and it works out,

he'll have less trouble getting other ones afterward," she reasoned.

"Exactly," the director said. "It will prove he's safe to hire."

"Everyone is going to be excited!" Helen predicted.

The director went back to his desk and sat down to go through the envelope of mail. He glanced up at her and said, "The only ones who know so far are you, Irma, and Grace Ebbett."

"What did Miss Ebbett think?"

He shrugged. "She seemed surprised, but I wouldn't say she was all that delighted. You know how she is. Wonderful business manager, but the very idea of a big star frightens her. I've explained that Alan Brown won't be expensive."

Helen smiled. "That should relieve some of her worries." She was a warm admirer of the fiftyish gray-haired Grace Ebbett, who had been the company's business manager since its founding.

The daughter of a wealthy cosmetics manufacturer, who with his brother had built an international corporation, Grace Ebbett had remained in the family home in Porthaven after her father's death. She had also stayed unmarried, devoting all her energies and part of her fortune to making the theater a success.

Helen's mother, Joan, had been younger than the business manager, but she and Grace

had worked together almost from the start of the theater and been close friends. And on her mother's death it had been Grace Ebbett who had seen to it that Helen had enough money to complete her education at Emerson College.

Mason Trent smiled at Helen as she turned to leave. "Don't let the excitement about Brown's coming spoil your performance to-night. We're doing good business with *Chapter Two*, and you're great in it!"

"I'm excited," Helen told him. "But not that excited." And she went out of his office.

Irma was still busily typing as Helen joined her.

The pretty redhead looked up and said, "Now you know!"

"Yes!" Helen enthused. "It should be wonderful!" And she whirled around happily at the idea.

"I hear he's a heartbreaker," Irma said. "You'll have to be careful!"

Helen grinned. "Maybe I already have a little crush on Alan Brown. But that's just a fantasy. In real life I have Jim, and he won't approve of my paying too much attention to another man."

"So you have got Jim Prentiss," Irma said. And she scowled. "But then I wouldn't count on it. The princess is backstage in the scenery shop with Jim right now!"

"She is!" Helen said, startled.

Princess was the nickname the company

had given Grace Ebbett's niece, Julia. The daughter of Grace's younger brother, who lived in New York, the tall, languid beauty had arrived in Porthaven looking for work. Her aunt had given her the job of publicity director, along with duties at the box office. No one had expected the sophisticated young socialite to stay long, but she'd surprised them by remaining for more than six months.

Irma warned Helen, "If I were you, I'd go out there! Julia has ideas about Jim, and don't you forget it! I think he's the reason she's stayed here so long. It's not that she likes her job. She does as little work as she can."

"I know," Helen said grimly. "I'll just take a look out there."

The scenery shop was in back of the actual stage, and a small door in a larger sliding door connected the shop with the main stage area. Sections of scenery could be made in the shop and later moved onto the stage. Jim Prentiss was recognized as one of the best set designers in the region and did sets for a number of other theater companies within a hundred-mile radius.

Helen had met him while they were both in college. Yet it was quite by chance that they both ended up working in Porthaven. There was a mutual attraction between them, and it was recognized by everyone in the company that they were a couple. Everyone except Julia.

Soon after her arrival, the tall, indolent beauty had looked over the various local men, liked what she saw in Jim, and ignored Helen's claim on him. Since then, the princess, as Julia was known, had taken every opportunity she could to be in Jim's company.

Helen now made her way through the dark auditorium and up the steps to the stage, which was set for *Chapter Two*, the company's current production. She moved backstage toward the scenery shop. As Helen reached the door, she heard voices on the other side, and Julia's sultry laugh.

She opened the door and went in to find Jim Prentiss talking with Julia while his young apprentice labored at painting a flat. Jim was a pleasant-looking young man, and his friendly smile gave his face a glow that made it seem quite handsome. Just now he was smiling at Julia, who stood at least two inches taller than him.

Julia turned as Helen entered, and the tall, brown-haired girl had an arrogant look of amusement on her thin, lovely face as she said, "I thought you'd show up soon."

"What made you think that?" Helen asked coldly.

Julia smiled. "I knew you'd gone for the mail and ought to be back by now."

"I wonder you aren't busy," Helen said. "There are a lot of press releases to be sent out about the next play."

"I know," Julia said with her usual self-assurance. "My Aunt Grace told me we're going to have Alan Brown. So now I have to add that to all the news stories."

"So you haven't any time to waste," Helen said.

"I never waste time," Julia drawled. Then she smiled warmly at Jim. "See you later!" And she made an eye-catching exit.

As soon as the tall girl had left, Jim gave Helen an apologetic look and said, "She was only here a few minutes."

"I'm sure I don't care," Helen told him. "Only, I don't think it's fair that your helper should do all the work."

"He doesn't," Jim said. "But he makes a good chaperone. I'd be nervous out here with her if he weren't around. She's a very nervy lady!"

"Nervy, all right," Helen said. "I'm not sure about the lady part. Well, anyway, she broke the news to you."

"About Brown coming to play here," Jim said. "That ought to sell a lot of seats. And what a break for you to get to work with him."

"I'm a little nervous," she confessed.

"No reason to be."

"That's what Mason says."

"Mason knows," Jim said. "Alan Brown is a big star. And I know you think he's terrific. But for my money, he's not that brilliant,

though he is pretty good. But he's had a lot of breaks, too, and having the money to start his own production company was the main one."

"That did get him going," Helen agreed. "I guess he must have found a rich backer for All Star Productions. But he had to impress them, get them interested in his talent."

"I agree he's got something on the ball," Jim said. "And I think it's generous of him to come to a small theater like this."

"He had his start here."

"Even so," Jim said, "there are a lot of actors who wouldn't do it. I say give him credit."

"I do," she said. "I've been reading lines with an apprentice and getting careless. I'll really have to work from now on."

Jim smiled. "Good for you," he said. "That's the spirit."

"If you believe so much in hard work, do some yourself," she teased him. "I'm going home now to rest a little before I have a snack and do tonight's performance."

"We'll go out and eat somewhere nice and celebrate after the show," Jim said, following her onto the darkened stage. When they were alone out there, he took her in his arms for a long kiss.

She sighed and said, "You know I'm terribly jealous of you."

He looked at her. "Because of Julia?"

"Yes."

"No need," he said. "I'll have to keep an eye on you and Alan Brown."

"He's old enough to be my father!" she protested.

"That would only make it more interesting for him," Jim warned her. "He's been married and divorced three times and every one of those gals was younger than him."

She laughed. "Don't worry about it!" And she kissed him lightly on the cheek before leaving him, hoping her secret feelings for Alan had remained hidden.

Helen had her own small foreign car parked on the lot. And now she made her way toward it, unlocked it, and got into it for the drive to the other side of town, where she lived with her aunt, Irene Clayton. The pleasant cottage on a quiet side street had been her home since her father had died nearly twenty years ago and her mother and she had come to Porthaven to live with her mother's older sister.

Aunt Irene was a widow even back then. Her husband had been in the fishing business and he'd been on a boat that had been wrecked in a bad storm. She had continued to manage the business, which had grown under her astute handling.

Joan Green had soon found work with the theater company as assistant to Grace Ebbett, and she had remained on the job until her death in the auto accident. After that Helen

had only her Aunt Irene, and so the two had drawn closer together. The widowed woman served as both Helen's father and mother. It was she whom Helen always went to for advice. And being able to live at home while she worked in the theater was a decided advantage.

Aunt Irene usually came home from her office early and as Helen drove into the parking space by the cottage, she saw her aunt's car was already parked there. She left her own car and hurried into the house.

Aunt Irene, a stout, matronly woman with white hair, glasses, and a warm disposition, was standing in the living room waiting to greet her.

"You look excited!" Aunt Irene said.

"I am," Helen declared happily. "Guess who is coming to play opposite me in *A Doll's House*? Alan Brown!"

Her aunt's reaction was not what she'd expected. The broad, friendly face took on a look of distress.

And the older woman said, "I can't think of that as good news."

CHAPTER TWO

"Why isn't it good news that I'm playing opposite Alan Brown?" Helen asked.

Her aunt looked upset. "You know, don't you? You must remember him! You've heard your mother speak of him. And I've told you the story about the actor who almost married your mother."

"Then *he* is the one!" she exclaimed, startled. "I—I didn't even think of that. I've just got the fuzziest memory of him, if I actually remember him at all."

"Of course, he was the one," Aunt Irene said, and she sank down in a nearby chintz easy chair.

Helen sat down on the floor by her aunt's chair, her legs curled under her, and looked up at the round, troubled face of the older

woman. "Alan Brown was really in love with my mother?" she asked.

"Yes."

"But then Mason Trent wouldn't know anything about that. He's only been here the last four years."

"But you should have known. I've told you the story!"

"I was so excited, I forgot," she said. "Of course, Alan Brown was here in the early days. When Mother and Grace Ebbett were with the theater."

"Grace Ebbett was the one who really got the theater going with her money," Aunt Irene said.

"And she's still the mainspring of it. We couldn't last without her."

"Does she know Alan Brown is coming?"

"Mason told her today. I don't think she knew until then. None of us did for sure."

Aunt Irene gave her a questioning look. "I wonder how she reacted to the news?"

"I gather from what Mason said, she wasn't all that delighted. He thinks she's worried that Alan Brown will be too expensive. But he won't. He's working for a minimum Equity salary."

"It's possible she may be thinking of something else."

"Such as?"

"Before Alan Brown began romancing your mother and trying to get her to leave Portha-

ven with him, he spent a lot of time courting Grace Ebbett."

"Grace Ebbett!" Helen exclaimed.

"Why not?" Aunt Irene said indignantly. "She was pretty enough in those days. Still is, for that matter, if you consider her age."

"I know that," Helen said. "But she's so stiff. I mean, as regards men. She shows no interest in them whatever. She seems to care about nothing but managing the theater and looking after her estate."

"She was twenty years younger then and, while older than your mother and not a match for your mother when it came to looks, she was an attractive woman."

"And Alan Brown was acting at the theater then?"

"Yes. And he made quite an impression. People took to him. They always have."

"And he turned away from courting Grace to court my mother?" she said. "Wasn't that awkward? Grace and my mother were friends."

"The best of friends," her aunt agreed. "And your mother told me she went to Grace and they had a talk."

"About Alan Brown?"

"Yes. Your mother said Grace told her she was through with him. But she didn't say why. Grace said if Alan Brown truly loved your mother, she had no objections to his turning his affections to her."

"That was very generous."

"They had that rare sort of friendship," her aunt said. "So your mother and Alan Brown were together all the time. We all expected they'd be married and she'd go away with him when he went to New York."

"But she didn't," Helen said.

"No."

"Why?"

Aunt Irene sighed. "She never told me. I suspect there were good reasons. Perhaps she began to see through him. He's always been temperamental, difficult, fickle. I wonder he's done so well. You know he's been married a lot."

"Perhaps Mother was the only one he ever truly loved, and she turned him down," Helen said with a show of romantic interest.

Her aunt shook her head. "That's a pretty idea, but I wouldn't bank on it if I were you."

"No?"

"No. I think your mother felt he was too fickle. Maybe she tired of him as Grace Ebbett seemed to have. Some actors are very shallow. They may seem wonderful on the stage, but they're quite different personally."

"I've discovered that," Helen admitted.

Her aunt sighed. "There was a lot of talk. A lot of rumors. That Alan Brown did leave people wondering when he went on to Broadway. He had first dated Grace and then he'd dropped her and was always with your mother. In the end, he left both of them. Of course, in

a small town, people are bound to gossip."

"What did they say?"

"Just about everything. But your mother and Grace ignored the gossip and in a short while it ended. I thought it was over for all time. But now he's coming back!"

"A lot of years have passed."

"There are many people who will remember," Aunt Irene said. "And there's bound to be some of that gossip again."

Helen protested with a smile, "Everyone is older. Alan Brown is older. I don't think they'll be all that interested."

"Don't you fool yourself!" her aunt warned, and then she added, "And there's something else to consider."

"What?"

"You!"

"Me!" Helen exclaimed, not understanding. Then suddenly, she said, "You mean it may be strange to him, to have me playing opposite him. He'll know who my mother was. Someone is bound to tell him right away. He'll probably remember the name anyway."

"More than that." Her aunt eyed her worriedly. "You may not have realized it, but in the last few years you've grown to be almost the image of your mother!"

Helen stared at her aunt. "Well, lots of daughters resemble their mothers." Then she shrugged.

"But you—you could have been her twin."

"I can't see it," the girl protested. "I do look

like her, but not all that much!"

"You're thinking of her in the years before she was killed," the older woman said. "I'm remembering her as she was in the days when she and Alan Brown were in love."

"She really looked the way I do now?" Helen asked.

"You truly could be twins," her aunt said. "Allowing for the change in hair styles and makeup. The basic likeness is there. I see it and I'm sure Alan Brown will see it!"

Helen stood up and considered this. "You never told me before. I mean, that I look so much like Mother when she was my age."

"There was no reason to mention it until now."

"I'll feel embarrassed."

"What about Alan Brown?" her aunt said.

"What do you mean?" Helen asked.

"He'll feel he's confronting your mother again," Aunt Irene said.

"I can't believe it!"

"You'll see," the older woman said. "Don't think I want to make you uneasy. Or cause any trouble. But I see a situation which Mason Trent or none of the others, except Grace, could possibly be aware of."

Helen frowned. "Mason did say Grace seemed upset."

"Now you have an idea why."

She protested, "Grace couldn't possibly be worried about me!"

"She might be," her aunt said. "She has

eyes. She can surely see how much you resemble Joan."

"How is *she* going to feel meeting Alan Brown now that they're both so much older?"

"Grace is a sensible woman. I expect she'll manage it very well if he does."

"You think he might not?"

"He was always a strange, moody person," her aunt said. "Not easy to get along with. Many a night he sent your mother home crying."

"Really?" Helen listened with awe.

This was a world of which she knew little, almost nothing. This was a side of her mother that was completely new to her.

"He may have changed. I hope so," Aunt Irene said.

"He's a great success! A big star!"

"That doesn't mean he's changed."

"I'm sure that he has," Helen said with the optimism of the young.

"I hope so." Aunt Irene's broad face showed concern. "I don't want you to be hurt."

"How could I possibly be hurt?"

"You'll be exposed to him."

"We'll be working together. He'll be busy learning the part and we'll all be working hard. He'll probably just show a passing interest when he finds out he knew my mother and nothing more. Why should I mean anything to him?" The rapid beating of her heart belied the coolness of her words.

"Because you're young and beautiful," the older woman said.

"He's used to lots of young and beautiful girls."

"So I understand," her aunt said dourly. "He married and divorced three of them, didn't he?"

"I guess so."

"Suppose he notices you look like your mother and decides he's interested in you?"

"Aunt Irene!" she laughed in protest, hoping she sounded convincing. "You've been reading too many romances!"

"Never look at them, too busy with my accounts," her aunt said. "But I'm pointing out something that could happen. And I think you ought to be aware of it and ready for it."

"It won't happen."

Her aunt shrugged. "I think your mother said something like that before she started falling in love with him. And she was in love with him, make no mistake about that! I heard her tears in her bedroom long nights after he left."

"She should have gone with him then!"

"Maybe he didn't want her anymore," Aunt Irene said.

"He would have if he'd loved her," Helen argued.

"Now you're the romantic! I'm worried about you, girl."

Helen bent and kissed her aunt on the soft

cheek and said, "I love you so, Aunt Irene. And I know there's nothing to worry about. He'll probably hardly look at me. And if he does, there's Jim Prentiss! I'm practically engaged to him!"

"Better get him to give you a ring then," Aunt Irene said. "That might help."

"I don't think either of us are ready for that," Helen protested.

"That's the way you young people are today. I don't understand it," Aunt Irene told her. "In my day, marriage was an important goal for young people. Nowadays it doesn't seem to mean anything."

"I sometimes wish we were engaged or married," Helen said with a sigh. "Especially now that Julia Ebbett is trying to set her cap for him."

Her aunt gave her a look of interest. "Now that's the first I've heard about that."

"It's been going on ever since she came here from New York. I'm not saying Jim encourages her, but she is determined."

"Better watch out!"

Helen smiled knowingly. "Maybe I could use Alan Brown to make him jealous."

"That sounds dangerous to me," her aunt warned. "I'd forget all about it."

Helen rested, had a light snack, and went over to the theater for the evening performance of *Chapter Two*. The Neil Simon comedy

was always a pleasing show, and on this occasion it went very well.

The performance over, Helen changed into jeans and a velvet jacket and went down the dressing-room stairs to the stage door. Jim also in jeans and a tweed jacket was waiting for her. They drove away together to a shore-side restaurant which featured quiet piano music and first-class seafood.

A party of four, two husbands and wives, came over to pause briefly at the table and congratulate Helen on her acting in *Chapter Two*.

Helen smiled across the table at her companion and said, "People can be nice. I appreciate them taking the trouble to say they enjoyed the show."

Jim grimaced. "Sure. But big stars get too much of it. It gets so bad, they can't even go out without being bothered by people. I'll bet Alan Brown won't want any of that."

She said, "He's surely a big star. But I doubt if he'll be bothered much here."

"It'll be the same as anywhere else," Jim said. "Maybe worse. After all, he was with the company years ago at the start. So some people here know him. It will be like coming back home for him."

"The more I think about it, the more surprised I am that Mason was able to talk him into it."

"Especially for *A Doll's House* where the male lead isn't all that sympathetic," Jim said.

"But it's a great acting part and different from the plastic heroes Alan Brown has been playing on TV and in movies," she pointed out.

"That could be the attraction," Jim agreed. "I'm having real fun with the set."

She eyed him with a teasing look. "Because of Julia?"

He blushed. "In spite of her."

"What does she talk about?"

"Herself mostly. And what a boring job her aunt has given her."

"That's because she's doing such a poor job of it," Helen claimed. "She isn't half trying."

"And she thinks I ought to go to New York," Jim said.

"She would."

"She also thinks I ought to get out of show business and go into commercial design."

"Why?" Helen demanded angrily. "You're beginning to make a real name for yourself as a scenic designer."

"Julia thinks there's not enough money in it. She claims her father's design people get fabulous pay for creating those cosmetic containers and things."

"So you'd like to spend the rest of your life making little plastic bottles?"

He laughed. "No chance. I love the theater."

The waiter came with their food and they said little for a while. They were both hungry after the work of the evening.

Jim doubled as stage manager and so was as busy during the performances as she was. It wasn't until they were having coffee that she told him about the romance between Alan Brown and Grace Ebbett and also between her mother and the star.

Jim was amazed. "He actually had a romance with old Grace?"

"She wasn't old Grace then," Helen reminded him. "My aunt says she was very attractive."

"Maybe in a prim way. She's certainly a regular spinster type now."

"Career woman," Helen said. "She's the heart and brains of our theater company."

"Granted," he said. "Career woman is right. And she's dedicated."

"Without a question," she said.

"I doubt if there will be any big flare-up or sparks between those two again."

"I agree," Helen said. "And my mother is dead."

"Both his old girl friends out of the running," Jim said, with a shrewd look at her. "That suggests something."

"What?"

"He might decide to take an interest in you."

She laughed. "Now you sound like my Aunt Irene."

"Why not? You're young and lovely. And you're also a good actress. You should really be his type."

"I think he's coming here to work! To star in a play. Not to find himself another girl friend. He already has plenty."

"He'll be here for a good many weeks," Jim pointed out. "If he gets bored, he might look for some diversion."

"I have no intention of being a diversion," Helen said. "Let him try Julia."

"He wouldn't look twice at Julia," Jim said. "She's not his type. His whole life has been show business. That's why he keeps falling in love with actresses and marrying them."

"You're right," she said. "All his brides have been actresses."

"So you see," he said.

"No problem," she said with a twinkle in her eyes. "I'll just tell him I'm engaged."

Jim surprised her by smiling and saying, "Why not? I like the idea."

Helen was tempted to tell him if the idea appealed to him so much, the least he could do was offer her a ring. But she decided he might interpret this as bearing down on him. So she dismissed it. The conversation turned to a discussion of the new play and soon they left to drive home.

Helen thought Jim's good-night kiss was warmer than usual. But he made no further reference to Alan Brown. Still, she went into the house thinking that everyone was making far too much of the coming star. Especially of his prowess as a lady killer. He would probably turn out to be a tired, middle-aged man worried about his role and what his appearance with the Porthaven players would do to his reputation.

In her room Helen went to the dresser and studied the photo she kept there of her mother. It had been taken only a few months before her fatal accident. Though the woman in the photo was surely attractive, Helen could not see her own face reflected in it. She was thinner, and her hair was straight while her mother's had had a slight curl to it. Yet Aunt Irene insisted that she looked much as her mother had when she was twenty-four.

It was possible. Her memories were all of a serious woman in her early middle age. There had always been a sadness about her mother, which Helen had put down to her having been widowed so early in life. But maybe there had been another reason which she had not guessed. Perhaps her mother had been sad because she'd fallen in love a second time and had lost Alan Brown, the man she loved, for some unknown reason. It made Helen curious about the past and what might have gone on.

She undressed, put on her pajamas, and got into bed. As she turned off her bedside lamp and placed her head on the pillow, she wondered if some of the mystery of the past might be solved with the arrival of Alan Brown. Would she discover if the star and her mother had truly been in love? And if so, would she learn the reason for their parting so suddenly?

CHAPTER THREE

There was a new excitement at the rehearsal of *A Doll's House* the next morning with the news that Alan Brown was to be the star. As Mason Trent discussed some properties with the property manager, the actors sat or stood around in small groups in the auditorium discussing this new turn of events.

Julia Ebbett was seated sulkily in the first row with a clipboard in her lap. Helen went down and sat by her for a moment.

She asked the tall girl, "Have you written anything on Alan Brown yet? You know, he was one of the original members of the company here."

There was a bored expression on Julia's chiseled features as she said, "That's old news. Who cares?"

"A lot of people care," Helen argued. "Especially the local people. It should be part of the story. Your Aunt Grace should be able to tell you a lot about those days."

"I tried her and she wouldn't," Julia said. "Closed up like a clam. Said she was too busy. She told me to write my story myself. So that's what I'm trying to do."

The lanky Mason Trent above them on the stage turned away from the property man to give his attention to Julia. "We need some children for this show, a boy of about seven and a girl of five or six. But they don't have much to do. So I'm going to run a contest for local kids to fill the parts. Send out a notice to the schools. We'll visit and see any possible young actors in their schools next Tuesday and cast the parts from the best talents we find."

Julia sat up straight with an agonized gasp. "That will mean a lot of extra work."

Mason Trent gave her a grim look. "I know that. But I want it done!"

"We really haven't got much time," Julia said plaintively.

"We have if you get at it right away," the director said. "I'll expect you to have the notices written for me to check after lunch. We'll make copies and have them sent to the two or three nearby schools. We'll go to them Tuesday afternoon, and I'll be the sole judge. Have you got that?"

"I guess so," Julia said sulkily and rose and

made her way down the aisle to the office.

Mason gave Helen a wry smile. "Such enthusiasm is almost too much! Come up here, I want to discuss a few things with you for a moment."

Helen made her way up to the stage and the tall director hovered over her with the script in his hands. He discussed some scenes where Nora pretends to be lighthearted and childish with her husband, Torvald, while she is secretly terrified of a blackmailer, a blackmailer who can destroy her marriage because he knows that Nora had forged her father's name on a document years ago when she was trying to borrow some money. Though she had borrowed the money only to save the life of her ailing husband—and though she had secretly scrimped and worked hard to repay it—she knows the rigid Torvald would never forgive the forgery.

"Those are your toughest scenes," Mason said. "They must neither be overplayed nor underplayed."

Then they discussed Nora's changing attitude toward her husband during the course of the play—how she starts out by adoring him and being willing to do anything for him and ends up by leaving him when she sees how rigid he is and how he never regarded her as more than a doll, a child.

"That's where the title of the play comes in," Helen said.

"Exactly," the lanky director said. "And by

the way, I've enlisted Alan Brown to co-star as your husband for reasons other than the fame he's gained. I think he's at his best playing such flawed characters. I've watched his films and TV performances, and only when he does that sort of part is he really good."

"Then Torvald Helmer should be wonderful for him!"

"I'm counting on it," Mason said. "And I know you're going to be fine. Don't let him awe you. Concentrate on your own role. Let me do the work of coordinating your performances. I'm sure it will come out well."

"I hope so," she said. "I'm a little overwhelmed at the thought of working with such a big star."

"Get that out of your mind," he said. "When the apprentice reads the lines today, play to him just as if he were Alan Brown. We'll be starting in about twenty minutes. Relax until then."

The director then turned away to talk to Jim Prentiss about the set. Feeling some fresh air and sunlight might do her good, Helen strolled across the stage and out the stage door. There was a platform out there and a few steps leading down from it to the grassy area surrounding the rear of the playhouse.

And standing out there was a familiar figure, the veteran character actor, Denison Abbot. Whenever anyone questioned Helen about the seventy-year-old actor, she always told them he was exactly what an old actor should

look like. He was of medium size, with an aristocratic, kindly face and a shock of white hair, parted on the side. The old man's face was lined, and at the moment he looked rather wan.

Helen impulsively went to him on the platform and threw her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. "I knew you were coming, but I had no idea you'd already arrived."

The old man's keen blue eyes regarded her with fondness as he smilingly told her, "I only arrived an hour ago. You look as lovely as ever and I hear you're doing well as Nora."

"And you're to be Krogstad!"

"Interesting part," Denison Abbot said. "I've done it many times before. Once at Stratford in Connecticut. But now I'm a little old for it, perhaps."

"Nonsense," she said. "You'll play it so well no one will even think of your age." She gave him an anxious look. "I heard about your heart attack. How do you feel?"

"I'm all right," he said in his deep, sonorous voice. "The doctor wants me to rest as much as I can when I'm not working."

"You must be sure to do that," she said earnestly.

The old man gave her a knowing look. "Yes. I must. By the way, I hear we have a star coming here to join us on Monday. None other than Alan Brown."

Helen nodded. "Yes. Do you know him?"

"I've worked with him several times over the years," the veteran actor said. And there was something in his tone which suggested the experience had not been all that pleasant.

"I see," she said.

"Have you met him?"

"No."

Denison Abbot shrugged. "I don't know why Mason Trent sought him out. He can be difficult."

"I think because he was here at the start of his acting career," she said. "And Mason feels he does parts like Torvald Helmer well."

"He's a good enough actor," the old man agreed. "But he's very temperamental. Has a high opinion of himself. Being the owner of his own television producing company has given him a distorted sense of power."

"I suppose that could happen."

"He gave me a bad time once," Denison Abbot said. "I settled it by walking out on the job. I don't think he liked it."

Helen said, "He's probably forgotten about it."

"Not Alan," the old actor said. "He's the type who holds grudges. But I expect we'll get along well enough. To quote the bard, 'Tis neither here nor there.' We shall manage."

"I'm glad to hear something about him," Helen said. "I'll be working very closely with him. I will have to watch myself."

"Stand up to him," Denison Abbot advised.

"Look to your own rights. Don't let him cow you. And whatever you do, don't show any personal interest in him."

She said, "You mean that could be dangerous?"

"Extremely so," the old actor said. "One of Alan Brown's beliefs is that every girl he meets falls instantly in love with him."

"Surely he doesn't believe that!"

"I swear it!"

Helen said firmly, "Well, he won't find that in me." But her heart was pounding.

"Watch him," Denison Abbot warned her. "He can be a charmer when he likes, but he has no integrity."

"I'll be on guard," she promised.

At this point Irma came out and told them, "Mason is almost ready to begin."

"We'll be right in," Helen told her friend.

And after a moment she and the old actor went in to join the others on the stage.

The rehearsal, which was little more than a run-through at this early stage, ended around twelve-thirty. Helen usually drove to a diner on Shore Road. But she did not go directly to her car on this occasion. Instead, she went into the business office hoping that Grace Ebbett might be there. And she was in luck. The prim business manager was still at her desk.

Helen halted in the doorway and asked, "May I come in?"

The older woman glanced up and a smile crossed her pale face. She wore horn-rimmed glasses and always dressed very quietly. The navy blue suit she was wearing was typical.

Grace Ebbett said, "Of course, you can come in. How is the play going?"

Helen smiled. "As well as you could expect. I think it'll be a good production. I hope."

"Classics aren't easy to sell," Grace said, always the businesswoman. "But we do have our basic subscribers who come to everything. That gives us a chance to risk the darn things."

"Having Alan Brown to star in it should make it a box-office hit," Helen said.

"You think so?" the older woman asked.

"Yes. He's a very big name in movies and television."

"I rarely attend movies and I don't watch much television," Grace Ebbett said. "So I have no idea of his drawing power."

"He has a good following," Helen promised. "And then he should have local appeal. He did begin here, after all."

A strange, wary look crossed the older woman's face. "He did. But I doubt that many people know that today."

"You must remember him."

The gray-haired woman glanced at the papers on her desk as if anxious to avoid eye contact with Helen at this moment. She said,

"Yes, I do. He was here only a short time. He knew your mother as well. Did Joan ever mention him to you?"

"Occasionally, when he did a part on television which we saw, she would mention he had been here."

Grace now looked up at her. "What did she tell you?"

"Really, nothing," Helen said. "Except that she knew him."

"We both knew him," Grace said tautly. "I expect he'll be shocked to learn that your mother is dead. And surprised to find you here as our leading lady."

"I'm a little uneasy about it," Helen admitted.

Grace Ebbett said, "You mustn't let that happen. If Alan Brown is still the same as in the old days, he'll be too interested in himself to pay much attention to anyone else."

"Do you think Mason was wise to invite him to play here?"

Grace offered her a weary smile. "Julia was pestering me about that. And I'll tell you what I told her. I look after the business management of the theater and Mason Trent is the artistic director. Neither of us interferes with the other. Having Alan Brown here is strictly Mason's business."

"I understand," Helen said.

Then she left to have her lunch. As she

drove to the diner, she mulled over the older woman's words and felt she'd really received no satisfactory answers to her questions. Grace Ebbett had not said whether she approved of Alan Brown's returning or not. The inference was that she did not care much for the idea but would not interfere with Mason Trent's decision.

The prim woman had been careful not to show her feelings. It was interesting that she'd asked Helen whether her mother had spoken of Alan Brown to her. It showed she was still remembering how the actor had quickly turned from her and tried to coax her mother away with him. In a way Helen felt it had been to her mother's credit that she had turned him down. But why should she think that? There was something very appealing about the man despite his difficult ways. Besides, many creative people were difficult.

Irma was already at the diner seated on a high stool by the counter near the window. She lifted her large pocketbook from an adjoining stool when Helen came in.

"What kept you?" Irma asked over the cottage cheese she was having.

"I was talking with Grace Ebbett," Helen said, sitting down.

"Oh!" Irma said with a look of disgust on her freckled face. "That niece of hers has a lot of typing for me to do this afternoon. Some-

thing about bulletins for the schools. She should be doing it herself!"

"Julia avoids hard work whenever she can," Helen told her with an amused look. And at the same time she ordered a hamburger and coffee.

"Something to do about a contest for youngsters for the new play, I guess."

"Yes," Helen told her friend. "I suppose you weren't there when Mason mentioned it. He had the idea this morning. I think it's a good one."

"Nothing wrong with the idea," Irma said with annoyance. "But there sure is something wrong with Julia. She may be a beauty, but she's lazy!"

"She's been spoiled."

"And her Aunt Grace still spoils her," Irma complained. "She wouldn't have gotten the job except for her."

Helen smiled. "The men like her. She is a very beautiful girl."

"She's after Jim Prentiss," Irma warned her.

Helen frowned as the counterman placed her hamburger and hot coffee before her. "But why? Jim has no money and no great future. I'd think Julia would be looking for some Ivy League type with family and a job in the family company waiting for him."

Irma raised her eyebrows. "She's probably

tried that and failed. Now she's ready to settle for any good man."

"Jim isn't interested," Helen said, taking a bite of her hamburger.

"Don't be too sure of that," Irma warned. "That gal knows how to handle men."

Helen finished her lunch listening to Irma's usual prattle about the happenings at the theater. Her friend was talkative as well as being a good worker and a very fair actress. She loved gossip and never lost a chance to spread it. In spite of this, Helen liked her and knew she could depend on her.

After lunch they both returned to the theater office. Julia was there with her letter made up, waiting for Irma to return and make typed copies of it. Helen left them to go out to the stage where Jim and his assistants were making some measurements for the new set.

Jim gave her a friendly nod as she came up on the stage.

He said, "We have a lot of furniture planned. Too much. We're going to be skimped for space."

"You'll manage," she said, seating herself on the steps which led from the theater auditorium to the stage.

Jim finally came and sat with her. He was smiling as he said, "I think knowing that Alan Brown is coming has everyone on edge."

"Surely not you!" she said, surprised.

"Why not?" the young man replied. "I don't want him to be criticizing my set."

"You build good sets," she said. "He'll probably be telling you how good you are!"

"And you!" Jim said.

She blushed. "That's something else! Don't worry about me!"

"I do," Jim teased her.

"Waste of time," she told him, rising. "I've been brought up to watch out for myself."

"Remember that," Jim said, also rising, "especially when Alan Brown is around!"

She drove home sometime later for her usual short nap and evening snack thinking that she wished she'd never heard of Alan Brown. She tried to recall what her mother had actually said about him and couldn't. This reminded her that her mother had been dead nearly five years and some of the ordinary memories of conversations between them were fading away. It was all rather sad.

The weekend passed quickly. Friday and Saturday nights were always the best-attended performances. Sunday was their one day of rest. Helen and Jim drove to the beach at Hampton for a last sunning and had dinner at a clam place near the shore.

The weather changed abruptly Sunday night and it rained hard. But Monday was bright and sunny once again. They skipped Monday evening performances, running Tuesday

through Saturday. So rehearsal was scheduled for Monday evening rather than during the day, and it was on Monday evening that Alan Brown was to make his first appearance!

Tension was growing. Helen was at the office to help Irma with some of the routine office chores. And then Mason Trent came out of his office and over to her desk.

"I wish you'd wash the station wagon," the director said with a good-natured smile on his lean, tanned face. "The old girl is pretty battered, but no need for her to be muddy as well. I used it in the storm last night."

Helen nodded and rose from the desk by Irma. "I'll do it right away."

Mason Trent laughed. "Thanks! That's what I like about the actors here. No temperament! We must have everything at the best when our star arrives."

"Definitely!" Helen said with emphasis, joining in his laughter.

She went to the scenery shop and borrowed one of Jim's multi-stained aprons and put it on to protect her shirt and jeans. Then she combed back her hair and put a rubber band around it to make a ponytail. This done she found a pail and a sponge and went out to the parking lot. She moved the car close to the hose and began spraying it with water.

The station wagon was really dirty. She gave it a thorough spraying and then filled the bucket with water and began sponging the

station wagon carefully. She became completely absorbed in her work and did not hear the car which drove up behind her.

Then a voice, male and pleasant, said, "Hi, kid."

She paused and looked up and found herself confronted by Alan Brown.

CHAPTER FOUR

The famous star was staring at Helen with amused condescension. He was slightly smaller than he had seemed on the screen and he was wearing a perfectly tailored tan suit.

She stood awkwardly, her mouth gaping for a moment and the sponge in one hand. At last she managed to say, "Hello!"

Alan Brown smiled. "You're doing a good job on that old wagon."

She nodded and tried to smile back, wishing she were at least a thousand miles away as she said, "Yes, it's a relic, and we've had it a long while."

The star looked around him. "So this is the Porthaven Regional Theater?"

"It is," she said, wondering desperately why

she couldn't think of something brilliant to say.

"I'm Alan Brown," he said, giving her another smile which revealed perfect white teeth.

She now realized he had a few lines etched on his handsome face, lines that didn't show up on television or in the movies. But somehow they made him more appealing.

"I know," she said, feeling like the perfect fool he must think her.

"You recognized me?" He sounded pleased.

"Everyone knows you," she said, wondering what cliché she would utter next and wishing she had fled at the first sight of him.

The famous star laughed. "It's good to hear you say that! Is the director around?"

She nodded. "Yes. He's inside."

"Good," Alan Brown said. "I want to let him know I'm here. What sort of company do they have?"

Again Helen felt like running off, but she managed to stand her ground, sponge in hand, and say, "The audience seems satisfied. The theater operates all year round now except for a few weeks."

"Yes, so I've heard," the star said. He glanced at the building again. "It's not all that large. But I suppose it is large enough." He nodded to her again. "I'll have to remember you when I want my car washed."

He indicated the shiny cream-and-white

Mercedes in which he'd driven up and which was parked a little distance away. Then he went on to the side door of the theater in his search for Mason Trent.

Helen watched him go with a feeling of panic. She was terrified Mason Trent might ask her to come in and be presented to the newcomer. She couldn't do it! Not looking the way she did! She ran around to the scenery shop and found Jim Prentiss discussing the new set with his chief apprentice.

Helen tugged on his arm. "Sorry," she said. "I have to leave in a hurry. Will you have your helper finish with the washing of the station wagon?"

"What's wrong?" Jim asked. "You look as if you'd just seen a ghost!"

"Worse than that," she lamented. "Alan Brown just arrived. He found me washing the wagon and decided I was some sort of apprentice."

Jim studied her with a chuckle. "No wonder! That's quite an outfit!"

"Take it!" she said. "I'm getting away before Mason tries to find me!" And she pulled off the apron and tossed it to him and ran out.

Within a few minutes Helen was in her car and driving away from the playhouse. She headed for home where she took a shower, shampooed her hair, and prepared to look more like a proper leading lady before the eve-

ning rehearsal. Then she sat down with her copy of the play to study more of her lines.

She was still occupied with this task, curled up on a divan in the living room in her robe, when her Aunt Irene came home from work carrying the daily quota of groceries she picked up each afternoon. After unloading the packages in the kitchen, Aunt Irene came out to greet her.

The white-haired woman said, "I didn't expect you back from the playhouse so early."

"I had to shower and shampoo my hair and I have lines to memorize," Helen said. "I want to be ready for tonight."

Aunt Irene looked wise. "For the big star! Has Alan Brown reached town yet?"

"He came in this afternoon."

"Have you met him?"

Helen decided to be discreet. "Not really. I did see him, but we weren't introduced or anything."

"What did you think of him?"

"He's handsome, all right. He's certainly quite attractive. But his face was craggier than I realized."

"He did date your mother," Aunt Irene reminded her. "He could have been your father."

"He looks anything but fatherly," Helen said. "He looks fantastic."

"So he didn't notice you at all?"

"No."

"Are you going to tell him who you are? Remind him of his being in love with your mother?" her aunt wanted to know.

Helen rose from the divan and closed her script. "Please! Let me be introduced to the man first! I don't want to give him too many shocks all at once. It will be enough for him to get used to me as his leading lady."

Aunt Irene started back to the kitchen with a chuckle. "I'd like to be there when he finds out that Joan was your mother," she said as she vanished.

Helen wasn't all that anxious to bring the matter up. She felt awkward enough about her first meeting with the handsome star. What she worried about now was making an impression on him as an actress. If he should take it into his head she wasn't suitable for Nora he could ask, and probably get, Mason Trent to replace her.

And she didn't want that to happen. This could be her chance to be seen and commented on by the national and big city critics who just might journey to Porthaven to see Alan Brown do his first stage acting in years.

She dressed carefully for the evening rehearsal, replacing her blue jeans and blouse with a pretty green linen dress and looking properly prim and feminine.

When Helen reached the playhouse, Irma, who was playing the role of Nora's friend, Mrs. Linde, was already there talking to Norman

Brace, the young man who was playing the sickly Dr. Rank. Irma at once left him to cross to where Helen was standing at the other side of the auditorium.

With a smile, Irma asked, "Where have you been hiding all afternoon?"

"Did Jim tell you?" Helen asked.

"Yes," her friend laughed. "I think it was hilarious!"

Helen eyed her wryly. "You'll forgive my not thinking it so funny. I decided I'd better look more like a responsible person and actress if I wished to keep my job."

"I've never seen you more dignified or pretty," Irma said. "I hope it isn't wasted."

"What do you mean?"

"I've met our star. I'd say he is so filled with himself he hardly pays any attention to the people around him."

Helen agreed. "He is something of an ego-tist."

"Mason Trent took him around the office earlier and introduced him to everyone. He was looking for you."

"I was afraid of that. That's why I ran!" Helen said ruefully.

"You should have seen him strut. It's obvious he thinks he's doing us all a favor."

"Did Mason take him in to see Grace Ebbett?"

"Actually, they met outside in the main office. He remembered her from when he started

with the theater back in that loft. He was very warm with her, but she was cool and aloof. You know what she is like. She was polite, but she let him see she wasn't bowled over by his fame."

"What about Julia? I'm sure she made an impression on him," Helen ventured.

Irma nodded. "She came in before Alan Brown left. They had met before in New York at some disco place. But I don't think either of them are interested in the other."

"I'm surprised," Helen said. "Julia always throws her line out for the biggest catch!"

Irma laughed. "I have an idea our little rich girl doesn't think Alan Brown all that good a catch. She has designs on a certain designer!"

Helen moved toward the stage and waved this off wearily. "Don't go over that again! I know who she likes and I'm not worried."

"Just trying to warn you," Irma told her. "If Jim were my boyfriend, I'd worry plenty about that one!"

The rather personal discussion was ended by Mason Trent's arrival. He went straight up to the stage where Helen and Irma were standing and nodded to them.

He said, "I've got Alan Brown settled at his hotel. He'll be here shortly. In the meanwhile, we have a problem."

"What sort of problem?" Helen wanted to know.

"I gave Brown a rundown of the cast and he's complaining about Denison Abbot playing the role of Krogstad. He considers him too old."

Helen frowned. "Krogstad is a man with grown children. I should think he could be played at almost any age."

"That was my idea," the director agreed. "But there is a line in the play where Krogstad mentions being at school with Torvald Helmer. And with Alan doing Torvald, he thinks the reference rules any older actor out."

"Couldn't you cut that one line?" she suggested.

Mason Trent said, "I suggested that, but Brown wasn't satisfied."

Helen gave him a knowing look. "You know that he and Denison Abbot had trouble some time ago. Denison considered some of the requests he was making of him in a series for television were wrong. And rather than play his role the way Brown wanted, he left the show."

"I hadn't heard," Mason Trent said, interested. "No doubt that's the grudge Brown has against poor old Denison. And this job is all important to Denison. I'd hate to cancel his contract."

"What will you do?" Irma asked.

Mason sighed. "If Brown continues to complain, I'll have to replace Denison. I'll keep him on as understudy for Krogstad and Dr.

Rank, and have him play the part of the porter."

"But that's nothing!" Helen protested. "How can he accept it?"

"I think he will for me," Mason said. "But you are right. It's not a part that will do him any good. Especially at this critical time in his career. People might get the idea I replaced him in the role because of his health."

Helen said, "I think it's mean of Alan Brown."

"I agree," Mason said. "But the unfortunate fact is that there is some justice in his complaint. Krogstad and Mrs. Linde eventually plan to marry. And Irma is very young also to marry someone of Denison's age. I fear, in my desire to help the old man, I've made a serious blunder."

"I'm sure he could play it as middle-aged and get by," Irma said. "I've seen him do it before in *Sleuth*. You remember?"

The director nodded. "That's probably why I decided to use him. But I won't start serious rehearsals with Brown in disagreement. I'm afraid Denison has to give up the part, except as an understudy. I'll bring in another younger actor. Brown has a man in mind from his television show. He's going to talk to him before he comes here tonight."

"Denison Abbot is a proud old man," Helen warned the director. "This is not going to be an easy situation for him."

"We're close friends," Mason said. "I'll use that to help get him to agree." He looked down into the auditorium and said, "Here comes Denison now. I want to speak with him alone."

And he nimbly jumped down from the stage and went to meet the white-haired actor.

Left alone with Helen, Irma turned to her and said, "Now we know how easy Alan Brown is going to be to work with!"

"I'm simply brokenhearted for Denison Abbot," Helen said. "Just getting over his heart attack and now facing this."

"At least he won't be working hard," Irma said.

"It's the emotional stress of it that will harm him," Helen said, glancing down into the auditorium.

The director and the old actor were seated together at the back of the shadowed theater. Helen could see them engrossed in earnest conversation and worried that Denison Abbot might be shattered by the director's request. The two men continued to talk for a little, and when Mason Trent came back to the stage, the character actor remained where he was seated.

Mason sighed and told Helen, "It's done. He's agreed to stay on. Of course, he's not happy. But he needs the work."

"I'm glad he's willing to stay," Helen said. "Maybe you can find something for him in the next play."

"Be sure that I will and a role more suitable next time," Mason said.

Gradually all the others arrived and still there was no sign of the star. Mason moved about the stage restlessly and every so often glanced at his watch.

Helen took advantage of the wait to go down and sit with the character actor who'd just been demoted. She said, "I heard about Alan Brown's complaints. I think he acted like a temperamental tyrant."

A sad smile appeared on the white-haired man's face. "To be fair," he said, "I think Mason stretched things a little to give me the part. With my hair covered with a dark rinse and some judicious touches of makeup, I could have managed it. But since Brown objects, there's no other solution."

"I'm sure it's because he remembers your leaving his television show that time."

"I've thought of that," Denison Abbot said. "But no matter! I shall be the porter and the understudy. Mason has asked me to stay and I will not let him down."

"I'm glad," she said, putting her hand on his. "We all want you in the company."

"Thank you, my dear," the old man said. "Just you watch your step with the visiting monster."

It was then that Alan Brown arrived, nattily attired in dark slacks and a turtleneck sweater, with a script in his hand. He had a

sports jacket slung over his shoulders and was wearing the star's obligatory dark glasses. He conferred with Mason Trent a few minutes and then the director moved to center stage.

"All right," the director said. "We're going to have a reading. Ready, everyone!"

Denison Abbot rose and smiled at Helen. "My part is small, but you and I open the play. As a courtesy I will sit in on the reading."

"We'll go up there together," she said, taking his arm.

When they appeared on the stage, still together, Mason Trent brought Alan Brown over to them.

The director said, "Alan, you know Denison Abbot, and this is our leading lady, Helen Green."

Alan Brown bowed graciously. "Miss Green!" he said in a polished manner. And then he gave his attention to Denison Abbot, saying, "You know the situation, Abbot?"

"Yes," the old man said quietly. "Mason informed me."

"I'm quite willing to have you understudy and read the role of Krogstad until Donald Barnes arrives. He will replace you. You remember he was the brother in my television show."

"A very good actor," Denison Abbot agreed, and then he moved away.

Alan Brown offered Helen a full sample of his charm, smiling and saying, "I've been

hearing fine things about your work. I understand your performance in *Chapter Two* is excellent."

"I've never done Nora before," she said. "I hope I'm equal to it."

"You're surely lovely enough," the actor said gallantly. And he stared at her. "You know, it's strange. I feel I know you. That I've met you somewhere before."

"Oh," she said, hoping desperately that the reading would begin.

Mason saved her by coming over to them and saying, "Take your chairs. We're ready to begin." They took the nearest chairs in the semicircle of the players, and Mason Trent sat in a chair downstage facing the semicircle of the cast. He started to read the opening stage directions, and the reading began.

Most of the regular company already knew their lines and so were able to recite them with only the open scripts on their laps in case of a memory failure. Helen noted that Alan Brown also had a superficial knowledge of his part. He'd read a line and then quote the rest of the speech from memory.

They went straight through the first act before calling a brief halt. Helen thought that Alan Brown read the husband's part very well. And Denison Abbot was so excellent as Krogstad, playing the role subtly, she thought it a pity that his age was barring him from the part.

During the pause Mason told Alan Brown,

"That was fine. We'll resume in a few minutes." Then he turned to discuss a few points with the young man playing Dr. Rank.

Alan Brown drew out a pack of cigarettes and offered Helen one. "Do you indulge?"

"No," she said.

"I shouldn't," he said, lighting one and exhaling the smoke. Then he gave her a shrewd look. "I like the way you handle your lines. You show intelligence as well as emotion."

"Thank you." She smiled. "I'm sure you're going to be very good as Torvald."

He shrugged. "I've played everything." And staring at her hard again, he added, "I still have an idea I've seen you before!"

She decided the truth might be the best response. "You did!"

"When?"

"We met when you first arrived."

He looked puzzled. "I don't remember you in the office. Mason spoke about you, but as I recall it, he didn't find you."

She smiled apologetically. "I left. I was the one you talked to. I was washing the station wagon."

Alan Brown eyed her incredulously. "You were the kid washing the station wagon?" he gasped.

"Yes," she said.

"So that's it," he said. And he laughed. "You weren't very glamorous then. You look great now!"

"Thanks," she said.

Mason Trent resumed the reading once again. And they went through the second act. Alan Brown stumbled a little, but Helen felt he would be good when he'd learned all his lines.

As they came to a second interval before going on to read the third act, the handsome star turned to her again. He said, "I'm not satisfied."

"What's wrong?" she asked, worried.

"Nothing in your work," he assured her. "It's you! I'm positive I've met you before. And not just as the car washer. But as yourself. Your face and manner are terribly familiar to me."

She listened to his words and saw his troubled face and realized she was facing another dilemma almost as soon as she'd settled the first one. She debated what to tell him now.

CHAPTER FIVE

Once again Helen settled for frankness. She said quietly, "I believe you knew my mother."

Alan removed his dark glasses and stared at her in amazement. "Joan!" he exclaimed. "I should have realized. You are her daughter!"

"Yes."

"You look very like her," he said, studying her with awe. "I suppose you've been told that."

"Some people have said it," she agreed.

"But Joan wasn't an actress," he said. "She had no acting ambitions at all. I thought that a shame. She had looks and a talent which could have been developed."

"She liked the business end of the theater," Helen said with a small smile. "I was exposed

so much to theater and theater people I'm afraid I became stagestruck."

Alan Brown said, "I consider that all to the good!"

"Thank you," she said.

"Your mother is dead," he went on. "I remember hearing or reading about her death somewhere. A car accident, as I remember."

"It was," Helen said. "It happened five years ago."

"Did she ever see you act?"

"As a student," she said. "I didn't come here to play leads until after her death."

"A pity," Alan said. "She would have been proud."

"She mentioned several times that she knew you," Helen said.

"A long while ago," he said wistfully. "I never thought I'd be back here one day playing opposite Joan's daughter."

"You began in the loft down by the wharves," she said. "Mother told me about those early years of the theater."

His eyes were fixed on hers. "And she told you about me?"

"Mentioned you rather than discussed you."

The actor continued to stare at her. "Helen Green! I ought to have known."

The reading resumed, and they did the third and final act. In the big final scene in which Nora leaves her husband, Helen felt her performance was not yet strong enough. But she

was professional compared to the famous star who stumbled badly over many of the long speeches.

When the reading ended, he apologized, "I haven't been able to give this much time yet."

Mason folded his large playscript. "Nothing to worry about," he told them all. "We'll resume our reading of the play tomorrow morning at ten."

Alan Brown rose. "I have a lot more I'd like to talk to you about." His handsome face brightened. "Let's go somewhere and have a snack together now."

"I'm sorry," she said, embarrassed. "Someone has already invited me out."

The handsome star smiled endearingly. "I'm always too late. Another time, then?"

"I'd like to," she said, smiling in return.

"Incredible likeness!" he said, studying her again before he turned to Mason and some other members of the company.

Helen quietly left the stage and the theater. She went out to the parking lot where Jim was waiting for her in the small half-ton truck which he used for transporting his completed sets. When the sets were too big for it, he hired a larger truck. He was playing the radio, listening to a country music band, when she stepped into the truck and sat beside him.

"It took a while," Jim said, at once starting the truck.

She sighed and slumped back against the

seat, relaxing for the first time all evening. "Mason made us read the entire play and then he took rather long breaks between each act."

Jim swung the truck out to the road and headed for the center of the town. "I expected he'd be working you all pretty hard with Alan Brown there."

"He did," she said, staring out idly as they drove along the ocean road.

"How is the great star?" Jim wanted to know.

"Pretty good when he gets his lines down. Some of his readings were flubbed or badly done. But it was his first time with us. And, of course, there was another problem." And she went on to tell him about Denison Abbot losing his part.

When she'd finished, Jim said, "I think that was mean on Brown's part. If everyone else wanted the old man to try the part, what harm would be done?"

"I agree it was chiefly because of the feud between them," she said. "But to be fair to Alan, Mason wasn't too smart in his casting. He really should have given Denison the part of Dr. Rank. Rank can be a bit older than Krogstad. Well, at least he's still in the play."

"Porter and understudy," Jim said as he drove along. "That's pretty bad."

"I know," she agreed. "But Mason is also keeping him on for the next play."

"Which will be?"

"A revival of the mystery play, *The Ghost Train*. There are three or four good parts he can play in that one," she said.

"At least that's good news," Jim replied. "I've been so busy getting ready for *A Doll's House* I haven't talked with Mason about what is coming next."

They halted at a parking lot on a wharf just off the broad, cobble-stoned Main Street. Surprisingly the parking area was filled with cars even at this late hour on a Monday night. Although most of the buildings along the rather dark street were warehouses and shops, two or three popular restaurants were located there, and it was to the largest of these, named The Lobster Pot, to which Jim was taking her. It was a favorite hangout of the theater crowd.

The place was rather dimly lighted out front and looked much like the adjoining warehouses except for the neon sign above its somewhat ordinary glass door. Inside, it was huge with three or four rooms at slightly different levels. There was an odor of good food in the air, and on a platform in the largest room, a four-piece combo was playing dance music, including old show tunes. The combo was excellent. As many people came to listen as to dance.

The hostess recognized them. "I just loved *Chapter Two*, Miss Green," the girl gushed as she showed them to their table.

"Thank you," Helen said.

The girl lingered by their table with a smile on her plain face and said, "And I hear Alan Brown is in town for the next play. If he ever comes in here, I think I'll faint. He's so handsome!"

Helen laughed. "You'll likely see him here. He was at rehearsal tonight."

"What's he like?" the girl asked breathlessly.

"Very much the same as he is on television."

"I'm so thrilled!" the hostess said, leaving them menus as she went back to her post by the door again.

Jim's good-natured young face showed amusement after she left. "Why didn't you tell her the truth?" he wanted to know. "Tell her he's mean and self-centered."

"I couldn't do that!" she protested. "You can't destroy glamor. That's what the theater lives on!"

"I'd say Alan Brown lives on his ego," Jim said. "Picking on old men and causing them to lose their jobs."

She listened to the combo, which had just finished some lively numbers from *Fiddler on the Roof* and was now playing a real old song.

"Aren't they great!" she exclaimed. "I could listen to them every day."

"I enjoy them," Jim agreed. "What's it to be?"

They had a friendly squabble about what they'd order and she finally settled for clam

chowder and coffee, while he had a huge hamburger with all the fixings and coffee.

"I worked late in the shop," he said. "It always makes me develop a huge appetite."

"I'm always more hungry after a performance than after reading like tonight," she said. "Working with the great man for the first time made me terribly nervous."

"It sounds as if he approved of you," Jim said.

"I guess so," she agreed. And then, with a sudden smile, she said, "He also recognized me!"

"As the girl washing the car? I'll bet he was impressed."

"No. He found that out, too! I was so embarrassed. But he kept saying he was sure he'd seen me before until I told him about my mother."

"What did he say then?"

"He seemed awed. It's hard to explain it. I suppose it was strange for him to find himself playing opposite the daughter of someone he was supposedly in love with."

"Did he say anything about it?"

"He wanted to talk, but I got away as soon as I could. I knew you were waiting."

Jim gave her a wise look. "Want to make a bet?"

"What?"

"He's going to ask you out. And I think he's going to fall in love with you."

She gasped incredulously. "You're joking!"

"No. I mean it!"

"He's old enough to be my father!"

"But young enough to marry you or at least date you," Jim said. "Lots of these older men want young girls. A promising young actress in her twenties should be just right for our fortyish friend."

She stared at the young scenic artist in dismay. "You are really serious!"

"I told you I was."

She shook her head. "Well, I say you're the only one who is thinking that way. I'm not and I'm sure he isn't." But she felt she wasn't being completely honest.

"We'll see," Jim said with a wink as the waitress came to serve them.

They mostly listened to the music as they had their late evening meal. Then they went on the floor for a dance and after that Jim drove Helen home, since she had both a rehearsal and an evening performance for the next day.

He parked in front of her place and, with an arm around her in the dark car, said, "I'd hate to lose you."

She snuggled close to him. "Small chance!"

"I think there's much more risk than you think," he said.

"You're not going to start that talk again."

"I mean, not even thinking about Alan Brown," Jim told her. "It's just that you're

likely to go much further in this business than I ever will. And you'll do it more quickly."

"I don't agree," she protested. "Your scenic studio does a lot of sets for other theaters. You're more in demand all the time."

"That's small stuff compared to what could happen to you if you had a movie chance or even a Broadway show. Not to mention television."

"I'm perfectly happy here until I master my craft more," she said. "So you needn't worry!"

He drew her close to him and kissed her hard on the lips. It was a long kiss filled with his caring, and she responded to it. Only in his arms did she feel a complete security. He had come to her following her mother's death and she had to believe their romance was fated.

As he let her go, she sighed and said, "If you only knew how much I love you, Jim!"

He gave her another little hug. "It wouldn't matter," he said. "I'd still worry!"

She went into the house with her head in the clouds. She loved someone who deeply cared for her. She was happy in her work and had a good home with Aunt Irene. What more could anyone ask? She'd forgotten all about Alan Brown and the happenings earlier in the evening. None of that seemed important to her at this moment.

As she passed her Aunt Irene's bedroom, she saw the door was partly ajar and the bed-

side lamp was on. Her aunt did a lot of reading in bed.

The older woman called out, "How did the rehearsal go?"

Brought back to reality again, Helen put her head in the doorway and said, "It went very well."

Propped up on pillows, Aunt Irene placed her book aside as she asked, "Did he ask you about your mother?"

"Not right away. He kept mentioning that he felt he'd seen me before. And I finally told him about Mother."

"What did he say?"

"He seemed a little stunned."

"I can imagine."

Helen said, "He'd heard about the accident and so he knew she was dead. He spoke very sadly about that."

"I should think so," Aunt Irene said, her good-natured face indignant. "But he didn't bother to write his sympathy at the time."

"I think he must have been very busy," Helen said, trying to placate the older woman.

"Those two were in love," her aunt went on. "At least I know your mother was. Then it all ended without any kind of an explanation from anyone."

"Life isn't like plays or novels. There are often a lot of things never explained."

"I think he may tell you."

"What?" Helen asked.

"Whatever it was that broke them up," Aunt Irene said.

She gave the older woman a look of dismay. "I'd never dream of asking him!"

"You may not have to," the older woman said. "He may want to talk about it."

"I'd rather not hear."

"I'd like to know," Aunt Irene said definitely. "First he was with that Grace Ebbett all the time. Then he dropped her and it was your mother. But in the end he left her just the same as he did Grace."

Helen said, "I understand he and Grace barely spoke today. I don't think she enjoys having him around."

Aunt Irene's round face showed amazement. "She's the manager and chief money source of the theater. She could refuse to have him if she wished."

"She'd never do that," Helen said. "That would mean interfering with the artistic management of Mason Trent and she wouldn't intrude on his decision."

"I don't run my business that way," the practical businesswoman declared. "If I don't want a person, I tell them to leave."

"This is a little bit more complicated," Helen told her.

Then she bid her aunt good night and went on to her own room and to bed.

Helen rarely had dreams. But oddly enough, her sleep was filled with dreams in which her

mother and the handsome Alan Brown played a part. She saw them standing together on the lawn by the theater. And when she hurried up to speak with them, they seemed not to know her.

Then she found herself confronted by the star in a corridor of the theater. He smiled, called her by her mother's name, and took her in his arms.

She actually remembered a little of what she'd been dreaming when she awoke the next morning, and it caused her to wonder.

It was raining when Helen drove to rehearsal. The only one onstage ahead of her was the veteran character actor, Denison Abbot.

The old man smiled and said, "We seem to be the punctual ones."

"I like to be on time," she said, seating herself on one of the chairs scattered about the stage.

"So do I," the older actor agreed. "I feel I need to be on hand for all the rehearsals since I'll be memorizing both the part of Krogstad and Dr. Rank. Happily the porter has only one line."

She asked, "What do you think your chances are of playing either of the roles? Norman, the man playing Dr. Rank, is very healthy."

"You never know," the old man said. "People lose their voices, have minor accidents, or

a parent or relative is ill or dies. And as for Donald Barnes, who is coming to do Krogstad, he's a likable guy and a good actor but one of the worst drinkers in our business."

She stared at him wide-eyed. "Doesn't Alan Brown know that?"

"I suppose so," the old actor said. "But he is one of Alan's stable of actors on the TV show. I imagine Alan thought of him first and Barnes couldn't very well refuse the job since Brown is his chief employer."

"Mason is very strict about drinking. He won't have any of it backstage."

"That's as it should be," Denison Abbot agreed. "But Barnes will drink on the sly. And there's always a chance he'll go too far and not be able to work. So I'll have to keep that in mind."

"You should warn Mason."

"If I did that, he'd think I was saying it because I was angry at Barnes replacing me," the old actor said. "Better to let him find out for himself. Mason isn't stupid. If it gets out of hand, he'll soon catch on."

Irma was the next to arrive, followed by Mason Trent and the others. As on the previous night, Alan Brown arrived last. Dapper, as usual, in designer blue jeans and shirt.

As Mason prepared the stage for their rehearsal, Alan Brown came over to Helen and bowed.

He said, "You look as lovely, as usual, this morning."

She stood up. "Thank you," she said. "I'm looking forward to the rehearsal."

"So am I," he said, his eyes never leaving her face. It was as if they were memorizing every area of it for some future reference or remembering her mother's face and comparing hers to it. He went on, "You made me think a lot last night. I was haunted by the memory of your face."

"I don't understand," she said.

"I mean it brought back so many thoughts of Joan, your mother," he went on. "I can't believe this is happening. That we should be brought together this way."

She smiled. "I'm very pleased. I have never worked with a real star before."

"Think of me as an old friend, Helen," he pleaded. "That's what I would like. Joan was very dear to me and so shall you be."

Touched by his warm words, she said, "Thank you."

"Call me Alan," he said. "I won't have you deferring to me as the star. And you shall be Helen."

Mason came up to them with a smile. "I see you two are getting on well. That's fine. It will help the play. But remember when it comes to the third act, you have a difference and Nora leaves you."

The star nodded. "I know that's the plot of the play." Then he turned to her and, with an almost tender look, said, "I hope it isn't repeated in real life."

CHAPTER SIX

The morning rehearsal went well. Helen thought that Alan Brown gave a much better reading than he had the previous night. She enjoyed working with him, especially in the many big scenes between them.

Mason Trent dismissed the company shortly after twelve-thirty as the stage had to be set for the evening performance of *Chapter Two*.

Alan Brown came to her at once and asked, "Will you have lunch with me?"

"I think not," she said. "I rarely spend much time on lunch and I have lines to go over, and then I must rest a little before tonight's performance."

The handsome star smiled grimly. "Your reasons are surely good and valid. Very well,

what about supper tonight after the show? I'll be on hand to see it."

She hesitated, knowing that Jim might very well expect to take her out again or at least go home with her and have coffee and a snack at her place.

She said, "I don't like to promise."

"Don't evade me," the handsome actor pleaded. "I have so much to talk to you about."

Relenting a little, she said, "All right. We can meet after the show tonight if you like."

"If I like!" he echoed. "I'll be delighted to have you as my guest. Any special place you prefer?"

"I sometimes go to The Lobster Pot," she said. "But it's a large place and you mightn't like it. You're almost sure to be recognized there."

"I'm used to that," Alan said. "It doesn't bother me all that much anymore."

She said, "I'll leave the place to you."

"Let's make it The Lobster Pot, and I'll call in the reservations," he said. "I have to go back to the hotel now. I expect Donald Barnes to check in at any time, and I want to be there when he arrives. He might even be there already."

He left her and she went on to the main office where she found Mason Trent in an earnest discussion with Grace Ebbett. They stopped talking when Helen arrived, and the director turned to give his attention to her.

"You're doing very well," he said with a smile on his long face. "I'd say that Brown is impressed. What do you think of him?"

"He's interesting," she said. "A good actor and he seems like a nice person."

Mason Trent sighed. "He wasn't very easy on the business of replacing Denison Abbot. But I suppose as a star he's used to having his way."

Grace Ebbett gave the director a bleak glance. "You must have thought of that before you invited him here."

"I did," the director admitted. "But the reality is just a little more formidable than I expected."

"I'd handle him carefully," the business manager warned him. "He's capable of almost anything, including walking out the day of the opening." With this grim comment delivered, the older woman returned to her small office.

Mason gazed after her in dismay. "I wish she'd come right out and said some of these things before I brought Brown here."

"Late now for warnings," Helen agreed. "But she knows him."

Mason gave her an anxious look. "The main thing is that he and you get along."

"I don't think that will be a problem," she said.

"I hope not," the director replied moodily and walked on to his private office.

She and Irma had lunched together at their usual diner, and Helen told the other girl of her talk with the star.

"He wanted me to have lunch with him," she said.

Irma lifted her eyebrows. "And you turned him down?"

She smiled. "I thought I should. I prefer a snack with you. And I want to rest and study. A lunch with him would be liable to linger."

"That's so," Irma said. "But he is interested in you."

"I'd say chiefly because of my mother," Helen said. "I've told him I'll have supper with him after the show tonight."

Irma's eyes sparkled. "Smart girl! Late dinner by candlelight! Now that is a lot more romantic!"

"I'm not looking for romance," Helen protested. "And I hope he isn't! I'm just going because he was once a beau of my mother's."

"Still, you never can tell," Irma said. And then she tugged at her friend's arm and warned, "Watch out! Here comes Julia!"

The languid Julia had entered the diner and, when she saw them, she came strolling across in a manner calculated to attract male stares. She had on very tight jeans and a skimpy blouse which showed her figure off to advantage. She was carrying a leather attache case. Now she sat on the stool next to Helen and put the case on the floor beside her.

Julia's perfect face had an air of smugness. She said, "I've just come from the hotel. I've been doing a story on Donald Barnes."

"He's arrived then?" Helen said.

"Yes. He came in around ten and I went over at eleven, as soon as he was settled in," the tall girl said. "I left when Alan Brown returned from rehearsal. I guess they're having lunch together."

Irma said with impish taunting, "I'd think they'd have asked you to lunch with them."

Julia tossed her head and said, "They did. But I refused. I only have a glass of milk at lunch. And anyway Donald Barnes had started drinking while I was interviewing him. I thought he might become a nuisance."

Helen listened with interest. "I've heard he's a drinker."

"He's a dreadful lush. I found that out in New York," Julia said airily. "These big names don't impress me. I've met them all at one place or another. Barnes passed out at Barney's Cafe one night and Alan had to send him home in his limousine."

Irma made a face. "You must find it dull here with the peasants."

Julia smiled archly at her. "I manage. I enjoy living in the old family home with Aunt Grace. And there are some of the peasants whom I find truly interesting."

Since they had finished their snacks, Helen and Irma excused themselves and left Julia to have her glass of milk alone.

When they were outside walking to the car, Irma warned Helen, "I'd say the peasant who interests her most is Jim Prentiss."

Helen tried to ignore the remark. She followed her usual routine for the day, but she was careful not to mention to her Aunt Irene that she was dining with Alan Brown. She had a feeling that her aunt would not approve. But she felt she must do it if only for her mother's sake.

She tried to appraise her feelings for the star who had so suddenly become part of her life. It was obvious he could be difficult and arrogant. It was obvious that other people found him less than lovable. But deep down she couldn't help being drawn to him. She found herself making excuses for him. Talented people often had a certain temperament. And Mason had used poor judgment in not choosing Dr. Rank—rather than Krogstad—as the original part for Denison.

When Helen arrived at the theater that night, she saw Jim standing backstage talking to the electrician.

She went over to him and, when he'd finished with the other man, she told him, "I won't be seeing you after the show tonight, Jim."

Jim's pleasant face showed mild surprise. "No?"

"I've promised Alan Brown to have some food with him," she said. "Mason wants me to keep him in good humor. And Alan wants to

talk to me about my mother."

"You're sure it's your mother he's interested in?"

She felt herself blushing and thought it was all quite silly. "Of course," she said. "I knew you wouldn't mind."

Jim's face showed no betraying expression. He said, "Well, have a good time!" And with a nod he walked off into the shadows heading for his scenery shop.

She looked at him, a trifle puzzled. He'd really given her no hint as to what he felt. But she was sure it would be all right with him. She put it out of her mind and hurried up the stairs to her second-floor dressing room.

The house was about half-filled for the Tuesday night show. Helen found herself unusually nervous, perhaps because she knew that Alan Brown was somewhere in the dark auditorium watching. She played her part with a slight, frantic edge and hoped that she was all right. Norman, who was playing opposite her, responded, and the play moved along swiftly.

When the curtain fell on the first act, the young actor told her, "You're working in a different tempo tonight. I like it."

"I'm nervous," she apologized. "I was afraid I might throw you off by going through my lines as fast as I did."

Norman's face showed admiration. "I think

it helped. This new pace is better than the way we were doing it."

And to her surprise Mason agreed. When she met him backstage, the director said, "You're giving a top performance tonight. All hint of staleness gone. Keep it up!"

So she did. And the audience responded with more applause than usual at the curtain calls. She was wryly amused that what might have been a detriment had turned into a plus for her. She changed quickly and said good night to Irma, who shared her dressing room, and went down to meet Alan Brown.

He was waiting for her just inside the stage door and she saw that he was wearing a smartly tailored silk jacket and dark slacks. With him was a somewhat stout young man with a bronzed, rather hard face. He was dressed carelessly and looked somewhat rumpled. He was smoking a rather fat cigar.

Alan came toward her with hands outstretched, saying, "You were great!"

"A little edgy, I'm afraid," she apologized, thinking that her own plain blue dress was not in a class with the clothes worn by the star.

"I want you to meet Don Barnes," Alan said heartily and brought the younger man forward.

Barnes removed the cigar from his mouth and, taking her small hand in his massive paw, he said in a deep voice, "You were all

right, kid!" His voice sounded something like Humphrey Bogart's, but it seemed odd that it came from a stocky man with a rather surly face.

She said, "You're to be Krogstad, I hear."

"Yeah," the young man said with mild disgust. "Ibsen I could do without, but Alan said he needed me, so here I am."

"I think you'll enjoy it," she said.

He shrugged and puffed on his cigar. "I finished working in these peanut playhouses years ago. Give me New York or L.A. I don't need any other spots."

"I'm sure they keep you busy in New York and in films," she said. She had just had a whiff of the actor's breath and, despite the cigar smoke, she could smell whiskey strongly.

Alan regarded him rather uneasily and, taking her arm, said, "Well, we must be going or we'll be late for my reservation. I'll see you back at the hotel, Don."

The burly man nodded. "Sure," he said. And to her, he added, "Nice meeting you."

"Thank you," she said. "I'll see you at rehearsal in the morning."

"Don't remind me of it!" Don Barnes said, wincing.

Alan hurried her out and, as they walked to his Mercedes, he said, "You mustn't mind Don. He's trying to act like Marlon Brando with only a fraction of the talent."

"He doesn't seem to think much of Ibsen or us."

"He's a solid actor," Alan said. "A little flaky as a person, but he'll do as I tell him." He opened the car and helped her in and then they drove to The Lobster Pot.

The place was crowded. The hostess went white and then crimson and showed them to a table in a suitably remote and dark corner with the air of someone in a daze.

When she left them the menus, she said in a voice with a tremor, "Will you autograph one of the menus for me, Mr. Brown?"

Alan, who had just helped seat Helen, looked at the girl with a friendly smile. "I'll do it now," he said. "What is your first name?"

"Myrtle!" the girl exclaimed. "And thank you, Mr. Brown!"

He autographed one of their menus and gave it to her. "We only need one," he said.

It was only the start of an unusual evening. Several other female patrons came over with slips of paper, or tiny books to get Alan's autograph. He was polite and friendly to them all. Helen watched with the growing knowledge of the price paid for being a well-known person. She received a small amount of attention in the local area as a resident actress, but it was nothing compared to this.

The flurry of excitement over Alan somehow determined their food order. It was to be

expected that he insisted on lobsters and champagne. This represented extravagance to her but seemed his regular style. They dined with the combo playing romantic melodies in the background.

Alan paused with his champagne glass to give his full attention to the music for a moment.

He said, "That's the waltz from *Fiorello* they're playing. Twenty years ago your mother and I danced to that same music." And he put aside his napkin and stood with his hand stretched out to take her over to the dance floor.

Helen went with him touched by his reference to her mother. He took her in his arms and, as she could have expected, he was a most expert dancer. There were only two other couples on the floor for the waltz and so they had plenty of room to move about.

In her ear, he said quietly, "The name of the waltz is 'Until Tomorrow.' And I think it has a special meaning for us. The tomorrow I've waited for so long has finally come."

She did not know how to answer him and so said, "It's a lovely tune and you dance superbly."

"Only with the right partner," he said.

When they finished dancing, they applauded the musicians and then walked back toward their own table. On their way they passed the less desirable tables and seated at

one of them talking very animatedly were Julia and Jim. Apparently they hadn't paid any attention to the dancing and so didn't notice Helen and Alan. Nor did Alan seem to recognize the other two theater people. So Helen carried on and passed the table without pausing to speak, thinking it was probably best that way.

Back at their own table, she found herself slightly upset at Jim's being there with the willowy Julia. But she realized it had no more significance than her dining with Alan Brown. No doubt Jim had simply dated Julia to fill in an hour.

Alan poured some more champagne in their glasses and said, "What's wrong? You suddenly seem miles away."

She forced herself out of her mood and smiled. "Sorry. I was thinking about something."

"I doubt if it was pleasant. You looked sad. I can't have that on our night out," the star said. "To Ibsen!" And he raised his glass.

She raised her glass and touched his. "I can always pay tribute to a genius."

He put his glass down and studied her. "Do you know you have a kind of genius?"

She stared back at him. "I'm not sure I heard you correctly."

"I meant it. You have a spark. The magic quality one needs to be a star in the entertainment world. You showed it tonight."

"I'd call myself no more than a competent actress," Helen said. "And I'm not sure I was at my best tonight."

"I know better than you," the star told her. "I've appraised and purchased talent for my television company for almost fifteen years. I've seen a lot of actresses but none with your looks and ability."

"Thanks," she said. "I think you're just a little too enthused."

"Let me be the judge, Helen," he said solemnly. "I want you to leave this company and come to New York under my management. I guarantee to make you a star within twelve months."

Helen found it hard to believe what she was hearing. She said, "You're kind. But I'm not ready for that yet."

"I say you are," he said. "If you remain with this type of regional company too long, it isn't good. You get stale. You don't keep developing. You have to keep moving in this business. Now is the moment for you to break the chain."

"I have a contract for six more months."

"I could get Mason to let you go."

"I don't want to," she said. "I feel I have more to learn here. And I'm happy in Porthaven."

He sat back with a sigh. "You're a lot like your mother in more than looks."

"Wouldn't you expect me to be?"

"I could understand her lack of ambition. She wasn't an actress, even if she was a beauty. But you have her beauty and great talent as well. Do you think she'd want you to throw it all away?"

"I don't think I'm doing that," she said. "Enough talk about me. Let's talk about my mother. That's why we came here."

The star smiled ruefully and picked up his glass of champagne and finished it. "You know in some ways this reminds me of the last night your mother and I dined together."

"Tell me about it."

"I'm not going to let us end the same way," he warned her. "We went for supper at the old Porthaven House. It's gone now. There's a parking lot on the site. We had a quiet supper much like this. There was music, a pianist. Your mother looked as lovely as you do tonight and seemed about the same age."

"She couldn't have been much older than I am now," Helen said.

"We talked and talked. Then I took her home. And I never saw her again." Alan Brown paused for a moment, then added, "Until I met you. You have no idea how much you resemble her."

"If you cared for each other, why did you part?"

"That's another sad story," he said with a weary smile. "It was all her choice. But I never forgot her. Perhaps if she hadn't been killed

in that tragic accident, I might have come back to her. Now, I've done something almost as good. I've found you!"

"I'm a different person," she said, her heart beating quickly.

"You embody all I loved in Joan," he said. "It's as if she's living again in you. That is why I want to help you make the kind of career you deserve. The kind of life you should have is within your reach if you'll only have faith in me."

She looked at her watch. "It's late. Remember rehearsal in the morning."

"Is that your answer?" he asked.

"It's the only answer I can give you now," she said. "We must go."

"Very well," he sighed.

He paid the bill and they left. The restaurant was almost empty and she noticed that Jim and Julia had already gone.

They drove back to Helen's place in near silence. When they reached it, Alan turned to her and, in a pleading tone, said, "Helen, don't let history repeat itself!"

"What do you mean?" she asked in a taut, low voice.

"Don't let me lose you as I lost your mother," he said. "I don't know if I could bear going through that again. I love you, Helen." And he took her in his arms for a long, thrilling kiss.

"Alan!" she said in a hushed whisper as she

pulled away from him and hurried to get out of the car.

"I meant everything I said," he told her.

She turned and walked to the house without a word as he drove away. She was suddenly conscious that her heart was pounding wildly and she was completely confused. Worst of all, she was afraid. She was really beginning to believe the things Alan Brown had told her.

ARKANSAS CITY PUBLIC LIBRARY

CHAPTER SEVEN

At breakfast the next morning Aunt Irene gave Helen a sharp, scrutinizing look and said, "You're pale and there are dark circles under your eyes. What time did you get in last night?"

Helen kept her eyes on her breakfast plate of cereal and evasively said, "Sometime around midnight."

"Isn't that late when you're both rehearsing and working?" her aunt asked. "I thought you kept those hours only on Saturday and Sunday nights when you have no morning rehearsals."

"I guess I forgot the time."

Aunt Irene said, "Indeed. And who were you with to make you forget the time?"

She looked up, blushing. "I was with Alan Brown if you must know!"

"Aha!" her aunt said. "I thought so. I had an idea he'd lose no time chasing after you."

"He's not chasing after me!" she protested. "We just went out for a bite and to talk about Mother."

"I'll bet most of the talk was about you," her aunt told her.

"Why do you feel so strongly about him?" Helen asked.

"I don't like him."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure," Aunt Irene said frankly. "But my instinct tells me he isn't to be trusted. Isn't that enough?"

Defensively Helen said, "I'm sure it's because he and my mother broke up and you have always blamed it on him for making her unhappy."

"It could be that," Aunt Irene said as she took a sip of her coffee.

"Then you've been blaming him wrongly," Helen insisted. "From what he's told me, it was Mother's idea entirely that they break up."

"That's his story," the older woman said. "I hope you are not ready to believe whatever he tells you."

"I'm not," she said rather guiltily. "But I still say you are not being fair to him."

Her aunt rose to leave. "Maybe because it's

generally known that all through his life the fine Alan Brown has never been fair to anyone." And she left.

Helen finished her breakfast alone. She was full of doubts and concerns. With the arrival of morning much of the romantic mood of the previous night was forgotten. And she wondered why she had been so easily won over to believing anything that the star had chosen to tell her. One important thing he had neglected to explain. The actual reason he and her mother broke up. He said it was her mother's decision, but he hadn't gone into it. She would like to know much more about it.

It was a dark day as Helen drove to the theater and her mood was equally somber. She reached the theater early so she could go to the scenery shop and talk with Jim Prentiss. He usually came to work early and spent long hours in the studio.

He was drawing up a floor plan at his tall desk when she entered.

He turned and, looking at her direction, he smiled and said, "You're really early!"

"I wanted to speak with you before we began in there," she said.

He leaned against his desk. "I saw you last night."

"And I saw you though I wasn't sure you'd noticed me," she replied.

"I decided it might be the best way to handle

it," he said. "You and your partner made a great dancing couple."

"I hope you weren't silly enough to be jealous," she said.

He smiled ruefully. "What about you?"

"Never," she said. "Though I was a little surprised to see you with Julia. You didn't lose any time after asking me."

"You refused."

"I told you why," she said.

"So you did," he said.

"And then you promptly dated Julia."

"Let's set the record straight," Jim said, coming over to her. "She came to me with the news I already had. She suggested we go have a snack and I was free to go."

Helen smiled back. "I knew what you'd say. And I just wanted you to know it was all right."

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"Let's not go into that," was her protest. "Did you enjoy your evening?"

"Not much."

She gave him another warm smile. "Come to think of it, neither did I." Was she being honest? she wondered.

Jim chuckled. "So you see?"

"Let me make an early booking with you for tonight," she said.

"With me?"

"Who else?" she said.

"I'll be waiting in my truck as usual after the show. I don't know whether I can take you to such a grand a place as The Lobster Pot. Julia broke me last night."

She laughed. "I don't want to be out late. We can have some food and coffee at my place!"

"Just so long as Alan Brown isn't there," he teased.

"Don't worry," she said. "My Aunt Irene wouldn't have him in the house!"

She went on in to rehearse feeling much better. Gradually the others arrived. As usual Alan Brown was the last to arrive and his friend, Don Barnes, came with him. It was the first reading of the play with Barnes as Krogstad, and she was interested to see how he'd make out.

Alan came directly to her and patted her affectionately on the back. "Wonderful time last night!"

She managed a smile. "It was fun. Let me thank you again."

"I want to do it again, soon," he said. "What about tonight?"

"Sorry," she said. "I'm a working girl. I can't manage late dates two nights in a row."

He looked disappointed. "I'll get Mason to let you skip a morning rehearsal."

"Don't you try!" she warned him.

"Just an idea," he said with a shrug. "Well, we'll work it out later."

Mason Trent came over to her and said, "Are you ready? You look worn out!"

She said, "Too much high living. I'm going to bed early tonight."

"You'd better," the director said.

The rehearsal began and she felt she was a little off. But the play started fairly well. Then Don Barnes made his entrance as Krogstad. Being used to the pleasant voice of Denison Abbot, Helen was shocked by the harsh way Barnes read the lines. At times he mumbled them. But despite this, the overall impression was that he would manage very well in the role though playing it much differently from the older actor.

During the break, she went outside. The sun had come out a little and it was warmer than it had been in the early morning. Old Denison Abbot was out there, and she thought he looked tense and worried.

She asked him, "Are you feeling all right?"

"I had a bit of pain in my arm this morning," the old actor said. "But it's gone now."

Helen frowned. "Oughtn't you to see a doctor?"

"I'm over sixty," the actor said. "If I went to a doctor every time I had a pain, I'd be in the waiting office all the time."

"You're incorrigible," she said. "What do you think about Barnes?"

"The same as before," Denison Abbot said. "But I'm surprised he'd come to a rehearsal

this early in the morning with whiskey on his breath."

"I've smelled it on him before," she said. "But I was so intent on the play I didn't notice it this morning."

"He's been drinking," the old actor said. "But I guess he's so bad now it's the only way he can carry on."

"It's horrible!" she said.

"I agree," Denison Abbot said. "At least Alan Brown doesn't have that weakness."

"No."

"How are you two getting on?"

She gave him a bitter smile. "He wants me to leave here. He is certain he can make me a star!"

"I've heard that story before," the old man said dryly. "You have talent, plenty of it. But I wouldn't put too much faith in that offer."

"I'm not," she said. "But I can't be abrupt with him. He and my mother were good friends. And Mason has asked me to humor him."

"Be discreet," was the older actor's advice as they were called back inside to the rehearsal.

Don Barnes improved as the morning went on. But she saw that he was terribly nervous and his hand holding the playscript shook in a frightening fashion. Helen was sure Mason Trent was watching him with a less than

pleased expression on his long face.

When the rehearsal ended, Alan Brown quickly went to Barnes and they left the theater together. Helen had an idea Alan wanted to get him out of the way before Mason Trent singled the actor out for a reprimand. She was standing by the stage door waiting for Irma to come along when Julia appeared looking smug and sidled up to her.

The tall and lovely Julia said slyly, "You weren't the only one at The Lobster Pot last night."

"I know," she said. "I saw you and Jim. He told me you asked him to take you there."

Julia's lovely face registered annoyance. "It was his idea as much as mine."

"I hope so," she said.

"You're not going to get anywhere with Alan Brown," Julia warned her. "He has a half dozen girls!"

Helen asked sweetly, "Are you upset because you aren't one of them?"

"I could have been if I wished," Julia said with anger. "My father wouldn't allow it. He dislikes theater people. And the more I see of them, the more I agree!"

"You seem to enjoy Jim's company."

"He shouldn't be in the theater," Julia replied. "He's much too talented. He could make a fortune in business. My father is coming to visit Aunt Grace soon and I'm going to have

him meet Jim and make him an offer to go into the design office of our cosmetic business."

"Jim won't be interested," Helen said confidently. "He's in love with the theater!"

Julia raised her shapely chin high as she said, "Well, maybe if he falls in love with someone else, he'll feel different about the theater!" And she swished out the stage door leaving a frustrated and speechless Helen.

After having lunch with Irma, Helen returned to the theater office with her friend to help fold the handbills they were sending out to a series of distant towns advertising the appearance of Alan Brown in *A Doll's House*. She and Irma had worked for only a little while when Mason Trent called Irma into his office to take some letters he had to dictate. Helen continued on alone and then she looked up and saw that the gray-haired Grace Ebbett had left her small office to come into the main area.

Grace smiled in her prim fashion.

She asked, "How does our leading lady find herself doing this sort of work when my niece, who is hired for publicity, is always off somewhere filling in her time?"

Helen returned the smile. "I don't mind. We all have to help. And Julia does a lot of interviews and seeing editors of the papers around the area."

"I know she hates this office and routine

work," Grace Ebbett said. "I suppose I can't complain. She's not my responsibility. Her father brought her up to be a glamour girl and I must say he has succeeded. I hoped her being here might change her a little."

"I think it has in some ways," Helen said.

"She looks down on theater and theater people," Grace said sharply. "And so does her father. I blame him for her attitude. It's hard for me to understand. I've loved the theater all my life."

"And done so much for it."

"Not as much as I'd like to," Grace sighed. "When your mother was alive and working here, we had great plans for a touring company as well as the Porthaven theater. But I've had to give that up. It has become so expensive to operate here."

"But business is building every year," Helen said. "We have more subscribers all the time."

"Yes," the prim older woman said. "That is satisfying. And it helps with the grants we get from business and government. Also, having Alan Brown as guest star was a smart idea on Mason's part. It will get the theater wide publicity."

"I'm certain of it."

Grace eyed her worriedly. "How is he doing in the part?"

"Very well."

"And what has he been like with you?" Grace asked.

"With me?" she hesitated.

"I mean, personally," the older woman said. "He has to have noticed how much you resemble Joan. Hasn't he said anything to you about your mother?"

"Yes," she said. "A lot. He's talked about her a lot."

Grace Ebbett seemed more tense. She said, "They were in love, you know."

"So he says."

"Oh, it was true," the gray-haired woman assured her. "But then he went away."

"Yes."

Grace gave Helen a concerned look and then rather surprisingly said, "Be careful of him!" And she turned and went back to her own little office.

Helen watched after her, shocked and saddened. She knew that before Alan Brown had fallen so much in love with her mother, he had been in love with Grace. And she could tell that Grace would always bear the scars of that lost love.

She left the theater office soon after and went home to study a little and rest. She fell asleep through sheer weariness and did not dream at all. But when she woke up after her nap, she found herself confronted with the same problems which had nagged at her before. And most of them had to do with Alan Brown and how she felt about him.

Whether he'd meant it or not, he had

planted some intoxicating seeds in her mind. He'd warned her that remaining with the small company too long would be dangerous for her overall career. She had seen this happen to others and she did not want it to happen to her.

But until Alan had come along to point out she was ready for more important things, she had been satisfied. What if she were destined to remain in regional theater all her life? Jim was happy in it and making his name as a scenic designer. She had actively considered marrying him and he had suggested that he would ask her when he was financially able to take a wife. Why not let it remain that way?

Because Alan had cleverly opened a door just wide enough for her to see other possibilities! Dazzling opportunities! With fame and money easily earned for no more labor than she was putting into her work in this modest theater. She had always been ambitious or she wouldn't have gone as far as she had. It was difficult to close her mind to ambition now. And besides, she couldn't deny her feelings for Alan himself.

As she dressed to leave for the theater, she found herself daydreaming about Alan. And she found herself more curious than before to know the true reason her mother broke up with him.

Of course twenty years ago he hadn't been a star but a struggling young actor who knew

he must leave the regional theater if he were to ever make a big reputation for himself. He had left the old loft theater which had preceded the current playhouse in Porthaven. And he had found fame and fortune because he had been ambitious. Why had her mother not agreed to go with him? If she had, she might be alive today and sharing his fame. Helen herself would have had a stepfather renowned in entertainment circles!

When she reached the theater she forced everything but her role out of her mind. As a result she gave a good performance and felt better for the time spent onstage as somebody else. There was no sign of either Alan Brown or Don Barnes backstage.

Mason noticed this and, as she came down after the play, he accosted her at the stage door. "Any idea where Alan Brown is tonight?" he wanted to know.

"No," she said.

The director looked grim. "All I need is for him and Barnes to start on a drinking spree together!"

"Has that happened in the past?"

"When he's with Barnes," the director worried. "I've heard some bad stories about those two. Of course, Barnes is an alcoholic. I ought never to have hired him. But I didn't know at the time."

"Maybe Alan is keeping an eye on him to see that he's sober for rehearsal in the morning."

"I'd like to believe it," Mason Trent said, "but I don't. I think I'll go over to the hotel and take a look in the lounge for those two."

Deep down she felt Mason was being unfair to Alan. But she tried to put the thought out of her mind.

Jim was faithfully waiting for Helen. And they drove back to her place. Aunt Irene was on hand to warmly greet the young man and then she discreetly went up to bed. Helen and Jim remained in the spotless white kitchen and she fixed them some chicken sandwiches and tall glasses of fresh milk.

As they sat at the kitchen table, she said, "Mason is worried about that Barnes. He's a terrible drinker and he sometimes gets Alan Brown drinking as well. Or so Mason says."

"Don't tell me the great star is a lush!" Jim said.

"No. But he does drink too much occasionally. According to Mason."

"Mason should have let Denison Abbot do the part," Jim said. "The old man could have been made up to look younger."

"I suppose so," she said. "But Alan did have a point."

"It could be he wanted to get his friend down here to break the monotony and that was his way of doing it."

"I never thought of that," she admitted, not quite believing it. "Why did everyone pick on Alan? Was it jealousy?"

"I think he's wily enough."

She smiled. "Be fair. He's also talented and brilliant."

Jim studied her over his sandwich. "He can't keep his eyes off you. Do you know that?"

"You're imagining things!" She blushed.

"I'm not," he said. "I think he'll try to take you with him when he leaves."

She was stunned that Jim could read things so correctly. She pretended to be surprised and said, "I don't think that's likely to happen."

"Wait and see," Jim said. "He's bound to make you an offer."

"He was in love with my mother," she said. "It's that that makes him act as he does. He sees her in me."

"And now he's in love with you."

She felt her cheeks get even warmer. "No!"

"Yes," Jim said. "And what about you?"

She didn't answer his question but instead said, "What about you and Julia? You know she hates the theater."

"She's told me," Jim said.

"How can you find anything to like in her?"

Jim shrugged. "She's beautiful and wealthy. And I assume from what she's told me there's a job for me in her father's company which goes with her."

She gasped. "Would you even consider anything like that?"

Jim eyed Helen calmly. "Only if I lost you."

CHAPTER EIGHT

They were now coming to the last days of the run of *Chapter Two* and the final rehearsals of *A Doll's House*. Helen found herself almost always exhausted between the rehearsals and the performances. The role of Nora was long and tiring. In addition to having many lines to learn, it called for great emotional depth. She and Alan were on the stage together a lot of the time in what amounted to long dialogues.

At least she was helped by the star doing the part of Torvald well. As the days went by, she began to more appreciate the quality in his acting which had made him a star. Further, he was always patient and considerate of her when any problem in staging their scenes together occurred. She began to feel

guilty for keeping so aloof from him except when they were working together.

Alan had a bewildered air whenever she put him off and refused his invitations for one reason or another. But she felt she owed it to Jim not to go out alone with Alan anymore. As a result Alan spent much of his time together with Don Barnes. And that excellent but drunken actor showed no sign of reforming. He appeared at a number of rehearsals with the smell of whiskey on his breath; she noticed it in her scenes with him. But because Don gave such a fine performance of Krogstad, the director closed his eyes to this breach of rules on the actor's part.

On the final weekend of *Chapter Two* Jim Prentiss went to Cambridge to supervise the erection of a set he'd designed for the Lowen Theater. He planned to work through the weekend and be back in time to have the set for *A Doll's House* up for the opening on Tuesday.

Helen finished an especially trying rehearsal on Saturday morning and went to the office afterward to ask when a costume which had been sent to be altered would be returned to the theater. As Mason Trent was still on-stage working with the two children who'd won the opportunity to play in the production, she asked Grace Ebbett about the costume. For the woman was involved with such things.

The prim Grace frowned and went and made

a phone call and returned to Helen in the main office with the word, "The dressmaker says she will have it ready for rehearsal on Monday morning."

"I was hoping I could try it on before then," Helen worried. "Monday leaves it so late if it isn't all right."

The older woman's face showed sympathy. "I'm sorry. It's a ten-mile drive to the dressmaker's house. If Julia were here, I'd send her there to pick the dress up and bring it to you for a fitting."

"I suppose I could go."

"No," Grace said. "You should rest. You look exhausted as it is. And you have to give the final performance of *Chapter Two* tonight as well as the matinee today."

"There are no rehearsals tomorrow," Helen said. "Perhaps if I went up, the dressmaker would let me have it then."

"I'll call again and see if it can't be rushed somehow," the older woman said. "Check with me after the matinee. I may be able to make some arrangements to get it here."

"Thank you," she said. "So Julia's also away for the weekend."

Grace Ebbett looked embarrassed. "Why, yes, I thought you knew."

"Really?" Helen said, sensing there was something about this she didn't understand.

"She went with Jim," Grace said. "He had to see about his set in Cambridge and she

needed to visit the various Boston newspapers about the opening here on Tuesday night. Also her father is in Boston on business this weekend and she wanted to see him. So she and Jim drove up together. They'll both be back late Sunday night or early Monday morning."

Helen tried to conceal her shock on hearing this. She said, "I see." And then added, "Well, don't worry too much about that costume. We'll manage somehow."

And she left to have a brief snack at the diner with Irma. She tried to tell herself there was nothing really wrong in the two going to Boston together. But she felt that Jim ought to have at least told her about it. What made her more upset was the information that Julia's father was to be in Boston when the two were there.

Julia had been champing at the bit to have her father meet Jim and try and woo him away from his theater work to industry. Just as Julia was trying to win the young artist for herself. It seemed that everything had worked out well for her.

Irma on the stool beside Helen asked, "Why are you so quiet? Don't you feel well? I told Mason he's overdone the rehearsals."

She gave her friend a wry glance. "It's not the rehearsals. I just found out that Julia went to Boston with Jim this weekend."

Irma's pretty face registered astonishment. "He and she went away together?"

"He took her with him and he didn't even say a word about it to me," Helen said.

"It's been her fault!" Irma said angrily. "You know she's been after him!"

"Did he need to be such a willing partner?" Helen wanted to know. "I've deliberately refused to go out with Alan Brown in consideration of Jim. He doesn't seem to care how I feel."

"Julia has plotted this somehow!"

"Even so he should have let me know," she said.

"Men!" Irma said, rolling her eyes. "You know what they're like. I'd forget it if I were you. We have a heavy afternoon and night ahead."

"You're right," Helen said with a sigh and she gave the counterman their orders.

Alan came to her after the matinee.

He told her, "I saw the show again this afternoon. I think you're better now than when I first saw you."

"Thanks," she said, awkwardly anxious to get on to her dressing room.

The handsome star said, "About tonight. We'll not be doing anything tomorrow. Will you come out for a late dinner with me after the show tonight?"

"I'm very tired," she told him.

"You'll have tomorrow to sleep in and rest. We don't rehearse until Monday morning. And tonight is the last performance of *Chapter*

Two. It's the ideal time to go out. It will do us both good. Don't refuse me," he pleaded with her.

Helen offered him a weary smile. "You don't give up easily, do you?"

"Not where you're concerned," he said.

She briefly considered his offer, knowing that deep down she wanted very much to accept.

"All right," she said. "I'll meet you here after the show."

"Great," he said. "I'll make reservations for our special table at The Lobster Pot. We'll celebrate the end of the run."

So it was that at eleven-fifteen they entered the friendly restaurant and were shown to the quiet table in the secluded corner which Alan had chosen. On their way in, Helen was conscious of many eyes in the crowded restaurant being upon them. But happily no one came to bother Alan for an autograph.

When he had ordered for them, once again choosing lobster and champagne as the main items of their feast, he eyed her warmly across the candlelit table.

"I was afraid you wouldn't agree to see me again," he said.

"We've been working so hard," she replied, looking down.

"I know," the star said. "But there's more than that to it. It's that Jim Prentiss, the scene designer, isn't it?"

She grimaced. "Jim and I are long-time good friends."

"I've heard you're more than that."

"People too often romanticize and talk about things they don't know," she said.

Alan Brown replied, "No one knows that better than I."

She said, "At this time in my career I'm not rushing to have a romance with anyone. I need to be free for my work."

"Unless the romance happens to be with someone who can push you ahead in your work," he said, his face looking even more handsome in the reflection of the candlelight.

"I'm not even sure about that."

"I love you, Helen," Alan said earnestly. "And I can help you advance in the theater."

"Please," she said. "I'd rather not discuss it." Yet deep in her heart was an unexpected joy she'd never known before, accompanied by a nagging uneasiness.

"I need to. Just let me say what is on my mind and then I'll drop it," he promised.

She sighed. "All right."

"I think you're foolishly sacrificing yourself and your career for that young man. And he's in Boston now with Julia."

"That's just a coincidence."

"They went there together," Alan told her. "But forget that. Let us talk about us. You know that I once loved your mother and now I find myself even more in love with you."

She looked at him very directly. "What happened?"

He paused. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what happened between you and Mother? Why did you part? Why?"

Alan Brown stared at her. "I'm surprised she didn't tell you. Are you sure she never told you anything about it?"

"If she had, I wouldn't be asking you now," she said. "I think I have a right to know in view of all the other things you have said."

"Very well," he said. "You know that we were very much in love. The theater was a lot smaller in those days. We operated out of a loft and only played weekends."

"Yes. She told me about all that."

The actor frowned. "I was just beginning to feel I knew something about the business. I came here to work for several months. The first person I went out with was Grace Ebbett."

Helen was interested to hear him refer to the older woman. It was the first time he had.

She said, "I've been told that. Why did you turn from her to Mother?"

He gave her one of his frank smiles. "Easy to answer that one. I fell head over heels in love with Joan. I'll admit I wasn't fair to Grace. But on the other hand, I'd never been in love with Grace. Your mother won my heart at our first meeting."

"She and Grace were close friends and co-

workers. Wasn't it awkward for them?" she asked.

"No. Because Grace was very big about it. She understood my feelings for your mother, and that they were genuine."

"But in the end you left without my mother."

"I'm coming to that," he said. "You seem to forget there was another person involved."

"Another person?"

He looked at her. "You!"

She stared back at him in utter surprise.

She said, "I was only a child. I hardly remember you from then."

"That's what happened. I asked Joan to come with me and leave you behind with your aunt, at least during the school year. Your mother wouldn't do it."

In a voice choked with emotion, she asked, "Are you saying my mother robbed herself and you of happiness because of me?"

"Yes," Alan said. "I'm sorry. I'd hoped not to tell you."

"I wanted to know."

The star was apologetic. "Neither of us would give in. She insisted she should bring you with us. I fought for your staying here with your aunt. I said you could join us in the summers, on holidays."

"Mother never hinted any such thing to me."

"It's the truth," he said. "I suppose I was selfish. I became angry and left on my own."

"You didn't try to discuss it with her again?"

Alan said, "After I went to New York it was only a few months until I moved to Hollywood. I was so busy getting my television company formed and successfully underway that I had no time for anything else. Then, years later, I was about to return to Porthaven to see your mother when I read of her death."

"I see," Helen said quietly.

"I'd say I died a little myself when I heard the news," he went on sadly. "I was still haunted by my memories of this place and of Joan. And that is why I accepted the offer to come here and act when Mason Trent approached me."

She listened in silence. The combo was playing some sentimental melody in the background. She suddenly realized how much her life was involved with that of the man sitting across from her. She had been the reason for the broken romance between him and her mother.

She said, "I'm sorry. I wish it had worked out better for you and Mother."

The star reached out and took one of her hands in his. "Joan died and so I never saw her again. But I did come back and I found you. I think it was meant to be. That we were fated to meet."

"I just happened to be here."

"You are here and the actress with whom

"I'm going to co-star in this play," he said. "We have more in common than your mother and I had. She was not an actress, but interested in the business end of the theater. You, like myself, love a life on the stage."

Helen looked at him earnestly, saying, "But we are so far apart in many ways. I'm really just a nobody. And you are famous! A well-known star!"

"Being a star doesn't guarantee me any happiness," Alan said. "I've followed the dictates of fate and returned here for a second time. And I've had the experience of falling in love again. If you turn me down, if I lose you, I'll be a very unhappy man."

"You've been married several times before."

"Searching for what I know Joan could have given me and never finding it."

"What makes you think I can fill her place in your life?"

"I'm positive of it," he said. "I could be with her at this moment, you're so much like her. You've come to end my unhappiness and searching."

"I don't know," she said. "I—I'm confused. I must think about it." It was true. A short time before she'd felt great joy. Now she was enmeshed by turmoil.

"I don't mean to rush you," he hastened to say. "You have a month before I'll be leaving. Just decide before then. And see me more

often, so you can really get to know me. I mean, apart from our working together on the stage."

She said, "I want to know you better. But there is another person involved."

"Jim Prentiss," the star said. "I know. But can you call it any more than a friendship? You told me that's all it was."

"We've both thought of it as something deeper than that."

"Yet he has made no commitment to you, has he?"

"I'm sure he will one day," she said. "I haven't asked for anything."

Alan eyed her earnestly. "If you think you're truly in love with Jim, I'll step aside. But I don't think you are. You're just confused. And I don't want to see you throw away your life on a fantasy."

"Give me some time to consider," she told him.

"I can offer you an entry to the world where you belong," he said. "I'll star you in your own television series. I'll make you a nationally known figure within a year!"

It was a heady offer and Helen couldn't deny that she was dazzled by it. Also, she was ready to believe that Alan Brown loved her and she loved him. But still she did not want to be rushed into a decision.

They had a wonderful dinner and Alan drove her home and saw her to the door.

In a voice, tender and quiet, he said, "I hope I have made you understand my feelings to-night. And I also hope that you will come around to my way of thinking."

"Good night, Alan, and thank you," she said softly.

He took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly, then with a sad smile he left her and went back to the Mercedes and drove away. Helen watched the red taillights of the car as it vanished in the darkness and wondered what she was going to do. A whole new future was being offered her. A wondrous new love.

She went inside the darkened house and made her way up the stairs. On the landing she was surprised to be confronted by her Aunt Irene wearing a dressing gown.

The older woman had a troubled expression on her round face. She said, "I saw you from the window. I couldn't help it. I heard the car stop and looked out to see if it might be you."

"It doesn't matter," she said.

"You were with Alan Brown."

"Yes."

"I feel as if the years had been rolled back," Aunt Irene said soberly. "I looked out and saw a scene identical to one many years ago, when he so often brought your mother home."

She looked directly at her aunt. "Do you think they were very much in love?"

"What does he say?"

"That they were."

"Perhaps it is true," Aunt Irene said. "But he deserted your mother and left her unhappy."

"Did she ever speak of it to you?"

"No."

Helen said, "He told me the reason tonight."

"What did he say?"

"That I was the reason they parted. Mother wanted to take me with her when she went away with him. He refused. He said I should stay with you while I went to school."

"I never thought of that," Aunt Irene admitted. "It may very well be true."

"He says he planned to return to her one day and then he read of her death. Now he claims to be in love with me and he wants me to marry him."

Aunt Irene looked distressed. "You're not seriously thinking about it?"

"I don't know," she said. "Why?"

Her aunt shook her head in frustration. "I can't find the proper words. But I think it would be wrong. I'm not sure I trust him."

Helen patted her aunt's arm. "You mustn't worry. I don't intend to give him any immediate decision. I want to think about it more after the play opens and I have less on my mind."

On Sunday morning she slept late. When she got up to have brunch, she found a huge bouquet of roses waiting for her on the dining-room table.

Aunt Irene gave her a knowing glance. "They came a while ago. Guess who sent them?"

"I know," Helen said, smiling at the flowers.

Her aunt wore a wistful expression. "I'm afraid he's trying to buy you, my dear."

Helen reassured her, "I'm not all that easily bought."

"I think your mother said something like that," Aunt Irene told her.

A little later Helen was reading when a car drove up before the old house. She went to the front door and opened it to discover Grace Ebbett out there. The older woman had her altered costume over one arm.

With a smile Grace Ebbett said, "The dress-maker had the alterations completed this morning. I dropped by for it on my way from church. I knew you wanted to try it on."

Helen took the dress. "You shouldn't have bothered," she said.

"No bother," Grace said. "I hope it fits properly now. It should be a big opening on Tuesday night. Incidentally, I had a call from Julia in Boston this morning."

"Oh?"

Grace nodded. "She says all the main Boston critics are driving down. And some from New York as well. She was in an excited mood. She said she'd had dinner with her father and Jim Prentiss last night. He's up there also with a stage set for one of the theaters."

"Yes, I know," Helen said.

So Julia had managed to get Jim and her father to meet. It would be interesting to know what might come of the meeting. It could be that Jim was also on the verge of making an important choice.

CHAPTER NINE

The atmosphere was tense in the shadowed backstage area as Helen came down dressed for her first entrance as Nora. She passed several of the backstage people along the way, including Jim Prentiss.

He smiled and said, "Good luck!"

"Thank you," she replied with an answering smile.

In the hectic hours before this opening night, she'd had no chance to talk alone with the young scenic designer. She knew he'd returned from Boston on Monday morning and Julia had been with him, but everyone had been so busy preparing for the first performance of *A Doll's House* there had been no time for personal matters.

She reached the spot from which she would make her appearance onstage, holding some packages. Alan, as Torvald, was standing behind the set in another area, where he'd make his entrance and join her. He waved and she waved back. The actress who played the maid was in position onstage.

Standing with Helen was Denison Abbot, dressed for his role of the porter. The small Christmas tree he would be carrying was next to him and he gave her a smile of encouragement.

He said, "Some of the best-known critics from New York and Boston are out there. It could be an important night for you, my dear."

She pressed his hand. "I wish you were onstage with me all the time. But I'll feel better for having you there when I first come on."

"I shall be watching," the veteran actor promised. "And do remember to make a strong entrance and then build on it."

Helen nodded. Mason Trent came over and kissed her lightly on the cheek. Then the director gave the electrician the signal to lower the house lights, and next he motioned for the curtain to rise. The murmuring out in the darkness of the auditorium ended and there was an awed hush of anticipation as the lights blazed on the empty stage and they waited for the play to begin. Helen took a deep breath, then moved forward quickly, the role of Nora already assumed as she moved through the

doorway onstage. Denison Abbot came on her heels, carrying the Christmas tree, which he handed to the maid.

Helen, as Nora, told the maid, "Be sure and hide the Christmas tree carefully. The children mustn't see it until this evening when it's all decorated." Then she turned back to a waiting Denison Abbot and asked, "How much?"

"Fifty, ma'am," the old man said with dignity.

She paid him and he thanked her and left her alone on the stage. She took a bag of macaroons from her pocket and ate a couple, then went cautiously to the door of her husband's study and listened. Then she said happily to herself, "Yes, he's home."

Alan, as Torvald, called out to her and a moment later made his entrance. The crowded house at once broke into a tribute of applause which he graciously recognized by standing smiling at Nora in admiration. Then he continued with his lines.

The evening was a blurred affair in Helen's memory. She had barely time to rest and prepare herself during the intermissions. She knew that everyone in the company was playing well. That Don Barnes was especially good as Krogstad and Irma's Mrs. Linde was received warmly by the audience. But it was surely Alan Brown's night. He was magnificent and his good support carried her along

to heights she had never achieved onstage before.

The final curtain fell to a loud ovation and they took many curtain calls with a number of the audience standing in tribute to the performance.

When the last curtain call was taken, Alan, who stood in the middle of the stage, holding Helen's hand, turned to her and, with a proud, knowing smile, said, "I told you!"

"It was you," she told him. "You carried the play!"

"No," he said. "You gave the outstanding performance. Wait until you read what the critics say." And he kissed her on the lips in full view of everyone.

Irma was the next to come and throw her arms about Helen. Her friend was in tears. "Tonight was magic!" Irma said, sobbing happily.

Don Barnes gave Helen a friendly nod and said, "I need a drink," as he quickly left the stage.

Mason Trent came to her and said, "You were everything that I expected. Now go change and be ready for the party we're having for the out-of-town newspaper people in the lobby."

"I won't be long," Helen promised as she picked up her skirts and started away.

Jim Prentiss was waiting by the bottom of the dressing-room stairs.

He said warmly, "The best ever! You were great!"

"Thanks, Jim," she said. "How did you make out in Boston?"

He shrugged. "The Cambridge people liked my set."

"And Julia's father?" she said. "I understand you had dinner with him."

Jim looked red-faced and embarrassed. "How did you hear that?"

"I heard it."

"Another story," he said. "Mr. Ebbett is an interesting man."

"I'm sure he must be," Helen said. "I have to hurry up and change. I'll see you at the party."

But, of course, she didn't. At least not to talk with him. The one time she spotted Jim at the other side of the lobby, he was talking with Julia. Helen was almost continually in the company of Mason Trent and Alan Brown, who introduced her to the visiting critics. Everyone was enthusiastic about the production and a few told her she was bound to receive excellent mention in their reviews.

Helen was literally walking on air. It was a night of triumph unlike any other opening night she'd known. Mason Trent cautioned her not to look on this as the peak of her career.

The director reminded her, "In a week we'll be starting rehearsals on *The Ghost Train*. It

won't be as important a production as this, but it should be fun."

Alan overheard the remarks and made it a point to take Helen aside. They entered the darkened auditorium together, away from the laughter and noise of the crowded lobby.

He held her in his arms and then told her, "I hope you're not seriously thinking of beginning rehearsals on another play?"

"I told you I have a contract here with months to run," she said.

"Let me buy it out," Alan said.

"No," she told him. "I'll make a decision and talk to Mason about it myself. I'd rather do it that way."

"You want to give him time to find a replacement for you."

"My part is only minor anyway in *The Ghost Train*. Irma could do it."

"I'd like to see it settled," Alan said.

"It will be," she promised. "And now take me home."

He showed surprise. "Leave the party?"

"I'm going to," she said. "I'm dead tired. You can remain if you like. If I stay here another five minutes, there's a risk I might collapse."

Alan kissed her on the cheek. "I'll drive you home and come back and say good night to the late staying guests."

She gave him a concerned look. "You should limit your own celebrating. You have a performance tomorrow night."

"I will," he promised.

"Mind Don Barnes," she said. "He's already drunk and he'll be anxious to have you join him."

Alan laughed lightly. "I can take care of Don. Let's go out the stage door so we won't run into anybody."

He drove her home and after a final good-night kiss she went in to find her Aunt Irene seated in the living room waiting for her. The older woman stood up and came over to Helen with a happy smile on her round face.

"You are a fine actress, Helen," her aunt said. "I never knew how good until tonight."

"Everything went well," she said. "It wasn't only me. Alan was the star."

"He was good but you were better," Aunt Irene said. "I made up my mind to sit up until you came home and tell you. I didn't care if I had to sit here until dawn."

The girl laughed. "I was far too tired to stay out until dawn. I'm going straight to bed this minute!"

When Helen picked up the theater mail on Thursday and took it to the office, most of the papers with the reviews were included in the mail envelope. She and Irma and Mason Trent eagerly went through all the papers from Boston and New York and clipped out the reviews. While shorter and not quite as enthusiastic as the local papers, the out-of-town people had

been friendly toward the production. Helen had been praised as much as Alan Brown, perhaps a little more because she was a new-comer.

Julia joined them while they were going through the papers and sat back watching with one of her arrogant smiles. "Don't say I didn't do a good job publicizing the play," she said.

Helen smiled at her. "If the reviews are any answer, I'd say you did marvelously."

Mason Trent said, "Your best work to date, Miss Ebbett."

"I'm glad you finally appreciate me," Julia said. "I'll be going back to New York shortly."

The director looked surprised. "Grace didn't say anything about it."

"My aunt doesn't know," Julia said. "My father and I decided when I saw him in Boston. I find it much too dull here!"

Mason Trent said, "That means I'll have to get someone else to work on publicity for *The Ghost Train*. There's a fellow on the local paper who asked me about a job here. I'll call him."

Julia lit a cigarette and waved a slim hand with red nails shining. "He is welcome to take over any time!"

Helen heard this exchange with a slight feeling of anxiety. The immediate question in her mind was whether Julia's leaving meant

that Jim might be deserting the theater as well. Had she won him over?

As soon as she could, Helen slipped out of the office while the other three continued going through the various newspapers and checking the reviews. She went directly to the scenery shop at the rear of the stage and found Jim and his apprentice painting the flats for the next play. He paused in his work when he saw her.

She said, "We've never had that chance to talk."

He stood up. "It's been a busy time."

She glanced at the apprentice and then at Jim again, and asked, "Could you take a few minutes off for us to talk now?"

"Sure," Jim said.

And he slipped off the apron he'd been wearing, and they left the studio to step out to the platform behind it. She stood leaning against the platform railing in the sunlight with a brisk breeze blowing her long hair slightly. Jim stood near her.

She said, "I just heard that Julia is leaving the theater."

"Yes," he said. "She's going back to New York."

"Did her father offer you a job?"

Jim smiled. "Yes, he did. He thinks I could fit well into their designing group."

"Are you going to accept?"

"That depends," Jim said, his eyes meeting hers. "What about you? You're a star now. All the big-city papers writing about you!"

"I haven't made any plans."

"Hasn't Alan Brown asked you to join his television company?"

"Yes."

"And you'll probably do it."

"I haven't made any decision," she said, looking away, out across the ocean.

Jim said, "I'm sure he's told you that he loves you."

She nodded. "Yes. He wants me to marry him."

"Well, that would be no new experience for him. He's been married a few times before."

She turned to the young set designer. "That's a mean thing to say, Jim. Not like you at all!"

He shrugged. "Sorry. I happen to be jealous of the handsome Mr. Brown."

"You may not have a need to be."

"That's what I'd like to find out."

"What do you mean?"

"If you decide to take his offer of marriage and joining his company, I'd like to know."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to remain here if you go."

"That's ridiculous!" she told him.

"Maybe. But it's a fact."

"What will you do?"

"If I lose you," he said, "I'll go with Julia. Maybe I can do well in the cosmetic business, after all."

"Good luck!" she said bitterly.

"The same to you," Jim said. "Now I think we've covered all we had to discuss. I'd better get back to my work." And he turned and went back into the studio.

She stood there frustrated and a little angry. She also experienced a feeling of loss combined with fear. She and Jim were drifting very far apart and she wasn't sure this was what she wanted. She really didn't know what she wanted.

Helen went home and up to her room and wept. Then she tried to make a decision. It weighed heavily with her that her mother had loved Alan Brown and, because of her, the two had missed their chance at happiness together. Now Alan was in love with her. And she was certainly attracted to him. Was it fair of her to repeat history and turn her back on him? He seemed sincere in his attentions and he could send her on to greater glory in the theater.

But opposed to this was her long friendship with Jim, which also was a romance, however you looked at it. She believed in Jim's talent and had no worry about his future. They could go on in the theater together as a couple and be very happy. She might not get further than

leading roles in regional theater companies, but if her life was good otherwise, wouldn't that be enough?

She had a difficult choice to make and she must make it within a short time.

Friday came and Helen had still not come to any final decision. It was a lovely October day and she received a phone call from Alan when she was at her desk in the theater office.

The star said, "I want you to join me this afternoon. I've rented a cabin cruiser and I'm going out for a while. The ocean is calm and the weather wonderful!"

"I'm not sure," she protested. "I like to rest in the afternoons."

"You can rest on board," he promised. "We'll be back by five at the latest, in plenty of time for the evening performance at eight."

She debated and was still not convinced. "Who else is going?" she asked.

Alan laughed at the other end of the line and said, "No need to worry. We'll be properly chaperoned. Don Barnes and his girl friend are coming along."

It was a lovely day and she'd not been out on the water all summer. So she decided to accept the invitation, asking, "When and where?"

"The Front Street Dock at two o'clock," he said. "We'll go for a short cruise as far as Ogunquit and then back. We should easily be here by five at the latest."

"I'll be there," she promised.

She had lunch with Irma, who was not too enthusiastic about the idea.

She worried, "Are you sure Alan Brown knows how to handle the boat?"

"They wouldn't rent it to him otherwise," Helen was sure. "It could be fun."

"I hope it is," Irma said. "I don't like the water myself."

At five minutes to two Helen drove to the wharf on Front Street and found Alan standing rather nervously waiting for her. She parked and locked her car and then he led her across the wharf and down some wooden stairs to step onto a luxurious cabin cruiser tied up alongside. It was lovely, sleek and white with a high wheelhouse. Anyone up there had a supreme view of the surrounding area.

She asked, "Where are Don and his girl friend?"

Alan grimaced. "Trouble! Don is down below. He's been drinking and he and his girl friend quarreled and she left. She won't be coming."

"What about him? Is he all right?" she worried.

"Sure, he'll sober up after a little," Alan said lightly.

Then he called a man over from the rental cabin on the dock and had him help with the line and free the cruiser. Alan then took her up to the wheelhouse and got the sleek craft

underway. It slid through the water quickly and easily. As they reached out farther, it swayed gently with the heavier waves.

She said, "Do you consider this a calm sea?"

"Very," he said. "The waves can really be huge when it's rough."

"There's motion enough for me," she told him.

Alan chatted gaily on, seeming to enjoy the sense of power being at the wheel gave him. And she suddenly became aware that he was not completely sober, either. Small fears began to nag at her. She looked and saw the rapidly receding shoreline.

She asked, "Aren't we going out a long way?"

"The fishing boats go a lot further than this. They are all around out here. There's no danger!" Alan was enjoying playing the role of jaunty sea captain.

Helen looked around at the expanse of rolling water and could see nothing else.

She said, "I don't see any of those fishing boats."

"You will," he said confidently.

"Do you know how to chart the way to Ogunquit?" she wanted to know.

"I had the rental people go over it all with me," Alan said. "We're heading that way now."

And he had, indeed, swung the sleek cruiser around, in a sharp motion which had made her temporarily queasy. She searched the ho-

rizon worriedly and still saw no sign of any of the fishing crafts.

She was about to comment on this when she looked and saw a drunken Don Barnes shakily making his way up to join them. He was slack-jawed, his eyes red, and his face covered with a small stubble of beard indicating he hadn't shaved since the previous day. He was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He looked burly and in an ugly mood.

He ignored her and asked Alan, "Where's all the booze?"

Alan gave him an annoyed look. "There's none left."

Barnes supported himself against the instrument panel and growled, "You're a liar!"

"All right," Alan said. "I'm lying. But there's no more for you. You need to sober up if you're to work tonight!"

"Don't worry about me!" Don Barnes said angrily and, bracing himself, threw a fist into Alan's face.

The actor staggered back releasing the wheel. With a frightened cry, Helen took his place as the two men began exchanging blows in the tiny area. She tried to keep the cruiser on the course which Alan had chosen as the battle between the two went on.

Alan finally delivered a blow to Barnes's jaw and the burly actor fell heavily back against the instrument panel and then slumped to the floor.

Alan was now gazing at the instrument

panel, which had been hit by the full weight of Barnes. Some of it was smashed.

He gave her a worried glance. "I think he's smashed the wireless."

"What now?" she said, frantic.

Alan looked grim. "I think we should go straight back to Porthaven as quickly as we can."

"So do I," she said. And, gazing down at the motionless Barnes, she asked, "What about him?"

"Let him stay there until he comes around on his own," Alan said, his face white with anger. There was a cut on his cheek where Barnes had hit him.

Helen knew she'd made a bad error in coming on board the cruiser. She watched with growing apprehension as Alan made a clumsy try at swinging the boat in another direction. And it was then she first saw the tall clouds of heavy white fog extending from the water to the sky. The great clouds were rolling toward them like an advancing army!

CHAPTER TEN

One moment they were cruising in choppy seas with the horizon wide around them, and the next they had moved into a weird world of shroudlike mist, with only the angry waves near the boat visible to them. Everything else was a foggy universe of gray nothingness. You could see only the deepening clouds!

Helen stared ahead and gasped, "We've been caught up in a fog bank!"

"Does this happen often around here?" Alan asked from the wheel, his voice indicating his uneasiness.

"Whenever there's a quick temperature change, as there must have been, it can roll in with frightening rapidity!"

"What do you think our chances are of cutting through it?"

"Small," Helen said tensely. "It generally moves across the water and onto the land. It can move inland for miles!"

"I didn't know this could happen," he worried.

She gave the battered instrument panel a sharp look and asked, "What portion of our wireless and radar may still be working?"

"They're both useless until we've made some repairs," Alan said grimly. He glanced at Don Barnes still on the floor of the wheelhouse. "Thanks to that lunatic!"

She glanced about them into the scary barrier of gray mist and said, "At least slow down to a crawl. We might run into something before we could halt, or have something run into us!"

"We should be heading for Porthaven," Alan said.

"But you're not sure!"

"No."

"We should try to protect ourselves somehow," she worried. "Is your signal horn still working?"

"It's all right," he said.

"Then start using it," she begged him. "If you don't, we may be run down. There are a lot of large commercial boats in these waters."

Alan Brown stared at her. "You think I should keep blasting out a signal?"

"Yes."

"It seems pointless and crazy to me," he said.

"You won't think so if suddenly some larger ship looms up to cross our bow or cuts us in two," she told him with anger. "At least it will let other boats know where we are!"

"All right," he complained, "I'll do it." And he started using the horn at short intervals.

Its loud, melancholy lament added to the weird feeling of their plight.

Helen was standing by the wheel trying to see into the thick fog clouds when she realized there was a stirring at her feet. She looked down and saw that Don Barnes had risen on his elbow and now was shaking his head.

She said, "So you're coming round?"

The burly man looked up at her stupidly and then struggled to his feet. He eyed them belligerently and asked, "What is going on?"

"We're lost in the fog, mostly thanks to you," Alan told him angrily. "You crashed against the instrument panel and smashed a lot of delicate equipment!"

The rapidly sobering Don glared at them. "How did I get here?"

"You came up in a battling mood," Helen said, looking him directly in the eye. "Alan had to try and subdue you. You fell into the instrument panel and then collapsed."

Don Barnes had a grumpy look on his somewhat battered face. He moved to the window

and stared out into the fog with disbelief. "You can't see anything!"

"We know that," Alan said, still at the wheel, with the cruising speed reduced to a crawl.

Barnes turned to him belligerently. "Can't you let up on that damn horn? My head is splitting!"

"Not without taking a chance one of the big fishing boats will run us down," Alan told him.

Barnes glared at them silently for a moment and then wanted to know, "How did you get us into this?"

Helen spoke up wearily. "It's no one's fault. The fog just happened to come in by a freak chance. If we had the wireless and radar we could perhaps manage."

Barnes addressed himself to Alan. "Do you know what you're doing? Are we heading for shore or out to sea?"

"I hope we're going toward the shore," Alan said.

"But you aren't sure?" the belligerent Barnes demanded.

"No," Alan said. "What do you suggest?"

"I say, turn off the engines and try and stay in this one spot until we're found. We may be heading out to sea and not know it."

Helen warned the two men, "It's after five now and we have a show to do at eight tonight. We have to try to get back to shore."

"I don't care about the show!" Barnes ex-

claimed. "I don't want us miles out at sea to be lost if a storm should come up!"

Alan said, "I could handle the boat if the instruments weren't out of order!"

"You're saying again it's my fault," Barnes cried. "But it was you who suggested this trip."

"You were the one who drank too much and caused the trouble," Alan reminded him.

Barnes regarded them both with disgust. "All right," he said. "Do what you like! Drown us all!" And he left the bridge and went down to slump on a bench in the bow of the sleek craft and stare out at the angry waves in surly fashion.

Helen said, "He's a lot of help!"

Alan was thin-lipped with concern. He said tautly, "I ought not to have brought him along. And when his girl friend left, I should have made him get off. But I'd promised you he'd be here to chaperone us."

"Some chaperone," she said bitterly.

"I agree," he said. "But I didn't know then."

She stared into the fog. "It's getting darker and the fog heavier. Do you think we'll get back in time for this evening's performance?"

"I'm beginning to doubt it," Alan said as he continued to gaze into the barrier of fog.

"But the theater! What will they do?" she worried.

"Do without us," Alan said curtly.

"But they can't operate without us. They'll

need three replacements for lead roles," she lamented.

"Let him close and return the money for tonight. It has happened before."

"Not at Porthaven," she said.

He gave her a grim glance. "There has to be a first time for everything."

"We oughtn't to have come out here with Don in the state he's in and your being an amateur skipper," she said hotly.

"I have a boat at my place," he said, looking wronged. "I thought everything would be okay!"

She looked at him with disgust. "Not only are our lives in danger, we're going to do the theater harm!"

"Who cares?" Alan demanded.

"I do," she said determinedly. And she kept her back to him as he continued at the wheel and blasted the horn.

Nothing happened in their shrouded gray world and there wasn't a sound except for their own foghorn. It was as if they were in the midst of a vast empty sea. She began to fear that perhaps Barnes was right. Perhaps Alan was guiding the cruiser farther and farther out to sea. A glance at her wristwatch told her it was now after six. About ten minutes after, to be exact. Her heart sank as she thought of Mason Trent making the announcement of the cancelation. She couldn't recall any such emergency before. And she

blamed herself for agreeing to the excursion.

The time seemed to go by more swiftly as it grew darker in their fogbound world. Helen studied her watch with despair as it grew later and later. Alan remained at the wheel while a disgruntled Don Barnes wandered down below and at last came up with an open can of tomato juice. He drank the juice and stood in the bow again resuming his surly silence.

She decided not to venture near him having no idea what his mood might be. He'd surely been nasty enough earlier. Alan's handsome face was lined with weariness and it struck her that he looked his age for the first time. She felt a slight sympathy with him, but all the same she blamed him for being so foolhardy as to start out unprepared and with only the drunken Barnes to assist him.

It was while Helen was ruminating on these things that they all at once heard the clarion sound of another ship's horn. And then looming out of the gray clouds like a ghostly craft there slowly appeared the outline of another, much larger boat.

Helen was the first to identify it, crying out, "It's the coast guard! Keep blowing the horn! Be sure they hear us!"

Alan fairly blasted at the horn and the coast guard ship came in close to them. Their officer had a megaphone and called from the bridge, "Where are you from and what's wrong?"

Alan cupped his hands and cried, "Radar

and wireless gone! Lost in the fog!"

The coast guard officer called back, "We caught you on our radar. You've been going around in circles. What's your port?"

"Porthaven," Alan said. "It's a rented cruiser. I'm Alan Brown. All of us are from the theater company there."

The men on the bridge of the coast guard craft conferred and then the officer shouted through his megaphone again, "We'll drop you a line! Can you make it fast?"

"I think so," Alan said.

"We'll tow you into Porthaven," the officer said.

Helen tugged Alan's arm. "Ask him if he can get us there by eight in time for the show?"

Alan gave her an unhappy look, but he followed her instructions saying, "Can you get us there in time for the curtain at eight?"

The man on the coast guard bridge shouted back, "Perhaps! If we do, you won't have any time to spare!" And then he said, "Be ready to catch the line and tie it to your bow!"

Alan told the disgruntled Barnes, "Give me some help with this!"

The burly man joined him and it was Barnes who actually caught the line and made it secure so they could be towed. The officer shouted other instructions to Alan. And then the larger craft began the task of taking them back to port.

By seven-twenty there was still no sign of shore.

Helen gave Alan a worried look. "I doubt if we're ever going to make it."

"At least we'll not drown out there," he said, looking back.

Barnes said, "They've no doubt canceled the show by now."

"I doubt it," she said. "Mason will wait until the last minute."

"It's close enough to that now," Alan said.

"We must have a plan," she suggested. "As soon as we land we ought to all get in your Mercedes and drive to the theater as quickly as we can. It's only a short distance."

"And the coast guard can phone ahead and tell the theater we're on our way," Alan agreed.

Barnes grumbled, "You expect me to go on like this? I need to shave and get something hot into my stomach."

"They can delay the curtain a half hour," she said. "People won't mind that knowing the circumstances. You should be able to make yourself presentable and get yourself on stage by that time. I know I can."

"Regional theater!" Don Barnes said with disgust on his angry red face. "I should never have let myself be talked into it!"

Alan coolly told him, "Thanks to your drinking, you hadn't any other jobs open. You were glad enough to come!"

Barnes clenched his fists and looked uglier than before. But he apparently decided that he'd had enough physical belligerence for the

day and turned away to stand with his back to them.

At ten minutes to eight, the coast guard ship began to slow down and they saw the vague outlines of the Porthaven dock through the thick mist. Alan went forward to get instructions and within a short time the cruiser bumped against the wharf pilings and the men on the dock secured lines and they were able to make their way up the wet stairs to land.

Alan hastily explained the damage to the ship to the rental agent who was on hand after a period of anxious waiting. He thanked the coast guard officer and asked him to phone the theater and say they were on their way. Then all three of them raced across to the Mercedes and Alan drove to the theater at a frantic speed.

As they came to a screeching halt by the stage door, Helen saw that the parking lot was filled with patrons' cars. Mason Trent was waiting for them.

"Come along!" he cried. "Not a moment to lose!"

They made their way up the steps, Barnes in the rear. The next twenty minutes were chaotic, but by the end of that time Helen was in costume standing in the wings with the old actor, Denison Abbot, ready for her entrance.

The play began and the audience gave both her and Alan a special round of applause when they came onstage. Barnes did not receive the

same sort of congratulation as his name had not been mentioned so prominently as being one of the missing party.

But the audience must have been aware he was not at his best. He mumbled many of his lines and had to be prompted several times. In addition, his makeup was faulty and he looked exactly like what he was, a man wandering about the stage with a hangover.

But they did successfully get through the evening. When Helen came off after the last curtain call, Mason Trent came to her and embraced her, saying, "You were fine tonight. You're a trouser!"

"I'm sorry," she apologized.

"It was entirely my fault," Alan Brown said with unexpected gallantry. "I coaxed her into going. I had no idea there were such tricky fogs at this season."

"Just don't let it happen again," Mason Trent told him. Then as Donald Barnes came by with a surly expression on his broad face, the lanky director called sharply to him, "One moment, Barnes."

Barnes halted and glowered at them all. "Well?"

"How dare you appear here half drunk and give a sloppy, disgraceful performance?" the director demanded angrily.

"I was out in that boat all afternoon not knowing if I'd be drowned or not," Barnes retaliated.

"So were the others and they were fine,"

Mason said. "You were drunk. You've been half drunk before and because you managed on stage I've said nothing. But if you ever show up again in the state you were in tonight, I'll dismiss you and complain to Equity!"

Barnes offered him a nasty smile. "Is that all?"

Mason nodded. "That's all!"

Barnes turned and made his way to the dressing-room stairs leaving them to watch after him.

Alan broke the awkward silence by saying, "I'll have a talk with him. I feel responsible for bringing him here."

"You were," the director agreed.

Alan said, "I'll let him understand if he expects to work for my television company he'll have to behave here."

"I wish you would do that," Mason said. "And no more wild excursions."

The director left them and Alan turned to Helen with a grim smile. "I guess I'm not the most popular guy in the company."

She sighed. "Just forget it. Everyone else will. It'll make a good story for the papers."

As if to prove her words true, Julia came straight to them from the other side of the stage and told Alan, "I want a story from you! We should be able to make the national news! Famous star nearly lost in fogbound cruiser! Last-minute rescue and the show goes on! What a free publicity ride as my swan-song piece for the theater!"

Alan laughed. "Let's all go out for a big dinner. I'm famished. And you can take the story down as we feast!"

"Fine with me," Julia said.

"Not with me," Helen objected. "I'm going to have someone take me to my car and drive straight home. I'm dead on my feet! I think I'll sleep at least around the clock!"

The elegant, lovely Julia smiled in her supercilious way as she said, "Well, it doesn't matter. I only need Alan."

Alan looked uncomfortable. He told Helen, "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Don't," she said. "I might be sleeping. I'll see you tomorrow night," Helen said wearily.

He kissed her on the cheek. "All right! Get your rest." And to Julia he said, "I'll meet you when I'm changed. It won't be more than a few minutes."

"I'll be here," the tall beauty assured him with a warm smile.

Helen went to her dressing room where she changed and heard about the frantic anxiety of the company from Irma. Mason had been ready to cancel the show when he'd received the phone call.

Irma complained, "I suppose Julia will write a story and have Alan Brown come out of this as a hero! Star or no star, I say he's a lightweight! He should have known better than to risk going out in a boat he didn't know how to handle."

"It was mostly Barnes who was to blame,"

Helen said and explained everything.

When they went downstairs, Jim Prentiss was waiting for Helen.

He looked truly concerned as he said, "You gave us all a bad scare."

She smiled. "You thought we'd miss the show?"

Jim shook his head. "I was sure something bad had happened. That you might be hurt or dead!"

"Nothing so dramatic," she said. "But I would like to get my car. Would you drive me to the dock?"

"That's what I've been waiting for," the young set designer said.

The fog was still heavy over Porthaven as they drove to the dock. Then Helen got into her car and headed it home as Jim drove along behind her. When they reached her place, she invited him in. The first few minutes were taken up by a greeting from Aunt Irene, who sputtered and gave thanks in alternate breaths.

"I was sure you'd been drowned," she said. "That awful Alan Brown! How I wish he'd never come here!"

"I'm safe," Helen said with a smile. "It's all right. Go to bed and rest!"

"I don't think I'll sleep a wink all night," Aunt Irene vowed as she went upstairs still grumbling.

Helen made coffee and Jim fixed them some bacon and eggs. With the addition of some

toast, they sat down to a good supper. Jim studied her across the table and she knew he was thinking many things.

At last he said, "Did this afternoon cure you? I mean, of Alan Brown?"

She hesitated and then staring down at her half-empty cup of coffee, she replied quietly, "It wasn't truly his fault. I don't think what happened has made any real change in my feelings about him."

"I was afraid of that," Jim said gloomily.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Helen slept until nearly eleven o'clock. Then she rose, showered, and had a good breakfast. It was Saturday, which meant an afternoon performance at three and an evening performance at nine, an hour later than usual.

As Helen lingered over coffee alone—since Aunt Irene worked at her office every Saturday until one—she considered the prospects offered her. On Monday rehearsals were to begin for *The Ghost Train*. If she accepted a part in that, she would be bound to continue on with the Porthaven company.

But if she listened to Alan and left with him when *A Doll's House* ended, naturally Mason would have to know very soon. Alan had promised to arrange for the breaking of her contract

and she was sure Mason Trent would not stand in her way. But how much did she love Alan? Was she all that anxious to try for the larger world of show business as Alan's protegee? And was she ready to become the star's wife as part of the bargain?

She still had a chance to keep her life on the even level which she'd planned. She'd not yet lost Jim to Julia, though there was a definite threat of that. Was Jim the one she really loved? He had been kind and solicitous of her last night, but he'd let her know in subtle ways that he might consider a romance with Julia and working for her father if he found himself alone. Helen knew she couldn't blame him for that. It was her choice that would make the decision for them both.

The experiences on the boat had not made much change in her opinion of Alan Brown. He had not been particularly wise, yet he had done his best under trying circumstances. She was definitely disgusted with Donald Barnes, but that was another matter. She decided to give more thought to her problem on Sunday, which would be her single day to rest and think if she should take on the new play. The first rehearsal for *Ghost Train* would start on Monday night.

It was an ideal autumn day again with the sunshine making it seem warmer than it really was. She arrived at the theater office about two o'clock and saw that the gray-

haired Grace Ebbett was interviewing a pleasant-looking young man in her office.

Mason Trent came by to smile and tell Helen, "Grace is hiring a young man from the newspaper to take Julia's place. She filed her story on the boat episode and left for New York this morning."

"So suddenly?"

"She's been threatening to leave for a week or two," the director said. "Just as well. She was losing interest in the job."

Helen smiled. "That's a good time to quit."

The director eyed her with concern. "You still look tired. You ought to get a longer rest tomorrow."

"I will."

"One good thing, you have a much less demanding part in the next play," he said with a smile. "I try to balance it that way when I can."

She didn't tell him that she was still undecided about doing the play. That could wait at least another twenty-four hours. Maybe longer since Irma could easily step into the role even if Helen decided to leave after starting rehearsals.

Before going up to her dressing room to change into her first costume, she stopped by the scenery shop to see Jim. He was going over a list of supplies and put this aside to join her out on the rear platform for a few minutes.

She glanced out at the ocean and said, "The air is so clear today!"

"Not much like yesterday," he agreed.

Helen smiled. "Don't remind me of it. I hear that Julia left this morning."

Jim nodded. "Yes. She came by to see me for a moment before she drove away. She expects to be in New York by late afternoon."

"Will you miss her?"

"Very striking lady," Jim said with a twinkle in his eyes. "And some fun!"

"What did she have to say?"

"She wants to see me in New York. Her father is still much interested in my work."

"Are you going to go there?" Helen asked.

"I don't know yet," he said.

"It could be a big break for you. Big business! A fat salary!"

He smiled grimly. "I've thought about it. What about you? Are you going to try the big time?"

She said, "I've been thinking about that as well."

"There comes a time you have to decide," he reminded her. "Some opportunities don't come around a second time."

"I've considered that," she said. "Well, I must get up or I'll miss the curtain." And she left him to go to her dressing room.

When she went back downstairs for her first entrance, Denison Abbot was there as usual.

While they waited for the curtain to rise, he said, "I encountered Donald Barnes as he came into the theater. The smell of whiskey on him would almost knock you down."

"Oh, no!" she protested.

"I thought I should warn you," the old actor said. "He may not show it onstage, but just as well to be prepared."

"Last night he forgot his lines, gave wrong cues, and almost ruined the play," she lamented. "I hope it won't be that all over again."

"I hope not," Denison Abbot agreed. "I'm sure Mason will be glad when the run is over and he'll see the last of Barnes and Alan Brown, too."

"Alan does have a big star complex," she admitted. "But at least he does his work well."

They had no further time to talk as the curtain went up and they stepped into their roles in the play. Helen felt weary but worked hard for the friendly matinee audience. Then Barnes made his entrance as Krogstad and the play began to falter. His timing was all off and sometimes when he should have spoken, he stood for seconds looking stupid and not in the scene at all.

When the curtain fell on the first act, an irate Mason Trent marched up to the actor and had a few hasty, angry words with him. Barnes sneered at the director and went to his dressing room.

It was fortunate that Denison Abbot had warned Helen. For all during the other two acts of the play she had to supply lines to the actor in their scenes and cover up for his lapses by reading part of his lines as her own. It was a nightmare experience, but somehow she saved the play from breaking down. Alan was forced to do some of the same things, but he was not as directly involved with Barnes in the play as she was.

When the curtain fell on the last round of applause, Mason Trent came onstage and in front of all the others in the company told Donald Barnes, "I expect you to sober up before tonight and I don't want to see you with alcohol on your breath ever again while you're working here!"

Having delivered his ultimatum to the sullen Barnes, he turned to the other actors and said, "I'm sorry you've had to endure this example of bad sportsmanship."

Alan watched Barnes go back to his dressing room and said, "I don't like the way this is going. It would have been better if Mason hadn't reproached him in front of the company."

Helen said, "He can't be allowed to go on drunk every night."

"He sometimes manages well when he's been drinking."

"I haven't noticed it," she said. "I think Mason was right."

"Have dinner with me after the show tonight?" the star asked her.

She shook her head. "No. I'm still tired. I need to go home and rest. It's lucky I'll be off all day tomorrow."

"Then have dinner with me at seven tomorrow night," Alan insisted. "I have some important things to tell you."

Helen hesitated, then said, "Perhaps. I'll let you know."

"I must see you before Monday," he told her. And she was sure it had to do with her not starting the next play.

She drove home between performances and managed almost two hours' sleep. Then it was back to the theater again. As she drove through the darkness, she speculated on what might be happening. She hoped that Donald Barnes had decided to behave properly, but she had little confidence in him. Reaching the theater, brightly lighted in the darkness, she parked in the area reserved for the company and made her way to the stage door.

She was just in time to hear angry shouts and oaths. And to her shock and horror, a drunken Barnes came striding out from his dressing room to cross to the elderly Denison Abbot and challenge him.

"You think you're going on for me tonight, do you?" Barnes jeered.

The old actor stood bravely up to him. "Mr. Trent has asked me to do so!"

Barnes laughed drunkenly. "You're an old fool if you think I'm going to let you."

"That's up to Mr. Trent, isn't it?" the old actor asked.

Barnes said, "You're trying to sneak into my job!" And with that he completely shocked Helen by raising his fist and driving it into the old man's face and knocking him down.

Since she was the only other one backstage at the moment, she ran forward and grasped the drunken Barnes by the arm and screamed, "How dare you do that!"

"It's all right," Abbot said, rising unsteadily.

"Let me go!" Barnes said roughly and pulled himself free and, seizing the old man, threw him heavily down onto the stage again.

Now the lanky Mason Trent appeared, his lantern-jawed face pale with rage. He threw himself at the burly Barnes and this time it was the bully who crashed to the floor. Two stagehands appeared and ran over to join in the melee.

Mason Trent told the stagehands, "Get this man's clothes from his dressing room and throw him out! Under no circumstances is he to enter this theater again!"

Barnes got slowly to his feet and warned Trent, "I'll fix your two-bit little theater! I'll sue you for your last dollar!"

"Get him away," the director said imperiously, his rage clearly still boiling.

As the stagehands led Barnes away, the lanky Mason went to Denison Abbot, who had gotten to his feet and was swaying a little. "Are you all right, Denison?" he asked.

The veteran actor was breathing heavily. "In just a moment! I didn't expect it! Came as a shock!"

"I should think so," Mason Trent said angrily. "I have never seen anything more contemptible than his attack on you."

"Nor I," Helen agreed. "Should we call a doctor?"

"No, no!" The veteran actor raised a protesting hand. "My breath is coming very nicely now. Let me sit down for a little and I'll be quite all right."

Mason Trent found a chair for him to sit on. Then he asked him, "Is there any possibility of your going on tonight?"

"To take Barnes's role?" Denison Abbot asked.

"Yes," Mason said. "One of the apprentices can do the porter if you're able to take on the longer role."

There were beads of perspiration on the old man's forehead. He said, "I'm the understudy! Of course, I'll go on!"

Mason studied him anxiously. "You're still trembling. Did that lush hurt you?"

"Perhaps a bruise or two, nothing really," the veteran actor said. "But I will make one

rather strange request in view of the circumstances."

"What is that?" the director asked.

"Will you have a taste of brandy sent to my dressing room. I need a small stimulant," Denison Abbot said. "By the time I'm made up and dressed, I shall be quite ready to play Krogstad."

The news of the ugly incident spread through the company as its members arrived. When Helen went down early, she met Alan Brown also in costume and ready for his first entrance.

The star said, "Well, Barnes has really finished himself this time."

"He was cruel and cowardly toward that poor old man who'd done nothing to him," she said.

"Typical of Barnes," Alan said grimly. "He'll come to my office in New York begging to be taken on for the television show again. And I won't have him."

The play began and Helen was onstage as Nora when Abbot made his entrance as Krogstad. In his darkened hair and youthful makeup she was amazed at how well he fit the part. Though he was older, he gave the illusion of being a man of forty. And his reading of the lines was magnificent compared to the way Barnes had fumbled through the role lately.

The first act ended to more applause than

usual. And Mason Trent complimented the old actor backstage. Helen also told him how good he was.

"But the company is so evenly good, my dear," the old actor said with a smile.

She placed her hand on his arm in a gesture of warmth and was worried to feel that he was shaking. She said, "You're actually trembling! Are you well?"

"Nerves, my dear," he said, placating her. "Even the best of us have them on opening night. And this is my first night as Krogstad."

She accepted this but found herself still worried about the old man they all loved so much. He had just recovered from serious heart problems and Barnes had battered him physically before anyone could come to protect him. It was amazing that the old actor was able to carry on so well.

It was a successful but tense evening. When the final curtain came, there was a great show of applause. And Helen was pleased that when Abbot stepped forward the tribute to him was notably large.

As the curtain came down, the company crowded about the old man offering him various congratulations. He stood there, the center of their admiration, with a smile on his good-looking, lined face. Then as Mason Trent shook his hand, the veteran suddenly lurched and fell forward onto the stage.

There were gasps of concern and sorrow and

Mason Trent was at once on his knees by the actor. After a moment he called sharply, "Get an ambulance!"

Mason Trent, Helen, and Alan Brown followed the ambulance to the Porthaven Hospital and waited tensely in the visitors' room for some pronouncement on the old man's condition. Helen and the director sat on a divan while the star strolled restlessly up and down before them.

Once he halted and told Mason, "I feel a great responsibility for this. If there is anything I can do, please let me know."

"It's what the doctors can do for him that counts," Mason Trent said sternly.

"Barnes must be mad from his drinking to strike an old man for nothing," Alan said.

"He's managed to get away with a great deal," the director said. "I suppose he thought he could do that as well."

Helen asked Mason, "What about the play? What are you going to do about filling the part?"

Mason frowned. "I've been thinking about that. There's no time to bring another actor in. The play doesn't have that much longer to run. I intend to take over the role of Krogstad myself."

"You can do it," Helen agreed. "It's been too long since you have done any acting. And you know the lines."

"I prefer to direct," Mason said, "but it is

within my age range and, as you said, I know the lines."

"Then that problem is solved," Alan Brown said. "I'm instructing my New York office to advise Barnes that he'll no longer be required for the new season's television productions."

Mason Trent said, "That is entirely your own business. I shall make my own complaint to Equity and try and have him brought up before the union for his bad behavior."

The white-smocked doctor in charge of Denison Abbot at last made an appearance and both Helen and Mason rose to speak with him.

Mason asked the middle-aged doctor, "What are Mr. Abbot's chances, Doctor?"

"No more than fair," the doctor said with a frown. "He has had another seizure. He'll likely recover with rest, but he'll have a tough battle."

"But he will recover," Mason said.

"I'd say so, he's a fighter," the doctor said. "If he takes better care of himself in the future, he might live a long while yet. Mind you, there's no guarantee."

"Would you encourage his return to the stage?" Mason wanted to know.

"In minor roles," the doctor said. "He should never work too hard again."

"Thank you," the director said. "When can I see him?"

"Not before tomorrow at the earliest," the doctor said. "He is now resting under medi-

cation. That is the best possible treatment for him at the moment. Rest and Nature can do wonders in cases of this sort."

Mason thanked the doctor, who then went on his way. Then Mason turned to Helen and said, "Well, at least the news isn't all bad."

"But can Denison Abbot afford to retire or just take occasional small jobs?" she asked.

Alan Brown spoke up. "I could give him odd work on my shows. He and I had some troubles in the past, but that's patched up now."

Mason Trent gave the star a cold look. "I think Denison would be happier in the theater than working for your television company."

"The work could be much harder in the theater," the star was quick to point out.

"Even so," Mason said, "I think it important that whatever he does, he feels happy about it."

Recalling the veteran actor's indictment of Alan Brown, Helen quickly spoke up. "I agree. I don't think he would enjoy working with Alan."

Alan frowned. "I don't find that very complimentary!"

"We're not trying to coddle you," Mason Trent said sternly. "I'm trying to plan a safe future for Denison and I think I have it. I'll talk to Grace Ebbett and I'm sure she'll find enough money for us to keep Denison on as my assistant. A kind of advisor and helper. And when small undemanding parts come up

which he may safely play, I'll let him do them."

Helen was enthusiastic. "I think it's a great idea. You've been working too hard anyway, Mason. And Denison Abbot's services would be of great value."

Alan looked ruffled. "Of course, it's among yourselves." And he moved a little away from them.

Mason gave his attention to her, saying, "I'm going back to the theater for a little. Perhaps Alan will drive you home."

"I'm sure he will," she said.

And he did. When he saw her to the door, he kissed her good night and asked, "Has any of this helped you make up your mind one way or the other?"

"I keep wondering that," she said.

"There's just a short time to go," he said, his handsome face sober. "You'll have to decide soon."

"I know," she said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next morning Helen phoned the hospital and was told that Denison Abbot's condition had improved and that she might actually be allowed to see him for a few minutes later in the day. She had promised Alan Brown to drive to one of the large shore restaurants and have dinner with him but felt she might stop by at the hospital on the way.

Time was running out for her and she was still wondering what she should do. Tomorrow night rehearsals for *The Ghost Train* would begin. If she didn't intend to remain with the company, she should let Mason Trent know before then. No one could much blame her for accepting an opportunity to star in television and perhaps on Broadway.

But the difficult thing was that this was

more than a career decision. Alan had made it clear that he was in love with her just as he'd once been in love with her mother. And she was certainly drawn to him, to his wonderful kisses. And yet . . . and yet . . . She simply wasn't sure about anything anymore.

She had for a long while expected to marry Jim Prentiss one day. They had discussed it and the others in the company had seemingly taken it for granted that their romance would end in marriage. Helen still felt strongly about Jim, but he was making it clear if she went with Alan, even in only a professional sense, he would likely desert his career in the theater and consider the offer made him by the wealthy Julia's father. And this meant he would sooner or later probably marry Julia.

She was thinking about all these things and standing staring out the bay window in the living room of Aunt Irene's house when the older woman came down in one of her concerned moods.

"What is the word from the hospital?" Aunt Irene wanted to know.

"Better than we expected," Helen said, turning to her. "He may be well enough to see me for a moment this afternoon."

"Poor old man," Aunt Irene lamented.

"Wonderful old man," Helen replied. "I think he has great courage and he will recover."

"That drunken actor who attacked him

should be prosecuted," her aunt said, seating herself angrily in a rocking chair near Helen.

"I'm sure he'll be made to pay."

"A terrible thing to do!" Aunt Irene went on. "And wasn't he brought here by Alan Brown?"

"Yes."

"I always say no good comes of Alan or any of his crowd!"

"Be fair!"

"I mean it," the older woman said. "I was sorry to see Joan alone and unhappy. But I'd have been sorrier to have seen her leave with him."

Helen, in her bathrobe, sat on the divan and stared across at her aunt. "Do you honestly mean that?"

"I do!"

She sighed. "It's interesting. Because I'm now faced with the decision of whether I'll leave with Alan or not."

Aunt Irene accepted the news with grim resignation. "I warned you he'd be after you," she said. "You're so much like your mother, I knew you wouldn't escape."

"It's a difficult decision for me."

"It wouldn't be for me."

"I need your help," she said. "Please tell me. Did my mother ever even hint to you why she suddenly broke off with him and refused to leave here, after she'd planned to go? I mean, aside from their fight about me. I sort of think

there was something else—that she would have found a way to make him take me.”

“She didn’t tell me and I would never press her to,” her aunt said, grim and tight-lipped. “I respect other people’s privacy.”

Helen frowned. “There had to be something even more serious!”

“She probably realized he was too great a risk. He was no star in those days.”

“But he did have money,” she said. “Enough to start his television company. And that was what made him.”

“I can only tell you that after the shock I think your mother was happier in the decision she’d made.”

Helen said, “But she was not an actress. It was different for her.”

“And you are.”

She gave her aunt a proud look. “Alan thinks I can be a star.”

“Does he?” the older woman said with biting sarcasm. “And is that what you want?”

“I love the theater. And I’m crazy about Alan.”

“Is the kind of stardom he’s offering anything like the sort of theater you’re doing here?” the older woman asked.

“It’s surely related,” Helen said.

Aunt Irene stared at her with sad eyes. “So you’ve decided to go with him?”

“I don’t know and that’s the truth!”

"What about Jim Prentiss?"

Helen clasped her hands and looked down at them. "That's a complication. I thought I loved Jim. But that was before Alan said he wanted to marry me."

"Which doesn't mean much since he's been married so many times before and divorced."

Helen smiled bleakly at her aunt. "He says this time will be different. That all those other times he was searching for my mother. And now he has found her in me!"

Her aunt surprised her by saying, "It's very convincing."

"I know."

And then in a harder tone, she questioned, "But how long will he believe that?"

"What do you mean?"

"We all have to make our own mistakes," Aunt Irene said. "I can only tell you I don't trust him. And from the little your mother did let drop to me, I don't think she trusted him either."

"Thank you," Helen said. "It's not too much help."

"It's the most I can say," Aunt Irene told her. And she went to Helen and kissed her. "You know you're like my own child. I wish I could be more help."

It was late afternoon and a troubled Helen dressed slowly for her date with Alan Brown at six. She had just donned her blue woollen

suit and was fixing her hair when the doorbell rang. She went to the door and opened it to find a shy Jim standing out there.

"Hi!" he said.

"Hi!" she replied with a smile. "I didn't expect to see you."

"I finished early," he said. "I heard the good news about Denison. Great old guy. Mason went to see him about an hour ago and he says he was actually able to talk for a few minutes."

"I talked with the hospital," she said. "They told me he was better. I thought I'd drop by later."

Jim smiled. "I'd be glad to take you."

"Sorry," she said, "Alan's picking me up." Seeing the shadow cross his face, she added, "But do come in and have a coffee with me. I feel I need one."

Jim accepted the invitation and they found themselves sitting on the divan sharing the coffee she'd made.

He said, "What about you? Have you decided to play in *The Ghost Train*? Mason is counting on you."

"Irma can do the part."

"Not as well."

"I'll see," she said. "What about you?"

"I'll keep on for a while," he said. "And the Mangley Theater in Boston has ordered a new series of sets from me for their production of *Tartuffe*. I'll be getting busy on that."

"Wonderful!" she said.

"Yes, wonderful," he said without much enthusiasm. Then he rose. "I'd better get going. I don't want to be in the way."

She rose with him. "You've never been in my way," she said.

"Sometimes I wonder."

She saw him to his truck and then went back to the house to wait for Alan. She didn't have to wait long.

He drove up in the shiny Mercedes and came to the door to get her, looking every inch the romantic star.

"I thought we should get an early start," he said, smiling.

"I'm glad you're here," she said. "I'd like to stop by the hospital for a moment."

He raised his eyebrows. "Now?"

"If you don't mind," she said. "There's a chance I may be able to speak with Denison Abbot for a moment or two."

"I thought he was too ill for that," Alan argued.

"No," she said with a smile. "He's improved greatly. You don't mind taking me there, do you?"

Alan's face had lost its pleasant expression, but he said, "No. Not at all. I'll stop at the hospital. Just don't be long!"

"I can't be," she said. "The doctors have strict orders to limit his visitors."

Alan was clearly in a sour mood as he drove to the hospital. He did not voice his annoy-

ance, but she knew it existed. Helen left him in the parking lot and hurried inside and up to the floor where the old actor had been assigned a room. The head nurse warned Helen the visit must be of short duration and then took her in personally.

The veteran character actor was propped up on pillows and looking very pale. When he saw her coming across the room, his face brightened and there was a new light in his eyes.

She came close and kissed him on the cheek. "Denison!"

"Good of you to come, my dear," the old man said.

"You look very well," she told him. "And as soon as you are better, Mason has a job for you at the playhouse."

"He told me," Abbot said. "I really must get well soon."

"I'll come back again," she promised.

"One minute," he said. "There's something I want you to see."

"Oh?"

"In my wallet," he said. "A clipping from one of the New York theater publications. I cut it out Saturday morning but didn't have time to give it to you." And he signaled to the nurse. "Will you see she gets the folded newspaper clipping from my wallet? Terribly important!"

"I will, don't worry," the nurse promised

with a smile. And then she told Helen, "Time to leave."

The nurse kept her word and took the wallet from its place of safekeeping and gave the clipping to Helen. She said, "There's only the one, so it has to be it."

"Thank you," Helen said. "Take good care of him. I'll be back." And she went to the elevator.

On the way down, she opened the folded clipping and read the short piece with a Hollywood byline.

It said: "Gail Martin has recovered from her recent illness in a Palm Springs sanitarium and is back in Hollywood telling friends she expects to be in Alan Brown's new series and also to be the next Mrs. Alan Brown!"

Helen carefully folded the clipping again and placed it in her own pocketbook. Then with a strange look on her lovely young face she walked through the hospital lobby and out to the car to join an impatiently waiting Alan Brown. She had decided not to make any reference to the news story right away.

At the restaurant Alan signed a few autographs for enthralled fans, then ordered dinner for them in his lavish way.

He said, "I've been told this is the finest restaurant in the area."

She smiled across the table at him. "And you always like the best."

He nodded. "That was why I fell in love with

your mother and now with you."

"Really?" she said.

He stared at her. "You're in a strange mood. How was Denison Abbot?"

"I'm sure he's going to recover."

"I'm glad," the star said. "The story could give us all a lot of bad publicity if the rough section of the media should get hold of it."

She arched an eyebrow. "You mean it might even touch your own reputation?"

He shrugged. "Well, Barnes is my friend and I've used him a lot."

"Are you finished with him?"

Alan hesitated. "I expect so. I'll have to check on our contracts with him."

Helen said, "You sound less sure than yesterday. Could it be he knows too much about you?"

The handsome star looked astonished. "What do you mean by that?"

She opened her pocketbook and took out the clipping and passed it to him. "Read this," she said.

He scanned it and looked up with his cheeks flaming. "That's a lie!" he said. "Some public relations man is trying to get Gail back into the business and he's cooked up this crazy story."

"She did work for you, didn't you?"

"Yes. Until she became a lush! That sanitarium she was in was for drying up drunks. You can't believe a woman like that!"

"But you were close once?" she persisted.

"We worked together," he said. "Where did you get that?"

"From Denison Abbot."

"Why doesn't that old troublemaker mind his own business?" Alan said in a rage. "I always had difficulty in working with him. Yet I was ready to help him!"

"I'm sure he wouldn't accept help from you," she said.

He tossed the clipping back to her. "It's nothing but lies! Invented stuff! Don't think anything more about it!"

"I'll try not to," she said, placing the clipping in her pocketbook once again.

He leaned forward earnestly. "You don't understand what it's like to be on top! To be a star! People are always trying to harm you! I swear I love you and you alone! And I want to marry you!"

"All right, Alan," she said quietly. "Let's drop it for the moment."

The dinner was strained after her introduction of the clipping. They kept up a conversation, but she was sure each of them was filled with his own thoughts. And Helen could not help noticing that Alan was extremely nervous. After dinner he drove her home and she did not invite him in.

At the door, he asked, "What about the new play? Are you going to start rehearsing tomorrow night?"

She said, "I want the night to think about it. That's why I need to be by myself."

"Very well," he said earnestly. "I can only believe you'll decide to come with me. Not repeat your mother's mistake. I'll be in touch with you around noon and talk to Mason Trent about getting your release from your contract with him."

She nodded and they exchanged a good-night kiss, which was little more than a polite gesture. She went inside and up to her room. It was destined to be a sleepless night in which she was tormented by the many things she'd discovered and the decision she must make. Then suddenly, in the darkness, an idea of remarkable clarity came to her. And she knew what she would do.

Early the next morning Helen went to the theater office. She spoke with Irma and heard the morning report on Denison Abbot was good. Mason Trent was in his office with the door closed and Grace Ebbett was making some business call on the phone in her own tiny office.

Helen waited until Grace finished and then she asked, "May I speak with you a moment, Miss Ebbett?"

"Any time," Grace said, inviting her in with a smile.

She went in awkwardly and sat across the desk from the older woman. She saw what a beauty Grace must once have been, and how

much character remained in her face. She was prim but there was also a warmth about the woman who had done so much for the theater company.

Helen said, "Isn't it wonderful about Denison Abbot!"

Grace nodded. "Yes. After that shameful incident. We don't need actors like Donald Barnes here."

"I agree," Helen said. "I've come to speak to you about a very personal matter, though. Something terribly important to me."

"Please feel I'm your friend," Grace said. "Your mother was my closest friend for years."

Helen said, "Yes. That's why I decided I must come to you. Alan Brown wants me to leave here and go to New York. He says he wants to marry me."

The gray-haired woman said, "I was afraid of that."

Helen leaned forward. "I know—according to the press—he's already promised to marry someone else. But he says that's a lie. Can he be depended upon? And can you tell me why my mother turned on him and refused to go away with him? No one else seems able to. He says he didn't want me with them. But I think there's more to it.

Grace sighed and looked down at her desk. "I didn't want Mason Trent to hire Alan Brown to return here. But I try not to interfere with Mason."

"I know."

"I have kept silent for many years," Grace said in a small voice. "And I intend to tell only you. You must keep it to yourself. Not repeat it to anyone, not even Alan Brown."

"You have my word," Helen said.

"Your mother kept her silence even when many people scoffed at her for deserting Alan."

"That's what I don't understand."

"Before Alan courted your mother, he was supposedly my beau. He told me he wanted to marry me. And then in a short time he turned to your mother. She came to me and I told her it was all right as far as I was concerned if she really loved him."

"So?"

"So your mother agreed to go with him and marry him. But by an accident she learned something. That the money he was going to use to start his production company he had gotten through me. I gave him the large amount without any strings. He was to be my husband, you see. But when he had the money, he deserted me and turned to your mother."

"And once she knew, she would have nothing to do with him!"

"Yes," Grace said. "You can see why I hate him. And why your mother felt she couldn't trust him. If you feel differently, I can only pray that he does feel for you what he has never seemed to feel for anyone else."

Helen rose quietly. "Thank you," she said. "I'll never repeat what you've told me. And I do appreciate it. Now I know that Alan has just told me a lot of lies."

"I hope it helps," Grace Ebbett said. "I cared a great deal for Joan and I care for you!"

Impulsively Helen went to the older woman and kissed her on the cheek. Then, her eyes blurred with tears, she ran out to the main office. And she knew she was over her childish infatuation.

She stumbled straight into Mason Trent's arms and he laughed and said, "You arrived at the right moment! Here's your script for rehearsal tonight."

"Thanks." She smiled and brushed the tears from her eyes.

The script still in her hand, she hurried out to the auditorium and onto the stage. She made her way straight to the scenic studio where Jim was alone, studying some plans.

He smiled when he saw her and, glancing at the script in her hand, asked, "What is that?"

"The script of *Ghost Train*," Helen said happily. "I'm staying, Jim!"

He took her in his arms and kissed her and then said, "I must write to Julia and tell her I won't have time to make that trip to New York I discussed with her."

Once again he held her close as their lips met anew.

AVALON ROMANCES

Delightful romances for teenagers and adults

RETURN TO TIMBERLAKE, by Mary Collins Dunne
SECRET OF MONTOYA MISSION, by Dorothy Baughman
PICTURES OF FEAR, by Lucy Fuchs
LOST IN A MIST, by Berta LaVan Barker
ONSTAGE FOR LOVE, by W.E.D. Ross
THICKET OF TERROR, by Georgia M. Shewmake
SUMMER OF DISCOVERY, by Isabel Cabot
QUICKSILVER LOVE, by Rose Flynn
THE CRYING WINDS, by J. H. Rhodes
A KISS FOR SAMANTHA, by Kathleen Pieper
BY LOVE BEWITCHED, by Dorothea J. Snow
A NEST OF HAWKS, by Juanita Tyree Osborne
LAKE OF SHADOWS, by Georgia M. Shewmake
A KISS TO REMEMBER, by Elsie W. Strother
HORROR AT HENNING HOUSE, by Evelyn Wray
LOVE'S TENDER PROMISE, by Marzee King Tew
A GIRL CALLED SAM, by Edith Moore
HOUSE ON STONE QUARRY, by Sally Tyree Smith
SHAMROCK IN THE SUN, by Patricia Bird
CARIBBEAN LOVE SONG, by Marlene Perriche
THE DARK BAYOU, by Juanita Tyree Osborne
FORBIDDEN REUNION, by Marjorie Gardner
A DREAM FOR TOMORROW, by Marilyn Austin
DANGEROUS SUMMER, by J. H. Rhodes
MAGIC OF LOVE, by W.E.D. Ross
LOVE'S DARK WILDERNESS, by Mary E. Webster
THE WATCHER OF WINDCLIFF, by J. H. Rhodes
THE LOST LEGACY, by Renate Chapman
MIDDLECLIFF TREASURE, by Hope Jordan
GHOST OF ARONOV POINT, by Dorothy Baughman
SECRET OF THE SILVER BIRD, by Dorothea J. Snow
MY LOVE BETRAYED, by April Lynn Kihlstrom
THE CURSE OF WAYFIELD, by Juanita Tyree Osborne
SWING INTO LOVE, by Mary E. Webster
THE BRIDE OF WINDEMERE, by Marlene Perriche
PERIL OF THE DUNES, by Georgia M. Shewmake