

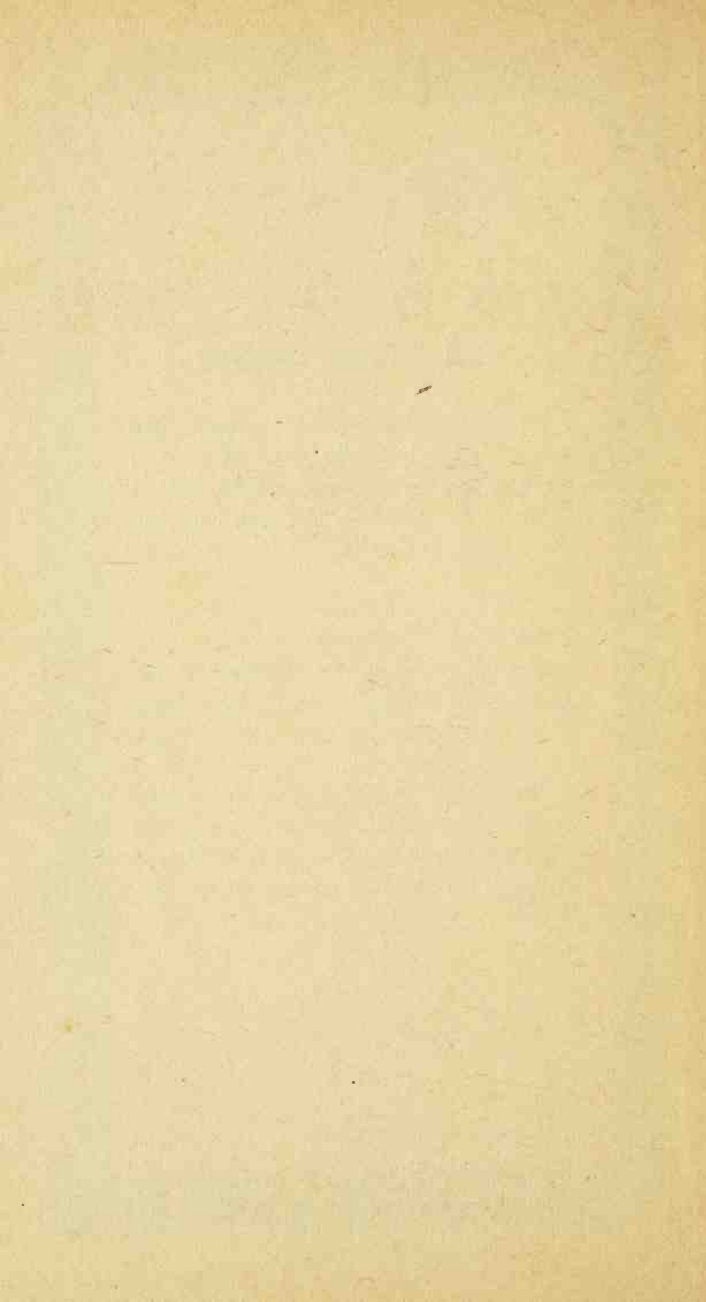
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Sable in the Rain

*A quest of love leads a beautiful
innocent to a house haunted by death*

W. E. D. ROSS





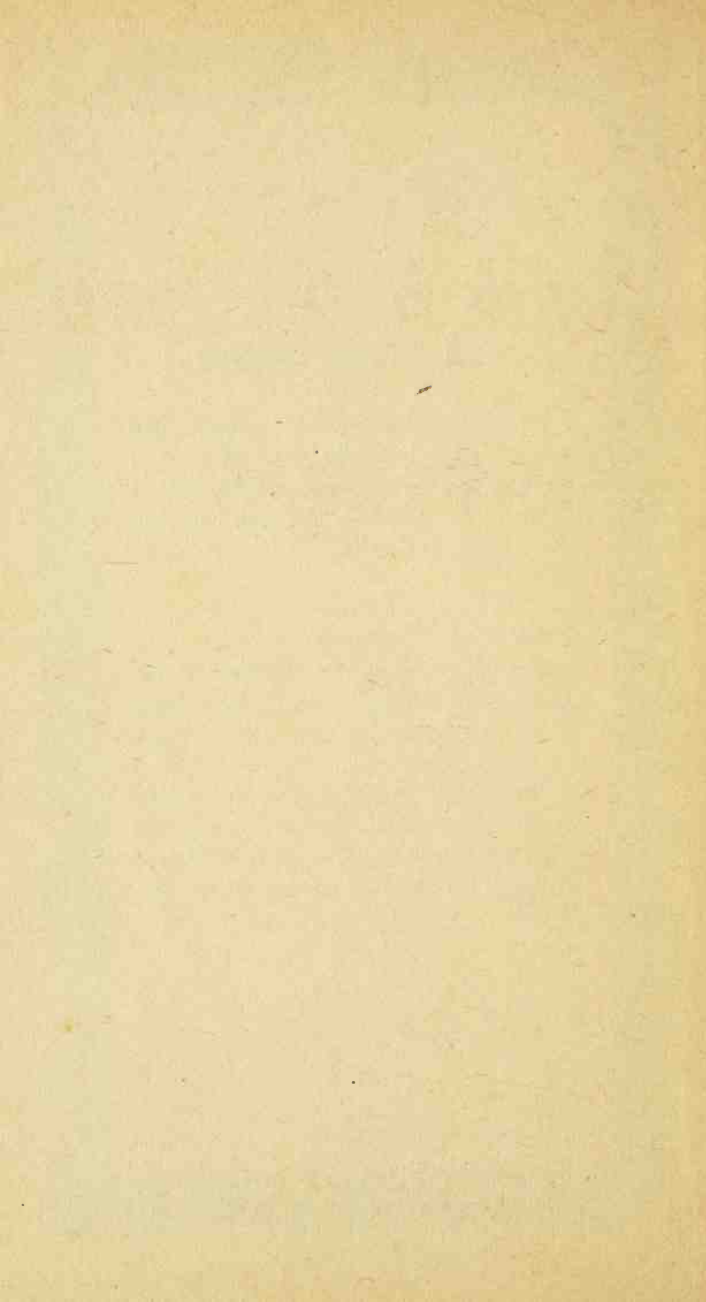
Carson

The Ghost Walks

Erica's bedroom was in darkness. She snapped the light switch, but nothing happened. Frowning, she stared into the shadows of the room. As her unease grew, she suddenly heard a door open. It was the closet door!

She let her frightened eyes move to it and peered through the blackness as the door gradually edged open. Chilled with horror, she waited, unable to move or cry out.

Finally the figure showed itself, blurred by the near-darkness. It was a young man in a blazer and sports trousers, wearing a flat-topped straw hat. The ghost of Carn Wills!



Sable in the Rain

W.E.D. ROSS



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FOREIGN COUNTRIES, REGISTERED TRADEMARK—
MARCA REGISTRADA, HECHO EN CHICAGO, U.S.A.

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To Brenda Frazier Chatfield-Taylor,
a lady of enduring beauty and
great charm, who one rainy
evening at Boston's Ritz-Carlton
suggested the story title:
"Sable In The Rain."

CHAPTER ONE

It all began when Bruce Cord vanished.

Erica Blake had met the tall, slender, personable young man at Boston University, where they had both taken a course in advanced psychology under Dr. Herman Greb. Erica had come to the university and the ancient New England city from the Midwest, while Bruce was from California. The vast, sprawling campus was a melting pot for students from all areas of the country and the world. A casual discussion about a lecture had led to some dating until a warm relationship developed between her and the blonde young man.

Bruce was the only son of a broken marriage, neurotic, ambitious and restless. So Erica was not surprised when, over a table at Your Father's Mustache, a popular spot with their crowd, he one night announced his intention of leaving the university.

He gave her one of his assured smiles and said, "I've had it, baby! I'm leaving B.U. fast. This sharp deal has come along, and I'm not going to miss it."

Erica was twenty, dark-haired, with serious gray eyes that indicated her level-headed temperament. She was also pretty with a pert oval face which now was shadowed with concern as she learned of this decision on Bruce's part.

"Aren't you making a mistake?" she worried.

"You know all the hang-ups I have about school," Bruce reminded her. "Right now I'm not sure what I want. You're a part-time student with a job, but it's different with me."

Erica knew this was accurate. She had an office job with an insurance company, which didn't interest her

a lot but gave her time and money for extra studies to count toward her degree. She considered Bruce fortunate that his father had provided him with the needed funds to attend the university as a regular student.

She asked, "Won't your father be upset if you leave?"

He shook his head. "No. He'll be delighted to get off the hook of paying my expenses. He's just gotten married again, you know."

"I remember you told me," she said, speaking loud enough to be heard above the banjo music which had resumed again in the crowded, dimly lighted night spot next to the Charles Playhouse.

"This job will give me a chance to know the right people," blonde, good-looking Bruce said. "And this can be a swinging town if you're in with the lively set."

Erica was still lukewarm about this new project of his. "You don't honestly know anything about interior decorating," she argued.

"I don't have to." He smiled. "The owner of the firm, Vernon Gray, does all of the actual design. I'll merely be a contact man to make sales calls and see that jobs are carried out properly. It's executive work in a way."

"In a way," Erica said doubtfully. "It's a big step, and I'm worried that you may not last on the job."

He laughed. "So I'll find another one. I should meet enough of the right people through Vernon Gray to have plenty of contacts."

She studied him wistfully. "I do wish you luck, Bruce. I just hope you've given it enough thought."

"My mind is made up," he said. "So look cheerful about it. I'll make some money and get in with the town's jet set. And it won't make any difference between us at all. You're still going to be my girl!"

Erica hadn't quite believed that then. And in the weeks that followed she had found out how little his words meant. The excitement of his new job and the new crowd to which it had introduced him took prac-

tically all of his time. She saw him only briefly at lunch hour once in a while. And then he did nothing but talk endlessly about his exciting new existence.

"I'm pretty much on my own a lot of the time," he said. "And I've met a lot of the right people."

They were having lunch at Joseph's to celebrate Bruce's new affluence. She eyed him shrewdly across the white-clothed table. "Are you still as fond of your job as you were?"

For just a moment his eyes took on a bleak look, and then he brightened and said, "Vernon is all right. A fussy kind of little man, but we get along. Still, if I had another offer, who knows?"

Erica smiled faintly. "I'd say you don't care anything about your work at all. It's the new world it has introduced you to that you like. I wonder if that is good."

"Good enough for me," he assured her in his brash manner. He'd suddenly blossomed out with Edwardian-style suits, broad silk ties and a hair style devised by a noted Newbury Street Italian specialist.

"You've certainly managed to build a new personality," she said.

He looked pleased. "Necessary for the game I'm in and for the great parties I'm invited to."

Erica had been notably left out of this phase of his new life. She said, "They sound exciting."

"You'll find out," he promised her. "I'm taking you around as soon as I get known to the group."

She put this down as another of his brash promises. But he surprised her about ten days later. One evening in early October, he phoned her apartment and said, "I'll be by to pick you up at seven tomorrow night. Belinda French is giving a party at her place, and I think it's time I let them see what a pretty girl I have."

"I don't know, Bruce." She hesitated. "I'll be a stranger there. I might not fit in or even like it!"

"You'll love it," he said with his usual enthusiasm. "And they'll love you!"

"What will I wear?" she asked.

"Belinda's parties aren't all that formal," Bruce said. "But they wear smart things. Maybe a nice cocktail dress or a pants suit. I leave it up to you."

She'd settled on a pale green jump suit which was flattering to her dark complexion. Bruce came by in a cab around seven, and as they made the drive in from Brookline to Beacon Street, she queried him about the party and the hostess.

"Tell me about Belinda French," she said. "Of course I've read about her in the papers and heard her mentioned on radio and television. She was a famous debutante of the late thirties, I know that. But what's she really like?"

"Didn't you see the LIFE article she wrote a couple of years ago?" he asked. He was looking very impressive in a powder blue Edwardian suit, broad crimson tie and wide collar.

"I'm afraid I missed it."

"She was very witty, and there were some great photos of her," Bruce enthused. "Of all the people I've met, she's definitely the most interesting."

"Go on," she said, slightly amused by the young man's enthusiasm.

He shrugged. "You know I hardly glance at older women. But Belinda is no ordinary older woman. She's still slim, beautiful in a way a girl can never have beauty. What I mean is: there's added character in her face, etched by her years of mature and gracious living. And she's smart; You wouldn't expect that, considering her background. I say she's a marvel."

Erica laughed. "I can hardly wait to meet this paragon. I feel very insignificant already."

Bruce leaned close and kissed her warmly. "You never have to worry about that. I wasn't trying to give you an inferiority complex, but I can't help feeling the way I do about Belinda. She's the kind of woman of whom there are maybe a half-dozen in

every century; the kind that are remembered and discussed down through the ages."

"What about her marriages?" she asked.

"There have been a couple of husbands at least," Bruce said. "But a woman like Belinda puts a man in the background. They usually tire of existing merely in her shadow. That kind of jealousy can be devastating on a personal level. So her marriages haven't lasted."

Erica gave him a shrewd glance. "So you wouldn't want to be her husband?"

"I think not," he said frankly. "I like her too much. I'd rather be her friend."

Erica arrived at the imposing red brick apartment building overlooking Boston Gardens feeling rather tense. She didn't know how she'd fit into the set which Bruce had so lately joined, and she was slightly awed at the prospect of meeting the dazzling Belinda French.

As they waited for the elevator, he told her, "You needn't worry about a thing. You look fabulous. They'll be delighted with you."

This turned out to be not too far from the truth. The elegant apartment was filled with people. The talk was loud and the drinking frantic. Bursts of shrill laughter and loud exclamations of pleasure punctuated the air at intervals. It was hot, and the thin blue haze of cigarette smoke made it hard to see the full length of the long room.

Belinda French was not immediately at hand, so Bruce got Erica a martini and one for himself. A few minutes after he brought back the drinks, a slender, radiant woman in a black dress and with jet-black hair came up to them with a smile.

"I'm Belinda French," she introduced herself. "And you're that little girl from B.U. that Bruce is always raving about. You have no idea how jealous it makes me."

Erica laughed politely. "You haven't heard him catalogue your virtues, or you wouldn't be jealous."

Belinda's sharp eyes showed a gleam of pleasure as she linked her arm in Bruce's. "I'm very fond of this young man," she said with husky sincerity.

Bruce could not disguise his admiration for the attractive older woman. "And you know how I feel about you!"

Erica watched them with a tiny feeling of embarrassment. She wondered if she had been invited to the party solely so the fabulous Belinda could see her and coolly appraise her. She felt like an outsider.

However, Belinda quickly changed the atmosphere by saying, "Bruce, you take care of this sweet girl. I really must give some of my time to the other maniacs I've summoned from the violent wards all over the city." She flashed Erica a brilliant parting smile and moved off in the crowd.

Erica gave a deep sigh. "That was an experience."

"How do you like her?" Bruce wanted to know.

"She's as lovely as you said and sort of overwhelming," Erica told him. "And she seems to like you a lot."

"I hope so," he said.

From an adjoining room a live music trio began to play loudly enough to be heard in spite of the clamor of conversation. Erica was surprised to hear them begin with what she knew to be an old popular song, "Bye, Bye, Blackbird."

She smiled up at the blonde young man. "That's an oldie."

"It's such a favorite of Belinda's I call it her theme song," he said rather seriously. "And in a way it could be. It represents the era when she first came out. I suppose it has pleasant memories for her."

"Probably," she agreed.

It was no more than a few minutes later that Bruce was physically pulled away from her by a loud, titian-haired girl in a gray midi-length dress. "I've simply got to speak to Bruce about a few things in private," the titian-haired one called back to Erica. "Don't mind!"

Left in a sea of clamoring strangers, Erica sipped her martini and listened to the trio continue playing "Bye, Bye, Blackbird."

"May I rescue you?" The words were suavely put to her by a smiling, middle-aged man with alert, twinkling eyes. It was Dr. Herman Greb, her former psychology professor at Boston University.

"It's good to see you," she said with sincerity, for she liked the amusing Cambridge-educated and Boston-oriented man.

"And to see you," he said, his round, pleasant face mirroring his enjoyment of the moment.

"I suppose all this is old hat to you," she said, indicating the chattering crowds around them.

"I'm afraid so," he said, giving the room a disdainful glance. "I find that cocktail parties are unique in that people attending them talk more and say less than they do anywhere else."

She laughed. "I knew I could depend on you for a comment," she said.

"Belinda is a remarkable woman." He sighed. "Otherwise I wouldn't be here. I see she has added Bruce to her court."

"Very much so," Erica said.

Dr. Greb studied her benignly. "Don't let it concern you. He'll get over it. Belinda is a diamond that dazzles the eye. But a study of her for too long a time can be wearying."

"You are just the same as at school," she told him. "You are rich with gems of wisdom."

His eyes twinkled. "Women are the wise ones. They know less and understand more than men. And that's not original with me. James Stephens wrote it in his 'Crock of Gold.' But I don't suppose a young modern like you knows the book."

"I'm afraid not," she said. "Sometimes I feel so young and ignorant, especially when I'm with people like you or Belinda French."

Dr. Greb arched an eyebrow. "I've an idea either Belinda or myself would be glad of the chance to be

young and ignorant again. We've traded far too many years for all the knowledge we've acquired. You and Bruce are the lucky ones!"

"Despite Viet Nam and pollution?" she teased the older man.

"In spite of everything," he told her with an unexpected solemnity. "Time is the one relentless thing, though I must say Belinda has seemingly fought it to a standstill."

"And so have you," she said. "At school, we felt you were the only one with a truly young mind."

"Thank you," he said, managing a bow in spite of the crowd that surged around them.

"I see you've found a friend!" It was Bruce, who had returned. She was at once aware of a change in his manner. He seemed less buoyant.

"Yes. The professor has been kind enough to keep me company," she said.

"My pleasure," Dr. Greb said gallantly.

Bruce frowned. "I'm in a fix. Something has come up. I won't be able to take you home. Can you manage it alone if I find you a cab?"

Erica was hurt but made certain she didn't show it. "Of course," she said. "And don't worry about the cab. I can get one on my own."

"No need of that," Dr. Greb said with a smile. "I'll be happy to escort you home. I have my car."

"Would you do that, Professor?" Bruce asked, obviously relieved. "That would be great!"

"Don't think any more about it," the pleasant-faced professor told him.

Bruce murmured more awkward apologies and then pushed off among the crowd. Erica turned to Dr. Greb solicitously. "You don't have to bother about me, Doctor. I can manage. I won't take you out of your way."

"I'd be delighted to do it," he assured her. "When do you want to leave?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Now?"

"Why not? All this loud talk is making me tired."

"I can only agree with you," he said. "Let's leave at once. If we can find Belinda, we'll say our thanks."

They weren't able to locate the vivacious dark woman, but they left anyway, knowing that with such a crowd to look after, their attractive hostess wouldn't miss them. When they reached Beacon Street, it was dark, and traffic was moving along at a rapid rate.

Dr. Greb stood with Erica on the sidewalk and said, "I'm hungry. If you're not in a hurry, why not join me for a bite? The Ritz Carlton is nearby, and their food is superb."

"There's no need for you to take me to dinner," Erica protested. It was all very awkward, and she was annoyed and hurt that Bruce should have left her in such a dilemma.

Professor Greb's pleasant face showed a mild concern. "But you mustn't feel that way about it," he protested. "I'd enjoy having you as my guest. I'm a lonely bachelor."

The offer was so genuine and friendly she felt she should accept. Also, she was hungry. So she said, "Thank you. I'd like it."

They left his car parked where it was and walked down Arlington Street to the Ritz. Upstairs in the pleasant dining room, they had a table for two by a window overlooking the gardens and the lights of the city.

After he had ordered for them, Dr. Greb said, "Belinda used to live here at one time."

"I didn't know that," Erica said.

"Several years ago," he told her. "It was during a period when she was feeling very lonely. There has been a good deal of tragedy in her life."

"Bruce didn't tell me that," she said seriously.

"The story is not too generally known," Dr. Greb informed her. "But the fact is that for most of her life, Belinda has been haunted by a ghost."

It was a startling statement, and Erica looked at him in amazement. "Please explain," she said.

"It goes back to a time years ago. Belinda had an early marriage that didn't work out. And then she met young Carn Wills. He was the heir to the Wills steel fortune and had everything a young man could ask for, including good looks and Belinda. She was ready to marry him, and I'm sure she was very much in love with him."

"You speak as if something dreadful happened."

"Something did," the brown-haired man said solemnly. "At that time Belinda had her own yacht. Carn Wills was among the guests on it the weekend their marriage was announced. As I've heard the story from her, she spent a long while on deck with him that night before leaving for her cabin. In the morning he was missing."

"Missing?"

Dr. Greb nodded. "He'd vanished without a trace. There was only one solution. He'd somehow fallen overboard. Only after his drowning did she discover that he wasn't able to swim. She blamed herself for leaving him alone on the deck and taking him on the cruise. Of course none of that did any good. Shortly afterward the story started that Carn Wills' ghost, wearing a red and white-striped blazer and a flat-topped straw hat, had been seen on the grounds of her Harwich estate. And on through the years, rumor has it she's been a haunted person."

"Do you believe the story?"

"I don't know," he said. "I've asked her about it, and she's been evasive. But somehow that experience changed her. Carn's drowning, I mean. She never married again."

"Bruce gave me the impression she'd been married several times."

"Engaged several times, but married only once," the professor said. "All these years she's lived a lonely life. I don't mean lonely in the sense of not having parties and being surrounded by acquaintances. But she has known few real friends, and her private life has not been a happy one."

"You'd never guess it from seeing her."

"She's a gallant lady as well as a pretty one," Dr. Greb said. "Perhaps it's Carn's ghost that always stands between her and possible husbands. I don't really know. Many men have wanted to marry her. But through the years she's had only two people with her, the two she most depends on: Anna, her maid, and Tony, her chauffeur. And I like to think I'm her friend."

Erica smiled sadly at him. "I'm sure you must be. And you've given me a very different picture of Belinda from the one the press gives and the one I had. Why do you suppose Bruce interests her so?"

"His youth perhaps. And she likes new people. But she'll never steal him from you. Don't worry about that!"

Months passed before Erica saw Dr. Greb again. And during all that time she didn't hear from Bruce. Hurt and humiliated, she kept to herself a good deal and avoided all their mutual friends. But as winter ended and gave way to spring, she became curious about him. And one Friday evening her curiosity drove her to the elegant shop on Newbury Street owned by interior decorator Vernon Gray.

A smartly dressed and groomed male clerk greeted her and took her name in to the decorator. A few minutes later Vernon Gray, smallish, with curly white hair and a face of chiseled Greek perfection, came out to her.

He confronted her in an aisle of the cluttered, if elegant, shop. Antiques, fine modern furniture and huge lamps of all sizes and dimensions filled the softly lighted place. He studied her with suspicion.

"You are looking for Bruce Cord?" he inquired in a nasal voice.

"Yes," she said nervously. "When I last heard of him, he was working here."

The cold eyes met hers. "He doesn't work here any longer."

"Do you know where he might be?"

"No."

"Have you any idea whether he is in the city or not?" she asked.

Suspicion on that perfect Greek face again. "Why are you so interested?"

"I used to see a lot of him." She faltered. "We were close friends."

"Close friends?" His question was somewhat mocking. "And he didn't let you know where he was going?"

"No."

Vernon Gray, which was surely an assumed name, appeared to be considering. He said, "Bruce left me just before Christmas. He took a job with Belinda French as a male secretary." His tone was derisive. "I believe a bonus of a sable coat which she gave him had something to do with his decision."

Her cheeks were suddenly aflame. "I see," she said quietly. "Thank you."

The dapper little man with the white hair raised a hand to halt her and said, "There's more to it than that."

She paused, half-turned to hurry out. "Oh?"

"Yes. I had reason to be in touch with Belinda at her Harwich home. She's been there all winter and spring. I said I wanted a few facts about some client's accounts from Bruce. I asked her to let him speak to me, or have him come by the shop when they were next in Boston."

"But he didn't come?"

"Hardly." The tone of the interior decorator was grim. "Belinda told me he vanished one night, simply disappeared, and that she hadn't seen or heard from him since."

"He vanished?" Erica repeated.

The interior decorator nodded with a sour smile. "That is what she told me. So I can't give you any help."

"Thank you just the same," Erica said, stunned by what she'd heard. And she left the little man to make her way out of the elegant shop to the neon lights of Newbury Street.

CHAPTER TWO

Erica was extremely upset by what she'd learned from the interior decorator. She stood on the busy sidewalk, debating what she should do. Then she began walking slowly down Newbury Street toward the Ritz Hotel. By the time she reached it she'd made up her mind. Going inside, she crossed the lobby to the phone booths and began looking up the number of Dr. Herman Greb. When she found it, she was amazed to discover that he also lived on Beacon Street, but some blocks distant from Belinda French's apartment.

It was now about nine-thirty, and she had no idea whether he would be home or not. But she made the call anyway. The phone rang a couple of times before the familiar voice of the pleasant older man sounded over the line.

Nervously she said, "It's Erica Blake calling."

"Erica Blake?" He seemed puzzled for a moment. Then he said heartily, "Of course; my brunette from the psychology class. Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"I haven't gotten around much this winter," she said.

"I'm certain of that, or we would have met."

"I've called you about Bruce Cord," Erica said awkwardly. "You probably know he left his job with the interior decorator and went to work for Belinda?"

"Yes, I heard that," Dr. Greb replied.

"From what I've learned, it seems he has suddenly disappeared. And I'm worried. I thought you might know something about it."

There was a slight hesitation at the other end of the

line. Then the professor said, "It so happens there is a good friend of Belinda's here at my apartment now. You know she decided to remain at Harwich through the winter?"

"Yes."

"Well, this friend of hers lives next door to her on the Cape. Come and have a talk with us. Can you come right away?"

"I can," she said. "I'll take a cab. I'm calling from the Ritz Carlton. I can get one at the front entrance."

"Excellent," Dr. Greb said. "I want you to get here before this friend of Belinda's leaves. When you arrive, buzz me from the vestibule. Let me warn you it's a walkup, and an extremely long one. But there are some compensations. The stairways are old and rather exquisitely designed, and the view from my terrace when you ultimately reach me is breathtaking."

Erica hung up, after promising to lose no time getting there.

The taxi took only a short time to arrive at the address. It was a very pleasant area of well-preserved mansions which had been converted into apartments. She found the building and Dr. Greb's bell and pressed it. After a moment the buzzer sounded to allow her through the lower door. She went in and began mounting the first of several steep stairways.

"Courage, my dear," Dr. Greb called down to her, his pleasant face showing over a railing high above her.

"I'm taking my time," she told him.

"As indeed you should," Dr. Greb assured her. "It gives you the opportunity to accustom yourself to these higher altitudes without the necessity of a space suit."

At last she reached the landing where he stood waiting. He took her hands in his and said, "Now you know how I keep in such excellent condition. Come in and meet Bevan Ayles."

Bevan Ayles was much younger than Erica had

expected. In fact, she didn't think he could be more than thirty. Handsome, dark and lean, he wore horn-rimmed glasses which somehow did not detract from his charm. Dr. Greb introduced them, and at once Erica felt she liked this stranger.

When they were all seated before the fireplace in the elegantly furnished apartment Dr. Greb said, "I can understand why you are concerned about Bruce."

Erica was seated on a divan across from the two men. "It doesn't seem like him to do a thing like that."

"I agree," Dr. Greb said. "Bruce was fond of Boston and the active life he was leading here. I'm sure being at Harwich during the winter must have made him very impatient."

"But if he was going to leave, surely he should have given word to somebody," she worried. "And why didn't he come back here?"

Dr. Greb offered her a resigned smile and sigh. "There is no telling what some people will do," he warned. "Bevan, in addition to being a friend of mine, is an architect. He's been living in his ancestral home in Harwich lately, writing articles for magazines and the general press rather than actively working at his profession. Being a neighbor of Belinda's, he sees her fairly often, and he is currently working with her to build a summer theatre and cultural center for the area."

Bevan Ayles had a nice smile. He smiled at Erica now. "It is only in the planning stages. But if Belinda decides she wants to spend the money, I'll be doing the drawings."

"It sounds exciting," Erica said.

"It is," he agreed.

"Then you must have met Bruce," she suggested.

"Oh, he did," Dr. Greb assured her. "Tell her about it, Bevan."

"He used to come over to my place occasionally," Bevan said. "And I could tell he was getting sick of Harwich. He complained that Belinda was proving a

difficult employer and he was even more bitter about the other members of the household. He hinted that he knew even more about what was going on there than Belinda did. He suggested there was something very wrong in that house."

"Wrong?" she asked with a slight frown.

"I think he was referring to family tension," Dr. Greb explained hastily. "I told you Belinda hasn't led a happy life. Her sister and her aunt share the place with her at Harwich. And they don't always see eye to eye."

"I didn't know," Erica said.

Bevan Ayles nodded. "That is true. Bruce made several veiled remarks about Belinda's sister. But I didn't expect him to leave so suddenly."

"Did you hear any of the details?" Erica wanted to know.

The pleasant young man with the glass shook his head. "No. I was away in New York on business for a week. That was when it happened. When I returned, I heard that Bruce had gone. I mentioned it to Belinda, and she seemed very upset. She said she didn't want to talk about it. So I asked no more questions."

Erica asked, "And that's all you know?"

"Everything," the young man said.

Dr. Greb asked him, "When did Bruce disappear? I mean, the exact time?"

"The week after Christmas," Bevan Ayles told him. "There was a mild spell. We had a lot of rain on the Cape. It took away all the ice and snow that had accumulated. I believe it was on a Friday night, late."

Dr. Greb turned to Erica. "That's not much help, is it?"

She smiled wryly. "Not much."

"I'm sorry," Bevan Ayles said sincerely. "I didn't like to press Belinda too hard for facts, especially since I wasn't really deeply interested, and I had an idea the incident had caused her some heartbreak."

"That's what puzzles me," Erica said. "They seemed

so fond of one another. I can't picture this happening."

Bevan said, "Probably the only way you'll get the exact story is by talking to Belinda herself."

"True," Dr. Greb agreed.

"That won't be easy," Erica worried, "especially if she remains at Harwich."

"She's doing that," the young architect said. "She's started work on her life story. She's going over all her press clippings and so forth. Bruce was helping her, and now it is in a kind of mess. But she's very determined. And she'll not give up at this point."

"She wouldn't be Belinda if she did," Dr. Greb said with dry humor. "So that means she'll be staying at the Cape right through the spring and summer."

"So she told me," Bevan Ayles said. Then he glanced at his wrist watch and announced, "I must be on my way. Quite a drive to Harwich."

Erica gave him a troubled smile. "Thank you for waiting and giving me the information you have."

"Not very much, I'm afraid," he apologized. "I hope you have better luck elsewhere and that you find this young man."

She blushed. "He doesn't mean that much to me. But he was a friend, and I'm worried about him."

Her reply seemed to cheer the architect up. Brightening, he told her, "I hope we meet again."

Dr. Greb smiled at them both expansively. "What is to prevent your meeting here as my guests? I'll look forward to planning the event."

"I'll accept as of now," Bevan Ayles said in joking fashion. Then he bade her good night, and their host saw him out to the hall.

Erica was left sitting alone in the apartment. She saw the white living room walls were decorated with some fine graphics and paintings. Matisse, Picasso and Dali were represented, and there was one tiny ancient portrait in oils that had the dark, powerful look of a Rembrandt. She was unable to take her eyes

from it. And when the brown-haired professor returned to the room, she mentioned it at once.

"That couldn't be a Rembrandt?" she said breathlessly.

Dr. Greb showed pleasure. "It is indeed a Rembrandt. Though a small one, it is extremely valuable. I occasionally loan it to exhibitions. And I count on it to provide for me in my sunset years."

"It's thrilling!" she exclaimed, standing and studying the elderly peasant face depicted in the master's painting.

This led to her being shown around the apartment and seeing all the fine-art treasures the professor had collected over the years. Then they sat before the fireplace again, and he served her a sherry.

"I'm sorry Bevan wasn't able to help you more," he said.

"He did what he could." Erica sighed. "He's really very nice."

The professor's eyes twinkled. "I was sure he'd like you. And I'm very happy that you found him interesting."

"He seems to be a close friend of Belinda's."

"Yes. I wonder what it was that Bruce found out in that house. Something that seemed to disturb him."

"It's hard to say. Bruce was very quick to sense a situation."

"Belinda must have been shocked when he left," Dr. Greb mused.

"Apparently."

"And he must have had a good reason for going. Bickering in the house would undoubtedly be one of them. Belinda and her sister don't get along. And her aunt is a strong-minded woman."

"I can understand the situation bothering him," she said. "But why did he decide to vanish? Why didn't he come back here, or let someone know where he was going?"

"All good questions. But how do you expect to find out the answers?"

"Bruce is the only one who could really tell us. And the next best hope is Belinda."

The middle-aged man seemed to have a sudden inspiration. He leaned over. "I have an idea. Maybe you won't care for it, but I think it might work."

"Go on," she said.

"How badly do you want to find out about that young man?"

"I'm very upset. I have the strange feeling something awful may have happened to him."

"Then I think you should go to some lengths to gain peace of mind. Bevan mentioned that Belinda is in the midst of gathering material for her memoirs. She's apparently in bad need of a secretary now that Bruce has deserted her. If I were to call and tell her I have a good reliable person available, I'm sure she's hire you."

Erica's eyes widened. "I hadn't thought of any approach like that."

"Well, I consider it worth thinking about," the professor assured her. "It would be an interesting experience, in any event. Could you get a six months' leave of absence from your present job?"

"I don't think so," Erica said. "I'd have to give it up."

The man with the twinkling eyes said, "Then why not do it? With your talents, you can always find another job. And who knows? You might like working for Belinda so well you'd want to stay with her."

She considered quickly. It was a mad, exciting idea, and perhaps the only way ever to get in touch with Bruce. But she had a good job and a pleasant, secure way of life. What foolishness to risk these things! And yet what was the value of a placid existence if she sacrificed all pleasure and adventure for it?

Looking at Dr. Greb's expression of smiling anticipation, she said, "You can call her. If she'll hire me, I'll give up my present job and join her."

"I think you've made a wise decision," Dr. Greb

said. "You won't be alone down there if you go. Bevan lives nearby, and you're bound to meet other year-around residents."

Erica said, "My chief reason for taking the job would be to try to discover what has happened to Bruce."

"I realize that."

She frowned. "And also to try to learn what that mystery was he spoke of. Perhaps it was connected with Belinda."

"In what way?"

She gave him a meaningful look. "I'm thinking of the legend you told me about."

His round face grew somber. "Of course. The ghost of Carn Wills, the young man who is said to haunt the estate and Belinda."

"Yes," she said. "He also vanished."

"But everyone knows what happened to him," Dr. Greb pointed out. "He fell overboard and was drowned."

"Fell?" she questioned, her eyes meeting his.

Dr. Greb looked somewhat uneasy. Then in a shocked voice, he said, "Are you suggesting that Carn Wills might have been the victim of foul play? That he was murdered?"

"Why not?"

He looked stunned. "But the authorities investigated at the time. It was their verdict that death happened by misadventure. Alone on the deck, Carn somehow lost his balance and toppled overboard. He drank a lot. I always thought he kept on drinking after Belinda went to bed. Finally he stumbled and slid over the side."

"It could have happened that way," Erica agreed. "But someone could have shoved him overboard."

"Who?" Dr. Greb asked with raised eyebrows. "Who would want to do that?"

"Anyone with a motive. For a start Belinda herself. She might have become weary of him or angry with him, decided she didn't want to marry him for some reason and so eliminated him."

Dr. Greb sat back in his chair and gave a deep sigh. "Well, it is melodramatic, but still barely possible."

"I'd rather say very possible," she corrected him. "And if she killed one young man, why shouldn't she kill another? Who knows but that she may have murdered Bruce and gotten rid of his body because he learned this dark secret in her past?"

"It doesn't seem likely," the professor argued.

"I disagree," she said. "They were going over old records, letters and such things. Who knows what hidden diary or long-lost confession Bruce may have stumbled on? And in her desperate fear of being revealed as a murderess after all these years, Belinda had to kill him!"

"The facts don't add up."

"Why not?" she asked. "All the years since Carn Wills' death, Belinda has remained without a husband. Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe she's preferred to play the field," the professor said. "She's been engaged a number of times."

"But broken off," Erica said. "Couldn't she have remained single because she wanted to punish herself for killing Carn Wills?"

"It's a pretty fantastic theory."

"But you see what I mean?"

"I do," he said. "And I'm reconsidering if I should try to sell your services to her. If you go down there in your present frame of mind, you're bound to cause trouble. You'll see a snake under every rock, dark evil where there is none. I don't blame you for being upset, but I think you should be sensible."

Erica saw that she had overplayed her hand. She'd made the mistake of frightening the sedate but kindly professor.

Quickly she managed a smile and said "I didn't mean to alarm you. I just wanted to prove I had some imagination."

He stared at her. "You surely did that."

"I didn't mean all those thing I said," she went on. "But I wanted to let you realize they are outside possibilities. Personally, I agree with you. Carn Wills undoubtedly stumbled overboard, and Bruce just became fed up with life at Harwich and ran far and fast. Only I want to find out where."

Dr. Greb looked relieved. "Then you aren't out to play a female Perry Mason?"

"Of course not," she said. She felt like an utter hypocrite, but her plan was working. And this was too important to risk losing it. She had made up her mind to embark on this adventure; let nothing destroy her chances.

He still seemed to have some lingering doubts. "You're sure I can trust you with Belinda? You won't try to make her confess to murder or some similar monstrous crime?"

"No," she said with a carefully managed laugh. "You have my word."

"Think it over then," he said. "And I'll call Belinda tomorrow."

"I don't need to think about it. I've decided I want to work for her if you can arrange it."

"I'll do my best," he promised. "If you like, call me here tomorrow night, and I'll tell you what her answer is."

"I'll call you," she said. "Will seven be too early?"

"Make it six-thirty if you like," he said. "I may be going out later."

She rose. "Six-thirty then. And thank you."

He was on his feet and beaming at her. "Just don't go down there playing detective if I get you the job. You wont need to. Belinda will gladly give you all the information she has concerning Bruce. She's not at all difficult."

"I'm sure you're right," Erica agreed. "And I have an idea she knows where he went."

"She probably does," Dr. Greb agreed. "And when she knows how you feel about him, she'll undoubtedly help you."

"I'm not in love with Bruce," she protested. "I'm just worried about him."

Dr. Greb smiled. "I guess I shouldn't have told you that ghost story. I gave you ideas about Belinda when I said she was haunted by Carn Wills' ghost. I couldn't resist repeating an intriguing story. But I've learned a lesson. I'll never make that mistake again," he said as he shepherded her to the door.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "I'm not even going to think about it again."

They said good night, and Erica made her way down the stairs.

Walking quickly along quiet Beacon Street, she soon came to the juncture with Arlington and there found a taxi to take her home.

The next day was endless, and Erica was filled with tension.

At six-thirty she phoned Dr. Greb as she'd arranged to. "I've been waiting for your call," he told her.

"And I'm pretty nervous," she admitted.

He chuckled. "No need to be. Everything is fine. Belinda was delighted to hear I knew a secretary I could recommend. You can go down to Harwich and begin whenever you like. She'll send her chauffeur, Tony, up to get you."

She felt very much on edge but knew it was what she wanted. She said, "Thank you! I can leave tomorrow afternoon. I'll simply go down to the office in the morning tell them I'm leaving and get my things."

"Will they let you go without notice?"

"We're having a slack time," she said. "They can spare me."

"You know best," he said. "Shall I tell Belinda to send the car to your place around two?"

"That would be excellent. I'll be packed and ready." And she wound up the conversation by carefully giving him her address and thanking him.

So now it was settled, and there would be no turning back.

CHAPTER THREE

Erica sat in her room waiting for Belinda's chauffeur to come for her. Almost on the dot of two he arrived. She went down and pointed out her luggage, which she'd already carried to the front hall in anticipation of his arrival. He was a big, athletic man and whisked them up as if they had been toy bags. Then he respectfully opened the door to the rear seat for her.

"I could ride in the front with you," she suggested, since she knew she was also to have the status of an employee.

The big middle-aged man smiled. She noticed that he had good features and seemed very intelligent. "No," he told her, "Miss Belinda wouldn't want anything like that."

She returned his smile. "Whatever you say." And she got into the car.

He closed the door, went around to the front and slid behind the wheel. It was a large black Cadillac, and Erica felt miles away from him in the rear seat.

He started the car and after a moment swung out into traffic. When they were under way, he asked, "Is this your first visit to Harwich?"

"Yes," she said. "Is Miss French's home close to the ocean?"

"Set directly on a cliff," he informed her. "The old section of the house is built a bit back, but the new part is on the cliff itself. It has two stories looking out over the ocean. You reach it from a stairway and passage leading from the main house."

"It sounds very grand," she ventured.

The man at the wheel laughed lightly. "It is. Her

father built it in the style of a castle. That was years ago. Miss Belinda added the new addition, with sliding glass doors overlooking the ocean and an inside swimming pool in the lower story. It's quite a place."

"You have been with Miss French a long while?" she asked.

The good-looking man in the chauffeur's uniform proudly said, "I've worked for her since just after her divorce. That was years ago. Been a lot of changes since then, but Anna and I have stayed on."

"Anna is the personal maid?"

"That's right. And I'm Tony, Miss Blake. Tony Regan. I could have had lots of other jobs, better jobs maybe. But I'm sort of devoted to Miss Belinda. And she treats me very well. So as long as she needs me, I'm staying with her."

"I'm sure that must be a great comfort to her," she said sincerely. "It is not easy to get competent help these days."

The big man was busy at the wheel. "You're going to take over as her secretary?"

"Yes," she agreed. And in the hope of drawing some information from him, she went on, "I'm taking the job Bruce Cord had."

There was no obvious reaction from the man at the wheel. "Miss Belinda has a lot of papers to check," he said. "She's going to write a book."

"I know," she said. And in another attempt to draw him out, she asked directly, "You must have known my predecessor, Bruce Cord?"

Tony Regan nodded. "Sure. But if you'll excuse my saying so, I never figured him as the type to be secretary to a woman like Miss Belinda."

This was better. He was at least offering some opinion. "Why not?" Erica asked, ready to lead him on.

"Too much the playboy," he said bleakly. "Young as he was, I have an idea he was making a play for Miss Belinda, thinking she might weaken and decide to marry him."

They had left the city for an expressway now, and

Erica leaned forward. "You wouldn't think much of that idea?"

"Frankly, no," he said, a grim expression on his rather handsome face. "Would you?"

She was increasingly impressed by his alertness and conversational ability. Either he had come to this job with special talents, or his years with the fabulous Belinda had given him a kind of polish. His abrupt question had caught her off guard. She hesitated a moment before answering.

Then she said, "I suppose there was a large age difference. But that might not matter to a woman like Belinda. She seems to cross every age barrier successfully."

"I agree," Tony Regan said. "I wasn't thinking so much of that. What put me off Bruce Cord was the fact he was such an obvious opportunist. He didn't care for Belinda because of the kind of person she is, but for what she represents. She was just a glamor queen to him, and Belinda is plenty more than that."

"Without a doubt," Erica said, listening attentively and anxious to keep him talking now that he'd started.

"Maybe I'm prejudiced," the chauffeur went on, "but I didn't think much of him. I avoided him whenever I could, and I wasn't surprised when he up and walked out."

"What really happened?" she asked.

A veiled look came over the face of the man behind the wheel. "I'd rather not discuss that. It's pretty personal to Miss Belinda. If she wants to tell you, it's okay. But I wouldn't want to be quoted. It just isn't any of my business. In thirty-odd years at this job, I've at least learned how to be discreet."

"I'm sorry," Erica said at once. "I didn't intend to intrude on Miss French's privacy."

The chauffeur glanced back at her briefly. "I realize that," he said. "And it's not that I don't trust you. But it's a matter of principle with me. There are some things about Miss Belinda's life I don't discuss."

"You're right," she told him. It seemed a good time to change the topic of conversation. "Which route are we taking to the Cape?"

"We take Route 6 down through Yarmouth and then shoot straight across 124 to Harwich," he said.

"It's a new area to me," she confessed.

"You'll like it," he assured her, "though it's a nasty-looking day. I have an idea we're in for a thunderstorm. It's quiet and sticky."

"It is very warm for the time of year," she agreed. "And it does feel like a storm."

"We get some big ones down on the Cape," Tony Regan said.

"Does Miss French have a yacht still?" Erica asked, again trying to draw him out.

He shook his head. "She hasn't had a yacht in years. She's got a thing about boats. I guess you've probably heard that a fellow she was going to marry was lost overboard on her yacht. She's never had a boat since."

"It must have been an awful experience for her," Erica said.

"It was," he commented quietly.

There was a strange note in his voice as he said this, and Erica had the feeling the legend of the ghost was not unknown to him.

"She's never married since then," she said.

"No. You might say she hasn't been lucky in husbands. The one she divorced wasn't much by all accounts. It seems to me she's happier as she is."

"I'd think she'd be very lonely, though."

"She's had a busy life," the chauffeur said. "And there are her sister and her aunt."

"I didn't know she had a sister until last night," Erica admitted. "I've never heard of her."

"No reason why you should," the chauffeur said. "She's not like Miss Belinda; she's never done anything or been in the papers. Mary doesn't look like Miss Belinda at all. She's fat and wears glasses. I'd call her ugly."

"Is she younger than Miss French?"

"Yes," Tony Regan said, "but only by a couple of years. She keeps her hair dyed, and she pretends she runs the house. But she doesn't do much. Her Aunt Celia is the main one when it comes to that. And She's a very old lady now."

"Those are the three in the family?"

"Just the three," he replied. "And we have a half-dozen servants, if you include the gardener. So it's a pretty busy place, with guests and neighbors and the like." He glanced at the windshield and turned on the wipers. "The rain is starting."

She saw the drops quickly come down. "So it is," she said. "You were right about the storm."

They were on a narrower road now and not making quite as much speed as before. He said, "You'll not find Mary or the old woman too much of a nuisance. They keep pretty much out of the way of Miss Belinda and her visitors."

"I'm sure they won't bother me," Erica said.

"They seemed to get under the skin of that Bruce," the chauffeur said disgustedly. "But then he was always complaining about something."

"Maybe that's why he ran off."

"I wouldn't know," the chauffeur said, wary once again.

After a while she spoke up again, "What is the estate called?"

"French House," Tony Regan told her. "Her father called it that, and Miss Belinda hasn't seen fit to change it."

A bolt of lightning flashed across the dark sky, illuminating it very briefly. Erica gave a small start and said, "It is going to be a thunder and lightning storm."

"No question about that," he agreed. "Anyway, we'll soon be there."

Now she heard loud thunder above the engine of the car. The storm was increasing in ferocity. They went through a village with the streets bare of people; the rain beat down a tattoo on the parked cars on

either side of the roadway before the cluster of business buildings and stores. In a few minutes they had left the village behind and were on a fairly deserted section of road again.

"You mind the storm?" Tony asked from the front seat.

"I'd be lying if I didn't say it bothered me some," she admitted ruefully.

"Miss Belinda doesn't care for this kind of weather, either," he told her. "She generally shuts the curtains and tries to blot out the noise with the stereo."

"That's one solution."

"I like a storm myself," he said as he wheeled the big car onto a side road. "Always have, since the days when I was a youngster."

"You have a trace of a Southern accent," she said.

"You're right, miss," he agreed with a chuckle. "My native state was South Carolina."

"It's hardly noticeable, but it's there."

"Too many years up here," he said. "But then we go down to Pinehurst for a month or so, and I just naturally pick it up again."

There was more thunder and lightning, making conversation difficult, Erica sat back in the near-darkness of the rear seat. They slowed down at an opening in a hedged area, and she saw a hanging wooden sign: "French House." They drove in an entrance flanked on either side by stone columns and down a narrow gravel road with high hedges the length of it. At last they came to an area of broad lawns, and a flash of lightning gave Erica her first view of the great mansion.

It was a castle-like structure of gray stone with towers and small windows with leaded glass. A wooden canopy over the front entrance sheltered the driveway at this point, and Tony Regan drove the big car in under it.

He turned to Erica with a cheerful smile. "This makes it a lot easier to unload in a storm."

"It surely does," she agreed, impressed by the quiet magnificence of the estate.

The chauffeur opened the door for her and, as she got out, said, "You go on inside and I'll see your luggage is taken care of."

She smiled. "Thank you for your kindness on the drive down."

"I enjoyed it," he said.

"I'll undoubtedly see a lot of you," she said. "This seems a wonderful old house."

"Miss Belinda is fond of it," the man said.

Erica went up the several steps to the door, and it opened as if by some prearranged signal. A matronly woman in a dark dress and white apron greeted her. "I heard the car," she said, "and I guessed it would be Tony back with his passenger. You are Miss Blake, aren't you?"

"Yes," Erica said. "I'm afraid I haven't brought very good weather with me."

"It has been threatening since morning," the housekeeper said, standing to one side to allow Erica to enter.

The reception hall was a large one, and there was a broad stairway to the left leading to the upper regions of the mansion, with a wide doorway giving access to the living room directly ahead. Even in the shadowy atmosphere caused by the storm, Erica was aware of the elegance of the house and its furnishings.

She said, "Is Miss French expecting me?"

"Yes," the housekeeper said. "She's downstairs in the living room of the new section of the house."

"Oh, yes," Erica said. "It's at a different level."

The housekeeper nodded. "It was only built on a few years ago. But Miss French spends a great deal of time there." She hesitated, then added, "My name is Mrs. Wren. I'm the housekeeper."

"I'm happy to know you, Mrs. Wren," Erica said. "You must have a lot of work keeping this place so neat and clean."

The older woman smiled. "It is a job, but I have some good help. I'll take you to Miss French."

Erica followed her along the length of the entrance hall, and they then took a flight of steps hidden by the main stairway. This brought them to a bricked corridor with a rounded ceiling. It was almost completely dark, so Mrs. Wren found a switch and turned on a row of flat glass overhead lights set in the bricks. They gave plenty of illumination and made the passage through the corridor less of a spooky experience.

The door at the end of the corridor was shut. The housekeeper had walked ahead to lead the way; now she came to the door and opened it. Then she stood back to allow Erica to step into the big room with its glass-doored wall revealing a wide panoramic view of the ocean. It had a high cathedral ceiling, and a huge fireplace at one end. At the other end of the big room there was a stereo, and before it stood Belinda, head high and defiant, as she listened to a loud recording of a Lester Lanin dance band. She was staring out at the turbulence of the ocean in the storm and so did not notice the arrival of Erica.

A vivid flash of lightning above the lashing gray violence of the foam-flecked waves lighted up the large room in a way that made Erica gasp aloud. Her gasp was heard by the flamboyant figure in the yellow and black zebra-striped dressing gown, and Belinda turned with a look of shock on her lean, attractive face. Then she went to the stereo and lowered the volume a little as a peal of thunder reverberated near them.

Crossing to Erica, she held out her hand. "You're Dr. Greb's little girl."

Shaking hands with her, Erica said, "I'm Erica Blake. I'm afraid I didn't time my arrival very well."

"You can't be blamed for this," Belinda said with a smile. She spoke loudly so as to be heard above the stereo and the storm. "Isn't it a magnificent sight from here?" She glanced out at the ocean again, her face brightening with enthusiasm.

"A storm seen from here is overwhelming," Erica agreed.

"I usually don't watch storms, and I hate the thunder. That is why I'm playing the stereo so loudly. Do you like Lester Lanin dance music?"

"Very much," Erica said.

"He's the best society dance band leader left," Belinda said. "So few of the big bands are around any more. Since I've been going through my clippings, I've discovered how many of them are missing."

"This is a wonderful house," Erica said.

Belinda gave a careless shrug. "It's always been home to me. My apartment in Boston and the other places I've lived have seemed temporary quarters. This is where I spent all my summers when I was a girl."

Erica said, "I don't know whether you remember me or not. I met you at a party at your Boston apartment once. Bruce Cord took me there."

Belinda stared at her. "No. I didn't remember. But I do now."

"I thought I should tell you."

Belinda was still staring at her in that odd fashion as the storm raged on and the dance music blared in the background. "I'm glad you did mention it," the older woman said. "Have you any idea where he is now?"

"No. I haven't heard from him since he left Boston."

A bitter look crossed the famous woman's still attractive face. "Bruce is a selfish boy—a foolish, selfish boy! Don't you agree?"

It was an awkward moment for Erica. She said, "I often found his judgment faulty."

"That is putting it mildly," Belinda said. "But, then, discussing him will only get us off to a bad start. And I don't want that. I need a secretary very badly if I'm to have my memoirs prepared for publication."

"I'm looking forward to the work," Erica told her.

"You'll not find it easy," Belinda warned.

"But it is bound to be interesting."

"I have all my papers in my study in the older section of the house," the older woman said. "That is where we'll work, except when I want to dictate some material to you. Then we might do it down here. It's very pleasant in this room, or out on the patio below when the weather is fine."

"I'm sure it must be," Erica agreed.

Belinda regarded her with interest. "You seem bright. I hope we'll work well together. Perhaps you'd better go to your room now. Mrs. Wren will have it ready, and I'll introduce you to the others at cocktail time. We have them in the living room at seven, and dinner is at seven-thirty. You'll soon become familiar with our routine, Erica. We have little formality and no strict set of rules."

"Thank you," Erica said.

Belinda sighed. "You're very pretty. Are you sure you are willing to isolate yourself here?"

"Very sure."

"We do have some very pleasant neighbors," the older woman assured her. "Carter Anderson in the next house to us is the family lawyer and a long-time friend of mine. And there is Bevan Ayles on the other side of the main road. He's a friend of Dr. Greb."

"I know," Erica said. "I met him at Dr. Greb's a short time ago."

"Then at least you know someone," Belinda said. "Bevan is not too old for you, and he's pleasant."

"He is," Erica agreed.

"He comes over fairly often, especially lately, as we're working on a building project," Belinda told her.

"He said something about it," Erica said.

Belinda frowned again as lightning flashed through the vast expanse of windows, creating a blue glare. "I wish the storm would stop. Maybe it will before cocktail time."

Erica left the colorful Belinda turning up the stereo full blast. As she walked along the brick-walled cor-

ridor, she heard the familiar strains of "Bye, Bye, Blackbird" once more. It seemed to be a favorite tune of Belinda's. And its lively yet nostalgic air vividly recalled the exciting period when Belinda had been featured on every society page.

Mounting the shadowy flight of stairs to the hallway of the older portion of the house, Erica met Mrs. Wren, the housekeeper. The prim woman asked, "Did you have a nice chat with Miss Belinda?"

"Yes," she said. "Now I think I'll go to my room, if it's ready."

"It is," Mrs. Wren said. "If you'll follow me upstairs, I'll take you to it."

The room was on the third floor of the old house, at the end of a hall, with a view of the grounds from one window and a good vista of the ocean from another. There were several closets and a bathroom off the room. It was furnished with heavy antique mahogany and had the same air of richness that pervaded the rest of the castle-like structure.

Mrs. Wren advanced toward a white marble fireplace that stood out against the dark blue of the wallpaper. "You have wood and kindling for a fire," she said. "It's not likely you'll ever use it. The whole building has central heating, and it's very efficient."

The lightning flashed, but it was not too noticeable in the room. Erica offered the housekeeper a wan smile. "The storm doesn't seem so bad up here."

"No. I think it's moving on, anyway." She glanced around. "I guess Tony has brought all your bags here."

"Yes," Erica said, checking on them. "This is a very nice room."

"Mr. Cord liked it," the housekeeper said matter of factly.

Erica's eyebrows rose. "Did Bruce Cord have this room?"

The housekeeper nodded. "Until he left. It's convenient to the rest of the house and a favorite room with guests."

"He left very suddenly, didn't he?"

The housekeeper at once grew wary. "Yes," she said brusquely. "If there is anything you need, let me know."

"I'm sure everything I need is here."

"I'll let you unpack," Mrs. Wren said, and left.

Alone in the somewhat dark room, Erica opened one of her bags and began to unpack. She took some dresses from the bag and went across to what appeared to be the main closet to hang them up. She opened its door and saw that it was large. Then she noticed it wasn't empty. There was something hanging there in the shadows. There was a string attached to a pull chain and light. She pulled it, and the light came on.

What she saw caused her to utter a small cry of surprise. Hanging there was the expensive fur coat which Belinda had given Bruce as a present. But what really startled her was the fact that it had been cruelly slashed with some sharp instrument. The front of the rich sable garment hung in tatters.

CHAPTER FOUR

Erica put on a modest brown and white dress and went downstairs promptly at seven. When she entered the huge room with its modern concealed lighting, she found Belinda there waiting for her with several other people she'd not yet met.

Belinda, outstanding in a dress of some sparkling black material, came to greet her and in her husky drawl said, "My dear, I'd like you to meet my Aunt Celia."

The elderly woman smiled up at Erica from an easy chair. She had light brown hair, obviously dyed, sharp blue eyes under almost invisible eyebrows and the mottled skin some old people acquire. Her face was patrician-looking and somewhat lined. And her long-sleeved beige dress did not fully conceal the fact she had a withered left arm.

The elderly woman addressed Erica in a pleasant, mature voice. "It is nice to have a new face in the house. And Belinda does need help. She's gotten her study in a dreadful state. Stacks of old letters everywhere! Did I understand you graduated from Smith, or was it Sarah Lawrence?"

"Neither," Erica said. "I was a student at Boston University."

"I made that very clear to you, Auntie," Belinda reproached the elderly woman. "I told you that Dr. Greb, my friend at Boston University, sent her to me."

"I guess you did," her aunt said with a resigned smile. And she told Erica, "I know little about these vast universities of today. When I graduated from Vassar, it was a small school."

Belinda's expression indicated she'd heard this refrain before. Taking Erica by the arm, she guided her farther down the room to where a stout, rather ugly woman wearing horn-rimmed glasses was talking vivaciously to a stern, white-haired man in grey tweeds who wore his hair in crew-cut style.

Belinda interrupted the conversation to introduce her. "This is my sister Mary," she said. "Erica Blake, my new secretary."

Mary French studied Erica from behind her thick glasses with an almost malevolent air. "So you are to take over the project of Belinda's memoirs?" she asked.

"Yes," Erica said with a faint smile, determined to be agreeable, however much antagonism the woman showed.

The stout, dark-haired woman, who bore no resemblance to her glamorous sister, said disdainfully, "I'm sure Belinda is making far too much fuss about this proposed book. Everyone has forgotten her, and no one will want to read it."

"I disagree with that," the man with the crew-cut, white hair said crisply. "Belinda is still very much in the public eye, and a host of people read everything that is printed about her."

Belinda smiled gratefully at the stern-visaged man. "Dear Carter!" she purred. She told Erica, "This is Carter Anderson, my neighbor, lawyer and friend. I would despair if I lost him in any of those roles."

Carter Anderson bowed stiffly. "Miss Blake, I hope you like it here at French House."

"It seems a lovely location," she said.

"As summer develops, you'll really enjoy it," Carter Anderson assured her. "The Cape weather is hard to rival at any season. We get little extreme weather here, summer or winter."

Belinda said, "Now you've met us all, what would you care to drink?"

"Perhaps a martini," Erica said.

"I'll prepare it for you personally," the white-haired man said. And he went over to the sideboard.

Belinda flashed her a smile. "I invited Bevan Ayles for dinner, but he couldn't come. He did say he might come over for a little while later on."

"That would be very nice," Erica said.

Belinda moved away to join the lawyer at the sideboard. This left Erica alone with Mary French. It was clear Mary was jealous of her noted sister.

She warned Erica, "You may not find it easy working for my sister. She has always been spoiled and had her own way. Our parents always gave her the most attention because she had a pretty face. Pretty faces often hide a lot of evil."

Erica was finding the situation awkward. She said, "I haven't given it much thought."

"I have," Mary French said, frowning over her drink. "I've had plenty of reason to. I can tell you the ugly duckling is the neglected one."

"Miss Blakel" Belinda's aunt called to her from her chair, giving Erica a chance to escape without making a reply to the sullen Mary. When she reached the old woman's chair, Aunt Celia studied her with those shrewd, faded blue eyes. "I saw Mary laying the law down to you," she said. "I want to warn you not to believe what she says. She's so jealous of Belinda it's painful. It has always been that way."

"I can understand," Erica said.

"You only have to look at Mary to know," Aunt Celia agreed emphatically. "That girl was behind the door when looks and graciousness were being passed out. She's never been able to hold a candle to Belinda, and that's where the trouble lies."

Carter Anderson came up with a martini in hand. He gave it to Erica. "I hope you'll find that dry enough."

"I'm not an expert," she apologized, taking the drink.

"Carter is," Aunt Celia said grandly. "I guarantee it will be well mixed."

Erica sipped it. "It is." She smiled.

Soon after that they all went to the dining room. Dinner in the large room was an ordeal for Erica on this first night among strangers. To make it even more depressing, she was seated beside Mary. And the stout woman lost no time returning to an account of her woes.

"When you have a famous sister, you can depend on it no one takes any interest in you," she informed Erica.

To change the subject, Erica asked, "Have you travelled a lot?"

"I've been around the world three times," Mary said sourly. "But Belinda was always with me, so I didn't really enjoy myself. When we were young, we had the yacht. But after Carn Wills was drowned, Belinda made my father sell it. If she couldn't enjoy it any longer, she was determined no one else should."

"You were aboard it when the young man was lost?" Erica asked.

"Yes," Mary said. "And so was Carter. He has always hoped to have Belinda show a romantic interest in him. Naturally, she hasn't."

"It was a tragedy, wasn't it?" Erica said.

The eyes behind the stout woman's heavy glasses held a weird gleam. "It was for me," she said. "I'd been talking with Carn that afternoon, and he said he was tired of Belinda's tantrums. He practically admitted he'd like to shift his interest to me."

This was a remarkable revelation and came as a surprise to Erica. She quickly realized that the plain younger sister of Belinda had provided a possible motive for Belinda killing that long-ago suitor. He might have warned her he was about to turn to Mary.

From the other end of the table Belinda called to Erica, "What dreadful story is Mary telling you now? You suddenly look quite pale!"

Erica at once smiled and said, "She's been telling me about your travels."

"What a shocking reaction on your part," Belinda

said mockingly. "I can't imagine what gruesome details she may have dug up."

Mary glared down the table at the beautiful woman and told Erica in a low voice, "She enjoys saying things like that—belittling me and making it seem I'm not bright."

At last the dinner ended. In the living room, Erica found herself talking to the lively Aunt Celia. The others had gone off to a different part of the house.

"I understand you were a friend of Bruce Cord's," the elderly woman said, those faded blue eyes watching Erica sharply.

"We were friends," the girl admitted.

"Belinda mentioned it to me. If I were you, I wouldn't discuss him with her."

"Why not?"

The mottled face showed impatience. "The young man was more than my niece's secretary. If you know this fellow, you should be aware of that. To put it bluntly, Belinda was considering marrying him."

"Oh?"

Aunt Celia sighed. "When I first met him, I decided there'd be trouble. I could see he was one of the sly ones, anxious to latch onto Belinda's fame and wealth. It was obvious to everyone. Carter Anderson didn't like him. And even Tony, our chauffeur, confessed to me that he was worried about what might happen."

Erica pretended a surprise she didn't feel. "You think he came here with the express idea of marrying Miss French?"

"Not a doubt of it," the old woman said emphatically. "He hadn't an easy disposition. He was continually quarreling with the other servants and with Mary. Not that Belinda would worry about that. But he made himself so generally unpleasant that I wondered how she could think of him seriously."

"And did she?"

"Oh, yes. She seemed blind to his faults. She gave him that sable coat and a lot of other presents. And

she let him idle his time away instead of really working with her on her memoirs. I was disgusted with her. But then she suddenly changed. That was just before he left. I heard her giving him a lecture on several occasions."

"She was turning against him?"

"I'm sure of it. She was starting to see that he was an unscrupulous person trying to take advantage of her. So they fought. I didn't know how it might end. And then he suddenly went away. It was a blessing!"

"And Miss French was badly upset?"

"It hit her hard," the old woman admitted. "She still cared for him, and there was a matter of pride involved. It gave Belinda confidence to think she could interest a man so much younger. After it happened, she let us all know it wasn't to be discussed. So I'm merely passing the information along to you."

"Thank you," Erica said. "I'll remember."

They were still talking when Belinda came into the living room with Bevan Ayles on her arm. She came over to them and said, "I told you Bevan promised he'd get here before the night was over. And he has."

"It's good to see you again," Erica told the slim man with the glasses.

He smiled. "And to see you." He bowed to Aunt Celia. "And how is my favorite member of the French family this evening?"

The woman in the easy chair looked pleased but said, "If you want to be honest about that, you'd admit you mean Belinda. She's really your favorite."

"Not at all," Bevan assured her. "You're much more dependable."

"But, Bevan, I have never tried to be dependable," the flamboyant Belinda said, touching a hand to her thick black hair. "Now do stay here and chat with Erica for a little while I finish going over a dreary list of dividend statements with Carter. He would come over here for a social visit and bring a lot of work with him!" And with a despairing gesture, she left them to return to the study.

"This is my cue to leave also," Aunt Celia said with a sigh, and lifted herself out of the chair. "I enjoy reading in bed on a rainy evening, and I have an unfinished book waiting for me." She gave them a knowing glance. "I know you two will manage nicely without me."

They said their good nights, and she slowly made her way from the living room to the hallway. When they were alone, Bevan and Erica sat down on a divan before the fireplace.

He asked her, "How do you feel about being here?"

"I think I'll adjust to it."

"Did Belinda remember who you were?"

"No. But I told her."

Bevan looked interested. "What was her reaction?"

"Very mild," she said. "But I'm not sure how she really feels about it. Probably she's in such bad need of a secretary she's decided to give me a try anyway."

"Could be."

"I've found sister Mary a little less than likable."

"That doesn't surprise me," he said with grim amusement. "There's a constant feud going on between the two."

"Mary is such a frump!"

"True."

"I like the chauffeur, Tony, very much. He's a superior type and more like one of the family than an employee."

"He is," Bevan agreed. "Belinda depends on him a lot. He does a great many extra tasks around the place. Last winter he did a regular construction job in the garage. That's the red brick building to the right of the house. There was a lot of waste space there, and he built brick walls and made an office for himself, a storage closet and a full bathroom. He did the masonry work and most of the plumbing without any help."

"He takes more than a casual interest in things here," Erica agreed. "I can tell that."

"No question about it," Bevan said. "Have you

found out anything concerning your missing friend, Bruce?"

"I'm using his bedroom," she said in a resigned tone.

"That's a strange turn of events," he said.

"Not really," she told him. "It's one of the best of the guest rooms, so they generally use it first. I feel just a little creepy about it."

His intelligent face showed concern. "If it really bothers you, make some excuse to have them change it. Or explain to Mrs. Wren privately. She's a good soul and would help you."

"It's not that bad. I don't want to be silly about it. But I did find something in the closet that gave me a start."

"What?"

"The sable coat Belinda gave him. Someone has slashed the front of it with a knife or something. The fur is hanging in tatters!"

Bevan registered surprise. "What about that!"

"I'll admit I was shocked."

"Do you suppose Belinda did it in a rage?"

"I think she might have, under the circumstances."

He frowned. "If Belinda had done it, I think she'd have hidden the coat away somewhere."

"Maybe she put it there to leave it out of sight and then forgot about it," Erica reasoned. "There are so many possibilities it is hard to guess."

"When you've been here longer, some of these things may explain themselves," Bevan said.

"Let's hope so," Erica said bleakly.

He smiled at her. "Dr. Greb is worried about you. He called and asked if you had gotten here safely. And he asked me to make a report on things here."

She brightened. "That was good of him."

"He feels responsible for sending you here."

"But I asked him to help me. It was what I wanted."

The young man studied her. "He'd still feel badly if you came to any harm here. And so would I."

"I'm not worried."

"I don't think you need be," he said. "But if anything should frighten you, if you should suddenly feel you're in any kind of awkward spot, you can always phone me. It doesn't take me more than five minutes to get over here."

She gave a sigh of relief. "That's truly comforting."

"I wanted to tell you," he said. "The local number is 5103. Or ask the operator, and she'll ring me."

Erica laughed ruefully. "There's no need to make all this fuss. I'm sure I'm perfectly safe here."

"There is the ghost of Carn Wills. Remember?"

She stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"They tell some pretty scary stories about this old house."

"I've never been troubled by ghosts anywhere."

"This could be the start," he said. "I think you should brace yourself for whatever might happen."

"Very well; I will."

"I'd lock my door at night if I were you."

"I'm not positive there is a lock," she said. "I'll check."

"Do that."

Erica said, "Carter Anderson is a very stern type, every inch the country gentleman. And he seems devoted to Belinda."

"He has charge of the estate," Bevan said. "And he's been in love with Belinda since they were in school together. But she has never seen him in a romantic role."

"But he still remains faithful to her?"

"Yes. He's never married. And he's over here as much as he can manage. He hasn't given up hope."

Erica looked at the young man with knowing eyes. "When that other young man, Carn Wills, vanished from the yacht, wasn't Carter Anderson one of those aboard?"

"Yes. I've heard him tell about it. They didn't know Carn was missing until the next morning. They

searched the yacht, and he was nowhere to be found. Then they knew the worst."

"So Carter was around when both young men conveniently disappeared?"

Bevan gave her an incredulous look. "What are you suggesting? Those events happened about thirty years apart."

"Yet there is a similarity."

The young man seemed skeptical. "You might as well think of Belinda herself as a possible murderess, or even Mary. All that group were on the yacht."

"I have wondered about them."

He smiled thinly. "You're not overlooking any possibility, are you?"

"Not at this point."

"I wish you luck," he said. "Maybe it would be a good thing if Bruce should surprise us all and return. It would ease a lot of minds."

They had no further chance to discuss the matter, as Belinda and Carter came back to the living room to join them. Belinda flopped down in a chair near them and said, "I won't look at another financial statement this year. You can take care of them all, Carter. Whenever I study them, I find I've lost money."

Carter Anderson, standing by her, smiled a wry smile. "It's been a bad year for the market. Everyone has suffered. You'll regain your losses later on."

"That's what you said last month," Belinda said unhappily.

Bevan smiled at her. "But you have plenty of money. You don't really need to worry, no matter what."

"Maybe," she said. "I still worry."

The conversation became general and animated. The four of them remained there talking until both Carter Anderson and Bevan suggested it was time they leave. Good nights were said, and then Belinda and Erica started up the broad stairway together.

"You're comfortable in your room?" the dark-haired celebrity asked.

"It's a nice room. I understand Bruce used it."

"I'd almost forgotten," Belinda said, halting on the stairway, her hand on the railing. "You don't mind being there?"

"No." This wasn't entirely true.

The clever older woman gave her a sad smile. "You mustn't allow yourself to believe the things they say about this house."

"I'll remember," Erica promised.

They continued up the stairs, and Belinda surprised Erica by going to the door of her room with her.

The one-time celebrated debutante explained, "If you don't mind, I'm going in there with you. There's something I want to get."

CHAPTER FIVE

As Erica hesitated the slim woman asked, "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," Erica said, opening the door.

They went inside, and she switched on the lights. The sound of rain still could be heard on the windows. Erica said, "It's amazing. It is still raining hard."

Belinda stood in the middle of the room. "It's not supposed to end until the early morning."

The lovely dark-haired woman crossed directly to the closet and, opening the door, found the damaged sable coat and brought it out. Holding it before her, she said, "I assume you've already seen this?"

"Yes."

The keen black eyes gave her a skeptical look.

"Why didn't you ask me about it?"

"I don't know," Erica said cautiously. "I didn't think it was any of my business."

Belinda smiled at her derisively. "It actually isn't." She moved to the bed and tossed the coat on it. "It isn't worth much now."

"I noticed the damage."

"I should have gotten rid of it before this," Belinda said, her slim fingers touching the pearl necklace at her throat as she stared at the ruined coat.

"I guessed it had to be the one you gave Bruce," Erica said.

"Obviously," the slender older woman said with irony.

"I wonder he didn't take it with him."

Belinda smiled grimly and, seating herself on the

bed, gently stroked the coat. "We had a quarrel the night he left me."

"I see." Erica was very tense, hoping that now at last she'd hear the full story.

"It was during the week after Christmas. A thaw had set in, and instead of snow we were getting rain down here."

"I remember," Erica said.

"Bruce had been getting increasingly moody and demanding." Belinda gave her secretary a knowing glance. "I don't have any idea how much you know about him and what he was doing here. But we had sort of an understanding, that in the spring we'd be married."

Erica felt sad. "I guessed there was something like that."

Belinda was studying her. "Are you in love with him?"

Erica shook her head. "Once perhaps. I don't think so now."

"That's good. He's not capable of truly returning affection. I found that out. He began insisting that we be married right away. I hadn't decided about him yet, and I told him so. He stormed out of the house and went walking in the rain in his sable coat. When he finally came back, I reprimanded him and told him I always wore my fake fur coat during a storm like that. He said nothing, but left me again."

"And did he go out a second time?"

"Yes, but not until later," Belinda paused. "I never saw him again. But the next morning Tony found this coat on the lawn. It was drenched and ripped as you see it. In his rage, Bruce had deliberately destroyed the coat and thrown it away."

Erica nodded. "That gesture was like him."

Belinda cast unhappy eyes on the coat. "I dried it out and brought it up here. I had an idea he might come back."

There was a silence between them. Erica broke it.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Belinda ran her fingers over the torn coat again and then glanced up at Erica with a pathetic smile. "I think I would have forgiven him."

"I know," Erica replied quietly.

"But weeks passed, and he didn't return, and at last I realized that he wouldn't," Belinda said with a sigh. "I knew how much he must have come to hate me to hurt me so."

"You've had no word from him at all?"

"None."

This was a let-down for Erica. She had believed until this moment that Belinda had some idea where Bruce had gone. But it seemed she was wrong. She felt the dark-haired woman was telling her the truth.

She said, "I can't understand that. He might at least have sent you a card."

Belinda was staring across the room with a far-away expression. "He did this disappearing act deliberately to hurt me. He knew I had a special fear of people vanishing. It dates back to the time Carn Wills was drowned, years ago. But the scar is deep. I told him all about it. And so when he decided to leave, he managed it this way to do me as much harm as he could."

Erica stared at the older woman. "That doesn't sound like Bruce. I know he could be thoughtless and greedy, but he wasn't really cruel, not in the way you suggest."

"Perhaps he was changing."

Reluctantly, Erica agreed. "Perhaps."

"People do," Belinda said. "Of course I was exposed to a great deal of humiliation as well as hurt by what he'd done. My sister taunted me like a schoolgirl tormenting another about a lost toy. That's rather humiliating when, like Mary and myself, you both happen to be over fifty."

"She doesn't seem too mature emotionally."

"Still a child!" Belinda said scornfully. "She really rubbed it in—the whole bit about an older woman and a younger man. Carter Anderson was both en-

raged and relieved. But I know he wanted to see Bruce out of the way. About the only person who was truly understanding was Tony."

"Your chauffeur."

"Yes. Tony has been standing by me in times of trouble all down the years. I'd be lost without him. He took the car and went scouring the countryside for some clue as to where Bruce had gone."

"Did he learn anything?"

"Not much, though a gas station owner on Route 6 told him a young man answering Bruce's description had shown up at his place that night. He said this young man had remained with him on the all-night shift until a truck came through on its way to New York. Then he got a ride and left."

"So Bruce probably went directly to New York," Erica said. "That could explain why he didn't return to Boston. He wouldn't have been too eager to do that, anyway. He'd given up his job, and he'd have had to admit failure with you to all his friends."

"Would that have meant so much to him?"

Erica nodded. "I think so."

Belinda smiled bitterly. "Anyway, that's how it happened. I imagine you've been wondering."

"I have."

"It's one of the reasons I haven't returned to my Boston apartment," the older woman said. "That, and my desire to get on with my memoirs."

"I can understand," Erica said.

"Mary has been impossibly sarcastic to me ever since," the slim woman went on. "And Aunt Celia goes around with a smug expression, as if she knew what was going to happen all the time. It hasn't been easy."

"You should try to forget all about him."

"That's not possible," Belinda said. "And anyway, I have a strange feeling about it all now."

Erica stared at her. "A strange feeling?"

"Yes." Belinda looked at her solemnly. "It came to

me one day when I was up here alone. I occasionally have come up to look at the coat and think."

"And?"

"And on this particular afternoon, I seemed to get a kind of message, almost as if Bruce were standing beside me, whispering to me. And his message was that he was dead."

A chill shot through Erica at the older woman's words. "You seem really to believe it!"

"I do," Belinda said quietly.

Erica swallowed hard. "Of course it's just a nervous reaction. There couldn't be any truth in it!"

Belinda was tense. "Don't you believe in mental telepathy?"

"I'm not sure," Erica said.

"I do. And I think that message came to me from Bruce."

"That he's truly dead!" Erica said with awe.

"Yes. I've had experiences like it before. And I've never been wrong. I've lived longer than you have and known many strange happenings."

"So it was his ghost you imagine talked to you?"

"Yes. His spirit planted the message in my mind. I believe he died in some sort of accident. Maybe he was killed by that truck driver. I'm sure he had a large sum of cash on him. They might have done it for the money."

Erica was alarmed. "Did you tell the police?"

"No."

"Why?"

Belinda looked down. "I didn't want to face the scandal. If part of the story came out, soon everyone would know it all. I've been through too much. I couldn't face it."

"But if you honestly believed Bruce was killed for money?" Erica questioned in bewilderment.

"I've behaved like a coward," Belinda admitted. "But then this is only a feeling on my part. I have no evidence to back it up."

"Did you have Tony try to find out about the truck?"

"Yes. I thought maybe gas had been purchased with a credit card, and we'd have a record by which to trace it."

"But there was no record?"

"None. The gas purchase had been made in cash. And the truck was hired from a big rental company. It had no identifying local name, and the gas station owner hadn't taken down the number. All he could remember was that it had a New York license."

Erica heard all this with a sick sensation. Had Bruce really placed himself in danger once too often and paid for it?

She asked, "How did Tony seem to feel about it?"

Belinda rose with a tiny gesture of despair. "He thinks there was foul play. He agrees that Bruce may be dead."

"I still say you should get in touch with the police."

"How would it help?"

"There may be some other record of that truck being down here that night," she said. "The police might be able to check it out."

Belinda picked up the torn coat and moved toward the door. "I mustn't stay here all night talking to you. You must be weary."

Erica followed her. "I'm not feeling too badly."

"Do have a good rest," Belinda said with a parting smile, "and in the morning we'll get down to work."

When Erica was in bed with the lights out, she continued to worry about the situation. Her nerves were too much on edge for sleep to come easily. In the end it was the hypnotic rhythm of the falling rain that allowed her to drift off. She had no idea how long she slept, but it was still dark when she came awake with a start.

At first she lay there, not knowing what had interrupted her sleep. And then she heard it—the stealthy sound of a door opening! It seemed to her it was the door leading to the hall, but she was sure she'd bolted

it after Belinda left. Or had she meant to and forgotten? Raising herself a little in the bed, she stared in the direction of the hall door with frightened eyes.

Softly the sound came again, a gentle creaking. Then she heard the door being carefully closed. Her breathing was rapid as she speculated on whether someone had entered or left the room. Was there some evil presence on her side of the door, or had it gone out into the hallway? Or was she hearing a ghostly sound with no human intruder involved? Frozen with fear, she stared into the shadows and waited.

There was only the soft patter of the falling rain now. Whatever had been taking place was over. And it seemed reasonably certain there was no one in the room.

Eventually she forced herself to get up and turn on the lights. Of course the room was empty. There was no sign of anyone. She even opened each of the closet doors and the door to the bathroom. There was no intruder. And the door to the hall had been bolted!

Moving back to the dresser, she was about to turn off the light when her eyes fixed on something on the dresser top she'd not seen before: a gold tie clasp with Bruce's name on it. She recognized it instantly, as she'd given it to him. Panic surged through her once more. She was certain it had not been there earlier.

Very gingerly she picked up the tie clasp and examined it. There could be no doubt. It was the one she'd given the blonde man as a birthday present.

It was too baffling! She put the tie clasp down and, leaving the light on, returned to bed. She lay awake for what seemed an age. Then from sheer exhaustion she fell into a troubled sleep in which she dreamed of being haunted by a young man in a blazer and flat-topped straw hat.

When she woke up to a bright morning, with the lamp on her dresser paling before the sunshine, the nightmare was as vivid to her as the other unex-

plained events of the night. Wearily she rose, turned off the light, and prepared to go downstairs for breakfast.

When she was ready in a brilliant cotton print, she looked at herself in the dresser mirror and was shocked by the dark circles under her eyes. The strain of the trying night was clearly evident. Her gaze fell to the gold tie clasp. Her brow furrowed, she picked it up and placed it in the pocket of her dress. Then she left the room.

Aunt Celia was the only one at the breakfast table. She greeted Erica with, "I'm delighted to have you join me, my dear. Both Mary and Belinda have breakfast in their rooms, which I frown on, except for the extremely old." She chuckled and held her withered arm close to her waist as she helped herself with the other one. "Did you rest well?"

Erica poured herself some coffee. "Fairly."

"One rarely rests well in a strange room the first night," the old woman pointed out.

"Yes," Erica agreed, sipping her coffee. "It's often that way."

The faded blue eyes were studying her. "You do look weary this morning. You mustn't let Belinda work you too hard today."

Erica smiled wanly. "I'm sure she won't."

"Don't count on it," Aunt Celia warned her. "She is capable of boundless energy when she likes, and given to sudden enthusiasms which drive her madly."

"She seems a wonderful person," Erica said, buttering some toast. The breakfast had been set out buffet style so they could help themselves.

The old woman sighed. "She is that. I only wish she were a happier one. But then she was pushed into the social whirl far too early. Along with Cobina Wright and dear Brenda, she was one of the famous debbs of her season. She had to give too much of herself to that. Things might have been different if her marriage had worked out. But it didn't."

"It's strange she didn't marry again."

"She would have," Aunt Celia said promptly. "When young Carn Wills came on the scene, I was sure Belinda would find happiness with him." The old woman leaned close and in a low voice went on, "Not that Mary wasn't doing her best to come between them and get Carn for herself!"

"Oh?" Erica was listening with interest.

The old woman nodded. "Mary was young and slim then. And she wasn't bad-looking in those days. Not a beauty like Belinda, but still very acceptable, you understand. And I could see her trying to take Carn from her sister. Then you know what happened!"

"Carn Wills was drowned."

"Yes. I don't think Belinda has ever really gotten over it."

"A very sad business for her," Erica agreed.

"No one knows it better than I." The old woman sighed. "I have tried to be like a mother to her. Both parents of the girls died early in life. And that also was tragic."

"Bound to be."

Aunt Celia gazed down at her coffee cup. "There were several times later I thought she would marry. But fate seemed against her. And then when this young man, Bruce Cord, came along, I was very fearful she might marry him purely out of desperation, because of her loneliness. They wouldn't have been suited in any way."

Erica said pointedly, "That was solved by his vanishing."

The old woman looked strangely smug. "Yes, I considered that most fortunate."

The talk moved on to other things as they finished breakfast. Afterwards Aunt Celia went for a stroll in the sun, and Erica asked to speak to Mrs. Wren. After a few minutes, the housekeeper came to her in the front hall.

"Yes?" the matronly woman asked.

Erica drew the tie clasp from her pocket. "I found

this on my dresser this morning. I'm sure it wasn't there before. I'm curious as to how it got there."

Mrs. Wren looked wary. "It might have been there and you didn't notice it, miss."

"No. I'm certain it wasn't," Erica said. "It must belong to the young man who had the room before me."

Mrs. Wren studied the gold tie clasp and read the name on it. "So it did," she admitted.

"It's strange, isn't it?" Erica said, pressing for an explanation.

The housekeeper seemed oddly furtive. Suddenly she said, "Wait just a minute, miss. I'd like to ask somebody about this." And she turned and hurried back to the rear of the house.

Minutes passed, and Mrs. Wren appeared again. At once Erica saw an expression of relief on her matronly face.

Coming up to the girl with a smile, she said, "I've talked to the maid. I sent her up to do some extra cleaning while you were at dinner last night. When she was doing the rug, she found this under the dresser. And she left it there where you found it." Mrs. Wren handed the tie clasp back to Erica.

She took the clasp. "Thanks. I'll speak to Miss French about it." But at the same time she was thinking it didn't explain the eerie opening and closing of her door which she'd heard!

CHAPTER SIX

The study was on the second floor with a view of the ocean, though not as startling a one as that offered by the sliding glass doors in the new section of the mansion. It was a long, narrow room with book-lined walls and a fireplace at one end. Above the fireplace was a three-quarter-size painting of Belinda, smiling and exquisite in a white gown trimmed with ostrich feathers dyed blue at the sleeves. It showed her in the most exciting period of her youth.

At the other end of the room was a desk cluttered high with papers. Behind it sat the living Belinda, still lovely, undaunted and full of enthusiasm to match the bright day. As Erica rather timidly entered the room, her employer greeted her with a smile.

"You see I'm here first," Belinda said. "I'm not completely a spoiled, useless creature."

"I'm sure you're far from that," Erica said with a shy smile.

Belinda imperiously waved a slim hand. "Now you're to sit here by me, and I'll try to explain my filing system, or lack of it. Each stack of papers on the desk represents a period of my life or a special phase of it."

Erica sat down in a plain chair by the desk. "Is the material there already sorted?"

"Most of it," the dark-haired woman said. "But there are scads more letters, papers and such to be brought down from the attic. I had the idea that if I stored everything away in the attic, I could safely forget it. Of course I turned out to be wrong."

"Perhaps as you get the material sorted you should

place it in a separate file," Erica said. "Do you have a cabinet and a supply of folders?"

"I'll order them," Belinda said promptly. "Tell me what I should have and I'll phone Boston. They'll have the order sent down here by truck tomorrow morning at the latest."

"I'd say you need a three-section metal filing cabinet and a supply of good plastic folders and tags," Erica said. "You could store them here near your desk, and we'd have everything in order and close at hand."

Belinda's eyes sparkled. "Excellent! You see what a help you're being already?" And she interrupted their conversation to make a long distance call to Boston and place the order.

"That's settled," she said when she put down the phone. "Bruce was no help to me at all. He really wasn't interested in what he was doing here."

Erica took the gold tie clasp from her pocket and passed it to her, saying, "This was found in my room. The maid put it on the dresser. I recognized it at once, as I gave it to Bruce as a birthday gift."

"Really?" The famous woman arched her brows as she considered the clasp. Then she quickly passed it back to Erica. "Take it, my dear. It should be yours. At least it should be unless Bruce returns."

Erica put the clasp in her pocket again. "And you don't believe he will?"

Belinda smiled bleakly. "I made myself clear on that last night."

"So you did."

The older woman indicated a pile of newspaper clippings. "Those are the items printed my first year as a deb. There are many more, but I have chosen only the best of them. I have to be selective, or the book would run to thousands of pages."

Erica glanced at the painting over the fireplace at the far end of the study. "What a lovely painting of you."

Belinda stared at it languidly. "I've always felt I look just a mite plump and naïve in that."

"Not really," Erica protested. "It's a pleasant study, and extremely like you."

"Thank you." Belinda smiled. "I can tell you're a perceptive girl. I hope your talent extends to straightening out the mess I've made of these papers."

"I'm sure I can get things in order as soon as I begin work."

"And if I'm not here, don't let my sister waste your time," Belinda warned her. "Or Aunt Celia. But most especially Mary. She has very little to do, and so she enjoys coming here and making a nuisance of herself!"

Erica was amused by the older woman's indignation. There was no love lost between the sisters. "It's not likely she'll disturb me."

Belinda's mood had suddenly changed. She was frowning as she added, "And I don't want her going through my material. It's not any of her business."

"Very well."

"I know that must sound strange to you," the woman behind the desk said with a hint of apology. "But Mary has always been jealous of me, and if she saw anything she wanted she'd be likely to steal it."

"I'll remember."

"Good," Belinda said with a smile. "Now this morning I want you to help me go over my letters during the time I lived in Virginia. We can begin right away." And they did. Belinda scooped up material from a cardboard carton on the carpeted floor by her, and she and Erica screened the letters and clippings, making a new pile on one of the few bare areas of the large desk. They kept at it until lunch time. Then Belinda announced she was finished for the day.

"After lunch I'll be driving over to spend an afternoon by a swimming pool with some friends," she said. "I must get some of this good spring sun at once. You can carry on, selecting what you consider important."

Erica hesitated. "Do you feel you can trust my judgment?"

"Fully," the vivacious dark woman said. "You've picked up the idea even more quickly than I expected."

So it was arranged that Erica should work alone that afternoon. Actually, she was glad to do this. Belinda made her self-conscious and nervous. She was able to concentrate better by herself. When lunch was over, she returned to the study and continued with the material dealing with a two-year span in which Belinda had lived in a rented house in Williamsburg.

Absorbed by her work, she temporarily forgot the eerie happenings of the night before and her reason for being in the mansion. Belinda's life had been rich and exciting, filled with famous people and events. The clippings and letters reflected this. She was so caught up in her task she was not aware that anyone had entered the study.

"The princess has you hard at work!" Mary French said scornfully from beside her.

Erica looked up in surprise to see the stout sister of her employer standing there. The eyes behind her thick glasses held the familiar scornful gleam she associated with the unhappy woman.

"I didn't know you were here until you spoke," she said.

Mary smiled sourly. "I have a way of getting around. You'd be surprised how much I find out by moving softly."

"When I began checking these news stories, I forgot everything else," Erica admitted. "Just now I've been reading how Belinda spent a summer touring in one of Noel Coward's plays. And there are some fascinating letters from Coward that will have to be in the book."

Mary sneered. "Noel wanted to meet me, but Belinda stopped that."

Erica gazed at her incredulously, certain the woman was making this up. Living in the shadow of a

famous sister, she'd probably concocted a lifetime sequence of lies to ease her hurt pride. And probably by this time she'd repeated them so often she now believed them to be true.

"I'm sure you must be mistaken," she said quietly.

The stout woman, carelessly dressed in a shapeless print, moved over to a chair and slumped in it, facing Erica. "Don't think that," she said with an unpleasant smile. "That was only one of the hundreds of things she's done to me."

"I shouldn't be discussing such matters," Erica said with what she knew seemed primness. "And of course I have no right to offer opinions."

The sour smile on Mary's face remained. "You're hired to make her out to be wonderful," she said. "Naturally, that's what you'll do. She's writing this book so as to live her glory all over again."

Erica had picked up another press clipping. Glancing at the stout woman, she said, "Isn't that true of every book of memoirs? Don't you feel your sister is entitled to enjoy her fame?"

The smile vanished, and Mary French snapped, "She's welcome to enjoy it if she tells the rest as well."

"The rest?"

"I mean the despicable things about herself," the stout woman said with venom in her tone. "The things she has done to people. The way she's destroyed them. She won't tell any of that!"

Erica knew now why Belinda had warned her about her sister. It was going to be impossible to get much work done under these conditions. In the future she would try to keep the door closed when she was in the study alone.

She said patiently, "I'm sure you don't hate Belinda as much as you pretend."

"She's a vixen!" Mary said harshly. "Ask her about Carn Wills and how she acted when she found out he liked me! Ask her why she keeps that record of 'Bye,

Bye, Blackbird' he gave her and plays it all the time. Ask her what happened the night on the yacht!"

Erica sat stunned by the stout woman's outburst. How long had all this hatred been boiling beneath the surface to erupt so savagely? There was no point in trying to be polite or understanding.

Standing, she said in a firm voice, "I can't listen to any more of this. You must know this as well as I do. I'm a stranger here, trying to do work assigned to me. And you're interfering and making it impossible."

Mary in her turn showed surprise. Her broad face was flushed, and she seemed to be perspiring as she also got to her feet. "You're on her side," she said. "She's bought you."

"I'm working for your sister, and I want to get along well with everyone here. That includes you," Erica said. "But I can't sit and listen to outrageous talk."

Mary glared at her from behind the thick glasses. "I understand you were a friend of Bruce Cord's."

"What about it?"

"He knew the kind of person Belinda is. He found out soon enough. And you know what happened to him."

"I don't think his leaving could have had anything to do with Belinda," Erica retorted.

The fat woman sneered. "You can't be that naïve!" she said. And she turned and walked out.

Erica stared after her for a moment and then sank down in the chair behind the desk. The interlude had not been a pleasant one. And the wild accusations Mary had made about the glamorous Belinda, while probably the exaggerations of a jealous and neurotic woman, were fairly shocking.

She stared at the clippings before her with troubled eyes. All at once she was too upset to continue working. The room was suddenly hot and her head reeling. She decided if she could just go outdoors for ten minutes or so, she'd feel better and be able to return to her task. At the moment she could not go on

reading the glowing press clippings about Belinda, feeling the way she did.

Rising from the desk, she abruptly left the study and hurried downstairs and out the front door. The air was warm, and everything in the garden was fresh and blooming after the rain. She walked along the driveway, lost in her thoughts, almost unaware of her surroundings. Mary's ranting had thoroughly upset her, and she knew she must somehow get control of herself.

Ahead, a gardener was on his knees by a bed of flowers. He worked on as she drew close to him. He was an old man, wiry, with a lined, bronzed face and white hair. He wore a wide-brimmed, battered straw hat and shabby work clothing.

He looked up as she paused to admire his work and said, "Won't take long for things to grow now."

She managed a smile. "Not if this weather continues."

"Growing weather on the Cape is nearly always good," he said, a placid expression on the lined face, "except for an occasional year when there's a long spell of rain and fog."

"I'm not familiar with the weather down here. I've just arrived."

He regarded her with interest. "Your first time in Harwich?"

"Yes."

"You a guest here?"

"No. I'm Miss Belinda French's new secretary," she said. "My name is Erica Blake."

The old man rose to his feet with the native good manners of the true countryman. Then he carefully wiped a hand on his trousers and offered it to her. "Pleased to meet you, Miss Blake," he said. "I'm Ezra Finch. I've been the gardener here since the days of Miss French's parents."

Erica shook hands with him. The brief exchange was doing her good. The bitter talk and brooding atmosphere of the study seemed far behind her. She

said, "This is a magnificent estate, and you do a fine job on the gardens."

He smiled. "I try. Hard to get anyone to help these days. And Miss French doesn't like to pay out the kind of wages they ask. Money doesn't flow the way it did in the old days. I can remember when her mom and dad had lawn parties here for maybe three or four hundred people."

"Our way of life has changed," Erica said.

"Not a doubt about it," the old man said sagely. He indicated one of the large areas of flat lawn behind the main structure of French House. "They used to set a big red-and white-striped tent there and roll out a portable dance floor in the middle of it. There would be champagne, a buffet and a dance band from Boston. And all the young couples came in their finery. It was a sight to see." He smiled in recollection.

Erica heard him with interest. It was a picture of a life she'd never known. "There can't be much of that these days."

He looked disgusted. "You seen them dance lately? All that jumping around and never making any sense at all. And the music! There's only a little of it I can listen to. And the way the young folks dress! The men wear their hair longer than the women and their clothes sloppier than what I'm wearing now. You couldn't have a party like I'm telling you about today."

She smiled again. "I guess times are bound to change."

"I don't see it's for the better," the gardener said. "I was young then, and I used to pitch in and double as a waiter when they had parties. And I saw a lot of those people close up. They were good-looking folks. Now they all have a crazy look, like the LSD crowd."

"Still, there was wild dancing, not to mention short skirts, gold knickers and Prohibition liquor," she said.

Ezra Finch frowned. "Yep, nothing is ever perfect. But things generally were nicer, and rich folks could afford to entertain in a way they can't now. It doesn't

make much difference to me. I always have my flowers, long as Miss French will let me have the money to keep them up."

"You should be in sympathy with our flower people, as the hippies call themselves," Erica pointed out. "They preach the simple life."

"I go along with that part of it. Don't get the idea I'm against the young. I got a couple of grandchildren that I like a whole lot better than their parents."

She laughed. "That sounds like an excellent testimonial. I'm interested in the past because I'm working with Belinda French on her memoirs. And we're going over all her old papers, including her letters and press clippings. I'm getting a feel for those other days."

The gardener nodded. "Miss Belinda is a pretty famous person."

"I agree. And I think this book, recording her part in the era, is very important."

The old man's eyes had a far-away look. "She was as pretty a little girl as you ever want to see. And so was Miss Mary, for that matter. Hard to think what the years do to you. Not that Miss Belinda still isn't special. And Miss Mary is—well, she's Miss Mary," he finished awkwardly.

"I know what you mean," Erica said.

He stared at her. "So you're the new secretary?"

"Yes."

"That other one, the young man they called Bruce, didn't last too long."

"I know," she said. "I've heard about it. In fact, I was a friend of his when he lived in Boston."

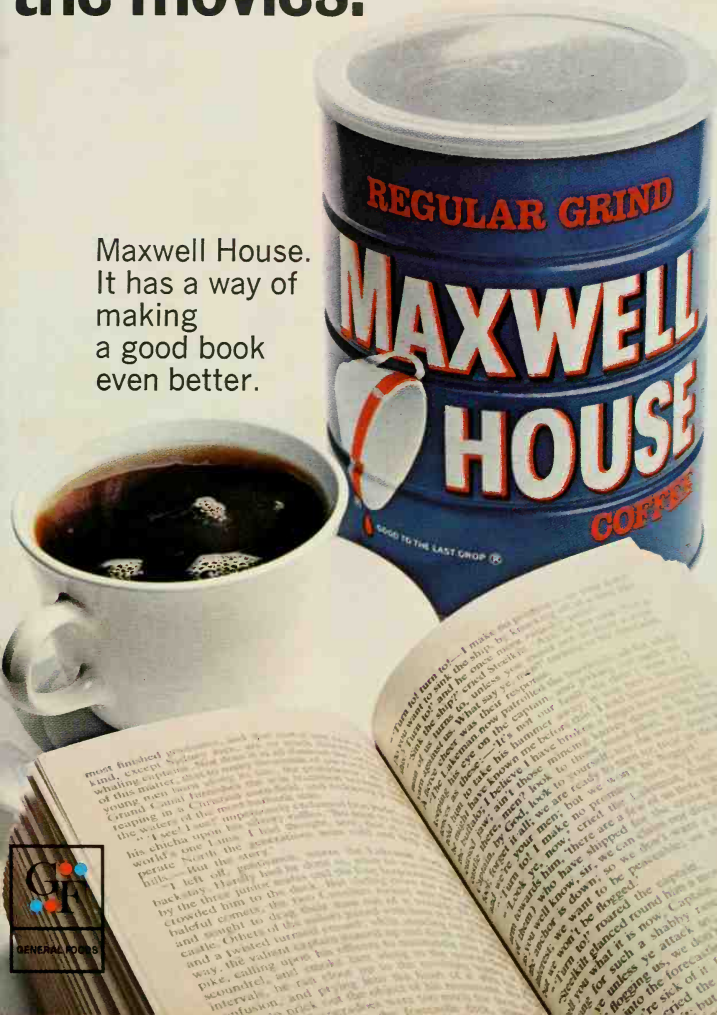
Ezra Finch appeared surprised. "He didn't strike me as your kind."

She smiled. "He wasn't exactly. But I was fond of him."

"Maybe he was all right," the gardener said grudgingly. "But he had a way about him I didn't like. And I heard some of the household staff talking. They

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claimed he and Miss Belinda were thinking about getting married."

"Perhaps," Erica said cautiously. "I wouldn't know."

"Nor would I. But the idea didn't appeal to me. She could have been his mother as far as age was concerned. A lot of the time he went to the village and caroused around with a group of them hippies who had rented an old carriage house there. I saw him in town many a night at the tavern with that long-haired gang."

This was new information. Erica wondered if some of the hippies might still be in the village and whether they'd have any news about what had happened to Bruce. She doubted it or the chauffeur, Tony Regan, would have heard.

She said, "Bruce liked that kind of people. He was really one of them."

"I know it," the old man said. "A couple of nights they had to bring him back here on one of their ramshackle motorbikes. The noise would wake the dead. The missus and me have a cottage in the bushes not far from the garage, and so they were bound to wake us up."

"He was drinking heavily?"

"Had to be. When I'd see him the next day, he'd be looking pale and shaky. But he could have been hitting them drugs they're all so anxious to poison themselves with. Old-fashioned poison like alcohol isn't good enough for them!"

Erica smiled wanly. "He occasionally went on drinking bouts. But I had no idea he'd go away to the village on his own when he was living here. He was so close to Miss French."

The old man gave her a knowing glance. "From what I saw of the way Miss Mary was acting, he could have been close to both of them if he'd wanted. She was real sweet on him. And then he just up and disappeared."

"Have you any idea why?"

Ezra Finch took a step nearer to her and in a low

voice said, "I've an idea he may have skipped with one of them gals from the hippie crowd. Some of them were pretty."

"Oh?" This was a new theory and not an unlikely one.

"Yep," he said with assurance. "The way I see it, he was tired of Miss Belinda and Miss Mary battling over him here. And he took up with one of those young beauties with the granny dresses and long hair. That probably meant he had to settle with the boy friend of the girl. The night he left, I heard them bring him home on a motorbike same as on a lot of other nights. And afterwards, when I was just falling asleep, I heard voices in an argument. I was too dopey to make out the voices. But I know the argument ended with a kind of startled cry. I figured somebody had hit somebody. Then it was quiet, and I want to sleep.

Erica listened in wonder.

She pressed the old man, "You're sure you didn't recognize the voices you heard arguing that night?"

"Nope." Ezra Finch was apologetic. "Fact is, I was half asleep. I couldn't tell whether it was a man and a woman, two men or what. But I knew they were mad at each other, and it ended with a scream."

"I see," she said, disappointed. "Well, probably you're right. Bruce may have gone off with one of those hippie girls."

The old man smiled broadly. "Those Jezebels were pretty interesting. Might have thought about it myself if I were younger."

"Are any of them still in town?"

"Nary a one," the old man said rather mournfully. "State Police moved in on them one night when they were having a pot party, and that was the end of them. The local bank that was renting them the place ordered them out. Sort of sorry to see them go, myself. They made a little excitement while they were here."

"I'm sure they did."

He looked apologetic. "Well, I must get back to work."

"I'm sorry I kept you talking so long. But I enjoyed it."

"Me too," the old man said, dropping to his knees again.

Erica moved on, her mind filled with what he'd told her. As she neared the house, she saw that someone was standing in front of the garage entrance, watching her. It was the chauffeur, Tony.

She waved to him, and he waved back and then came slowly toward her. She waited for him, noting that the garage was a large brick building with an apartment over it. She assumed he lived there.

He came up to her with a faint smile on his pleasant face. "I saw you having a long chat with old Ezra," he observed.

"Yes. He's quite a talker."

"He's more than that. He's a regular male gossip. Don't believe half he tells you."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Erica gave the good-looking middle-aged man a surprised glance. "I'm sorry you told me that," she said. "I was rather impressed with him."

The chauffeur, who was wearing slacks and a sweater, nodded. "He can be convincing. But he draws on his imagination."

"Really?"

"I promise you."

She sighed. "He seems very nice. I told him I knew Bruce Cord, and he gave me a lot of information about him."

"Typical," Tony Regan said wryly. "He wanted to impress you."

"It sounded pretty convincing," she insisted. "He told me that before he vanished, Bruce had been seeing a lot of a hippie group in the village. No one mentioned that to me before."

"Probably no one thought you'd be interested."

"I am," she admitted. And she gave the chauffeur a frank smile. "When you drove me down, I was being very discreet. I didn't explain that Bruce and I had been quite close friends. And one of the main reasons I took this job was to try to find out where he'd gone."

Tony's eyes opened wide. "Well, if you played coy with me, don't blame me for not bothering to fill you in with what I know."

"At least it's time I told you now," she said. "If you have any information about Bruce, I wish you'd pass it on."

"I've been through all that with the police. You begin to sound like them."

"I don't mean to. But I am worried about Bruce."

Tony shrugged. "He was a wise guy. I think he can take care of himself, no matter where he is "

"Probably."

"I know a few things," he admitted. "He *was* very chummy with that hippie outfit. Ezra was being truthful about that."

"I thought so," she said. "He told me something else that bothers me a little."

"What?" Tony was studying her.

"He claims that the hippies often brought him home by motorcycle when he'd been drinking too much."

Tony nodded. "That's so."

"And he says that on the night Bruce vanished, he heard some sort of argument that ended with a loud cry."

"He what?"

"Heard an argument and a loud cry. But he admits he didn't recognize the voices. The sound of the motorcycle only half awakened him, and he listened to all the rest of it in a kind of daze."

The chauffeur gave her a wry grin. "Let's be honest. That is where fact probably becomes fancy. He either dreamed it, or he deliberately made it up to give you a thrill."

She eyed him doubtfully. "Would he do that?"

"He's done it all his life. The thing that should have put you on guard was his beginning to hedge and saying it was confused. He was making sure you wouldn't be able to pin him down."

"Perhaps," she said. "But I didn't get that impression."

"I'm trying to be your friend," the chauffeur said. "You can take what I say at face value, or not, as you like."

"You're right, I guess," she said reluctantly. "At least he did advance one theory that strikes me as sound. He thinks Bruce ran off with one of the hippie gals."

"Why not?" Tony smiled. "They looked pretty good to me. And confidentially, Miss Mary was giving him a hard time."

"Oh?"

"Sure. It was Miss Belinda he liked and was hoping to marry. But Miss Mary developed one of her crazy crushes on him. And she tried to talk to him all the time and get him to take her places."

"Which Belinda didn't like?"

"Can you blame her?" Tony Regan asked. "After a while it was a continual battle. And he was in the middle of it."

She smiled wryly. "Things here didn't work out as he'd expected."

"You can bet your life on that," the chauffeur said. "Instead of getting Miss Belinda for his bride, he was being pestered by her sister."

"And so the hippies were a welcome escape."

"That's the story," he said shrewdly. "It's not the first time Miss Mary acted crazy about Miss Belinda's male friends. It began way back with Carn Wills."

"The one who was drowned?"

"Yes," he said. "She caused trouble there. And no one knows what happened on board that night."

Erica gave him a searching look. "Have you ever seen the ghost?"

He frowned. "That's one thing you won't get me to talk about."

"Sorry," she said. "I'm afraid I've already had my first run-in with Mary. She came to the study when I was working a little while ago and began saying all manner of awful things about her sister."

"Typical."

"I couldn't stand it, and I told her so. And she accused me of having been bought by Belinda."

He smiled grimly. "I've heard that, too. It's one of her favorites. She's still a spoiled girl, reaching out for what she thinks should be hers whether she hurts anyone or not. And she's deadly jealous of Belinda's fame."

"She certainly revealed that."

"Try and get along with her as best you can," he warned. "She can be nasty and even dangerous."

She stared at him. "Why do you say dangerous?"

He showed uneasiness. "I really meant a nuisance," he corrected himself.

But she was by no means convinced this was true. There had been something in his mind when he'd made the original statement. He'd indicated the stout woman was a psychotic, if only a mild one.

She said, "I must get back to work."

"Sorry I kept you," the chauffeur apologized. "But I wanted to fill you in."

"I'm glad you did," she said.

She entered the old mansion again and went back up to the second floor study. Everything was as she'd left it on the desk, and she resumed making a listing and selection of the papers as she'd been doing. There were no other interruptions, and she made good headway on the project.

Belinda did not return for dinner. Her aunt Celia made some veiled remarks about the kind of friends she visited being a bad influence on her. Erica said nothing. Her employer returned around eight o'clock and at once sent for Erica to join her in the living room of the new addition to the house.

She took the stairway and the brick corridor. Before she reached the end of the corridor, she could hear the strains of the stereo. This time Belinda was playing the "Bye, Bye, Blackbird" number very loudly. The record was scratchy and worn. Yet it still gave off a lively, nostalgic sound.

When Erica entered the living room with the panoramic view of the ocean, Belinda was standing by one of the sliding glass doors, staring out at the incoming tide lashing the rocks. Because of the loudness of the record, Belinda didn't hear her. So Erica went all the way across to the older woman and touched her on the arm. Belinda wheeled on her with a frightened look on her lovely face. At once it was apparent she'd been drinking.

The lovely dark-haired woman grimaced, went over and tuned the volume of the stereo low so that it

became merely background music. Then she looked at Erica again.

"I suppose you think I'm crazy to play this tune all the time," she said, slurring her words just a trifle.

"I know you like it."

Belinda took a few steps toward her. One hand held a cigarette holder, fantastically long. It contained a half smoked cigarette. Her black eyes were flashing. "Do you know why I like it?"

"Not really."

"No?" Belinda took a nervous puff on the cigarette and smiled coldly. "Well, you will before you're through," she said, "so I may as well tell you. It was Carn Wills' song. We met at a dance when the orchestra was playing it."

"He was drowned, wasn't he?"

"How clever of you to remember," Belinda said with drunken cynicism. "I'll fill you in a bit more. I was very much in love with him."

"I know it was a tragedy."

Belinda eyed her derisively. "Do you know what people still think?"

"No."

"That I caused his death, that I shoved him overboard. I was at a friend's place all afternoon until just now. And his name came up. And someone actually hinted that I knew something about his death no one else did; practically called me a murderess!"

"Wasn't that rather foolish?" Erica asked, startled by the revelation.

"Of course it was foolish," Belinda said unhappily. "I loved Carn. No matter what he did to me, I couldn't have brought myself to kill him."

Erica made a small despairing gesture. "It was all so long ago!" But she was thinking of the possible link with the disappearance of Bruce. It made her wonder.

"They still remember."

"People are rather cruel," Erica told her. "When mysteries of that type surround celebrities, they keep them alive."

Belinda went to the stereo again and shut it off. Then she picked up a silver-framed photo from the end of it, brought it over and thrust it in front of Erica.

"That was Carn," she said. "Wasn't he handsome?"

Erica studied the photo of the athletic-looking, smiling young man with wavy hair and a round face. He had no distinguishing features, although he seemed pleasant enough. Wanting to humor the dark woman, she said, "I'm sure he was nice."

Belinda took the photo back. "You don't have any idea," she said. "You didn't know him." She returned it to the end of the stereo and asked, "How did you get along this afternoon?"

"Very well," Erica said. "I've finished all that lot of material. We can start a new file in the morning."

"At least something is happening," the lovely black-haired woman said. "I want to get my story completed and in print. It will put an end to a lot of rumors."

Erica gave her a knowing glance. "It will also bring your name into the headlines again. You'll need to be prepared for that. Reviewers will write about your book, and there is bound to be a discussion of your life."

Belinda frowned. "I suppose so. I'll have to depend on the facts to make them see that I couldn't possibly have been guilty of killing Carn."

"What about the story that his ghost haunts the grounds?"

"That began with some malicious servant," Belinda said angrily. "And of course the sensational press picked it up. They always do."

"Which added to the speculations about his death, I suppose."

Belinda regarded her uneasily. "I say there is no ghost!" Yet there was no conviction in her voice. In her slightly drunken state, her bravado was forlorn.

They were both standing there in silence when the housekeeper, Mrs. Wren, appeared at the door. She directed herself to Erica, saying, "Mr. Ayles is up."

stairs in the living room looking for you. I told him I'd try to locate you."

"Thanks," Erica said. And turning to Belinda French, she asked, "Do you need me for anything else this evening?"

"No," the famed ex-deb said. "Don't let me keep you here. And say hello to Bevan for me."

"I will," Erica promised, still hesitating. "Are you sure you feel well?"

Belinda gave her a defiant smile. "I feel very well indeed, thank you." Her tone was as cold as the smile, and there was no mistaking the fact that the unhappy woman meant her words as a dismissal.

Erica left the room and quickly made her way along the brick-walled tunnel and up the stairway to the main house. She went directly to the great double living room, where she found Bevan Ayles waiting for her. He rose to greet her.

"I thought you might like to take a stroll around the grounds with me," he said. "It's very mild and pleasant out."

She smiled. "It sounds appealing. I've been working inside most of the day."

"I wondered."

"Yes, I began with some of the material Belinda had already started to sort," she said. "It's quite a task."

Bevan looked understanding. "I can imagine."

Since it was already almost dusk, they left the house at once. He led her away from the gardens and the garage to another area of the grounds. Here there were open fields and a family cemetery built on a hill. He took the path that led up to the cemetery.

"This is one of the places of interest on the estate," he said. "The cemetery is an old one. It served several branches of the French family before Belinda's father built here. This land belonged to the family for more than a century, and there are other houses with descendants of the original French family in them."

"I see." Erica said, as they walked side by side. "It's

been an exciting day. Belinda came home a little while ago, slightly drunk and in a bad state about Carn Wills."

Bevan gave her a surprised glance. "What about him?"

"It seems she was at some friend's house this afternoon. And some guest from the city brought his name up and practically asked her if she'd really shoved him overboard that night over thirty years ago."

"Seems to have taken whoever it was a long time to get around to the question," he observed dryly.

She shrugged. "I suppose it was someone who'd heard the various stories and never met Belinda before. The impulse to question her was evidently too much to resist."

"How did Belinda manage it?"

"I have an idea she told the woman off. At any rate, by the time she got home she was in a depressed state. She showed me Wills' photo, and she was playing that 'Blackbird' tune."

"I've heard the record," he said with a sad smile. "There are times when I feel heartbroken for Belinda. And then I take the exact opposite view and decide she's sinsiter and a threat."

Erica looked at his troubled face. "Then you can't make up your mind whether she's a murderess or not?"

"That's the truth," he confessed.

"Neither can I."

They had reached the bottom of the hill on which the cemetery was situated. On one side there was a cliff-like area with jagged rock showing. And in the face of this rock there was an iron door with a rusted padlock. Erica's attention was drawn to it; it seemed to lead to some underground chamber.

Bevan said, "That's the door to a vault. In the old days when the ground was frozen hard, they placed bodies in there. When the spring came, they buried them."

Here eyes were wide with interest. "Is it still in use?"

"No. The cemetery isn't used any more. Hasn't been since Belinda's parents were buried here. One of the reasons I wanted you to see the place was that she had a stone placed here in memory of Carn Wills. His body was never recovered, of course, so the grave is empty."

"Why did she do it?"

"A sentimental impulse, I suppose," the young man at her side suggested. "I believe they held a regular service over the stone and made it his official burial place."

"I guess they do that quite often in drowning cases," she said.

Bevan nodded. "They do. I heard that young Wills' parents weren't too happy about what Belinda did. They were among those who thought she might have caused their son's tragic drowning. So they had a gravestone erected in their own cemetery and refused to attend the dedication of this one."

"They must have felt strongly about it."

"A lot of people did. The stigma of that tragedy has haunted Belinda down through the years."

They had taken a path up the hillside and were weaving their way between graves and headstones to the higher levels of the tiny cemetery. Erica said, "I'm very much aware of that since I came here."

The slim young man in the gray tweed suit walked ahead of her to a large black stone with white lettering. He paused before the broad stone. "This is it," he said.

With a slight feeling of awe, she moved up to the stone and read the name and the birth and death dates. "He was only twenty-two when he was drowned!" she exclaimed in surprise.

Bevan smiled at her wryly. "Everyone was a good deal younger then," he reminded her.

She was stunned. "He'd be over fifty if he were alive today!"

"That's right."

She stared at the stone again. "And still an aura of mystery surrounds his death."

"According to stories I've heard, his ghost is supposed to stalk this cemetery on certain nights," he told her.

"Belinda claims she doesn't believe in the ghost story."

"Then she's changed," Bevan said. "I know people she described it to."

Erica wasn't surprised. She said, "I have an idea she was lying. I could tell by her tone."

"I wonder why she's suddenly denying it exists?" Erica gave him a knowing look. "Could it be because she's afraid of another scandal may break concerning Bruce's disappearance? And she wants to do all she can to dispel the old rumors and gossip."

"I wonder," Bevan said.

"It seems likely," she insisted. "I talked to several people at the house today, and I learned some things."

"Such as?"

"Bruce was mixed up with a hippie group in the village. Did you know about them?"

"Vaguely. I saw them every so often. They're not here any longer."

"I know," she said. "Judging by what I heard from the gardener, Bruce often went to town to see them. And he may have had a girl friend among them."

"You were talking to Ezra Finch?"

"Yes. Would you consider him reliable?"

"I'd say so," was his reply. "He's been working for the French family for years. Why do you ask?"

Still standing by the gravestone, she frowned slightly. "Later I had a short conversation with the chauffeur, Tony. And he hinted very strongly that Ezra Finch was a gossip and exaggerated."

"Tony has been with the French family for just as long," Bevan said. "I'd call him Belinda's most trusted employee."

"Then you'd accept what he said about the gardener?"

"Not necessarily," the young man said. "There are often rivalries between staff members. And I'd guess that's what you've got here. Tony may not like Ezra Finch and so call him a gossip. But I think the old man is all right."

"So do I," she agreed. "And what you say about Tony having a personal dislike for him is probably true. That explains his trying to discredit him."

"I don't follow you completely. Discredit him about what?"

She looked up at him seriously. "On the night Bruce vanished, Ezra Finch says he heard an argument. After he was awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of a motorcycle, he heard a quarrel which ended in a loud cry. He was too sleepy to recognize the voices or get up to investigate. But he's positive about what he heard, sure it wasn't a nightmare."

Bevan seemed impressed. "That suggests a lot of things."

"I know. One of them could be that Bruce had a fight with a hippie about a girl and was hurt or killed."

"Or maybe he hurt or killed the hippie and then fled."

"That's all possible," she admitted.

"In which case Belinda would have nothing to do with his vanishing."

She hesitated. "I'm still not ready to admit that."

"But it could be."

"I know," she said reluctantly. "But somehow I feel there is a shadow over her, that she is mixed up in the disappearances in a definite way I don't understand."

"If that's true, your position here could be dangerous," he pointed out.

Her pretty face was grim. "It may be. Possibly I'll find the clue I'm looking for somewhere in the house. I'm still in the room Bruce had."

"I think you ought to have moved, since it bothers you."

"Better to suffer from nerves if there's a chance I'll

learn anything. And again, I may find a hint in Belinda's letters. I'm checking through them all."

"That could take some time."

"I expect it will," she agreed. "And then there's Mary. I haven't made up my mind about that ugly duckling sister. She may know a lot more than she admits. She came to me when I was working this afternoon and said a lot of awful things about Belinda."

Bevan showed surprise. "I wouldn't expect her to be so brazen. You're almost a stranger in the house."

"And Tony hinted that she might be dangerous, whatever that meant!"

The young man with the glasses studied her with resigned concern. "I'd say that you seem thoroughly to enjoy placing yourself in danger."

"I don't. But I must find out the truth about Bruce."

Bevan's eyes met hers. "Dr. Greb called. 'He's very upset about you. And so am I. I'd not know what to do if you came to any harm. I'd feel partly responsible for encouraging you to come down here.'"

"I wanted to come."

"And I wanted you to," he said with a sudden show of emotion. And he took her in his arms and surprised her with a kiss. When she drew back from him, she stared at him in amazement.

"What did that mean?" she asked.

"I seem to have fallen in love with you, Erica," the slender young architect said, his eyes shining happily behind his glasses.

"I can't believe it," she protested. "You've only known me a short while!"

"That's not important," he argued. "I make up my mind quickly. What about you?"

Erica, feeling the cemetery was a highly unlikely place for a romantic scene, was about to tell him she liked him but wasn't sure she was in love with him when a weird interruption prevented her from replying.

From behind a large tombstone about twenty feet away from them there came a sudden rasping cough!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Both Erica and Bevan turned to stare in the direction from which the unexpected sound had come. For a moment there was only silence and the gloomy array of headstones in the falling dusk. Then there came the rustle of a furtive movement, and an awkward figure rose above the distant tombstone and turned to hurry away.

Her eyes fixed on the retreating figure, Erica gasped, "That was Mary!"

Bevan sighed in disgust. "The miserable creature must have followed us out here."

She looked at him. "That would be typical of her."

The slender man showed annoyance. "At least she saw something worthwhile. She watched as I showed you Carn Wills' headstone, and she saw me take you in my arms."

"That's not likely to be a secret long," Erica said bitterly

"Do you mind?"

"Not if you don't," she said.

"I don't."

"It's nearly dark," Bevan said. "I suppose we should go back. It's too late to show you any of the ancient stones here. We can return some other time."

"I'd like to," she said, with a hint of a teasing smile, "when we aren't blessed with so much company."

Taking her by the arm as they made their way out of the cemetery, Bevan said, "I'm inclined to agree with you about Mary. She must be at least partially mad."

"She has to be."

"Spying on us out here that way indicates immatur-

ity or a guilty conscience," he said. "I wonder which it is."

"I wonder also," she said. "Mary was on the yacht the night Carn Wills vanished."

"I haven't forgotten," he said.

"And she had an argument with Bruce the day before he vanished."

"You're suggesting she could be the perpetrator of dark deeds?"

"It's not impossible," she told him. "The chauffeur must have had some reason for warning me against her."

"Did you ask him to explain?"

"Yes. But he became evasive. I suppose he doesn't want to be involved."

"A helpful attitude," Bevan said with bitterness.

They had left the cemetery and were now walking toward the old mansion. Lights showed at various windows of the house, and the light over the front entrance had been turned on. With darkness, the air had cooled sharply. In the distance, the roar of the ocean could be heard.

They reached the canopy over the front entrance, and Bevan said, "How are you going to handle this?"

"Maybe I'd better not say anything," she suggested. "I'll wait and see how Mary behaves."

"Badly, if I'm not wrong."

"You never know with the psychotic type. She might decide we hadn't been able to make her out clearly in the near-darkness. She could think we didn't know who was hiding there."

"Possibly," he said doubtfully.

"So I'd leave it at that."

He stood by the front door. "I hate to go and leave you here alone," he said.

"I'll be all right."

"I wouldn't like to call tomorrow and be told that you'd vanished," he worried.

"I don't think that's likely to happen."

"It better not," he said, his eyes meeting hers. "You know how I feel about you."

She gave him a warm smile. "One thing at a time. I'm still concerned about what became of Bruce."

Bevan said, "Bruce should have no bearing on our feelings for each other."

"He does come under the heading of unfinished business."

"That shouldn't keep us apart," he argued. And he gave her another brief kiss as they said good night. She went inside, feeling some better at the knowledge that Bevan was in love with her. But she was unprepared for the reception that awaited her.

She'd no sooner stepped into the hallway than she was confronted by Carter Anderson, the middle-aged lawyer, who glared at her.

"I'd like a word with you, Miss Blake," he said harshly.

She stared at him. "What is wrong?"

"I'll explain, if you'll come into the living room for a moment," he said. And he moved to the doorway.

Erica went into the big, dimly lighted room and turned to him. "I'm afraid I don't understand what is bothering you," she said.

The lawyer's angry eyes were regarding her again. "When I came here tonight, I found Belinda in tears."

"I'm sorry," she ventured.

"I asked her what was wrong, and she said you'd been talking to her, annoying her with some gossip about that so-called ghost!"

"You mean the ghost of Carn Wills?"

"Yes."

"I'm sure it was Miss French who brought that up herself," she said.

"Not from what she told me."

Erica found herself beginning to resent the lawyer's manner. She knew that he was extremely devoted to Belinda, rumored to be in love with her, but this gave him no right to behave like a bully about nothing.

She said, "I don't think Miss French was herself when she came home tonight."

The lawyer's stern face flushed. "Are you telling me she'd been drinking too much?"

"I didn't say that. But if you noticed it yourself, there's nothing for me to add."

He looked even more choleric. "I made no such admission, Miss Blake. It is far more likely Miss French is suffering from frayed nerves. I think this work of compiling her memoirs is far too ambitious a task for her to undertake at this time."

She said quietly. "I suppose that decision is up to her."

"If I come here and find her upset again, I'll feel compelled to take some action," the lawyer told her. "As the lady's attorney, I do have a certain responsibility."

He glared. "She's safely in bed now, and perhaps she'll be in a happier frame of mind in the morning."

"I hope so."

"In the meantime, I'd ask you to be much more careful about what you say to her," he went on.

"I will." She felt it was best to humor the outraged man, since he'd clearly let his temper take over and was in no state to discuss the problem in a sensible fashion.

He stared at her with suspicion. "I've also learned that you were actually a very close friend of that undesirable Bruce Cord."

Her own anger flared up. "I do not consider him undesirable."

"I'm merely judging from my own experience," the white-haired man said.

"And I from mine," she replied.

He was studying her with resentment. "Have you come here as a trouble-maker? Did you take your position here for that purpose?"

"Certainly not!"

"If you have, I can warn you that you're probably in for more trouble than you expected."

She looked at him in disbelief. "That sounds like a threat."

He at once reacted, becoming milder. "It wasn't meant as such. I'm merely trying to protect Miss French."

"You don't have to protect her from me," Erica assured him. "And you have no right to attack me verbally as you've been doing!"

There was careful restraint in the lawyer's voice as he said, "It seems we are misunderstanding each other, Miss Blake. I've not been threatening you, but merely warning you it would be unwise to come here with the idea of plotting against Belinda French!"

"Why should I do that?"

"I don't know," the lawyer said. "It is what I'm attempting to find out. Do you blame her in some way for the disappearance of your friend?"

"I don't think I've had any reasonable explanation of what happened to him!"

"He ran off, Miss Blake," the lawyer said with cold rage. "He ran off with a considerable amount of cash he'd taken from Belinda and her sister, Mary."

"I don't believe that," she retorted. "Bruce was not a thief!"

"I didn't say 'stolen,' Miss Blake," the lawyer told her. "I said 'taken'!"

"The way you said it left no doubt as to your meaning."

He smiled nastily. "I find you far too suspicious in nature, Miss Blake. I'm not saying your friend Bruce Cord was a thief, but I do say he was a kind of confidence man. He managed to wangle money from both girls and then ran off with one of those hippies who were staying in the village."

Defiantly she said, "Isn't most of what you're saying conjecture? Can you offer definite proof of your statements?"

"You know I can't do that. He was much too smooth to leave himself open to any charges."

"Then I suggest you not slander him."

The lawyer stared at her. "Very well, then, Miss Blake," he said with ominous quiet. "I'll say no more. But I won't leave without warning you that I'll recommend to Belinda that she discharge you if you cause her any more unpleasantness."

"It was not my intention to be unpleasant," she said.

"We'll see," Carter Anderson said dryly. And he left her, head held high, and strode toward the door.

She remained in the living room until he had closed the front door after him. Then she left the room and slowly mounted the stairs.

She had reached the second landing when suddenly from the shadows a wraith-like figure emerged. It was Aunt Celia, wearing a long gray robe. The old woman came close to Erica, a troubled look on her ancient face.

"I heard you and Carter Anderson quarreling in the living room," she said worriedly.

"It wasn't important," Erica quickly replied. "He's gone."

"I'd like to speak to you a moment in private," the old woman said, her faded blue eyes fixed on the girl. "Come into my room."

Erica followed the old woman a few steps down the corridor and into her room. The old woman closed the door after them and then stood facing her in the large, comfortably furnished bedroom.

Aunt Celia said, "You're sure there's no serious trouble between you and Carter?"

"I think not."

"I hope not," the older woman worried. "As I overheard a little of what you were saying, I know it concerns Belinda and that Bruce fellow!"

"Yes."

The old woman gazed at her anxiously. "Carter detested Bruce. And I take it he blames you for upsetting Belinda in some way."

"Which is nonsense!" Erica protested.

"Belinda becomes easily confused after a few

drinks," Aunt Celia warned her. "It's hard to tell what wild story she told Carter when he went down to the other section of the house to see her. She knows he doesn't approve of her occasional excessive drinking, so she'd go to any lengths to justify it."

"And I happened to be the scapegoat," Erica said bitterly.

"I'm afraid that's exactly what you were."

"If Carter Anderson has known her so long, she should be as aware of that as you are."

Aunt Celia shook her head. "Carter isn't rational where Belinda is concerned. He's been in love with her for years. Trained along as a sort of extra man. Never married himself, until now he's in late middle age with devotion to no one but that unhappy woman."

"I can see that."

"So you mustn't look for logic from him. He'll see only Belinda's side of anything. He'll accept all she says as solemn truth. And he's likely to make a vicious enemy if he decides someone is trying to hurt her."

Erica looked bleakly at the old woman "That's what he seems to have decided about me."

"I hope it's only a flurry and not a true storm," Aunt Celia said with a sigh. "And if I were you, I wouldn't upset him by defending Bruce. You're not helping Bruce by doing it; and worse, you're not helping yourself."

"I have to do what I think is right."

"Minding your own business would be smart and right," was the old woman's advice.

Erica sighed. "I've about come to one conclusion. All the trouble in this old house dates back to the night Carn Wills was lost over the side of the yacht."

The faded blue eyes showed surprise. "Why do you bring that up?"

"Because it's true. I think something happened that night that has been kept a secret."

"What?"

Erica paused a moment before answering. Then she said, "I don't think that young man died by

accident. I think someone who knew he couldn't swim deliberately pushed him overboard!"

The old woman gasped. "You're saying he was murdered!"

"Yes."

Aunt Celia looked shaken. "You shouldn't! You really shouldn't!"

"I dislike being so harsh," Erica admitted. "But I believe the shadows hanging over this house can only be dispelled by frankness. Who of those here now were on the yacht that night?"

The old woman considered nervously. Then, holding out a slightly trembling hand, she said, "All of us were on board: myself, Belinda, Mary and Carter. I'll never forget the moment in the morning when the discovery was made that Carn Wills was missing!"

"How did Belinda react?"

"She took it very calmly. But I knew she was badly upset. Later, when it was ascertained he'd drowned, she collapsed and was under a doctor's care."

"And Mary?"

Aunt Celia showed scorn. "She misbehaved, as you might expect. She'd been trying to win Carn from Belinda. And Mary was much more attractive in those days. She went into hysterics, as if she'd lost a lover."

"Perhaps she had."

"I doubt it," the old woman said.

"And Carter Anderson?"

"Carter was distressed. But there was no doubt he wasn't sorry to see Carn out of the way. He was sure then that in a few weeks Belinda would turn to him, and they'd eventually be married. As you know, it hasn't turned out that way. More than thirty years have passed without Carter being accepted by her as more than a friend."

Erica gave her a meaningful glance. "Could that be because Belinda suspects Carter is a murderer; that he pushed Carn overboard to rid himself of a rival?"

Aunt Celia frowned. "Carter isn't a violent type!"

Erica raised her eyebrows. "He talked roughly enough to me just now."

"Talk is one thing. Murder is another. I don't think even as a young man, Carter would have been capable of killing."

"What about Belinda herself?" She put the question quietly.

The faded blue eyes showed fear. "Oh, no! Not that!"

"Could Belinda commit such a crime if she found Carn was untrue to her?"

"Belinda loved Carn!"

"Love can turn swiftly to hatred if betrayed!" Erica reminded the older woman.

"No, not Belinda!"

"Mary, then?"

"Mary is mean enough but not clever enough," Aunt Celia said at once. She gave Erica a strange look. "I invite you in here to offer you some helpful advice, and I wind up being given a third degree by you!"

Erica shook her head. "No. I'm merely asking your help."

"You're inviting me to say that one of us is a murderer!"

"Yes," Erica said solemnly. "I admit it. I think it to be true."

The old woman studied her with frightened eyes. "You came here only to find out about us. You came to learn what happened to your friend, Bruce Cord. That's your reason for being here!"

"I may as well admit it."

"You don't care what happens to any of us!" the old woman accused her.

Erica's eyes met the faded blue ones. "I think murder should be punished, or else it blooms again, just as I think the thirty-odd-year-old murder of Carn Wills bloomed once more with the disappearance of Bruce. I say Bruce also has been killed to insure his silence."

There was anguish in the faded blue eyes. "You hate all of us, don't you?"

"No. Only the murderer among you."

"You mustn't jump to conclusions. I think your entire theory is wrong. Carn Wills died by accident, and Bruce Cord left here of his own free will!"

"I see," Erica said. "You say there was no murder."

"Yes."

"Then why the tragic, tense atmosphere here after such a long time? Why has Belinda never married? Why does anyone who tries to marry her die or vanish? And why does she cling to Carn's photo years later and play a record he gave her that is worn to the point of distortion?"

The old woman looked down, avoiding Erica's eyes. "I don't know."

"And what about yourself? You were on the yacht that long-ago night? What was your role in it all?"

Aunt Celia looked up at her again, fear showing in her faded blue eyes. "I tried to keep calm, to protect the girls as I always have from the time I assumed responsibility for them. I was a younger and more vigorous woman then."

Erica said sadly, "For all I know, you may be lying to me now as you still try to protect them."

There was another silence between them. Then Aunt Celia said, "Why don't you leave here, go first thing in the morning? If you remain, you'll only bring disaster on yourself and all of us."

"How can you be so certain of that?"

The thin figure in the gray robe hesitated. "Because you have come here looking for trouble. And it's all too likely you'll find it."

"Thank you," Erica said. "I'd be willing to leave in the morning and let the past rest if you could tell me where I can reach a live Bruce Cord."

"I can't do that," the old woman said brokenly. "He ran off in the night without leaving any word for anyone!"

"So everyone tells me," Erica said grimly.

"Leave in the morning," the old woman implored her. "We don't want more tragedy here."

"I'll think about it," Erica said.

Aunt Celia's face became gentle. "I wish you nothing but good, my dear. I'm thinking of your safety. Please believe that."

"I'm inclined to," she said with sincerity. "And I ask your apology if I've given you some unhappy moments in exchange for your attempt to help me."

"It's all right," the old woman said. "Don't worry about me. Have pity on Belinda. She has borne so much tragedy with courage and dignity. The public still thinks of her as a glamorous beauty. Don't tarnish the image!"

"I'd prefer to help her," Erica said. "I'm truly doing my best on the compiling of her memoirs. And I believe such a book would do her an enormous lot of good."

"Maybe," the old woman said. "I don't know."

Aunt Celia saw her to the door, and they said quiet good nights. Erica parted from the old woman and went on to her room, feeling nothing had been settled, nothing explained. If anything, the possibility of murder extending across the years seemed more likely than ever.

CHAPTER NINE

Erica's bedroom was in darkness, and she reached for the light switch which controlled a large lamp on her dresser. She flicked the switch, but nothing happened. Frowning, she stared into the shadows of the room and decided that the lamp must have been turned off at its base. So she crossed over to it to try to get some light.

At the dresser, she snapped the push button in the lamp's base, but still nothing happened. Standing there in dismay, she suddenly heard a door open. It was the closet door! She let her frightened eyes move to it and peered through the blackness as the door gradually edged open. Now her frayed nerves were reaching the breaking point. Chilled with horror, she waited, unable to move or cry out.

Finally the figure showed itself, blurred by the near-darkness. It was a young man in a blazer and sports trousers, wearing a flat-topped straw hat. The ghost of Carn Wills! She stared at the advancing figure with terrified eyes. As it came nearer she saw that it wore a grotesque pink Halloween mask and was carrying a cane.

The phantom raised the cane, and she knew she was about to be attacked. Only then did she manage to break the spell and cringe back as she cried out in fear! She screamed loudly as the cane descended with a whirring sound. She dodged as it cut through the air and ran toward the escape door to the hall. But the ghost in the straw hat and sports clothes pursued her, and the cane was raised for more blows. She turned to race from the bedroom, but the cane came down to give her a glancing blow on the head

and shoulder, and she plunged forward onto the hardwood floor and lay still.

The next thing she knew, someone was roughly turning her by her aching shoulder, and when she looked up into the semi-darkness she saw the face of the lovely Belinda bending over her.

"What's been going on here?" the dark-haired woman asked. Her hair was loose over her shoulders, and she was wearing a gold silk dressing gown.

Erica touched a hand to her aching temple. "I saw the ghost," she said weakly.

"You what?"

Erica raised herself up on an elbow. "The phantom with the straw hat and sports outfit! I saw him! He was wearing a weird pink Halloween mask!"

Belinda's intelligent black eyes stared at her. "You have to be joking!"

"No! You must have heard my screams, or you wouldn't be here!"

"I heard you," the older woman acknowledged.

"And you didn't see the ghost when you arrived?"

"All I saw was you on the floor," Belinda told her.

Erica struggled to her feet, her head still throbbing and her shoulder sore where the cane had descended on it. "It came after me with the cane. The last time it hit me, though only a glancing blow, as I was lucky enough to get out of the way."

Belinda was frowning. "Why didn't you turn on the light?"

"It won't work. I tried it!"

Belinda made no reply but crossed to her bedside, where there was a small night lamp on the table. She quickly switched it on to fill the room with a dull yellow glow. Then, with a determined expression on her intelligent face, she crossed to the dresser to make an examination of the light there. She tried the base switch and, when it didn't work, followed the cord until she was able to hold up the plug in her hand.

"No wonder it didn't work. The lamp plug was pulled out of the wall socket."

"I didn't do it!"

Belinda gave her a quizzical look. "I wasn't suggesting you did. The maid probably took it out to hook up the vacuum or some other cleaning appliance."

To prove her contention, Belinda promptly placed the plug in the wall and adjusted the push button at the base of the lamp, which went on. All the while Erica watched with a slightly ashamed expression on her attractive face.

Belinda glanced at her. "There! You see!"

"I didn't have time to try the cord," Erica protested. "As I was about to, a figure came out of the closet door."

Belinda frowned. "The closet door is closed now."

Despair surged through Erica. "I don't care what it is now! I did see a ghost emerge from it—the ghost of Carn Wills, just as I've heard it described!"

The famous ex-deb's face shadowed. "Please don't babble that nonsense!"

"But I saw him!"

"There is no such ghost!"

"Then somebody came in here and pretended to be he," she maintained. As a new thought came to her, she pointed to the closet door. "He could be hiding in there at this moment!"

Belinda looked disdainful. "Really!" She moved across to the closet door and hurled it open. It was empty! "Well?" she demanded.

"It's gone," Erica said weakly.

"If there was ever anything here," the dark woman said. "I'd say you are suffering from an overworked imagination."

"I wouldn't have called out for help if I hadn't been threatened," Erica said. "And I was hit on the head and shoulders."

"That probably happened when you fell."

"No."

"I say you dreamed it all or imagined it!" Belinda told her.

"I was wide awake."

"Don't be tiresome," the mature beauty told her. "I suggest you take some kind of sleeping tablet and get to bed as soon as possible. It's late."

"You refuse to believe my story?"

"I'm afraid so," Belinda said. "You seem to be all right. Your room harbors no intruder, and your lights are on. Good night." And she went out with a resigned expression on her lovely face, closing the door behind her.

Erica stood there, stunned. Each new development was more baffling than the previous one. Despite Belinda's attitude, she knew she had seen something, living or dead.

She went to the door and bolted it. Then she began slowly to prepare for bed.

The next day was fine again, and when she joined Belinda in the study, the celebrated beauty behaved as if the events of the previous night had not happened. She made no reference to them whatever and instead seemed unusually excited about their project.

"I'm going to have you do some of the more recent letters and newspaper items today," she said. "I have a file marked 1959-1965. I'd like to have you skim through that material and select what you feel should be included in the book."

"We still have the late forties to go over, Erica said. "Shouldn't we do them first?"

"I want to be here with you when you do the forties," Belinda told her. "I have some very interesting items to use from those years."

"And you won't be available today?"

"No. I'm having Tony drive me into Boston," Belinda said. "I have some banking to take care of and some shopping to do."

"I could do some typing of the things we've already picked out and let the files go for another day," Erica suggested.

"I'd rather manage it this way," the celebrated ex-deb said. "So I'll leave you to carry on."

Erica saw her employer was determined. So she said, "Very well. I'll do the file you suggested."

Belinda gave her a bleak smile. "Thank you," she said with a hint of mockery in her voice. And she left the study.

Erica resignedly sought out the tied stack of papers the mature woman had indicated and began to sort through them. She quickly realized that there had been a gradual lessening of the media space devoted to Belinda in these later years.

One photo she came across that struck her as extremely poignant was a study of Belinda and the late Marilyn Monroe, arm in arm, on a movie set. The caption indicated that the lovely black-haired woman and the blonde movie star had become good friends while Belinda had acted as technical advisor on a movie featuring the star and dealing with the adventures of a debutante in the thirties. Erica at once put the photo out for use.

There were other stories of equal interest and some that seemed too dull to be worthy of inclusion in the proposed book. But Erica had no trouble deciding to use photos and stories of Belinda with a smiling Elsa Maxwell and a dignified Oleg Cassini. There was another interesting story about Belinda visiting Arthur's when it was the important New York in-spot and her reactions to it.

Among the many photos Erica came across was one of Belinda at French House, standing near the entrance with a handsome young man. The smiling blonde man was dressed in sports clothes and had an arm around Belinda as she smiled up at him happily.

Erica turned the photo over and saw written on it in ink, "With Norman Wade, May 17th, 1963." She studied the photo again and wondered who Norman Wade might be. Then she went back to sorting out the material. But the name of the young man remained in her mind. A number of times she came across it in the news items relating to 1963. Then, in

October of that year, references to Norman Wade ended.

At first it didn't strike her as too strange. She worked on in the musty atmosphere of the book-lined study. But the memory of his smiling face kept coming back to her. She seemed unable to dismiss it from her mind. Whoever Norman Wade had been, he'd certainly spent some time at French House. The photos proved that. So he would be known by the others. She hurried on with the sorting and finishing shortly before twelve.

It was time for her to take her noon break. The lower part of the house seemed deserted, and so she went outside. The sun was warm, and she was glad she'd ventured out. A stroll in the noon sun would be pleasant.

She was wandering through the garden when she saw the veteran Ezra Finch clipping a hedge. She at once decided to question him about Norman Wade, for he surely must have seen him during his stay at the mansion. She went directly to where the old man stood working.

"Good morning, Mr. Finch," she said pleasantly.

He turned his lined, tanned face and stared at her in surprise. A hand went up and touched the brim of his straw hat in greeting. Then recognition showed in his rheumy eyes. "I know you. You're the young lady who is here to help Miss Belinda with her book."

"You've a good memory," she said. "I'm Erica Blake."

"Tony, the chauffeur, told me about you," the old man said. "You were a friend of that other one, that Bruce fella."

"Yes," she said.

"Ever hear what became of him?" the gardener wanted to know.

"Nothing so far."

The old man nodded sagely. "Tony says he had an eye for one of them young hippies. It wouldn't surprise me. Guess he ran off with the pretty little one

with the straw-colored hair. According to Tony, he happened to go by the pond one day and saw the two of them in swimming.

"It sounds as if they must have been good friends."

The old man blinked at her, the shears held low. "I expect so," he said.

"You have no idea what the name of the girl with the straw-colored hair was?"

The old man in the straw hat rubbed his chin. "I should remember. I think Tony called her Alice. Yep, I'm sure of it. But you ask him."

"I will," she said, and made a mental note to do so.

The old man returned to his clipping but continued to talk. "Another fine day."

"Yes. Things should grow quickly."

"Be like summer in another week if this weather keeps on," he agreed.

She said, "Is there any short cut between here and Bevan Ayles' place?"

"You bet," he said. "Just go up the gravel roadway and take the first path on the right. That follows straight through the little patch of woods to his rear lawn. 'Bout five minutes' walk."

"Thank you," she said. She hesitated another few seconds. There were so many things she wanted to ask the gardener while she had the chance, it was hard to know where to begin. "Ezra, in your years here have you ever seen the ghost?"

He at once stopped clipping and gave her a wary glance. "You talking about the one that is supposed to haunt Miss Belinda?"

"Yes."

He moistened his lips with his tongue. "Well, that's a techy subject in these parts. Miss Belinda don't like anyone to talk about it."

"I know. But you can trust me."

He glanced around to make sure they were alone, leaned closed and in a taut voice said, "I saw it one night, right out here on this lawn. Young feller was staying here that summer. Guest of Miss Belinda's. He

was working part time as golf pro over at the club. He was standing out on the lawn, and I saw this phantom come up and stand right behind him. The ghost was dressed in a straw hat and wearing a blazer. Well, I was in the door of my place, and I shouted out to warn him. I yelled, 'Look behind you, Wade!' And he did. But by that time the ghost had gone. Just sort of vanished into the dark. It made my flesh creep!"

She listened to his account with a mounting feeling of terror. "Wade," she said. "Would that have been Norman Wade?"

"Yep," the old man said. "Did you know him?"

Erica shook her head. "No. But I've read about him in Miss Belinda's clippings and letters. I've also seen his photo. That must have been in 1963."

"You're right," Ezra Finch said. "That was the summer of '63. I remember because it was the year my arthritis hit me so bad."

"What sort of person was he?"

"Nice enough fella. Easy going. Miss Belinda always liked them that way. I don't think he enjoyed the idea of working any harder than he had to. Before he left here, he had given up his job at the golf club and was just lounging around. He was a heavy drinker."

She was becoming aware of a pattern. "You say before he left here. When did he actually leave?"

The old man shrugged and went back to his clipping. "I couldn't tell you that, except that it was in October or around there. Miss Belinda came out one day and asked me if I'd seen him around. We was sort of friends. He'd come out and talk to me and maybe sip a martini."

"Go on," she said impatiently.

Ezra Finch lowered his shears and turned to her again. "I told Miss Belinda I hadn't seen him for a couple of days. And she stood there staring at me and looking kinda funny. She said he'd not come home the night before, and that he'd left all his stuff behind him. Well, it struck me right then that maybe that

phantom I'd seen stalking him had finally caught up with him and finished him. But I couldn't say nothing like that to Miss Belinda, so I said that maybe he'd gone into the village and met some of the golfers and gone on a binge. They're a hard-drinking crowd. She thanked me and went away."

Erica asked, "Did he ever come back?"

"Nope."

"He left his possessions here and never returned for them?"

"Not that I heard of," the old man said. "I guess if that ghost got him, he didn't need anything."

She frowned. "I hardly think that's the explanation," she said. "Did anyone ever mention him to you again?"

"No. After a while no one thought about him. But when you talked about the ghost, it all came back to me."

"Thanks for telling me the story," she said. "I found it very interesting."

"Sure," the old man said, giving her a questioning glance. "You seen the ghost, too?"

She sighed. "I may have. I'm not certain."

"Wouldn't surprise me," the old man said. "I know it's around." And he returned to his clipping.

Erica walked back toward the house to have lunch. She realized that there were any number of things she'd not yet learned about the old mansion which were important to the mystery she was trying to solve. As she entered the cool, shadowy hallway, she heard Aunt Celia in conversation with Mrs. Wren in the rear hall. And she waited for the old woman to finish and come back to the front of the house.

Aunt Celia appeared a few minutes later and gave her a wary look. She was wearing a dark blue dress, and her left arm held close to her waist as usual. She said, "Well, you've decided to remain here?"

"For just a little," Erica said. "What about Norman Wade?"

"What about him?" Aunt Celia asked testily.

"I've just learned that he spent some time here," Erica said. "And I've seen his photo with Belinda."

"Well?"

"I understand she was very fond of him."

Aunt Celia frowned. "What difference does that make to you? Belinda has been fond of many men. And she's entertained a number of them here. I call that her business and no concern of yours."

"I happen to be employed to arrange her papers for her memoirs," Erica said quietly.

"Then ask her the questions," the old woman snapped.

Erica said, "I would if she were here. From what I've learned, Norman Wade vanished from here in much the same manner as Bruce Cord."

Aunt Celia showed surprise on her pale lined face. "Those two young men were here years apart."

"I realize that. But there is a similarity."

Aunt Celia sighed and told her, "Come into the sewing room. I can't stand here discussing the family's private affairs."

Erica followed the old woman down the hall and into a small side room off it to the right. Aunt Celia acted like a conspirator in some spy drama. She studied Erica with those faded blue eyes.

"I can tell you Norman Wade was a lazy no-good, exactly like your friend Bruce," she said sourly, "And in the same way, Mary stupidly decided she should try to steal him from Belinda."

"That's hard to believe."

"It's a fact," Aunt Celia insisted. "I talked to both girls, and I even begged Carter Anderson to get rid of Wade. He didn't even have good health. He was one of those diabetics who wear a tag to identify themselves in case they go into shock. That young man had nothing to recommend him, and yet both Belinda and Mary fell head over heels for him. And so he stayed on here."

"But he eventually vanished?"

Aunt Celia looked grim. "There was no mystery about that."

"Oh?"

"Belinda caught him with Mary in his arms. There was a mighty quarrel, and she ordered him out of the house and off the estate. He was caught red-handed, and there wasn't anything else for him to do."

"But what about his things?"

The old woman snorted. "I tell you he didn't have much. Some clothes that Belinda had bought him and a few personal possessions of no real value. He had a sister in Ohio, and Carter Anderson wrote her. She replied that he often went underground that way. He'd served a prison term when he was in his late teens, and he often changed his name and identity. Carter had his things packed and sent them on to the sister. We never heard anything else from her or Norman Wade."

"Don't you think it odd that first Carn Wills vanished, then Norman Wade, and just a little while ago Bruce Cord. Doesn't it seem too much of a coincidence that they should all vanish? Doesn't it seem suspicious to you?"

"Why should it? They disappeared years apart. And everyone knows Carn fell overboard and was drowned, while Belinda sent Norman Wade packing. And that Bruce you seem to think so grand ran off with some little hussy from the hippie community in the village."

"They all vanished," Erica repeated.

Aunt Celia's faded blue eyes studied her with scorn. "You're making a bad mistake. And you can only bring harm to everyone. Why don't you leave as I suggested?"

"Not until I've learned some additional facts," Erica said. "I'm not satisfied with the pat way you explain things."

"I've told you the truth," Aunt Celia said. But her whole manner indicated that she hadn't.

"Thanks," Erica replied with resignation, knowing

that nothing would be gained by pressing the old woman further. "I'm sorry to be such a nuisance."

Aunt Celia's lips were set grimly. "Perhaps Carter Anderson was right in reacting angrily to you last night. I may even decide to phone him and ask him to come here and order you to leave."

CHAPTER TEN

When Erica came out of the sewing room, she was just in time to see Mary French hurrying down the hallway to the front of the house. It sent a wave of annoyance through her, since she was sure Mary had been eavesdropping outside the door. If so, she'd not heard anything too flattering about herself, and it served her right.

Erica felt an overwhelming desire to escape from the brooding atmosphere of the old mansion. And she had no wish to sit at the luncheon table with Mary and her Aunt Celia. It seemed she might find an ideal solution to her problem by taking the short cut the gardener had told her about and walking over to the estate of Bevan Ayles. If the young man were at home, she had no doubt but that he'd welcome her to lunch.

Without further hesitation, she left the house and made her way up the gravel roadway in the direction Ezra Finch had pointed out. It was a lovely warm afternoon, and in the cool woods surrounding the road she could hear the calls of birds.

At last she came to the path the gardener had mentioned and began the walk through the woods. It was cooler, but the ground was uneven, and she had to pick her way along the stony surface. It was also darker, since the tall trees shut out most of the sunlight. Once she rounded a turn quickly, and a rabbit raced across in front of her, causing her to halt and give a small cry. Then she smiled at her needless alarm and continued on.

She had no idea how long the path might be. But she judged she must have been about half way to the

other estate when she paused a moment to glance around her. Suddenly she heard footsteps a short distance behind her. For no particular reason they inspired fear. Since the path was winding, she couldn't see who it was. And she had no desire to find out. She began hurrying along the path, glad that she was wearing low-heeled sport shoes. She became breathless as she raced on. And still she was in the deep woods.

She began to worry that she might have taken the wrong path or a wrong turn. And she halted again for a moment to catch her breath. This time she heard no footsteps, so she decided she must have eluded her pursuer. She made a mental note to avoid taking any chances on the return journey. She would go back the long way.

A few minutes later she emerged in a field and saw the huge white colonial house in which Bevan Ayles lived straight ahead. It was also on a high, flat piece of ground overlooking the ocean. She saw that there were several cars parked near it and at once took heart. Hurrying on toward the house, she reached the steps of a glassed-in patio at the front and saw Bevan sitting there with the amiable Dr. Greb.

Bevan saw her at precisely the same instant and, smiling, came out of the patio area to greet her. He took her in his arms for a brief kiss. "What a wonderful surprise. I was going to phone you and tell you the doctor was here," he said.

She smiled up at him. "I suddenly had an overwhelming desire to see you and perhaps have lunch."

"So you shall," Bevan promised her. "You'll lunch with the two of us. Come inside; Dr. Greb is anxious to talk to you." He escorted her up into the glass-enclosed patio, his arm around her.

Dr. Greb was on his feet to shake hands with her. He had a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "It seems my role as matchmaker won't be required. You two are getting along very well on your own."

She blushed. "Don't be misled by Bevan's impulsive gestures."

Bevan beamed at her. "We have come to an understanding," he assured the doctor.

Dr. Herman Greb smiled wryly. "I should hope so, after the demonstration you offered just now." He turned to Erica again. "Now let us all sit down and enjoy our cool drinks while you fill me in on what is going on at French House."

"A good many things have happened," she said.

"Begin at the beginning, my dear," Dr. Greb requested. "I managed to get you the position down here, and I've worried about you ever since. That is actually why I came down today. Bevan's phone explanations were so lame they left me more befogged than if I hadn't heard from him."

"They couldn't have been that bad," Bevan said. And he offered Erica a glass of a pink concoction liberally loaded with ice. "There's a lots of lime in that and plenty of ice to keep it cool."

"Thank you," she said, taking the glass. And she began her account of all that had taken place.

When she had finished, Bevan stood up and said, "If you two will excuse me, I'll make arrangements for lunch to be served out here. I know you're both hungry, and there isn't too much time."

After he left them, Dr. Greb gave her one of his shrewd glances. "That is a most amazing story," he said.

"What do you think?"

He spread his hands. "I'm baffled. As you point out, over the years three men vanished at a point when each of them seemed about to marry Belinda. Also, all three of them had shown some interest in plain sister Mary. It's hard to believe that it was sheer coincidence."

"Then it has to be murder, or rather, three murders done by a single person or persons," she suggested.

"Yes," Dr. Greb said with a sigh. "And that seems a rather fantastic conclusion. You don't think of the French family as possible murderers, or even their friends. Yet I must admit Belinda has the style for it."

"I agree," Erica said, sitting back in her wicker chair. "She is a strong enough person to kill."

"I'm not saying I suspect her, mind you," Dr. Greb warned.

"But she is capable of murder; more so than the others."

"I think she's a more likely suspect than Mary," Dr. Greb said.

"The way she looks when she talks about Carn Wills gives me a strange feeling," Erica admitted. "It's as if she were discussing someone she loved and destroyed."

"And her obsession with that ancient record tells me something," Dr. Greb declared. "You say she plays this version of 'Bye, Bye, Blackbird' repeatedly?"

"Yes. The record is badly worn from being played over the years."

"That song is linked with the mystery," he said, "beyond the fact it was supposed to be Carn's favorite tune. I'll wager he played it the night he vanished into the ocean."

"Very possibly," she agreed.

"And Carter Anderson was on board that night. I wouldn't rule him out as a prime suspect, he said. "He's always been around when the young men have vanished."

"I don't like him."

"From what you say, he has a mean temper," Dr. Greb agreed. "And of course sister Mary could be a psychopathic killer. I don't like your description of her."

"Even Tony, the chauffeur, claims she's a dangerous person, but he wouldn't say why."

"Ah, yes, this Tony," he said. "I have an idea he could fill you in with a lot of information, in addition to what you've mentioned, if you could somehow persuade him to talk."

"That won't be easy," she said. "He's a very solid, loyal type."

"You sound as if you admire him."

"In a way I do. I surely can't blame him for having those traits and wanting to avoid any unpleasantness for his employers."

"True," Dr. Greb agreed.

"He is discreet. I imagine he values his job and knows he won't be able to hold it if he isn't careful about what he says."

"Quite a normal attitude. And I can understand that you respect him for it. But you may have to be a trifle unfair and ruthless in order to get further information from him."

Erica said, "He won't be forced or cajoled. He'll tell what he feels he safely can and no more."

"But like myself, you feel there is more?"

"I think so."

Dr. Greb sighed. "After that incident last night, I doubt if you should spend another night in the house."

"I really don't mind," she protested. "I'm caught up in this affair now."

"I feel personally responsible for you," Dr. Greb worried. "How can I get you to change your mind?"

"You can't."

"But one of them is probably a killer. If your screams hadn't reached Belinda last night, you could have been killed."

"Perhaps," she said. "But I'm not ruling out the possibility that she may have been involved in the attack. No one else appeared to have heard me."

Dr. Greb nodded unhappily. "I understand that. At the moment you have no way of telling in which direction danger lies."

"A few days and nights more, and I should know the facts."

"Or find yourself the fourth murder victim."

"I doubt it," she said. "All the others have been men. That is part of the pattern. I have a feeling a woman may be safe from the killer."

Dr. Greb looked bleak. "I wouldn't count on that. The only reason there has been no female victim is

that the killer's interests have not been threatened by a female."

"And I might be seen as the first female threat?"

"Yes."

"Everyone in the house knows why I'm there now," she said. "The old woman has urged me to leave."

"Which could be excellent advice."

"Not when I have the fate of Bruce on my conscience," she said. "And in a strange way, I'm now interested in what really happened to the others, even though they were people I've never met."

The middle-aged professor smiled thinly. "When I allowed you to come down here, I had no idea you had the instincts of a detective. If I'd known, I might have been much less willing to aid you in getting the position."

She returned his smile. "No matter what happens, I won't blame you."

"I blame myself. I plan to remain down here for a few days. But that will do precious little good, since I'll merely be a bystander."

"I'll feel better, knowing you are near enough to consult," she said.

"If you are given that opportunity." Dr. Greb sighed. "It's a nasty business all the way."

Bevan Ayles came back into the patio. "My house-keeper will have the food out here in a moment," he said. "Sorry to have taken so long."

"Quite all right," Dr. Greb told him. "We've had a most interesting though somewhat gruesome discussion. And I'm still deeply concerned about this young woman."

They had luncheon together, and then Bevan drove Erica back to French House. When he let her out of the car, he warned her against using the woods path, saying, "I wouldn't take that route again. You could have run into trouble today. Either come the regular way, or phone me and I'll call for you."

"I'll remember," she said. "Thanks for a nice lunch. And it was good seeing Dr. Greb."

Bevan nodded. "Your visit was timed perfectly. He was glad to see you. He's worried about you."

"Tell him I'm going to be extra cautious," she promised.

Bevan's eyes met hers. "I'm counting on you to do that. I'll phone you this evening. Perhaps we can spend some time together."

She went inside and up to the study to begin work once more. There was a feature article on a voyage on the S.S. France which Belinda had made in 1965. She marked much of this account as being of interest, and put aside a photo of the dark-haired woman with the France's captain for possible inclusion in the book.

It was while she was absorbed in this task that Mary French came into the study again. The stout woman stood by the desk meekly for a moment and then said, "I'm sorry I made myself so unpleasant the other day."

Erica looked up from her reading with a smile. "That didn't matter."

Mary looked unhappy. "Sometimes I behave stupidly. I shouldn't have said the things I did. I'm really fond of Belinda, though she doesn't deserve it, considering the way she's treated me." A hint of the old sullenness came creeping into her tone.

Erica said hastily. "Let's not worry about it any more."

Mary's broad face brightened. She was wearing one of her plain black dresses over her shapeless body. She came nearer the desk to see what Erica was doing and spotted the smiling photo of Belinda and Norman Wade. She quickly reached out a pudgy hand and picked it up.

"Where did you find this?" she asked tautly, her eyes on the photo.

"In the file Belinda gave me," Erica said.

Mary gave her an odd glance. "You know who it is?"

"The name is on the back. Norman Wade. I imagine you knew him."

"Very well," the stout woman said in a low voice.

"I didn't realize there was a picture of him in the house. I haven't any."

Erica looked at the woman in black directly and in an innocent way asked, "Where is he now?"

The effect on Mary was startling. She went a sickly white and looked dreadfully nervous. "I have no idea," she said.

"But he lived here for a time?"

"Yes."

"And then he left?"

"Yes," Mary said. "Do you need this photo?"

"I'm afraid I do," Erica said, "at least until I've checked with Belinda as to whether or not she'd like to use it in the book."

"She won't want it!" Mary blurted out, and then looked embarrassed.

Erica raised her eyebrows. "How can you be so certain?"

The stout woman hesitated. "I'm not. I don't know. I'm guessing. I don't think she'll want it."

Erica smiled. "In that case, I'll see that you get it. Will that be all right?" And she reached out her hand for the photo.

Reluctantly the stout woman returned it to her. "Yes. I'd appreciate having it," she said. And without another word, she turned and left the room.

Erica stared at the photo after Mary had gone. So the smiling playboy, Norman Wade, had meant a great deal to the stout woman.

She forced herself to dismiss the subject from her mind and went on with her work. Soon it was five o'clock, and she put away her various files and went upstairs to her own room. By the time she'd changed into another dress and gone downstairs for dinner, Belinda had returned from Boston.

Mrs. Wren greeted Erica in the hallway and said

"Miss Belinda would like to see you in the lower living room."

Erica thanked her and made her way down the stairs to the new section of the house, which Belinda seemed to favor. When she had traveled the length of the brick tunnel and arrived in the room, she found Belinda there with Mary. Each had a cocktail glass in her hand, and Belinda was playing a bouncy dance record on the stereo.

Belinda smiled a greeting at Erica as she entered the room and poured her a drink from a silver decanter on the small bar. Handing it to her, she said, "Martini time!"

Erica took it. "Thank you."

Belinda spoke above the dance music. "I had a most stimulating day in Boston. And I found this marvelous Peter Duchin album. It has a lot of the oldies, including my favorite, 'Bye, Bye, Blackbird.' Do you know it?"

"I've heard you play it," Erica said.

Mary, seated in a chair facing the sliding glass windows overlooking the ocean, turned and said, "I hate it! It makes me sad!"

Belinda gave her a reproving glance. "Many things make you sad after a sufficient number of martinis, darling!"

Mary looked crushed by this remark and lapsed into a morose silence again. And from the stereo came the familiar strains of the "Blackbird" number. Played in lilting fashion by the Duchin band on this new record, it was much more pleasing than the hoarse strains of the worn old record which Belinda frequently played.

"I hear you found a photo of Norman Wade today," Belinda said crisply.

"Yes," Erica said. "I'd not heard of him before."

"He isn't important," Belinda said with arrogance. "Destroy the photo and any mention of him."

Erica tried to hide her amazement, saying, "Very well. But your sister asked if she might have it."

Belinda shot an angry glance at Mary, who seemed absorbed in her martini and the ocean. "She doesn't need it. Tear the photo up."

They finished their drinks and then went upstairs to the dining room. In the corridor, Erica realized that Mary was becoming quite drunk. The stout woman seemed in a daze and walked unsteadily. To complicate matters, Mary continued drinking a copious amount of wine at the meal, while Belinda watched her with a false smile and a cold glitter in her eyes.

As soon as the meal was over, Erica got away from the two. It was a warm, pleasant evening, and she strolled across the lawn in the direction of the garage. She saw that Tony was out there in his shirt sleeves, polishing the big black limousine.

He paused in his task, the chamois in hand. "Car got dirty on the way down," he said.

"It takes work," she agreed.

"If you're going to keep it in shape," he said. He looked more youthful and athletic without his coat and with his shirt open at the neck. With a pleasant smile, he asked, "How was your day?"

"Busy. I worked hard. Belinda is in a good mood. She found a new recording of 'Bye, Bye, Blackbird.' She can't seem to hear enough of it."

The chauffeur looked bleak. "She overdoes that bit. I say it's a sign of age. No matter how good she looks, she reacts to the old things, including the ancient songs. That tune was only fair when it was new. It's tired now. She should be willing to forget it."

"I imagine it was a big number in her heyday."

"It was," he agreed.

"Do you suppose they might have played it on the yacht the night Carn Wills was drowned?"

The big man looked puzzled. "I wouldn't know. Maybe they did. The song would have been popular then."

Erica nodded. "I think that's why she likes it so. It reminds her of that big romance."

"Could be," Tony said shortly, and began polishing again.

"Did you ever hear of a Norman Wade?"

He stopped working to stare at her. "Norman Wade?"

"Yes."

Tony considered. Then his face brightened. "Oh, you mean the golfer. He hasn't been around in years!" Erica gave him a knowing glance. "Didn't he also leave rather suddenly without taking any of his things?"

"Did he? They never told me."

"It's what I've heard," she said.

Tony gave her a slow smile. "Not much you don't seem to hear. What's your interest in Norman Wade?"

She shrugged. "Nothing special. Only he seems to have been a kind of earlier version of Bruce. And they both vanished in the same manner after quarrels with Belinda."

He eyed her oddly. "You make Miss Belinda sound like a dangerous lady."

She managed a small smile. "I don't think she is. But there's something about it all I don't understand."

Tony asked, "Does it concern you?"

"No, I suppose not."

The chauffeur said, "Then I wouldn't worry about it. That's how I've kept my job all these years."

Erica took this as a hint he didn't want to discuss it any more. And so after a moment she left him to his work and went on across the lawn. She'd not gone far when she suddenly saw Mary weaving across the field ahead of her. The stout woman was walking unsteadily, but she was obviously going somewhere.

Erica followed her, keeping a safe distance behind. And it wasn't long before she realized that Mary was on her way to the ancient cemetery. When she reached the cemetery area, the stout woman went to the iron door in the rocks under the cemetery and, using a key which she must have had with her, fumbled with the lock and finally opened it. A moment

later she swung the rusted iron doors open and entered the dark cavernous vault under the cemetery. Standing partially hidden by some bushes, Erica felt an eerie chill shoot through her. What sinister purpose did the drunken woman have in entering that haven of the dead? Had it something to do with their conversation of the afternoon? Was the stout, unhappy Mary the multiple murderer she suspected French House concealed?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Erica waited and watched for what seemed a long time until the stout woman appeared once more in the doorway of the vault. She drew the rusty metal door closed and then seemingly began searching for the lock. Erica could sense the consternation that was overtaking Mary French by her movements as she groped around in the area of the door, looking for the missing lock. In her drunken condition, she'd apparently dropped it somewhere and now couldn't locate it.

She opened the vault door again and vanished inside. Erica watched, mesmerized by the strange twist events had taken. After an age the stout woman came out and closed the vault door after her. Then she glanced around furtively as if worried that someone might have seen her. After that she began hurrying back toward the old mansion.

Erica felt a thrill of excitement. She waited until the stout woman was at a safe distance; then she stepped out from the bushes.

She knew that the vault had to be still unlocked. This was her ideal chance to see what was there before Mary reached the house and found another lock to seal the vault door.

It was her turn to cross the open field. And when she reached the door, she saw that her conclusion had been correct. The lock was missing from the low, rusty iron doors. She grasped the metal flange and pushed the door open. It moved with creaking resistance as its bottom scraped on the hard earthen floor. She stared into the darkness as an aroma of decay and dampness assailed her nostrils. And she waited in

the doorway until her eyes became more accustomed to the shadows.

Just a few feet ahead on the floor, she saw a metal object glittering against the brown of the earth. She bent down and picked it up. She was unable to make out what it was, but thrust it in the pocket of her dress. Then she advanced a little farther and saw the vague outlines of caskets stacked against the walls. She moved over to the right, where the caskets showed most plainly in the scant light from the door. And then her eyes fell upon the skeleton stretched out on the ground almost at her feet!

She stumbled back with a cry of fear as she stared at the grinning skull, the rib casement and the spidery bones of the arms and legs. It was too much! She wheeled around and rushed toward the doorway and the fresh air and light beyond it. She was sobbing with fear as she stepped out of the terrifying place into the fading daylight.

But a new shock was waiting for her. Standing there with a scowl on his face was the lawyer, Carter Anderson. He spoke to her coldly. "Well, what does this latest act of yours mean?"

"I discovered the door open and the lock gone."

"I think that very unlikely!"

"How else could I have gotten in there?"

"What you have done is further invade the privacy of your employer," the man with the white crew-cut raged.

Erica was wondering what he knew about the skeleton on the floor of the vault. She said, "I was merely investigating to find out why the door had been left ajar!"

Carter Anderson glared at her. "I shall have to report this to the family."

"Do as you please," she said.

"It strikes me that your behavior has been objectionable ever since you arrived here," the lawyer went on.

"Please," she said, "I'm not feeling well. I don't want to argue about it."

"I should think not," he snapped. And he passed her to go over to the door and pull it shut. Then he slipped the flange on and glanced about on the ground for the lock. He lifted his eyes to her. "Have you the lock?"

"No. I said it was missing. That first attracted my attention."

"Where could it have gone?" he demanded. "And who would have unlocked it in the first place?"

She was about to name Mary, then realized she couldn't do that without betraying the fact that she'd been spying on the stout woman. In a small voice, she said, "I wouldn't know."

"Belinda will be angry to find out that the vault had been left unlocked," the lawyer warned her.

"Surely there is nothing so valuable in there that anyone would want to steal it," Erica said.

He scowled. "I fear you miss the point. I'm thinking of the distaste she'll feel that it happened."

She had an urgent wish to get away from the tall man in tweeds, who seemed to have taken a thorough dislike to her. She said, "I've a bad headache. I'm returning to the house."

Carter Anderson had his back to her as he went on searching the ground in the vicinity of the vault door for the missing lock. She took advantage of the opportunity to hurry off. But along the way she changed her mind about going to French House. Instead, she decided that she would at once get in touch with Bevan Ayles and his friend, Dr. Greb. So she took the main roadway to reach the other house.

She was almost there when she heard a car on the road behind her. A moment later it came abreast of her, and she saw that Dr. Greb was at the wheel with Bevan seated beside him. Both men registered surprise on seeing her.

Bevan got out. "We've just been to the village," he said, standing by the side of the road with her.

"I had to see you. Something weird happened."

He frowned. "Get in the car and tell me about it," he said. And he opened the car door so she could seat herself between Dr. Greb and himself.

Dr. Greb gave her a welcoming smile. "At least you're still safe."

"I came near not being," she told him. Bevan slid in next to her and closed the car door.

"Tell us what's the latest," Bevan said as they drove in beside his white colonial house.

They remained seated in the car as she told them, "I followed Mary from the house to the cemetery. She'd been drinking. When she got there, she went into the vault. She stayed for quite a few minutes. When she came out, it developed she'd lost the lock somewhere. She was too confused to make any decisions, so she merely shut the door and hurried back to the old mansion."

"And you?" Bevan asked.

"I went on to investigate the vault," she told him.

Dr. Greb groaned from his seat at the wheel. "Is that what you call being cautious?"

"I couldn't overcome my curiosity," she said.

"Go on," Bevan said.

"I reached the vault door, and it was still unlocked. So I opened it and went inside." Fear and revulsion made her hesitate. "It's a gloomy, smelly place," she said. "And after I'd been there a few minutes, I saw a skeleton stretched out on the floor in a far corner."

Bevan whistled and gave Dr. Greb a startled look. "What do you make of that?"

Dr. Greb took it with his usual calm. "I'm sure the French family can well afford coffins for their dead. It would suggest that this might be an extra body, if I may put it delicately.

"There's no way to put this delicately," Bevan said with disgust.

"What would a body be doing in there?" Erica asked. "Most of the time the vault is used as a storage place for burials of those who die in the winter when

the ground is frozen hard." She looked up at Bevan. "You told me that. And what would those other caskets lined along the sides mean?"

The young man frowned. "I have an idea the cemetery was filled years ago. For a time after that they simply placed caskets of the deceased in the vault with plates on them and left them there. In more recent days they've used the village cemetery for their burials. And I believe they dig graves there with modern equipment even in the dead of winter."

"So the vault has largely been unused in recent years?"

"Correct," Bevan said.

"Then why should Mary have so much interest in it? And why, when she was drunk, would she go there?"

"Because," Dr. Greb said dryly, "she apparently has a morbid interest in that extra body."

"That skeleton must belong to one of the missing men," Bevan said.

Horror crossed her face. "Not Bruce!"

"No, that's rather too recent an incident," Dr. Greb said. "But what about that other person, the one who vanished some years ago?"

"Norman Wade," she said, thinking of the smiling photo of a young man and the macabre skeleton in the cave.

"Yes," Bevan agreed. "That seems more like it. Mary was supposed to have had a romance with him. That's why Belinda got rid of him."

"Got rid of him could be truly the right phrase," Dr. Greb said in pointed fashion.

Erica saw that it would soon be dark, and she felt they were losing time sitting there merely discussing the incident. So she said, "I think we should go there now. I'd like you to see the skeleton before they lock the vault up again. I'm sure Carter Anderson will go directly to the house and see that they find another lock for it."

Bevan nodded to the professor at the wheel. "You

turn the car around, and I'll tell you the way. We can drive to within a short distance of the cemetery. Do you have a flashlight in the car?"

"I think so," Dr. Greb said. "Look in the dash compartment."

The young man with the glasses reached forward and opened it. Pushing around the contents, he finally discovered a small flashlight. "There is one," he announced.

"It will be dark when we get there," Erica said.

Bevan told her, "You can stay in the car. We'll take a look for ourselves."

"No," she said. "I want to go with you."

Dr. Greb had turned on the headlights, and his placid face was revealed in the glow from the dash. "Don't tell me you share Mary French's unfortunate addiction to skeletons," he said.

"I don't," she told him grimly. "But I don't want you to miss it."

Bevan's arm was around her shoulders, and he drew her to him. "I think you really enjoy all this," he said, teasing her.

"Not one second of it!" she protested.

They left the main road for the side roadway to French House. Then, before they came to the ancient mansion, they made a short turn to the right which put them on an even narrower and rougher road leading to the cemetery.

Bevan finally said, "All right. We're there. Stop the car and turn off the headlights. We don't want to advertise that we're here, especially if Carter Anderson is a maniac killer and wandering around."

Dr. Greb did as he was told. "How far to the vault from here?" he asked.

"Just a couple of minutes' walk," Bevan said. "We'll reserve the flashlight for when we get there."

They all left the car and started across the field. They had only a short walk to the entrance of the vault.

Bevan fumbled with the door. "It's not locked," he told them as he opened it.

The vault was revealed, to the accompaniment of the usual creaking sound. Bevan turned on the flashlight and, bending down slightly, entered the low doorway to the cavernous place. Dr. Greb saw that Erica was between the two of them. He followed on her heels.

Bevan flashed the dim beam on the stacked caskets, which were grimy with dust and cobwebs. "Where is the skeleton?" he asked.

Erica stepped up beside him. "Over to the right. Follow me." But when they reached the spot where she'd seen it, the ground was bare. She stood there, staring down with disconcerted eyes. "I don't understand," she protested.

"What now?" Bevan asked.

"The skeleton is gone," she said.

"You're sure this is the spot?" he wanted to know.

"Positive." she said.

"Then we must accept the fact that the skeleton picked up its bones and walked away," Dr. Greb said with grim humor.

"There's a more logical explanation than that," Bevan said angrily. "Carter Anderson undoubtedly realized that Erica had seen it. To cover his guilt, he quickly removed the skeleton after she left."

"And where would it be now?" the professor asked mockingly.

"Anywhere," Bevan said. "He might even have opened up one of the other coffins and tossed the bones in it. I'm not going to make a complete check at this point."

"What will we do?" Dr. Greb asked.

"Get out of here as soon as we can," Bevan said gloomily.

"I'm sorry," Erica told him. "I did see it here."

"I believe you," he told her. "But you might have a hard time convincing others."

They left the vault and closed the door again. Then they walked back to their car in the darkness.

When they were in the car once, more, Dr. Greb asked Bevan, "Where to next?"

"Back to my place for a council of war," the young man with the glasses said. "We'll go back the same way we came. I'll direct you."

When they reached the friendly atmosphere of Bevan's place, they all went inside and relaxed in the living room before the great stone fireplace.

Erica reached in her pocket for a hankie, and suddenly her hand touched the bit of metal she'd seen on the floor of the vault and picked up. She drew out the rust-encrusted disc and held it for them to see.

"I found this in the vault," she said.

Bevan frowned, came over and took it from her. "Some kind of tag."

"Can you read it?" Dr. Greb asked.

"Not as it is now. I'll have to try to get some of this rust off it," Bevan said.

The next five minutes were the most suspense-filled Erica had ever endured. And then Bevan came back into the room with the disc in his hand and a look of triumph on his pleasant face.

"I was able to read part of it," he said.

"Go on," Dr. Greb urged. Both he and Erica were on their feet.

"It's a diabetic's tag, and it has Norman Wade's name on it," Bevan said, showing them the still visible lettering.

"That proves it!" she gasped. "He was murdered and his body locked in that old vault!"

"I guessed the skeleton was his from the first," Bevan said grimly.

"Someone did remove it," Dr. Greb said, sounding stunned.

"Without a doubt." Bevan sighed. "What I'd like to know is who removed it and who killed Norman Wade?"

"Probably the same man," Dr. Greb suggested.

Bevan frowned. "I'm not so sure."

"Why do you say that?" Erica asked him.

"The person who hid the skeleton might have done so in the mistaken idea that he was protecting Mary. His motive might only have been that and not to conceal the fact of the murder."

Erica listened to Bevan's theory and realized that it was sound enough. She said, "That could be true. But there's no question someone murdered Wade."

"And that fits in with the theory that both Carn Wills and Bruce Cord were killed, and by the same person."

"We're nearer the truth," the professor said. "But there are still an alarming number of questions to be answered."

"I agree," Bevan said.

"Belinda may turn out to be innocent," Dr. Greb admitted. "But I am rather suspicious of her." He glanced at Erica. "How do you feel about that?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm only certain of one thing. Belinda is the cleverest person at French House."

"No question of that," Bevan agreed.

"So," Dr. Greb said.

Erica shrugged. "She's also perhaps the most devious. Occasionally she gives me the impression she may be a little mad. Yet the madness in no way interferes with her cleverness."

"That is also possible," Bevan said.

"She's the one Carter Anderson is devoted to," Erica went on. "And if he is the murderer, I'd be inclined to think he killed at her bidding. And the motive in all of the cases could have been that each of the three men betrayed her to some degree with her sister, Mary."

Dr. Greb smiled thinly. "Now we are removing the shadow of suspicion from the younger sister and returning it to Belinda."

Bevan looked sober. "Where it may very well belong."

"Then why was Mary at the vault," Dr. Greb asked.

Erica frowned. "Possibly because I brought up the name of Norman Wade today. Suppose she knew that he'd been murdered and where the body was. After she became sufficiently drunk, she went out there to investigate. The sight of the skeleton frightened her so that she lost the lock."

"Why not?" Bevan said.

Dr. Greb looked smug. "I would assume most of the principals in our drama are gathered at French House now."

"Very likely," the young man with the glasses agreed.

"I'll soon know," Erica said. "It's time I went back."

"If you go back," Bevan said.

"I must," she told him.

"It seems to me we might find it interesting to accompany Erica there," Dr. Greb said. "We can pay a neighborly call and size up the various reactions for ourselves."

"An excellent idea," Bevan said. He glanced at his wrist watch. "It's about ten. Do you think they'll all be up?"

"I think so," she said, "except possibly Mary. She had a lot to drink. She may have gone to bed by now."

So they left Bevan's place and drove the short distance to French House. Bevan parked his car in the area to one side of the house left for guest cars. Then the three of them walked across the lawn toward the lighted entrance of the great mansion.

Bevan had Erica by the arm, and they were almost under the wooden canopy that covered the driveway at the front entrance when her eyes wandered to the bushes some twenty feet beyond. And there stood the motionless figure of Carn Wills' ghost, in the flat-topped straw hat and blazer.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Erica instinctively halted and let out a small cry of alarm. Bevan glanced at her and asked, "What is it?"

"Over there in the bushes," she said, pointing. "I saw the phantom. The ghost of Carn Wills!"

Both Bevan and Dr. Greb stared in the direction she'd indicated. But by that time the ghost had vanished. There was no sign of anything.

Bevan told her, "Wait here for a moment. I'll take a closer look."

She waited under the lighted canopy while he and the professor went over to the bushes and made a more thorough search.

"Nothing there," Bevan said as he returned to her. "Are you sure you didn't mistake a shadow for the ghost? A moving tree branch in the near-darkness can be scary."

She shook her head. "I don't think it was a shadow. But I can't be sure."

"Best thing is to forget all about it for the moment," was Dr. Greb's advice. "If we go inside and discuss it, we'll throw everything off balance."

"I agree," Bevan said.

"There's no point in making a lot of it," Erica said. "I could have been mistaken." But she didn't really think she had been. That phantom figure was too clearly etched in her mind.

They went inside and found most of the household gathered in the living room. Belinda came forward to give them a warm welcome. She was glad to see Dr. Greb again and told Bevan, "I don't know why you don't visit us more often."

Bevan looked embarrassed. "I've been busy lately."

"That's a poor excuse," Belinda told him. And as Carter Anderson came up beside her, she said, "You know Carter." And she introduced Dr. Greb to the lawyer.

The lawyer ignored Erica altogether, except for a stiff nod, and gave his attention to Dr. Greb.

Bevan and Belinda were chatting pleasantly, and this left Erica free to wander down to the other end of the living room where a sodden, dozing Mary sat in one of the easy chairs before the fireplace and the elderly woman with the withered arm in another.

Aunt Celia looked up at her with a smile. "I wondered where you were."

"I went over to visit Bevan," she said.

The old woman nodded. "He's a fine young man. I can't imagine why Belinda didn't latch onto him years ago."

"I'm sure they're very good friends."

"Yes," Aunt Celia said. "And he's been wise enough to see that it's kept at that." She glanced across at the partially asleep Mary. "I'm afraid this hasn't been a good day for my other niece."

"I saw her taking a walk earlier," Erica said, watching for some reaction from the old woman. "I believe she went over to the cemetery."

Aunt Celia frowned. "So she's been doing that again. Whenever she's drinking, she has these morbid spells."

"I didn't know."

"No one has been buried over there in ages. I can't think of any sentimental reason for her visits. I call them sheer madness," Aunt Celia said with disgust.

"She is a strange girl."

"This is a strange house," the old woman said. "And you continue to ignore my advice to leave it."

"I'm thinking seriously about it."

"You'd be wise if you listened to me," the old woman said.

Erica glanced down at the other end of the dimly lighted room and saw the others were still talking.

She watched the white-haired, crew-cut lawyer for a moment. His face was set in stern lines as he continued his conversation with the amiable Dr. Greb.

Then she turned back to the old woman. "What sort of man is Carter Anderson? I mean, what do you really think of him?"

Aunt Celia registered surprise. "What a question to ask!"

"I mean no offense," Erica said.

The old woman stared at her. "He is the oldest friend of all of us. Since her college days, he's been in love with Belinda."

"I know that. Why has she never thought of marrying him?"

Aunt Celia curled her lip. "Because the strong kind of man has never attracted Belinda. She has always preferred playboy types she can dominate. And you know the tragedy it has brought her. She even outfitted that friend of yours with clothes."

"I remember she bought Bruce a sable coat," Erica agreed.

"Which he ripped to shreds and left out in the rain the night he went away from here," Aunt Celia said with scorn. "A fine way to show his gratitude."

"It doesn't seem like a thing Bruce would do."

"But he did it!" Aunt Celia insisted. "And if you're remaining here to whitewash his name somehow, I say you're wasting your time. He was a worthless, greedy young man, one in a long line of them who have preyed on Belinda!"

"And Carter Anderson felt the same way about him?"

"Carter felt even more strongly," the old woman said. "But like myself, he was helpless to do anything as long as Belinda tolerated the young man."

"I wonder," she said.

The mottled face of the elderly woman showed surprise. "Why do you say that?"

Erica had no intention of revealing her suspicions

about the lawyer. She said, "It was just a random thought. Don't pay any attention to it."

Across from her, Mary French had emerged from her nap. The stout woman gazed at her with bleary eyes. And then, in a slurred voice, she said, "You hate us, don't you? Hate every one of us!"

Erica was too surprised to have any ready answer. "I don't understand," she protested.

"Be quiet, Mary!" Aunt Celia snapped at her.

But the stout woman continued to stare dully at Erica. "You came here to avenge him—Bruce! That's why you're here! It's the only reason!"

Aunt Celia gave Erica a shocked look. Then she told her niece, "It is bad enough to be in the state you're in without further disgracing yourself with mad talk."

Erica decided the best cure for a dreadfully awkward moment was to move away. She left the two to return to the others. Bevan was still in a confidential conversation with the glamorous Belinda. This ended as Erica approached.

Bevan told her, "I think we'll be leaving now."

This surprised Erica. She'd expected him to remain longer. "Oh?" she said, thinking he might explain.

"We retire early here in the country," he said with a smile. Then he said his good nights to Belinda and Carter Anderson. He escorted Erica out into the hallway and told her, "I think you should go straight to bed and have a good night's sleep. This has been a nerve-wracking day and night for you."

She looked up at him. "I don't get it at all. No one said anything about the vault being open or the skeleton. And now you're leaving so soon."

"Don't let it worry you," he told her. And he took advantage of the fact they were alone in the entrance hall to give her a good night kiss.

Then Dr. Greb joined them and in his amiable way warned her, "Don't see any more phantoms tonight, my dear."

She smiled bleakly. "Not by choice, I assure you."

She saw them out and remained on the steps to watch their car drive away. Before going back inside, she allowed her eyes to wander to the spot in the bushes where she'd seen the phantom. There was nothing there now; no waving branch, no hint of movement to suggest anything out of the ordinary. Could she have imagined it?

Carter Anderson was still in the living room with Belinda. She could hear the low murmuring of his harsh voice as she mounted the stairs on her way to her room.

She had changed into her dressing gown and was applying face cream when there was a soft knocking on her door. She sat up very straight, staring into the mirror with frightened eyes. And in a taut voice she called out, "Who is it?"

"Only me," Belinda replied from the other side of the door. "May I speak with you a moment, darling?"

"I'll be right there," Erica said, relieved to hear the familiar voice of her employer. And she went over and slipped the bolt on the door to let Belinda in.

Smiling, the black-haired woman entered. She was wearing her gold dressing gown and looking as glamorous as ever. "I had to stop by a moment to see if you were comfortable," she said. "Aunt Celia told me that Mary said some hateful things to you downstairs."

"It was all right."

"I don't agree," Belinda said firmly. "I intend to give my sister a lecture tomorrow when she is in a fit state to understand. I hear she was mooning around the cemetery in her drunken condition."

"She was out there," Erica admitted.

"And Carter Anderson claims she unlocked the vault and left it open. That's something I can't forgive. She might at least have respect for the dead."

"Carter Anderson found me exploring the vault and appeared upset," Erica said, watching the dark woman closely to note her reaction.

Belinda didn't appear surprised. "He mentioned it.

If you found him a bit stern, blame it on his anger. Like myself, he feels the cemetery should not be violated in any way."

"I understand," Erica said.

Belinda went to the door. "No matter what happens, you do have friends here," were her surprising final words before she said good night and left.

Erica bolted the door again with a feeling of uneasiness. She got into bed and turned out the last remaining light.

The memory of the vault and the skeleton grinning up at her from the shadows still haunted her. But she was very weary, and at last she fell into a troubled sleep. At once Bruce Cord appeared in her dreams. He was wearing the rich black sable coat Belinda had bought for him and was recounting his exploits at French House.

"I have them all eating out of my hand except the old woman, Celia, and that lawyer, Carter Anderson," he told her confidentially.

"You're heading for trouble here, Bruce," she warned him.

"Not a chance of it," he exulted. "I'm in solid."

She felt a drop of moisture on her cheek and another on her head. And she gave him a look of panic. "It's raining, Bruce, and you have on your new coat! We must go back!"

He halted and laughed at her as the rain literally began to pour down. "I like the rain!" he told her. "What do I care about the coat?"

"You can't wear sable in the rain!" she protested. "It isn't good for it!" And she was still protesting when she woke up with a start. The minute she sat up in bed, she knew she wasn't alone in the room. There was someone standing staring at her from the darkness. She could almost feel unseen eyes fixed on her.

In a frightened voice, she called, "Who's there?"

There was no reply. But after a few seconds she heard a floor board creak in the vicinity of the hall

door. Someone had managed to force an entrance into the room and stood waiting to attack her. Or was it the more macabre presence of the phantom, which was able to pass through bolted doors with ease?

"Who is it?" she demanded again in a taut voice.

Now she heard a stealthy movement coming toward her. And gradually a hulking form took shape. It was the sinister ghost in the flat-topped straw hat and blazer. And the features were the same as she recalled from that other moment of horror: the pink grotesquerie of a Halloween mask!

"No!" she screamed as the thing came close to her and snatched her up from the bed. She had no chance to scream a second time as a broad hand was clamped over her mouth.

And then she was literally carried out of the room. She kicked and struggled to free herself without success. She was like a helpless child in the grasp of the monster.

Vaguely she realized she was being taken through the large clothes closet and out an exit in its back wall. Next she was carried down the narrow, winding steps of what must have been a blocked-off rear passage to her room.

By the time they came to the end of the several flights of stairs, she was in a state of limp exhaustion from her struggles. But she was aware she was being carried through a side door out into the open. New terror flooded her as she debated what fate might be in store for her.

She began to squirm and try to cry out again, but it was no use; Suddenly from out of the blackness there shone a blinding torch. Her captor halted, and there was the sound of voices. At once she was released and allowed to fall to the ground, where she lay motionless in the wet grass for a moment. She was vaguely aware of a struggle going on. And then Bevan bent close to her and raised her up.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No," she managed weakly. "What does it mean?"

"The end of the mystery," the young man with the glasses said grimly, and helped her to her feet.

She saw that there were two other men standing beside Bevan: Dr. Greb and a stern-looking Carter Anderson. Dr. Greb had a flashlight, and without a word he changed the direction of its beam so it spotlighted a figure stretched out on the ground. It was her phantom attacker! But now the straw hat and pink mask were gone, and she was looking at the face of Tony Regan, the chauffeur!

"No!" she gasped.

"Yes, it was Tony," Bevan said quietly. "I'll explain it all to you later. Just now I want to get you inside and phone for the police."

They left Dr. Greb and Carter Anderson standing guard over the unconscious chauffeur. As Bevan helped her to the house, he said, "I arranged with Belinda to come back here. She knew I suspected someone in the house of being a murderer, but she didn't know who."

"Was that why she came to my room?"

"Probably. She was very much on edge when I explained my suspicions."

"But why Tony?"

"Like Carter Anderson, he'd been in love with her for years. I'll tell you all about it when all this is settled."

He did so the following day, when most of the excitement was over. The police had Tony Regan in the jailhouse at Yarmouth, and he'd broken down and made a complete confession of his crimes. Mary had collapsed and was confined to her room. But Belinda and Aunt Celia were made of stronger stuff and had borne up well under the new tragedy.

Appropriately, it was a rainy day. At Belinda's request, Erica had agreed to remain on at French House to complete the research and editing in preparation for the writing of the famous beauty's memoirs. She had forced herself to go to the study and make some effort to resume work. But her mind kept wan-

dering to the events of the previous night. Much of it was still a puzzle.

Then Bevan came in through the study door. "Mind if I interrupt you?" he asked.

"I've been waiting to hear from you," she told him, rising.

He came to her and took her in his arms for a long embrace. Then he released her and said, "Now I can finish my explanations."

"I wish you would," she said as they sat down.

His pleasant face wore a frown. "Tony Regan was at college with Belinda. In his freshman year, he was a popular figure on the campus. He dated her a lot, and they liked each other. Carn Wills was a rival for her hand, as was Carter Anderson, but they didn't have a chance while Tony was a football hero."

"So he knew her that far back?"

"Yes. He was a poor boy on an athletic scholarship. All at once he ran into bad luck. He received a serious head injury on the playing field. When he came out of the hospital, the doctors told him he could never play football again, and it was even doubtful if he could resume his studies. He'd received serious brain damage. He left college and didn't see Belinda for several years."

"And in the meantime she had been married and divorced," she said.

"Exactly," Bevan agreed. "And then Belinda's father advertised for a chauffeur. Among those who applied was Tony Regan. Eager to help him and still fond of him, though he had undergone a personality change, she urged her father to hire him. And he did. Everything was fine for a while."

"And then?"

"Shortly after that, Belinda began seeing Carn Wills again and announced her decision to marry the playboy. Tony made it his business to talk to her and tell her Carn had also been having an affair with Mary on the side. Belinda chose not to listen to him. Then there came the yacht cruise and Carn's mysteri-

ous fall over the side. It's not nearly so mysterious when you realize that Tony was a member of the yacht's crew."

"The next was Norman Wade, I suppose?"

"Yes," Bevan agreed. "It was years before Belinda became seriously enough interested in another young man for Tony to fear he would lose his hold over her. He no longer cared if she married him or not, just as long as he was able to be near her and protect her."

"His mind had really become twisted."

"Definitely. So he killed Norman Wade and placed the body in the cemetery vault. But Mary, who'd followed her usual pattern of trying to steal Belinda's suitors, had guessed some of what happened. But she believed Belinda had been mixed up in the murder, so she said nothing. Yet she couldn't resist occasionally going to the spot where the body was."

"And Bruce?" she asked, her voice low.

"Bruce was the third victim. Tony met him when he came home from the village that night. The voices Ezra Finch heard quarreling were those of Tony and Bruce. And it was Tony who killed Bruce and ripped the sable coat."

"What happened to the body?"

Bevan gave her a solemn look. "You remember that Tony was doing a large renovating job in the garage, building a new bathroom and office at the rear of it?"

"Yes."

"There is a false brick partition," Bevan said. "This morning the police ripped out some bricks. And they found the remains of Bruce in there."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "So now there's no doubt."

"No doubt at all," he said gently. "When Tony realized you were delving deeper and deeper into the mystery of Norman Wade and Bruce, he knew he had either to frighten you away or kill you."

"And after I discovered the skeleton, he decided on another murder?" she suggested.

"So he says. He hid the skeleton so it was gone

when we came to see it. But he no longer felt safe. And he knew about that old back stairway, which gave him secret access to your room."

"What will happen to him?"

Bevan sighed. "No jury will do more than send him to an institution for the criminally insane. Whether he can be cured or not is a question. He should have had treatment long ago."

"Poor Bruce!" She sighed. "Poor Tony! Poor all of us!"

"Not an easy world," Bevan agreed. "Perhaps Belinda is the hardest hit of all. I think she still cared for him a lot. And mad as he was, he still remained unselfishly devoted to her." He paused. "A funny thing. We always associated that tune she likes to play with Carn Wills. This morning she told me it had nothing to do with Wills. It was played at the first dance she and Tony attended together. She'd even forgotten about it herself until all this brought it back."

"Her memoirs will be a hit," Erica said wryly. "They can't miss, after all this lurid business."

"No," he said. "By the way, Dr. Greb is going back to town this evening. I'd like you to come over to my place this afternoon for a chat and dinner."

"I couldn't go without asking Belinda," she said.

Bevan was on his feet. "Let us ask her," he suggested. "I know she won't mind."

So they left the study and went down the stairway to the new section of the house. They walked along the brick tunnel to the big living room with its wall of glass facing the ocean.

Today the ocean was rough and gray. And they found Belinda standing in the center of the room, staring out at the waves as they tumbled fiercely against the rocks.

She was wearing a chic black pants suit. Looking wistfully beautiful, she turned to greet them. "I'm down here doing some serious thinking," she said.

"We don't mean to interrupt," Erica apologized.

"But Dr. Greb is going back to Boston. Bevan would like me to go over to his place this afternoon and remain for dinner."

Belinda smiled sadly. "Why not? There's no hurry with our work. And I can't imagine how you could settle down to it today, in any case."

"Thank you," Erica said. And then she and Bevan left the glamorous beauty alone in the big room once more.

They made their way down the length of the shadowy bricked corridor to the main house. Just as they reached the end of it, the familiar strains of the ancient, worn recording of "Bye, Bye, Blackbird" came to them hauntingly from the distance. For Belinda, there would be no release from the ghosts of other days.



Deadly Search

Vivacious young Erica Blake and Bruce Cord were more than just casual friends. They had met at college and dated quite regularly. But suddenly Bruce vanished without a word, without a trace, and Erica had to know why. Finding out wouldn't be easy. The only clues to his disappearance lay behind the heavy stone walls of a strange impenetrable mansion called French House.

That's when Erica decided to become a secretary to the wealthy, enigmatic Belinda French. But from the moment she entered the woman's home she was struck by the ominous echoes of fear that seemed to haunt every room...echoes that became shrieks of terror as she found herself a hapless prisoner in a mansion of menace and evil...