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SHE'S A LOVELY LITTLE GIRL WITH AN EAR FOR
EVIL, WHO LISTENS, OBEYS, AND KILLS WHEN...

SATAN WHISPERS

A Horrifying New Novel By
CLARISSA ROSS

THE HORROR BEGINS

Betty grasped the old woman by the arm. "Don't talk in circles! Tell me what has happened!"

Mrs. Doherty made a visible effort to pull herself together, and said, "It all happened about an hour ago. The storm began and I noticed that Sarah was not here. I went looking for her in the rain and met Mrs. Osborne looking for George.

"Go on!" Betty said tautly.

"We went down to the lake," Mrs. Doherty continued, "and we saw a rowboat out in the middle of the lake. There was someone in it. Despite the storm, we took one of the other boats and rowed out there."

"And the children were safe . . .?"

"Sarah was in the boat, waiting for us and crying," Mrs. Doherty said, her voice breaking. "But the little boy was gone!"

Filled with horror, Betty whispered, "Drowned?"

"Sarah says he became terrified of the storm and toppled over the side," Mrs. Doherty said.

"Too horrible!" Betty sobbed. She impulsively got up and ran up the stairs to Sarah's bedroom. The beautiful little girl in the bed was sleeping peacefully, a sweet smile on her face. Betty could not understand why, but something about the child's placidity sent a fresh surge of fear and guilt through her.

SATAN WHISPERS

Clarissa Ross

To the thousands of DARK SHADOWS fans and the clubs which they have formed. Those readers who faithfully read my thirty-three DARK SHADOWS novels will, I trust, enjoy this book, which I take great pleasure in dedicating to them. Their many letters have been most welcome and appreciated

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Chapter One

There was something terrifyingly eerie about this snowstorm! Betty Ryan clutched the steering wheel of her station wagon with a frantic grip as it once again swerved in the increasingly deeper snow. The white flakes came down steadily, silently, and smothered the familiar landmarks of the road. She had lived in this area of the shore north of Boston for nearly all her thirty-odd years, and she had never previously experienced such a storm. Nor had she felt so isolated and alien in this place she knew so well.

The green kerchief she had hastily tied over her long auburn hair to protect it from the wet snow had slipped back off her head. Her thin, aristocratic face with its high cheekbones and lovely large green eyes was now frozen with fear. The headlights of the car were almost useless in the thick snow. With a tiny sob of despair, she quickly switched them from high to second in the hope she might get better visibility.

For a few seconds she was encouraged, but then the stubborn downward flow of white, thick flakes dazed her. She kept straining over the wheel, trying

to peer into the almost solid curtain of white and barely seeing well enough to keep moving. Soon she knew the station wagon would go no further. Even the snow tires which had served her so well would not be equal to the depth of this storm!

Also, she was becoming less sure each minute that she was really on the road. She struggled to recognize some helpful landmarks, but it was an exercise in futility. Ever present in her mind were the several bridges she must cross and the high banks at numerous points along the highway which a swerving car of the size and weight of her station wagon could careen over in seconds.

Tears from her lovely green eyes trailed down her cheeks. Her thin-lipped but perfectly formed mouth worked feverishly as she prayed for help in her desperate plight.

"Let me get there in time!" she murmured pleadingly.

For reaching the King house was what was uppermost in her mind. Reaching the King house in time and finding Sarah, her beloved sixteen-year-old daughter, who was out somewhere in this blizzard and almost surely at the King's house. Where else could she have gone? She had to be there! Betty could only pray she might reach the ancient house on the highway soon and discover that all was well. She did not dare to think too much of the alternatives.

Events had happened at a staggering pace, and she had unwisely started out to find her missing daughter in the storm. Her phone conversation with Pauline King had only served to upset her

more. According to Pauline, Sarah had not yet reached the house. Yet Betty was convinced her daughter had to be on the way there. Her pretty, retiring Sarah had few friends and the Kings' house was where she usually went.

Betty caught a glimpse of the surrounding area in a short break in the downfall of white flakes and recognized a boarded-up building which housed a store in the summer months. This told her she was approximately four miles from the outskirts of Menton and the tall eighteenth-century house of three stories capped by an observatory known as a widow's walk, a place where the worried wives of captains at sea watched and all too often vainly waited for their husbands' ship to return.

The thought of the widow's walk reminded her of her own widowed state. Things had been much more difficult for her after Roland's death. Though her husband, a mining engineer, had often been away from home, sometimes as long as six months at a time, she had always depended on him and his judgement. They kept in constant touch by phone and letter. There had been good times when his career had allowed him to remain at home for extended periods. It was then he had helped most with the bringing up of their daughter, though Sarah was more at ease with Betty since she was always at home.

Home had been from the start a renovated nineteenth-century house of much charm, a few miles distant from the ocean and, with a dozen or so other houses, fronting on a good-sized lake. The village was known as Bedford and the lake as

Bedford Lake. But all that period of happy days was lost to her now. Roland had died in an auto accident in a rainstorm. His injuries had been so grave that he had died before the ambulance reached him, and so Betty had the responsibility of their daughter Sarah alone!

She realized that her mind was wandering and that in spite of her terror she was becoming slightly drowsy. She began to worry that somehow the storm had blocked the exhaust pipes and perhaps carbon monoxide was stealthily creeping into the car to send her to a sleepy death. She reached for the control for the power window on her side and let it down half-way, ignoring the invasion of heavy, wet flakes.

"Must go on! Must get there somehow!" she sobbed in a small voice. "I have to!"

And then her heart gave a leap of hope. There was blurred light some distance in front of her car, coming slowly along towards her. Someone else was out in this dreadful midnight storm!

Frantically she pressed on the horn ring but no sound seemed to come from the normally loud horn. Possibly it was blocked from the storm or simply could not be heard in the muffled atmosphere of the blanketing fall of snow. The lights of the other vehicle came nearer and she saw that there were also red lights flickering from it. Perhaps it was a snow plough and that accounted for its slow progress, or maybe it might be a police car.

She brought her own faltering vehicle to a stop and it slid a little in the wet snow as she applied the

brakes. She was frantic in a mixture of hope and fear as the other vehicle came abreast of her and she saw that it was indeed a State Highway Patrol car. The police car halted and the door on the driver's side opened. A tall young man in uniform greatcoat and fur hat with the ear tabs down stepped gingerly out and came across to her.

His young face showed incredulity as he shouted, "Are you crazy coming out in this?"

"I had to," she sobbed. "My daughter! I have to reach her! She went out! I think to Menton!"

"We've had warnings out all evening," the trooper said. "This is no ordinary night. Is your daughter driving?"

Betty nodded. "She had my little car. I don't imagine she got far in it if the storm was this bad then. She may have had to leave it somewhere on the road!"

"There are dozens of abandoned cars between here and Menton," the trooper told her. "Hers could be among them."

"She'd walk on or get a lift. I'm sure she has to be at the King house in Menton! That's where she was going!"

The trooper turned his back to the blowing storm and asked her, "Where do you live?"

"Bedford."

"You're closer to Menton now than Bedford," he said.

Betty nodded unhappily. "If the storm hadn't become so heavy I'm sure I could have made it all right."

"This is no ordinary storm, ma'am," the young

trooper said. "This will go down as the blizzard of 1978! Boston is already completely tied up!"

"I must find my daughter," she said tearfully. "What can I do?"

The trooper eyed her grimly. "Since you've gotten yourself into this mess, I guess we'll have to take over. Pull your car over to the side as far as you can. Lock it up and come with us."

"Abandon it?" she asked in dismay.

"That's right," he said wearily. "Unless you want to be frozen to death or smothered by carbon monoxide. You're not going to get anywhere without chains. We've heavy chains on our rear tires and we're barely creeping along."

"I can't go back to Bedford without Sarah," she protested. "I must find her. And as quickly as possible!"

The trooper nodded. "I know the King house. It's on the main road this side of Menton. We'll take you there unless we get bogged down."

"Thank you!" she said gratefully. "You don't know what this means to me. How important it is!"

"You made a mistake going out after your daughter," the trooper said. "No good arguing about that now. Lock up your car and get in our rear seat."

Tensely she went about obeying his instructions. He was right. She could barely get the station wagon moving now. She pulled it as far to the side as she could, shut off the engine, adjusted her kerchief and long cloth coat and then stepped out into the blinding white storm. She locked the car

doors and the trooper took her by the arm, helped her across to the patrol car and saw her safely seated in the back seat. Then he went around and joined the driver in the front.

The man at the wheel asked his companion, "What now?"

The trooper who had talked with her said, "We have to take this woman to Menton. You'll have to find a spot to turn around."

"That won't be easy!"

"I know it," the first trooper agreed. "There's a fairly large intersection ahead, maybe we can manage it there."

The driver complained, "The trouble is that the road is almost as heavy with snow as anywhere else. Pretty soon we're going to be stranded somewhere!"

His companion said, "Let's keep moving as long as we can." And turning to Betty, he said, "Relax, lady! If we can get turned around we'll take you to your daughter."

She sat crouched miserably in the rear seat. "Just so long as she isn't stranded somewhere out in this!" She glanced out at the steadily falling snow again.

The trooper said, "There are a lot of houses along this main road. Even if she gets stranded she should be close enough to one to reach safety and shelter."

The driver said, "We sent out plenty of warnings. What made your daughter start out for Menton?"

Betty sat forward to tautly explain, "Sarah, my

daughter, was in Boston. She planned to visit the Kings before she came home. I haven't seen her since yesterday."

The first trooper said, "I know King. He's a stockbroker and his wife has a bad leg from polio. She limps enough so you notice it. They live in that big white house which goes back a couple of hundred years."

"That's the one," she agreed.

"Bet the old house hasn't seen many storms as bad as this," the driver said.

"It's the worst in my time," the first trooper said. And then he turned to Betty again. "Are you concerned only because your daughter is out in the storm, or is there something else?"

"Something else," Betty said warily. "She's not well. That's what worries me the most. I don't know how she'll react to this terrible night."

"Don't worry, we'll get you there," he promised.

"Soon, I hope," she worried. "It must be as soon as possible."

"We'll do our best," the trooper assured her. Then he told the man at the wheel, "Just ahead is the intersection. Looks as if it's still open enough to turn in!"

"There's a big drift," the driver pointed out. "But I'll try it." And he did. Betty sat back watching with frightened eyes as the car balked at the drift for a few seconds and then ploughed through. The driver worked hard at the wheel and managed to turn the car around so that it now pointed in the direction in which she wanted to go.

“Good!” The trooper beside the driver cried in encouragement. “We’ll make Menton now if we can just keep moving.”

The driver kept his eyes ahead, attempting to see through the blinding fall of huge white flakes. He said, “We may make it or we may not!”

“Please do!” she begged.

The driver said, “I don’t have any say about it, ma’am. It’s my opinion that pretty soon everything on the road will be snowed under. That includes us! It will take the end of the storm and some extra army snowplows before traffic moves regularly again!”

The other trooper said, “If we don’t make it, we don’t. But we have to keep on trying.”

The driver said, “I wonder what put the station radio out of order?”

“I don’t know,” the man at his side said. “But it sure took a bad time to do it.” He explained to Betty in the back seat. “The radio quit about twenty minutes ago and we’ve been out of touch ever since.”

“I suppose it’s the storm,” she said, shuddering. “It’s dreadful!”

“Sure is!” The trooper said. And he fiddled with the radio for a few minutes, producing no sound at all. Then he added, “If we could hear from headquarters, we’d know what to do. It may be they want us off the road. Judging from the last report we had, the storm will go on until daylight at least!”

She leaned to look out the side window as she asked, “Are we making any headway at all?”

"We're moving," the driver said. "No more. It'll take a while to get to the King house in Menton. *If* we make it!"

"Your daughter was crazy not to go straight home when she saw the kind of storm it was," the other trooper said.

Betty nodded. "I know. But I suppose like the rest of us she never expected it would get this bad!"

"Worst I've ever seen," the trooper agreed. He gave her a look of sympathy. "Warm enough back there?"

"Yes," she said, "I'm all right."

"Try to relax," the trooper said. "We'll get you there if we can! Just hope our luck hasn't run out!"

He returned his attention to the road as Betty sat back in a corner of the rear seat with a tiny shudder. The trooper's words echoed in her mind; "Just hope our luck hasn't run out!" He had no idea how true that was for her, or how urgent it was that she reach the King house soon.

She had not told them everything. She hadn't dared. It was bad enough to be caught out in this wild storm without dwelling on the horror she might come upon at the end of it! It was too complicated, too shocking for her to be able to make them understand. She was not sure she understood herself. She only knew that, in addition to the threat of the storm, she faced something even more terrifying. She did not fully understand what horror might await her at the magnificent old mansion on the road to Menton, but she knew the sooner she arrived there the better, if she were to

save her daughter, and her own sanity!

Her eyes closed and she pondered on the beginning of it all. Sixteen years ago, or a little more, soon after she and Roland had moved to Bedford at the beginning of their marriage. They had entered the pretty picture-book house fronting on the lake on almost the second anniversary of their marriage, just at the time she had discovered she was pregnant.

Roland, a handsome, brown-haired man of thirty-one then, had picked her up in his arms with ease and carried her over the threshold. "This will be our home always," he told her. "We'll never find a better place."

She'd looked around the house in wonder and agreed, "I think you're right. We couldn't do better. But what if you are transferred again?"

"I'm bound to have assignments other places," her handsome husband said with a smile on his squarish, bronzed face. "But I shall go to wherever the work may be and then return here. You'll remain here and take care of the place."

She stood close to him and looked up at him with love in her liquid green eyes as she said gently, "And this is where our child will be born and grow up."

"Children," he said, kissing her, and holding her close. "We're going to have two, a boy and a girl. The first will be a boy!"

Betty laughed. "That's silly! How can you tell?"

"I've been wishing for it!"

"That doesn't mean it will happen that way," she protested.

"I wished for a house like this," he told her. "And I finally found it. So why shouldn't I be lucky again?"

Betty looked around the empty room with its shining hardwood floors, its bow windows with multi-paned glass, the white woodwork and walls. "It will be so much fun furnishing and decorating it," she said happily.

His arm still around her, Roland had laughed, "And it will cost so much money! I've put just about everything into this place!"

"I'll go on working," she said. "I'll be able to pay for almost everything we need with my earnings."

Her husband had frowned. "Do you think it wise?"

She laughed protestingly, "I'm barely pregnant! I have weeks and months to go before I'll be bothered in any real way. In my line one should be able to work until just before the baby is born!"

Betty was an artist. She'd graduated from an excellent college arts course in New York and returned to Boston to find work as an illustrator for a monthly magazine. But she had tired of this and had attempted to make a living from her own paintings, mostly in oils. She had turned out some excellent work in her first year as a freelance and made some money, though not enough to live on.

It was important that she be self-supporting since her mother was widowed and living in the Mid-West with a spinster sister who had helped put Betty through college. Betty wanted to be able to be independent and pay her aunt back. Unhappily,

a career of painting didn't seem to offer any immediate solution to that problem.

By good fortune she had one of her showings in the Gordon Gallery in Boston, and there she had been approached by a pleasant gray-haired man who introduced himself as Bernard Simms, director of the Boston Gallery of Fine Arts.

Simms had praised her work, especially her portraits. Studying the warm-toned oil of a friend which she'd only recently completed, he said, "I like your style. It's interesting."

Betty had been pleased by his praise. Her eyes had twinkled as she said, "Not modern, I'm afraid."

"True," he agreed. "And this is precisely what I like about it. You have deliberately adopted a style of thirty or forty years ago."

"I've been criticized for not being modern enough," she was willing to confess.

The fine-featured, older man inspected her painting again and said, "In my opinion you should be congratulated for your courage in painting as you wish. We have plenty of moderns."

"Thank you," she said.

Bernard Simms turned to her and asked, "How is it going?"

"Not too well," she said. "I'm beginning to think about taking a job in one of the advertising agencies."

"That could be a dead end," he warned. "You'd be pushed hard and not have much time for your own painting."

"I know," she sighed. "But it seems we have to

make choices.”

He'd smiled sympathetically. "True. So let me suggest one for you. Why not become a specialist in restoring paintings? You clearly have a feeling for art of an earlier period."

She stared at him. This had never occurred to her. She said, "But doesn't that take a good deal of special training? From the little I know it's very difficult and tricky."

"It is," Bernard Simms said. "But I was in the business once myself. I could teach you. And our gallery needs a full-time employee like you."

Betty always looked on this moment as one of the important turning points in her life, almost as significant as her first meeting with her husband-to-be at a party given by a friend. She impulsively accepted Bernard Simms' offer, and she'd not at any time regretted it. She had at once entered into an intensive training period on the cleaning and restoration of old art. She was shocked to discover how badly art work was often used and the sad condition in which many of the paintings reached the museum.

Under Bernard Simms' direction she learned to appraise each new acquisition of the gallery and to decide on the cleaning and restoring the various paintings would require. Cleaning was often all that was necessary, and had to be done slowly and lovingly with various methods. Restoring meant bringing out the colors which had dimmed over the years, or had cracked from dryness and heat. She also sometimes had to remove layers of paint which had been added to some fine original, changing

and spoiling it.

It took Betty a year to master the various techniques. Then she was left to work largely on her own. She had a bright studio with good north light high in the gallery and she was kept constantly busy. She learned that many people placed fine prints and drawings in strong sunlight and so allowed the light to fade them and discolor the paper. When she worked with oils, she used soft camel's hair or sable brushes, often a feather duster, soft cloths and special cleansing materials.

The restoring of cracked, flaked and otherwise damaged paintings utilized all her training in art. She had to mix paints to match, understand the varnishes used in various periods and duplicate them, know exactly how to retouch the originals and bring them back to glowing life. Each ancient, damaged painting was a challenge and a work of love on her part. So it was not strange that she had no wish to allow marriage or even motherhood to interfere with her career. Her work was terribly important to her.

So on that day more than sixteen years ago when Roland had carried her over the threshold of their newly purchased home she had been eager to argue that she must continue working, not only because they could use the money but because she so strongly loved her work.

Roland had not been so sure. He'd asked, "Are you willing to drive back and forth to Boston every day? It's almost an hour's trip in traffic."

"I have my own car and I like driving," she'd replied.

"What about later?"

"Let's wait until then," she said. "I'll hire someone to come in a few times a week and clean the house."

"And when the baby comes?"

"Of course I'll stay home for a while, just as I will before it is born," she said. "But I do want to return to my work at least part-time."

Roland smiled sadly. "I can see that I've married a determined feminist and career girl."

Her eyes, shining with happiness, fixed on him. "You knew that from the start. I warned you."

He reached out to take her in his embrace once more. "So you did," he admitted. "But I want you to work only as long as it's good for your and our child."

"You may count on that," she said. And so it was settled.

Thus began a busy and happy time in their lives. Moving into the house and decorating and furnishing it proved an almost full-time job for Betty. But both she and Roland had their regular work to look after. She hired decorators and workmen. They supervised as best they could and gradually their home took shape out of chaos.

The situation was further complicated by Roland's being on a project in Ohio and having to remain out there for weeks at a time. Betty was fortunate in having her work to keep her busy and to see that she was not lonesome in the country-like surroundings of their new home. Other houses ringed the lake and the one next to theirs, almost a mate of it, was owned by a bookish young lawyer,

Peter Osborne, and his attractive wife Margaret. It so happened that Margaret had become pregnant at almost the same time as Betty. Each young woman reached out to the other and they became close friends.

During the early months of her pregnancy when Roland was away, Betty often dined with the Osbornes and afterwards sat out with them on their screened porch overlooking the lake.

Margaret, warm, plain and brown-haired, one night smiled at Betty and said, "I think we're terribly lucky. This is a wonderful place to bring up children."

"We are off the main road," Betty agreed. "So we won't have to worry about traffic too much. That could be a problem when they are old enough to get around on their own."

Peter Osborne, tall, gaunt and red-haired with a tiny mustache and thick glasses, stood by the window in worn sweater and drab gray slacks and reminded them, "There's the lake!"

"What about it?" his wife asked.

"Could be a hazard," he told her. "Especially for small children!"

"Not like traffic!" Margaret protested. "I look on the lake as a plus. Almost everyone has a boat, there's everything from power-cruisers to sail boats and even we have a rowboat. The water is something to enjoy."

"People drown in water," her husband insisted. "And it's a real danger for small children. You'll have to make sure they understand the menace of the lake."

"Don't spoil the lake for us!" Margaret said. "And anyway you're worrying needlessly. The children aren't even born yet!"

"That will happen soon enough," Peter Osborne said. "I say one should plan in advance."

"I agree," Betty said with a smile. "But I also think that Margaret is right. You're worrying too much about the lake. When the time comes we'll tell the children to be careful and it will work out."

Peter stared out moodily at the wide lake and said, "I suppose so."

"He's a born worrier," Margaret told Betty. "Don't pay any attention to him."

Betty liked them both and felt that once again she'd been blessed, this time with likeable neighbors of about her own age. Her pregnancy was going well and the specialist who gave her routine examinations pronounced himself satisfied.

"It had better be a boy," she smilingly told him. "That's what my husband wants."

"He'll get what we deliver him," the doctor said, returning her smile. "And he'll be grateful. Or he'd better be!"

Bernard Simms, the curator of the museum, was as delighted at the prospect of her becoming a mother as she was, once she had assured him that as soon as the pregnancy was over and she could find a good woman to care for the child during her working hours, she would return to her post at the museum.

One morning in the sixth month of her pregnancy he came to her studio on the sixth floor,

bringing with him a large portrait which had been taken from its frame for restoration. He placed it on the easel where she gave her work first appraisal and stood back with her to view it.

"What do you make of that?" he asked.

From the first moment Betty found herself strangely drawn to the ancient painting. It was dull and darkened with age, with some cracking and a stain at the bottom lower corner. It clearly dated from the late 1750's and was a study of a young woman in her early teens, with a pink bonnet on her long black tresses, and wearing a pink flowing dress to match. She stood with one hand on a small, wooden stand.

But it was the face of the slim, dark-haired girl that was so intriguing to Betty. It was oval in shape, with a pouting mouth beneath a perfectly formed nose. Her eyes were green like Betty's, but their level gaze held a hint of something oddly sinister. It was a lovely, provocative face, which seemed to be filled with life despite the faded canvas. It was a face that Betty immediately felt would haunt her.

"Remarkable!" she said. "A beautiful girl!"

"Strangely beautiful," the gray-haired curator said. "There is something unusual there. A hint of strong character perhaps."

"I can see what you mean," Betty said, gazing at the painting, engrossed in it. "It's almost as though she were listening to something—something no one else could hear."

"One wonders what she was like as a grown woman," the old man went on. "I vow she must

have been spirited and turned many men's heads."

"Yes."

"Or perhaps she didn't grow up but died before she reached many more years," the curator mused. "So many young women died at an early age in those days."

"She's terribly interesting," Betty said, still fascinated by the girl's attractive and somewhat sensual face, and her attitude of listening to an unheard voice.

"We don't know the artist," Bernard Simms said. "But we do know it was done somewhere in the state. It came in with a lot from a dealer. It was probably painted by some itinerant artist of the time. They used to wander from town to village, working their way with their painting. Sometimes it would be a sign for a lawyer, an inn or some shop, and whenever the opportunity presented itself, they sought out some wealthy person to paint, or more often secured a commission to paint his wife or daughter."

"The beginnings of family art in the New World," she mused.

The old man nodded. "Yes. As these men became wealthy they had a desire to emulate the squires of England, from which many of them had emigrated. It was very much in fashion to have portraits of the master and his family done."

Betty turned her attention to the girl's portrait again and said, "This is truly unusual. Much better than the average."

"I agree," the curator said. "I want you to bring it back to its full splendor. Then the museum will

have something of which we can be truly proud.”

“It will be a delight to work on,” Betty said, eyes glowing with eagerness to get at the task.

“Don’t rush,” he said. “Take all the time you like. It will have to be cleaned. That stain may prove impossible to remove, in which case you will have to paint over it. The flaking is bad, but I think much can be saved.”

“I’ll save every inch of the original I can,” she promised.

He smiled. “That is why I wanted you to do this before you left us for the birth of your child. I don’t want to trust it to anyone else.”

“I want to do it,” she said. “And I should have it finished in plenty of time.”

This was what Betty fully expected, but it didn’t work out that way. The original paint had deteriorated so badly that she had to restore almost eighty percent of the painting. It was a tedious task and she was forced to work at it with painstaking care.

Yet the results were worthwhile. As the portrait was returned to its original strong color, it was even more compelling than when she’d first seen it. She remained long hours in the studio, often working at night when everything else was shut down. The night porter would let her out at seven or seven-thirty and she’d then drive home.

Her neighbor, Margaret Osborne, was also well advanced in her pregnancy. She often came over after Betty had returned home to have a cup of tea with her and chat.

On one of these nights her neighbor said

seriously, "I think that painting you're restoring has become an obsession with you!"

Betty smiled at her, a little startled. "Why do you say a thing like that?"

"I think it's true."

"Why?"

Margaret shrugged. "For one thing, you talk about it constantly. You seem to think I should understand all about it, even though I've never seen it."

"Well, it *is* my work."

"But I've never known you to be so absorbed with a particular painting before," her friend insisted. "Do you think it's healthy?"

Betty laughed. "And why should it not be healthy?"

Margaret looked embarrassed. "People like us, I mean women who are pregnant, sometimes get strange obsessions. I'm not even sure about myself, and I have noticed this in you."

"You're imagining it," Betty said. But she knew there was more than a small amount of truth in what her neighbor had mentioned. She *was* obsessed with the portrait, obsessed in the sense that she felt an overpowering need to restore it perfectly before her baby was born.

Even when Betty was away from the studio, the painting remained vividly in her mind. Visions of it kept coming to her and she often thought of it while she drove back and forth to work. At such times she often had some inspiration about the work and when she returned to the easel would hasten to put the idea into effect. It had never

struck her as odd that she should do this, until Margaret made mention of it.

Then she realized it was partly true. She was reminded once more of her fascination with the painting when Bernard Simms came to check on her progress.

He studied the painting, saw what painstaking care she was devoting to it, saw that a good deal of it was yet to be done. He said in mild reproval, "I hope you're not overdoing"

Impatiently Betty turned to him, brush and palette in hand. She was wearing a full blue smock which concealed any hint of her pregnancy. She asked the curator, "Why do you say that?"

"The porter tells me you've worked here late almost every night this week," the gray-haired man said.

"So?"

"Should you be working so hard at this time?" he wondered.

"I don't see why not," she protested.

"Your baby is due soon."

"Not all that soon," she said. "Besides, you gave me your word I'd be allowed to complete the work!"

"I mean that you should, but not at such a reckless pace. It could well wait until your pregnancy is over. Then you could resume."

Strangely, even to Betty herself, the effect of his words was enough to throw her into a panic. She felt a cold, sharp fear cut through her. "But I must finish it! Something might happen to me! I might not return!"

The mild, gray-haired man showed astonishment at her violent reaction. He said, "I didn't even think of that. Of course you'll be all right when you deliver your child."

The idea, now that it had come to her, distressed her terribly. She said, "You can't tell. There are cases of women who die on the delivery table."

"Don't say such things," Bernard Simms said. "You mustn't have such thoughts!"

Betty was struck by his shocked attitude, and tried to conceal her tension. She managed a weary smile and said, "I'm sorry, that was a stupid thing to say. But women in my condition do have strange thoughts, however wrong they may be."

"*Very* wrong," the old man said, still clearly upset.

Betty put down her palette and brush, went to him and touched him on the arm. "I was foolish," she apologized. "I didn't mean to sound so frantic."

"I'm sure you didn't."

She sighed. "I've been working very steadily on this project, and I suppose you're right. Someone else said the same thing to me—that the restoration had become an obsession on my part."

"I'd like to see you a little more relaxed about it," the curator said. "You're doing an excellent job, but you must get proper rest."

"But I am," she insisted. "You mustn't worry about me. Please don't make me stop working on it."

"Very well," he said, turning to study the partially restored painting once again. "When you

complete this it will be a gem."

"I hope you hang it well."

"It shall have an honored place, and you will be given full credit for your restoration," Bernard Simms promised her.

Betty smiled and stared at the painting. "Somehow I have come to feel an affinity with her, a strange attraction that extends across the centuries."

The curator gave her a tolerant look of amusement. "Why should you not feel that way? You are bringing her to life again. While creation of your child goes on within you, this other act of creation is going on here."

"I want her to be perfect," Betty said, staring at the painting once again, unthinking of the life within her.

"Make her as she was," the old man said. "That is all that is within your power."

"Yes," Betty said with a sigh. "I suppose she will always somehow elude me, remain a mystery to me."

"You are seeing her through the eyes of that long-ago artist who did the portrait," the old man reminded her. "Very often those eyes saw more than those around the subject. You may come to know as much about her as anyone could hope."

Betty felt a strange elation. She nodded, her bright eyes fixed on the girl's sultry features. "You're right," she said. "I sense that she was very intelligent, sensual and awfully stubborn. Perhaps stubborn to the point where it might have become a vice. And there's something else,

something I can't define, and somehow . . ." her voice trailed off, but she finished the sentence in her mind . . . "it frightens me!"

"Interesting speculation," the curator agreed. "Just don't overtax yourself."

She promised him she wouldn't and meant it. For a few days she deliberately took time off and went for long luncheons and to a round of the baby departments to buy needed things for the child she was expecting. She still was hoping it would be a boy, to please Roland. Her husband was returning in a few days and would be with her during the last two months of her time.

But as she busied herself with this other activity, the painting she was working on haunted her. She would be moving slowly along a store aisle when visions of that strangely provocative face would swim before her and dominate her mind, almost as if the girl was crying out, begging across two centuries not to be forgotten.

One afternoon Betty found herself rushing back to the studio from a late luncheon, gripped by a compulsion she could not resist. She threw down the parcels she'd been carrying, put on her smock, and returned to work on the painting until almost eight o'clock that night. The porter showed surprise as he let her, exhausted and stumbling, out of the museum.

That night her dreams were haunted by the lovely girl in the portrait. She was talking with her, but however much she strained she could not hear what the girl was saying. It was essential that she understand, yet she could not hear. She awakened

in a panic and dripping with perspiration.

The fear that she wouldn't complete the restoration before her baby's birth took a sterner grip on her. The next morning she drove to town early and was in her studio working on the painting by nine o'clock. At around ten-thirty, the curator came to see her and found her collapsed in a heap on the floor before her easel.

Chapter Two

Betty opened her eyes to a room which was strange to her and where everything seemed to be in pastel colors. The memory of how she had gotten there eluded her, but she was conscious of being weak and feverish. As she tried to collect her thoughts the face of a man unknown to her loomed over her and studied her with grave interest.

Words were spoken in low voices but she could neither recognize the voices nor make out the words. Then her husband's familiar features, set in a mask of fear, came within her field of vision and she weakly raised a hand.

"Roland!" she said in a whisper.

He took her feverish hand in his cool ones and murmuring, "Thank God!" he bent down and kissed her gently.

She blacked out again then, and had several other similar periods of consciousness alternating with turbulent, somehow malevolent darkness. Then, quite suddenly it seemed, everything came into focus. She felt like herself again, though very weak.

Roland was seated at her bedside and warned

her, "You must not exert yourself too much. You're getting well and we don't want a relapse."

She stared at him in a state of confusion and asked, "What happened to me?"

"You contracted some sort of fever," her husband said. "The doctors don't know exactly what it was. There are a lot of viruses going around these days."

"How long have I been ill?"

"Almost a week," he said. "But your fever has broken. You're on the mend."

"You came back," she said.

"Of course. Bernard Simms phoned me in Ohio and I came at once. No one knew what was wrong with you or whether you would recover."

Now thoughts came crowding into her mind and the most urgent one was of her unborn child. She raised herself up a little and gasped, "The baby! Is it all right?"

Roland smiled and eased her back down on her pillow. "You mustn't let yourself be upset. You're still carrying the child and the doctor sees no possible ill effects on it from your sickness."

"You're sure?"

"I have his word," Roland said. "From what I hear, you've been working too hard, trying to complete some restoration before your confinement."

"That didn't make me ill," she protested weakly.

"Something did."

"I must have caught a virus," she said. "I feel so much better now."

"If you're a good patient you'll be able to leave the hospital and go home to rest in a few days."

"When will I be able to return to work?" she asked anxiously.

He shook his head. "No more work until after the baby!"

Betty at once became upset. "No! I must complete that portrait first!"

Roland sighed. "I'm not going to argue with you. It's a matter you'd best take up with your doctor. But I'm not in favor of it, and I doubt if Bernard Simms would approve."

"It's something you don't understand," she pleaded with him. "I'll have no peace of mind if I don't complete that restoration."

Her husband said, "I can only repeat that it's a matter for your doctor to decide."

Betty knew what she must do and she gathered up her remaining strength and resolution to achieve it. Within a few days she had made such an amazing recovery that not only her husband and Bernard Simms, but her doctor and the staff who'd looked after her, were astounded.

The elderly Dr. Cook stood facing her in the middle of her room and said, "You've made a most remarkable recovery, Mrs. Ryan. Aren't you at all weak?"

"I've been walking in the corridor all morning," she told him with a smile.

"Absolutely amazing," Dr. Cook said. "I would not have thought it possible."

"When can I be discharged, Doctor?" Betty wanted to know. "It's wrong for me to use a

hospital bed when others may need it."

The doctor rubbed his chin. "You were very ill! Don't think otherwise!"

"But I'm better now."

"So it seems," Dr. Cook agreed. "I suppose I must let you go home with the provision that you take a great deal of rest. You have childbirth to face fairly soon."

"There is something else I must do before that," she said.

He frowned. "Indeed?"

"I've been working on the restoration of an old painting," she said. "I must finish it before the baby comes."

Dr. Cook raised his eyebrows. "You're talking about going back to work? Impossible."

"Please, doctor," she pleaded. "I will worry myself sick if I don't do it!"

"You need to rest."

"It will only take two or three days to finish the painting," she said. "I was near the end of the restoration when I collapsed. I will work only two or three hours a day. But you *must* let me go back to it!"

The elderly doctor spread his hands. "What can I say? You will probably do it even if I demand that you don't."

She smiled. "You're a sensible man, Doctor Cook."

"Mind you, I've not given you permission. I'm saying if you do it, it will be at your own risk."

"That is all I ask," she said.

He stared at her. "What makes this painting so

important to you?"

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "But somehow it has obsessed me. I'm haunted by it. I must finish it."

"I'm a simple man," Dr. Cook said. "The ways of art and artists are beyond me."

Betty remained at home for a week. Then, with her obstetrician's approval, she returned to work for four hours every morning. When she stepped back into her sunlit studio again and saw the girl in the portrait waiting for her, she became absorbed in the fascination of the painting once again.

She was amazed at how quickly the work went, now that she was feeling well again. She accomplished more in a few days than she ordinarily would have in several weeks. As a result, the portrait of the lovely young girl was restored to its original beauty and fairly glowed from its dark background. All the museum staff came to admire it.

"Perfection," Bernard Simms said, studying the lovely creature in the painting.

"She must have a fine frame," Betty said.

"Most definitely," the curator agreed.

"And a position of prominence in the collection," she went on. "You agreed to that."

"I will keep my word," the elderly man said. "She will hang in the main gallery on the street floor, with the best of our other art works."

Betty sighed with relief and smiled at him. "Now I'm ready to go home and prepare for the coming of my baby!"

"About time," her employer said. "You've not given yourself a proper chance, nor the child."

"My doctors assure me my fever didn't injure my baby in any way," she said. "And now my mind is at rest. I made a kind of vow to the girl in the painting that I would bring her to life again before having my baby."

"And you've done it well," Bernard Simms assured her.

Roland came and picked her up and they drove home. All the way she sat quietly, unaware of the pleasant summer afternoon. Her mind was far distant, thinking of the subject of the painting, and wondering what had become of her. For no reason she could understand, the fate of that long-dead girl whose name she would probably never know had become of major importance to her.

One thing was certain in her mind. She would never forget the sultry young woman in the pink dress. It was a strange feeling. The girl had become so real to her it was as if their paths had crossed, as if they had truly met. Betty had never experienced such a feeling about the subject of a painting before and she could not understand it.

Betty felt a personal satisfaction in knowing that the painting would have the best of frames and be hung in a special spot in the gallery where many thousands of people would see it. It was not any egotistical pride in her own accomplishment, but rather a feeling of completion in having restored the girl's extraordinary beauty and giving her the immortality of a place in the museum's permanent gallery.

"You're very quiet," Roland told her, glancing away from the wheel for a moment to study her.

"I'm relieved," she said. "Glad to have the painting done."

"No more than I," Roland said. "Now maybe you can settle back to the business of having our baby."

"My whole concern from now on," she promised sincerely.

Betty's daughter Sarah was born on a stormy night about a month later. Thunder rolled in the heavens and there were blue bursts of sharp lightning at the time of her birth, although Betty was unaware of it.

After the pangs of childbirth Betty receded into a fogged state, from which she emerged briefly some time later to be told, "You've given birth to a lovely little girl!"

Roland was ecstatic over the red-faced little newcomer who he insisted was the exact replica of Betty, and what man in his right mind could ask for any creature more lovely?

Betty failed to see the strong resemblance she was supposed to share with little Sarah, but she did find the baby lovable and amazingly good. The nurses predicted she was one of those rare babies who would give very little trouble to their parents.

Betty's own joy was somewhat marred when her doctor came to talk with her the day before she was to leave the hospital. He was a blunt man who lost no time getting straight to the point.

He first said, "What I'm going to discuss with you I've already talked over with your husband."

She felt a moment of anxiety. "Something to do with the baby? Some weakness, some hidden disorder?"

"The baby is fine," the doctor said. "A very healthy little girl. You are to be congratulated. No, what I'm going to say has to do with you."

"With me?"

"Yes," he said, with a sigh. "I may as well tell you plainly. You will have no more children."

Betty gasped, "You can't mean it!"

"I'm very much afraid I do," he said. "There were complications in your daughter's birth caused by a congenital weakness in your organs. The internal damage you incurred in giving birth to your little girl makes further pregnancies both unlikely and undesirable."

"Then there is a chance I may bear again," she said. "My husband wants a son, you know."

"My advice would be to adopt one," he said. "I very much doubt if you will conceive again."

"I won't give up hope," she said.

"As you like," the doctor said. And he rose and glanced at his wristwatch. "But another pregnancy might be dangerous for you and also for the child."

"I see," she said bleakly. "So Sarah is likely to be an only child."

"Yes," the doctor said. "But cheer up. You have a lovely baby. Many people would envy you that."

"I know," she said, smiling up at him wanly. "I suppose we all expect too much of life."

Betty worried about what Roland's reaction to

the news would be. She fully expected him to be disappointed, but actually it turned out to be quite the opposite. He was so enchanted with the baby, that he wasn't at all troubled by the thought they would probably have no son.

Bouncing a pudgy, contented Sarah in his arms, he happily said, "This one's all I need! If we get another one, okay. If we don't, I'm perfectly satisfied with Sarah."

Betty smiled and put her arms around him as he held their baby. "I'm glad," she said.

"She has black hair like my mother, not red hair like you," Roland said proudly. "She's going to grow up a proper Ryan!"

"Black Irish!" Betty teased him. "I thought you said she looked like me!"

"She does in a way," the proud father said. "But she resembles my family as well."

Within a few weeks Roland was called away on another project and Betty found Mrs. Mary Doherty, a devout Catholic lady from the adjoining village, to take the position of nurse-housekeeper.

Mary Doherty was middle-aged, worn of features, and motherly. The two most important things in her life were her Church and her family, and when she took on the post of nurse-housekeeper for the Ryans she automatically included them in her family. She thought Betty a beauty, Roland very handsome, and little Sarah the very epitome of all a baby girl should be. Betty felt she'd been fortunate in finding the Irish woman and she never had cause to feel differently.

Almost at once she received an invitation from the museum to return again to part-time work, and at once accepted it. Mrs. Doherty was quite capable of taking care of the child for the few hours Betty was in Boston each day.

Returning to the museum gave Betty a strong inner happiness. She loved her baby and being a wife, but her career was greatly important to her as well. One of the first things she did was hurry to see the girl in the portrait. It had an impressive gold frame and was hung in a spot where it was bound to draw attention.

A delighted Bernard Simms confided to her, "You'd be surprised to know how many comments we receive on that portrait! It's very unusual."

Betty gazed at the sultry, beautiful face with a kind of reverence and said, "She's more beautiful than I remembered."

"Your magic touch," the curator reminded her. "It was a faded, drab wreck when it came in."

"But her beauty was there in the painting," she said. "I merely brought it out again."

"The artist who wielded the brush was surely a genius," the curator said. "And, alas, a genius whose name we will probably never know."

She moved closer and said, "I see you have a name plate on it." And she read, "Daughter of the Vine Family."

Bernard Simms smiled. "I forgot to tell you. We received that information after you left. Came from the dealer who sent the painting to us. He said that there was a paper with it listing it as a portrait of a daughter of the Vine family."

"And that was all?"

"Yes. I assume the family lived somewhere in

this state, but that may not be the case."

"Will you try to trace it?"

"I think not," he said. "It would not increase its value in any way. But she does have a last name at least."

"I'm glad," she said. "It is the piece of work I've most enjoyed doing."

"We have plenty of others for you," the curator promised. "You'll soon forget this one."

Betty did soon find herself flooded with new work, all of it interesting, but none so much as the daughter of the Vine family. And contrary to what the curator had said, she did not forget the painting. At least once during every week she felt herself inexorably drawn to the portrait, where she would stand bemused for minutes at a time.

Margaret Osborne gave birth to a baby boy shortly after Sarah's birth, and the two young mothers became close friends. Margaret, however, had no career ambition and remained at home with her baby. When Roland was home for a week or two, he and Peter would get together, and the two families formed a strong bond of lasting friendship.

Birthdays came and went. Sarah was one year old, and then she was two. When she was three there was a joint birthday party for her and little George Osborne. The two children were playmates and close companions.

Mary Doherty confided in Betty, "Your Sarah really likes my little fellow. And she's a lot stronger and healthier than he is for all that he's a lad."

It was true. Margaret and Peter had brought a rather sickly son into the world. While Sarah

bloomed and grew, George was a reedy little figure suffering from a multitude of childhood ailments. Margaret's life became an endless round of health crises with her son, dealing with a series of doctors attending him.

Roland had one project near Boston which allowed him to be home at the time of Sarah's fifth birthday. It was a gala occasion, and she was already proving a little charmer with a fetching smile, curly black hair and a great affection for her daddy.

"Because I'm so much away," Roland explained it.

"I think it's simpler than that," Betty said. "I'd say she really prefers you. And contrary to your prediction, she isn't growing up to look like me at all."

"She's a Ryan," Roland said with satisfaction. "Looks like pictures of my mother when she was a little girl."

"I'm glad," Betty said. "She's certain to be our only child."

His face shadowed. "You worry about that more than I do."

She gave him a sad look. "I wanted a son, too."

"Well, we have Sarah," her husband said. "I'm perfectly happy." And to prove it, he drew his wife close and kissed her with a deep affection.

Betty, at this time, left her post at the museum to work for the State. Bernard Simms, her beloved boss, had taken a post at a museum in New York,

and she felt lost at the museum without him. A state official approached her, explaining that the many fine paintings in the public buildings were constantly in need of work and, in many cases, complete restoration. They had two men working for them and were aware of her special gifts, and anxious for her to join the team.

The salary offered was too tempting to refuse, and so she said goodbye to the museum and the daughter of the Vine family. Her new studio was on the top floor of the State House overlooking the Public Gardens. She worked alone as the two men in the department were continuously on the road working on paintings housed in other public buildings around Massachusetts. Occasionally they met for a general consideration of their work schedules but otherwise they were on their own. Many fine paintings came her way and she soon found herself as happy as she'd been at the museum.

Another birthday rolled around, and Sarah was six.

Mrs. Doherty observed, "The child becomes more of a beauty every day!"

To which Betty sadly countered, "I'm not sure her disposition matches her looks."

The Irish woman sighed. "You mean her tantrums."

"Yes," she said. It had started a few months ago and Betty felt the problem was growing worse. Sarah had suddenly shown a childish dislike for being disciplined or crossed in any way. When she was rebuked or refused anything she went into a

noisy rage.

"Being an only child," Mrs. Doherty rationalized. "It does spoil them."

Betty frowned, "She's not at all nice to little George, though he adores her and does whatever she asks."

"She used to like him but now she seems to have changed," the Irish woman said. "Children go through stages. George's mother makes a great fuss over him because he's sickly. I have an idea Sarah is jealous of the attention his mother gives him."

"That's unfortunate," Betty said.

"Not that you don't give Sarah plenty of attention when you're home," the Irish woman hastened to add. "But she's alone with me a lot and she sees George out walking with his mother and the like. Perhaps she wishes you were here."

Betty was reluctant to admit this. "I can't think that's what is wrong. I'm afraid it comes down to our spoiling her. And her father is worse when he comes home. It's a problem."

"She'll grow out of it," Mrs. Doherty said. "Once she starts school there will be a change in her."

"I hope so," Betty worried. "I don't like the way she's been behaving."

She made it a point the next weekend, which was warm and pleasant, to spend all the time she could with her dainty, attractive daughter. She sat in a lounge chair on the front lawn overlooking the lake and watched Sarah and little George at play. They were having a game of croquet with a miniature

lawn set George's mother had set out for them.

It was inevitable that the dark-haired, sturdy Sarah should outclass the frail, blonde George. But Betty was really upset by the way her daughter lorded it over the boy, and finally tried to cheat him, which resulted in a loud quarrel between them in which Sarah seemed almost ready to use the croquet mallet on the little boy.

Betty quickly put down her book and jumped up to stand between the two children and make peace. "We will have none of this quarreling!" she told them. And more severely to Sarah, "I say you are to blame."

Sarah's pert oval face showed disgust. "It's George! He's not good at games!"

"I am, too!" little George insisted stoutly. "She cheats!"

Betty said, "If you can't get along well together, you'd best not play with each other at all. Now which is it to be?"

Sarah looked down sullenly. "I can get along with him."

"Then see that you do," Betty warned her, "Or I'm going to make you stay over here all by yourself with no one to play with."

Her threat cleared the air for awhile. The two youngsters returned to play and seemed to get on very well together. Betty felt the reprimand had done Sarah good. Perhaps all she needed was more supervision and discipline.

Betty had been mowing her own lawn, but a flare-up of an old back problem made her appeal

to Mrs. Doherty to hire somebody to care for the grounds.

Mrs. Doherty considered her request and said, "About the only one I know does lawns around her is Hank Brenner."

"Hank Brenner!" Betty exclaimed in astonishment. "Isn't he the village drunk?"

"He drinks," Mrs. Doherty agreed. "Goes off on binges. But he works most of the time. He might miss a day, but he'll always turn up later to do the work."

Betty was reluctant. "Is he otherwise reliable?"

"He is," the housekeeper said. "Comes from one of the old families. But he was always peculiar and the alcohol brought on his downfall."

"Is he safe around the children?"

"He never shows up when he's drinking," Mrs. Doherty said. "And when he's sober he's as well-behaved as anyone. Speaks a lot better than most laborers you hire. That's because he had a boarding school education."

"I didn't realize," Betty said, impressed. "What a pity his drinking has ruined him!"

"He was handsome when he was young," Mrs. Doherty said. "Many a girl around here had her eye on him. But then he started his crazy drinking and they were all scared away."

"Where does he live?"

"He has a shack at the other side of the lake," the housekeeper said. "It's not much of a place, but it keeps him out of the weather."

"He does the Osbornes' lawn, doesn't he?" Betty asked. She recalled the lanky, unkempt

figure in ragged overalls and cap, a stubble of gray beard on his gaunt face.

"Yes," Mrs. Doherty said. "They've been using him right along. Mr. Osborne is allergic and can't do the lawns and Mrs. Osborne never does any outside work, except to tend her flower garden."

"Well, if the Osbornes have used him I see no reason why we shouldn't," Betty said. "You may as well hire him."

When she returned from the city a few afternoons later, the lawn mower was roaring over the lawn with the gaunt old man propelling it. She observed him for a few minutes and it seemed he was doing a very good job. Later when he'd completed the task he came by the back verandah for his money. One of the conditions of his taking on employment was that he be paid cash at the end of each day.

Betty happened to be on the verandah looking for Sarah to call her in to dinner when the old man shambled up and took off his cap, revealing long, gray hair. In a surprisingly pleasant manner, he said, "I've mowed the lawn and am ready to leave."

She said, "Yes. I'll pay you. I have the money inside." She went in, found it where she'd placed it on the table and came out and paid him. She explained, "I'm looking for my little girl. Dinner is on the table."

Hank Brenner took the money with a murmured thanks. As he stuffed the bills in his overall pocket he said, "They went down to the lake a while back. She and the little boy."

"Are you sure?" Betty asked, startled.

He nodded. "Saw them go."

"They're supposed to keep away from the lake," she worried. "I've drummed that into Sarah's head since the time she began to walk!"

Hank Brenner showed a smile on his beard-stubbed face. "I imagine they're safe enough. If I heard right, it was your little girl who insisted on going down there."

Betty nodded. "That doesn't surprise me. Sarah is often a rebel. And George seems to be a born follower."

The handyman asked, "Would you like me to go after them?"

"No, thanks," she said. "I'll do it. I want to give Sarah a good scolding!"

She left the verendah, making her way around the house, down the path which slanted over a hilly area towards the lake and the marina where various small craft were tied. As she neared the marina she saw Sarah and little George well out on the dock, looking down into the boats.

She felt a wave of annoyance that Sarah should so deliberately place herself in danger after all the warnings she'd been given. She called out from the shore, "Children! Both of you! Come back to me at once!"

Sarah responded with a bored expression on her pert, little face while George merely looked frightened. He came hurrying along to Betty first, with Sarah trailing him, sullen-faced.

When they came up to her, Betty scolded, "You *know* you're not supposed to come down here!"

Sarah eyed her resentfully and said, "George made me come!"

The frail George was all rage at this. He stamped a small scandaled foot and cried, "I did not. *She* was the one who wanted to see the boats!"

Betty told her daughter, "I don't care whose idea it was. You knew better than to come here. You remember I had warned you about it don't you?"

"Yes," Sarah said in a small voice, looking down.

"You could fall off and be drowned! You *know* that!" Betty went on.

"I can swim and so can George," Sarah told her in a surly tone.

"That is not quite the truth," Betty pointed out. "You've both been in the water when either I or George's mother has been along to watch you. You'd not last more than a minute in that deep water."

Sarah said, "We were being careful."

"Yes, we didn't go near the edge," little George told her.

"No matter," Betty said. "You must not *ever* come down here alone again. Do you understand? Not *ever*!"

"Yes," George said, looking at Sarah with a frightened expression on his small, pointed face.

Betty turned directly to her daughter. "You heard me?"

"I heard you," Sarah said with a defiant note in her voice, and she rushed by her mother and ran up towards the house to wash up for dinner. Betty

watched after her with a worried look on her lovely face. Then she offered her hand to George and said, "Come along, George; we'll walk up together." He docilely obeyed her.

That evening when the children were safely in bed she joined the Osbornes on their screened front porch for an after-dinner drink. It seemed a good time to express her concern about the youngsters.

She told Margaret and Peter Osborne, "I found the children down at the marina today. I scolded them and brought them back."

Margaret, seated on the wicker bench with her, smiled sadly and said, "You know what they're like. When they are together they do things they wouldn't think of on their own."

Peter, standing nearby with his pipe in hand, observed, "I've very carefully explained the danger to George."

"I've done the same with Sarah," Betty said. "But there they were. I wish Roland were home more often. Sarah needs her father to take a firm hand with her. But when he is here he does just the opposite. No matter what I say, she can do no wrong."

"It's because he's away so much," Margaret said. "It's touching, the way he enjoys being with Sarah when he's home."

Betty nodded. "And Sarah is always at her best then. She already knows how to twist her father around her finger."

Peter Osborne smiled. "Most of your sex pick up that trick fairly young. We're never really on guard against it."

Margaret said, "I'll keep a closer eye on them. I've been busy lately putting together the copy for the club yearbook. But I will try to supervise them more closely."

"It isn't solely your responsibility," Betty admitted. "I depend on Mrs. Doherty to take my place when I'm at work. But it's not the same as being here myself."

Always the optimist, Margaret Osborne smiled and said, "I'm sure we're making too much about this. I'm sure they won't go down there again."

"I hope not," Betty, not so hopeful, said in a taut voice.

Sarah's perverse behavior continued to concern her. And she especially worried about her little girl's scornful attitude towards Mrs. Doherty and to the occasional handyman, Hank Brenner, urging Sarah to be more respectful to them.

Sarah glanced from the television program she was watching to comment coldly, "They're only servants!"

Betty snapped the television set off sharply and said, "Don't let me ever hear you talk like that again! You must be respectful of older people even when they are working for you."

"Older people are *dumb*!" Sarah said.

Betty spent a full half-hour talking to the child and trying to instill in her some respect for her elders. She was shocked by Sarah's formed attitude and worried that it might become worse when she went to school and picked up other ideas from her peers.

Mrs. Doherty was more hopeful. She said, "You

mark my words. Come the fall and the little one goes to school, and she'll shape up as nice as you'd wish."

"Then I can't wait for school to begin," Betty said. The short experiment she'd had in sending Sarah to a local kindergarten had ended when Sarah had stubbornly refused to attend, claiming it was all too silly. Roland had, as usual, agreed that the experience probably was doing her more harm than good. But now formal schooling could not be put off longer. It was only months away.

Roland returned for one of his short intervals at home. The first night of his return, as they lay together in bed in the shadows of their room after a session of lovemaking, Betty began to speak of Sarah and her worries about her.

Her husband leaned over and, raising himself on a elbow, smiled down at her. "This is supposed to be *our* time!" he said.

"I know," she lamented. "But you're here so little, all these things come crowding into my mind."

"And I can think only of you and how good it is to be with you," Roland said and leaned down to kiss her gently.

She ran her hand along his cheek and gave a tired little sigh. "I'm sorry," she said. "I do love having you close this way. But Sarah is so important to both of us."

"I agree," Roland said. "I'm sure you'll be less concerned when September comes and she's in school."

"I'm counting the days," she said.

"I've made some enquiries," Roland told her. "There's a private school for girls aged six to ten in Menton. I'd like to see her go there. And there's a special plus. They send a school station-wagon to this area to pick up and return the youngsters. That way Mrs. Doherty wouldn't need to drive Sarah back and forth when you're at work in Boston."

Betty felt much happier. She said, "I've heard about that school. I was going to mention it to you. How did you know about it?"

"Fellow-passenger on the plane to Boston," Roland said. "You see, I keep Sarah's welfare in mind even when I'm not here."

So while Roland was still at home they went to the school and made arrangements for Sarah to be enrolled. Betty was much impressed by the young woman principal and those members of the staff whom they met. It seemed to her that their daughter would be in good hands.

August was humid and hot, and by an unhappy coincidence Betty's work load at the State House was heavier than usual. A number of paintings in one of the other buildings had been discovered to be in bad shape, having been overlooked for restoration in the past. She found herself working extra hours during the long, hot days with not even the help of air-conditioning.

When she returned home, it seemed there were always various crises to deal with. The refrigerator went out of order, Mrs. Doherty was in a state about this. Betty's efforts to get a competent repairman took three tries and two weeks. When that was looked after, Hank Brenner went off on

one of his numerous drinking sprees and so the lawn was neglected.

Margaret filled in for the absent handyman and not only did her own lawn, but that of the Ryan house as well. Betty was filled with guilt and offered to do her share when she came home after work, but the good-natured Margaret would not hear of it.

The children played peacefully and were suspiciously on their good behavior. Mrs. Doherty suggested that the heat had drained their energy along with that of the adults and so they were easier to cope with.

As Betty drove home from work on one of those very hot days an ominous thunderstorm broke just as she came onto the shore road from the city. The downpour was so heavy that she had to stop the car more than once and wait for the visibility to clear. The storm dissipated as she neared home, but she was left with a strange, drained feeling. A deep depression came over her for no reason that she could account for except the wretched weather.

Reaching her driveway, she parked the car and started up the back verandah steps. The moment she went inside and saw a tearful Mrs. Doherty standing with a hand on the kitchen table for support she knew something was wrong.

Taking a step towards her, she asked apprehensively, "Where's Sarah?"

The old woman sobbed. "She's safe enough, up in her bed."

"In her bed?"

"Yes," Mrs. Doherty said. "The doctor gave

her something and said she should sleep. I tried to get you on the phone but the line here went out with the storm earlier."

Betty grasped the old woman by the arm. "Don't talk in circles! Tell me what has happened!"

Mrs. Doherty touched a handkerchief to her eyes and nose and made a visible effort to pull herself together. She said, "It all happened about an hour ago. The storm began and I noticed that Sarah was not here. I went looking for her in the rain and met Mrs. Osborne looking for George."

"Go on!" Betty said tautly.

"We couldn't find a sign of them," Mrs. Doherty said. "And then Margaret Osborne thought we should go down to the lake!"

Fear shot through her. "No!" she protested.

Mrs. Doherty nodded. "We went down there and we saw no one. Then she spotted a rowboat out in the lake and saw there was someone in it. Despite the storm we took one of the other boats and rowed out there."

"And the children . . .?"

"Sarah was in the boat waiting for us and crying," Mrs. Doherty said, her voice breaking. "But the little boy was gone."

Filled with horror, Betty whispered. "Drowned?"

"Sarah says he became terrified of the storm and toppled over the side," Mrs. Doherty said. "We lifted her into our boat, and then Margaret Osborne helped me row back. In spite of what Sarah had told us, I don't think it had fully gotten

through to her. It was only when we reached the dock that she began to wail, and ran back to her house."

Betty sank into a nearby chair, "Oh, God!" she said in a broken voice.

"As soon as I got Sarah back here I called the police and a doctor," Mrs. Doherty said. "Then I tried to get you. but I couldn't get through to Boston."

Tears were brimming in Betty's eyes. "Poor little boy!"

"The police are out on the lake now trying to find the body," Mrs. Doherty said. "The doctor gave Mrs. Osborne a strong sedative and put her out as soon as he came. Then he called Mr. Osborne to come home."

"Too horrible!" Betty sobbed.

"The doctor checked Sarah and gave her something to make her sleep," Mrs. Doherty said. "You have much to be thankful for, ma'am. At least she's alive!"

"I know! I know!" Betty went on sobbing. And then she impulsively got up and raced up the stairs to Sarah's bedroom. The room was in shadow and the beautiful little girl in the bed slept peacefully, a sweet smile on her face. Betty could not understand why, but something about the child's placidity sent a fresh surge of fear and guilt through her.

Chapter Three

When she had somewhat recovered from the shocking news, Betty phoned Roland on the West Coast. He was torn between a desire to be with her and the necessity for being on hand for the opening of a giant power turbine which he had designed. Betty decided there was little he could do, and since Sarah was safe, he would be acting more wisely to remain with his work. She promised to convey his sympathy to their stricken neighbors.

She went over to the Osborne house and found Peter there with his older brother, who had come down from Boston. Peter looked ghastly and both he and his brother had been drinking. "Can I offer you something?" Peter asked.

"Thank you, no," she said. "I'd hoped that Margaret might be here. That I could speak with her."

"Asleep," Peter said almost harshly. "The doctor says she'll be out for a dozen hours at least. She was in very bad shape."

"Of course," she said. "And you . . . I don't want to say, Peter."

Peter turned away and filled his glass from a

bottle set out on the table. He took a gulp from it and coughed. Then he turned to her with tears in his eyes and said, "It's not surprising that Sarah survived. She was always the stronger of the two."

"She was very fond of George," Betty said. "I'm not sure how she'll react when she wakes up. This is bound to be hard on her."

Peter said, "I imagine she'll cope with it well."

"Do you really?" she asked.

His pale young face showed an expression almost of hatred. "Your Sarah is a strange little girl. I remember one afternoon when George wouldn't share his toy automobile with her, she waited until he put it down and then she deliberately stamped on it and destroyed it."

Betty gasped, "No one told me!"

"I wanted to, but Margaret wouldn't let me," Peter Osborne said. "I think it's something you should know so I'm telling you now. Sarah has a cold, cruel streak."

She stared at the grieving father, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. And then she decided that this indictment of her little girl was all part of his grief. He was venting his bitterness that Sarah had survived. She decided to overlook what he had said.

"Margaret and I warned them about the lake and the danger," she said. "I can't imagine what possessed them to go out in that rowboat. Or how they managed to get out to the middle of the lake."

"It most likely drifted," Peter Osborne said, taking another drink. "You could ask your Sarah who suggested going out in the boat."

There was an insinuation in his tone she could not ignore. She said quietly, "I will. I will ask her to tell me how it happened."

The boy's father turned his back on her. "If you don't mind. I'm not really up to talking," he said.

"Of course, I understand, Peter," she said. "Tell Margaret I was here." He made no reply to this, his head down, and she turned and started out.

Peter Osborne's brother, an older edition of the lawyer, followed her. He said, "I'm sorry my brother talked so strangely. He's a little drunk and this is a terrible moment for him and Margaret."

"I understand," she said.

"I'm sure that later he'll tell you that he's glad your daughter was spared," the brother went on. "Just now it's hard."

She sighed. "I feel so helpless. I want to do something. But what can I do?"

"Let them alone for a little," the brother advised. "Give them time to deal with this themselves."

"Yes," she said. "You're probably right." She thanked him and went back to her own house.

Early the next morning Betty phoned her superior at the State House and explained the situation, telling him she wouldn't be in for a few days. She was at Sarah's bedside when the child wakened and gazed up at her with a troubled look in her lovely green eyes.

"Did they find George?" Sarah asked.

"I don't know," Betty said. "I think not."

Sarah looked away, shuddering. "It was

awful!"

She patted the child gently on the shoulder, "You mustn't dwell on it!"

"He was frightened and he wouldn't sit down. I tried to make him but he wouldn't! Then he lost his balance and fell over. I tried to catch him but I couldn't."

"It wasn't your fault!"

"He was a silly, stupid boy!" Sarah said with a sudden fury which shocked Betty.

"You mustn't say such things!" she cried.

"I will! I will! He was a *nasty* boy!" Sarah said, her face becoming red as she squirmed under the sheets in one of her worst tantrums.

"Stop it!" Betty ordered her. Then begged her, "Please be a nice little girl!"

"I tried to save him but he was stupid!" Sarah wailed.

Betty called Mrs. Doherty up to stay with the child while she went downstairs and phoned the doctor again. She explained that Sarah seemed to be suffering from shock and was in a hysterical state. He promised to come by.

The doctor arrived a half-hour later and gave Sarah a sleeping tablet and instructions for the care of the girl in the days following. At last Sarah slept again and Betty was able to go to her bedroom and fall into an exhausted sleep.

The next few days had a nightmarish quality. The boy's body was recovered from the lake the morning following the accident. Sarah came downstairs and ate a little but she was strangely subdued and refused to leave the house. Obeying

the doctor's advice, Betty allowed her to do as she wished.

Several times she found her daughter at the window which looked out on the Osborne house, staring over there and watching whatever went on. Betty continued to be alarmed that the tragedy might have a traumatic effect on her daughter which could last a lifetime.

The funeral for little George was held in the village and Betty went to the church alone. At the cemetery, Peter Osborne's brother came over to her following the burial service.

The older man glanced back to where his brother was helping Margaret into the mourner's limousine and told her, "You can see that Margaret is still in very bad shape."

"I know," she said sadly.

"Also, they are moving into Boston to live with my parents for a time," the brother said quietly. "I have an idea they'll never return to Bedford. The house will probably be put up for sale."

"If they do I'll miss them, they were good friends. But I understand."

The brother nodded. "There is one thing more."

"Yes?"

"Peter said he did not wish you to make any efforts to see Margaret. Nor does he wish to talk with you."

She gasped, "Surely they can't blame *me* for what happened?"

"No," he said. "But perhaps having you around would be a painful reminder of the tragedy. I'm not sure what his meaning is, I'm merely relaying

his message."

"My little girl has suffered," she told him. "She has fits of hysteria and nightmares. She hasn't had a single night's sleep without drugs since it happened."

"You have my sympathy," Peter's brother said. "They'll be waiting for me. If you'll excuse me, I must be going." He left her to get in the limousine with the stricken parents and be driven off.

Betty turned to leave and was surprised to find herself confronted by Hank Brenner, the drunken handyman, who had been absent for some weeks. He was cleaned up and wearing a shabby gray suit. He was shaven but he wore no tie.

She said, "I didn't expect to see you here!"

His eyes were fixed on hers in a strange fashion. "I felt I should come."

"I'm sure the Osbornes would appreciate it."

"They didn't see me," the handyman said, glancing at the grave. "But I knew the little fellow and it seemed right I should be here."

"I understand," she said. "We've missed you. We've had a time trying to get the lawn done."

"I'll be back tomorrow," he said, looking guilty. "I had one of my sick spells."

"I see," she said. She told him about the Osbornes not returning to their house.

"I don't blame them," was his comment. "How's your little girl?"

"Still under a great strain," she said. "I'm worried about her."

Hank nodded. "She had quite an experience. Probably the first death she's ever known."

"I think it is," she agreed. "And she is definitely stunned by it all."

"Must have been a bad moment when she saw the little fellow drown," the handyman said.

"Yes. I'm trying to keep her mind off it."

"That would be wise," he said. Then he nodded and said in an awkward fashion, "I'll come around tomorrow. I'll be there regularly for the rest of the summer." And he walked away.

Betty watched him go with a feeling of puzzlement. She could never quite understand him. He was a strange mixture of vagrant and a man of fine background. He seemed to waver between the two in such a fashion that he was completely unpredictable. It was evident he'd felt sorry for the Osbornes and had come to pay his respects in the proper fashion.

Things were made easier for her by the sudden unexpected arrival of Roland. He came into the house and threw his arms around her one afternoon a week after the funeral and said, "I had a few days so I took a plane, and here I am."

"I'm so glad!" she said.

"Daddy!" It was a high-pitched, happy greeting from Sarah who came running into the room to join them and to be lifted up in her father's arms.

"My baby!" he said, holding her close to him and kissing her.

From the moment of her father's return Sarah's state of health improved. She began to go outside and play again and she even occasionally wandered over to the Osborne property and moved about with a sad expression on her young face.

Mrs. Doherty pointed this out and said, "She's feeling bad about the boy. But she won't say so."

"I think you're right," Betty agreed. She was somewhat relieved to see a natural reaction from the child. Her fear had been that Sarah was keeping all her emotions contained and doing harm to herself. Better that she grieve a little.

Roland remained at home as long as he could and then took a plane back to the West Coast. Betty returned to work on a part-time basis of three days a week. In a few weeks Sarah would be starting in private school. Gradually the memory of the grim tragedy began to fade a little.

Hank continued to show up regularly for the lawn moving and any other tasks they might find for him. On one of the days when he was working, Betty happened to be home. She'd given Mrs. Doherty the day off so there was just herself and Sarah in the house. She was writing some letters and listening to the sound of the power motor as Hank worked outside, when all at once she realized the sound of the mower had ended. A moment later there was a knock on the kitchen door.

Betty opened it to see an unkempt Hank standing there. His stubble of beard was back and he looked red-eyed from drinking. He said apologetically, "Could I have a glass of water, ma'am? It's hot work out there."

"Of course," she said. "Come in."

He came in and closed the door. She went to the sink and drew a glass of fresh water for him and gave it to him. She said, "Would you rather have a bottle of beer or some ginger ale?"

"No, ma'am, the water is best," he said and gulped down the almost filled glass.

"Do you want more?" she asked.

"Thank you, no, ma'am," he said, passing the glass back to her.

"It's good to have you back on the job," she said.

"Good to be back," he told her, taking a rather grimy handkerchief from his hip pocket and mopping his perspiring brow. "Miss the Osbornes," he said, replacing the handkerchief in his pocket.

She gave him a quick glance. There was a hint of something almost sinister in the way he said it. She studied his beard-stubbed face and said, "Yes. It was too bad."

He nodded. "Yes, it was," he said. He hesitated and then he went on nervously, "I think there's something I should tell you."

"Indeed?" She tried to pretend calmness but there was a strangeness about his manner which was scaring her.

The red eyes fixed on her. "You know I was on a drunk at the time of that boy's drowning."

"We thought something like that was keeping you away," she said carefully.

He spread his hands. "I swear I can't help it. Something comes over me and I have to have booze. Maybe it'll last only a day, but it can go on for a week or two."

"You should try an organization for alcoholics," she said.

"Too late for that," Hank said. "I'm not liable

to live long anyway. But there's something I need to tell you."

"Please get on with it."

"I was drunk at the time the boy was drowned," he said. "Or call it half-drunk. I was on my way back to my place across the lake and I stopped on the path by the lake and took a swig from a bottle. And while I was doing it I saw the boat out in the lake."

She was stunned. "You actually saw the boat with my Sarah and little George in it?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you do something?" she cried. "You might have been able to save the boy!"

"What could I do?" he asked. "I was at least half-drunk and it was storming, thunder and lightning and the rain coming down. They wouldn't see me and I couldn't get to them!"

"You might have tried!" she accused him. "You should have hurried back to the marina and found a rowboat and gone after them."

"It would have been too late," he said, a strange look on his face.

"How do you know?" she demanded.

"Because of what I saw."

"What you saw?" she echoed impatiently. "What did you see?"

"It's hard to tell you this, ma'am, but I must," Hank said. "I saw your little girl push that poor boy over the side of the boat!"

She gasped in horror. "You saw *what*?"

"And when he tried to hold on she pounded on his fingers so he couldn't. And he dropped down

into the water. And she watched him go!"

"I don't believe you," she said hoarsely. "It was some drunken dream you had!"

"I wish it had been," he said earnestly. "It's been bothering me ever since. I meant to speak at the funeral, but I couldn't!"

Tears of anger filled her eyes. "How dare you come in here with this story?"

"I didn't want to," he told her. "But I felt I should for your good. You have a right to know!"

"I don't believe you!" she said shrilly, advancing a step towards him.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said, looking frightened.

"You're mad!" she said. "You're mad and accusing my poor little girl of being a murderess!"

"I told you what I saw."

"Sarah couldn't do a thing like that!"

Hank said quietly, "I think she could. I've watched her for a time. Seen her being cruel to that little boy. What she did in the boat was just the climax to what she'd been doing!"

"Get out!" she said. "Go! And I don't ever want to see you back here again!" She threw open the door for him.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he apologized as he shuffled out. Then he halted to say over his shoulder, "I'd be careful with that child if I were you, ma'am!" And he went on out.

Betty gasped again, a gasp somewhere between dismay and anger. She slammed the door shut and sank into one of the chairs by the kitchen table. She found herself racked with sobbing, not certain

what she felt or what she believed.

And then all at once she was aware she was alone no longer. Sarah had appeared silently from the other room and was standing watching her.

"I heard him," Sarah said. "I heard all he said."

Betty ceased her sobbing and stared at her little daughter standing there so motionless and solemn. In a taut voice, she asked, "Did you hear what he said you'd done?"

"He lied!" Sarah cried angrily. "I tell you he lied, mommy! He made it up! It didn't happen that way at all!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! I thought George was being stupid and I told him to sit still and he wouldn't! I had nothing to do with his falling into the lake!"

"You didn't in any way touch him?"

"No," Sarah said earnestly. "I reached out to him as he fell in but I couldn't touch him. He was gone in a minute and he didn't come up again!"

"Why would Hank tell such a lie?" Betty asked, bewildered.

"He's crazy and he doesn't like me because I wouldn't let him pat me or talk to me! He's a nasty old man! I *hate* him!"

Betty eyed her wearily and opened her arms to her. "Come to me," she said. Sarah obediently came to sit in her lap as Betty held her head tight against her breast. Betty sighed. "There are times when I don't seem to be able to understand you at all."

Sarah was sniffing in child-like fashion now. "I

didn't do it, mommy. I swear I didn't!"

Betty stared straight ahead of her and in a low voice said, "I believe you. Don't fret, I believe you!" And she knew she must. She could not bear to consider anything else. Hank must be demented, or perhaps spiteful, as Sarah had said. He might even have an eye to blackmail. If he came near the place again she would call the police.

That very night Sarah began sleepwalking. Both Betty and Mrs. Doherty were terrified at the first sight of the spectral figure of the little girl in her long white nightgown moving slowly with a vacant expression on her face. When she stumbled and woke herself up they understood and realized that this unhappy state had been induced by all the strain.

Sarah's bed was moved into the big bedroom which Betty occupied and in this way her mother was better able to keep a close watch on her. For several nights the sleepwalking was repeated and on each occasion the child made her way downstairs before waking up. When three nights had passed without it happening, Betty hoped this phase might have ended.

Betty was working an extra day now, which meant she was away from the house four days a week. When Sarah went to the private school where she'd remain all day, Betty planned to resume a full five-day work week. The Osborne house now had a For Sale sign on it and their furniture had all been moved out.

Betty missed the friendly couple and the little boy. And she was sure Sarah continued to feel

badly about George and the terrible manner of his death. There had been no sign of Hank since the day he had told her his macabre version of the tragedy which she put down to drunken ravings. In retrospect she was certain she'd smelled liquor on his breath that afternoon he'd talked so wildly.

She almost forgot about him until he was brought back to mind in an unexpected and forceful manner. She and Mrs. Doherty were busy doing some canning in the kitchen and Sarah had gone out for a walk. Within a very short time they heard her coming back screaming.

"What is it?" Betty cried and raced to the back door to greet her daughter.

A tearful Sarah came stumbling towards her and sobbed out, "That man! That nasty old man!"

"Is he back?" Betty asked in anger and was about to tell Mrs. Doherty to call the police.

"He's out in the Osborne's garage! He's lying on the floor with a bottle in hand! He's drunk!"

Betty put her arm around the trembling child. "Never mind," she said. "You stay here with Mrs. Doherty and I'll wake him and tell him to get on his way."

Sarah ran in to the comforting arms of Mrs. Doherty and a determined and angry Betty started down the back steps and across the lawn to the Osborne garage on the other side of the house. It was a detached one-car affair and the door had been left open. An excellent refuge for a derelict to hide in and drink!

Betty marched to the open doorway of the garage and halted at the sight of the sprawled

figure on the cement floor. He lay as Sarah had described him, sprawled out on his back with a half-empty bottle still grasped in his right hand. But he wasn't drunk! She saw at a glance that he was dead! Someone had taken a huge stone and brought it down on his skull with a crashing impact which had smashed it like an egg shell. Hank was not a pleasant sight to see.

She turned away and held on to the garage door, expecting to be sick. She waited until the wave of nausea passed and then made her way blindly back to the house. She took Mrs. Doherty aside and told her what had happened, asking her to take Sarah into the living room. Then she phoned the police.

When the police came, she went over to the garage with them. The officer in charge frowned as he finished his examination of the dead man and came out to her.

He said, "He's dead, all right."

"When I saw his head I was sure of it," she said.

"Did you hear anything earlier?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I wouldn't have known anything about it but my little girl was out roaming around and found him. She knew him from his coming to mow our lawn."

The officer said, "And then you came over?"

"Yes."

"He was dead drunk of course," the officer said. "He has long been a known alcoholic. But what killed him was the blow on the head."

She gazed at him with frightened eyes. "You're saying it was murder."

"That stone didn't roll in there by itself," the

officer said. "Nor did it strike him on the head. Someone used it as a murder weapon, likely some other drunken derelict who was with him. They may have quarreled about money."

"It would be too far away for me to have heard them," she said. "The Osborne house is empty."

"They must have counted on that," the officer said. "His pockets are empty and he hasn't been dead long. Whoever was with him must have taken fright after they killed him, and ran off."

"My little girl was terrified," she said. "She thought he was drunk."

"Good thing," the officer told her. "And you can consider it fortunate the murderer wasn't still lurking around. He might have attacked the child."

"I hadn't thought of that," she said. "But I've been afraid of Hank. He's acted strange lately. I didn't want him around."

The officer looked grim. "Well, you won't have to worry now. It's my guess we'll have a hard time finding out who finished him. These derelicts kill each other off every now and then. Maybe they do the state a good turn."

Betty nodded. "Is there anything else?"

"We'll want a more complete statement later," he said. "But that will be all for the time being. We'll likely be looking around your property, the outbuildings and such, for any possible clues."

"You have my full permission," she said. "Anything I can do. It's dreadful to think a murderer is lurking around and may possibly return!"

"I'd consider that unlikely," the officer said. "But you should always take precautions. This is a rather remote little settlement."

"Yes," she agreed. "To make it worse, my husband is away most of the time."

The officer nodded "Don't open your doors to anyone until you are certain who it is. There's a lot of crime going on these days."

Betty said, "You don't realize until it comes this close to you."

"At least you've had a warning," the officer said. "I may have to question the little girl. But I'll do it as simply and quickly as I can."

"Thank you," she said. She returned to the house while the police remained by the garage making preparations to move Hank's body to the morgue.

She tried to calm herself so as not to upset Sarah. When she reached the kitchen, Mrs. Doherty was there. She asked the old woman, "Where is Sarah?"

"In the living room, I think," the old woman said. "She mentioned something about going to look for her doll."

"Her doll?" Betty said. "She rarely plays with dolls. It has always puzzled me. What would make her decide to search out a doll now?"

"Who can say?" the old woman said with a shake of her head.

Startled, Betty went on to the living room and found no one. She then hurried upstairs to Sarah's room to be met with the unusual sight of Sarah in her little rocking chair with a doll cradled in her

arms while she crooned to it.

Betty slowly walked towards her and stared at her. Sarah gazed up at her with a blissful smile and then returned her full attention to the doll she was clutching.

Betty said, "I came to tell you Hank wasn't drunk. The poor man was dead. Someone killed him."

Sarah raised a hand to silence her and in a whisper said, "Don't talk! My baby's asleep!"

That night Sarah went to bed early and when Betty quietly paid a visit to her room, she found the child sleeping soundly with a placid expression on her small, lovely face. Betty went on to her own room, grateful that her daughter was showing so little reaction to the horrifying fact of Hank's death, but at the same time somewhat mystified.

She fell asleep after a long while but it was to be a sleep filled with unpleasant nightmares in which fear played a large part. She found herself struggling against some unknown foe, trying to escape some dreadful fate, striving to convince those around her that the dangers were real. And then she awoke with a start and stared up into the darkness.

All too clearly she recalled the murdered Hank's indictment of Sarah in the drowning of the little boy. And just as clearly she remembered that Sarah had overheard the indictment and had later appeared in a frenzy of anger. Sarah had shown a deep hatred of the handyman, just as she'd shown contempt for the little boy who had toppled from the rowboat to lose his life in the lake's depths.

As Betty stared into the darkness, frightening thoughts crossed her frenzied mind. Was there any connection between the boy's drowning and Hank's murder? Could Sarah have played a larger part in each of the deaths than anyone guessed? The possibility made Betty sick with fear and revulsion.

She desperately needed to talk to someone about it and wished that her husband was not far away on another of his projects. She had to face this disturbing situation alone! She must protect her daughter, but could she ignore all the grim realities that seemed to link Sarah with the deaths?

The little sleep she had was not much good to her. As a result Betty was in a miserable state the next morning. In contrast, Sarah seemed buoyant and happier than she'd been in weeks. It was a nice day, and as soon as the child had her breakfast she went outside to play.

Betty mentioned this to the housekeeper, saying, "I can't understand it. She seems to have completely erased that murdered man from her mind."

"Youngsters can do that," Mrs. Doherty told her. "I think it is a gift of nature to help them over stressful times."

"It surely seems to be the case with her," Betty said as she watched from the window to see her little daughter busily setting out a rim of rocks around a section of the garden.

"Be grateful," Mrs. Doherty advised her. "At least she's found something to keep her busy."

"Yes," Betty said, continuing to gaze out the

window with troubled eyes as Sarah gathered up the large-sized round rocks and carefully arranged them in a neat border around the several flower beds.

It was mid-morning when the stranger came to the door. Betty answered the door herself and found herself face to face with a tallish, middle-aged man with a somewhat puffy, weary face, the chief adornment of which was a medium-sized mustache. He bowed and removing a somewhat battered gray hat, darker in shade than his crumpled gray suit, he introduced himself.

"I'm Inspector Hayward. I've been sent to continue the investigation of the murder in the garage next door. And you, I presume, are Mrs. Ryan?"

"I am," she said, surprised. He was not the type she'd expected at all. He seemed much more like a dishevelled professor than a police officer.

"May I come in for a few moments?" he asked politely in his well-modulated voice.

"Surely," she said, standing back belatedly and opening the door more widely. "You must forgive me, I'm still more than a bit upset."

The tall man with the mustache smiled indulgently. "You have every right to be upset, Mrs. Ryan."

"Do be seated," she said.

"Thank you," he said. He'd been looking out the same window she had and so had seen Sarah at work on her rock border. He said, "That must be your little girl. The one who found Brenner's body?"

"Yes," she said, rather nervously. "Do you wish to speak with her?"

"Later," he said. "For the moment I'd like to restrict my questions to you."

Betty sat tentatively on the edge of an easy chair and the Inspector sat down on the end of a divan across from her. He took out a black-bound book and a pen, presumably to make some notes.

"Distressing business," he said.

"Yes," she replied in a small voice.

"I have a special interest in Hank Brenner," the Inspector said. "I'm native to this area. I knew him growing up. He had a lot of promise. Of course, he didn't fulfill it. He destroyed himself."

Betty felt a need to keep her hands from betraying her nervous state, and so clasped them in her lap. She said, "Then you must have known his family? I understand they were well-to-do and once had a leading position in the community."

"That is so," the Inspector said. "They could not have dreamed that their only son would die a drunken itinerant with the family fortune long lost."

"I knew him very casually," she said. "He came here to do yard work."

The Inspector nodded. "I understand that in his sober intervals he was handyman to a good many of the people around the lake."

"Yes. The people who lived next door also employed him."

The Inspector gave her a very direct look. "The Osbornes?"

"The Osbornes," she agreed. "Of course, they

are not here now. That's how the garage came to be open and deserted."

"Creating an ideal setting for poor Hank's murder," the Inspector said thoughtfully.

She felt her mouth dry as she managed, "You do think it was a murder, then? I wondered if perhaps he might have struck his head by accident."

"Never," the Inspector said. "His skull was smashed in by the blow of a heavy rock. The rock was in the garage behind him. It could not have moved in there by itself, nor attacked Hank on its own."

"I see," she replied uneasily.

He eyed her in that shrewd fashion again and asked, "Was Hank still doing yard work at the time of his death?"

"No," she said, her heart pounding.

"Why not?"

The question came too quickly. She hesitated, "He began drinking heavily a little while before George Osborne was drowned. Both myself and the Osbornes had to take over our own lawns."

The Inspector wrote something down and said, "And you did not see him again until after his murder?"

"Yes, I did see him and I talked with him," she said quickly. "At the funeral. He attended the boy's funeral and he asked if he could come back to work for me again. I told him he could."

"Did he come?"

"Yes," she said.

"And?"

She hesitated again, not daring to mention how

Hank had indicted Sarah in the little boy's drowning. She skirted around the truth by saying, "When he came to do the lawn, he was drinking and a little belligerent. I had to tell him not to return."

"Unfortunate," the gray-haired man said. "You say he was belligerent? What exactly do you mean by that?"

Panic surged through her once more. She strove to think of a proper reply without telling the truth, and rather lamely said, "I complained of the way he'd mowed the lawn and he lashed out at me."

"It doesn't sound like Hank," the Inspector said, staring at her. "At least, not as I remember him. He was never aggressive."

"That is so," she said, careful with her words. "I expect it was the drink."

"Yes, that would be it," the Inspector said smoothly. "That brings us to yesterday."

"It was shocking!" she said. "Sarah came running to me in a hysterical state. I went out and I couldn't believe what I saw at first."

"You didn't in any way move the body, or any of the objects around it?" the Inspector asked.

"No," she said sharply. "I saw he must be dead and I got away from there as soon as I could."

He nodded and wrote in the book, at the same time saying, "The police were careless when they reached the scene. There was some needless handling of the rock, leaving such a jumble of fingerprints on it that it is useless to us as evidence if we find the man who committed the crime."

"That's too bad."

"Yes," the Inspector agreed. "So now we can only try to locate Hank's cronies, any of the drinking companions he had, and question them. The theory is that one of them killed and robbed him after they'd quarreled about something."

"It sounds most likely," she said.

"We have to begin somewhere," was his reply. "But there are times when such a trail leads to very unexpected places."

"I'll be afraid here until the murderer is found," Betty said nervously.

The Inspector rose and put his notebook away. "I wouldn't worry about it."

Surprised, she also stood up. "No?"

"Not at all," he said. "I do not regard this as the type of crime which indicates a pattern of repeat crimes on the part of the murderer. This killing was most likely done in a moment of anger and drunkenness by someone who knew Hank and had a grudge against him."

"So you wouldn't think him a threat to any of the rest of us?"

"That is correct," he said. And he went to the window again. Staring at the still busy Sarah, he said, "As I recall, your little girl was in the boat when that poor little lad drowned?"

"Yes. It was a dreadful business," she said.

The Inspector was watching Sarah intently. "Must have been a hard thing for your child to go through."

"It was."

"And finding Hank, as she did, yesterday. That must have upset her badly."

"Yes," she agreed. "But she seemed to get over that much more quickly. I can't understand it, but I'm glad."

"I don't think I'll question her after all," the tall man said. "I'd find out very little and it could be even more distressing for her."

"That is very considerate of you!" she managed.

"You are an artist, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I restore paintings."

"Your little girl seems to have inherited some of your artistic talents and liking for order," he said gazing out the window again. "See how neatly she is arranging those rather large rocks in a border for the flowers."

She joined him at the window. "I hadn't thought of that," she admitted. "But you're probably right, it's an indication of a desire for a pleasant pattern. She's never done anything like this before."

The tall man looked at her directly again. "Really?" He moved away. "Well, I must be going, Mrs. Ryan. I'll make my report. The chances are you won't be bothered by us again."

"Do you think they'll catch the murderer?"

"It's doubtful."

"That's frightening," she said.

"In a sense," the tall man said carefully. "But we may find it difficult to get the truth from people, to get evidence to lead us to the killers. There are many murderers among us, some of them most unlikely types. You must grow callous towards the situation, Mrs. Ryan. We find that is the only way to live with such things." And he

moved towards the door and she saw him out.

When he left she went to the window, watched him stop and make some pleasant comment to Sarah, he weighed one of the heavy rocks she was carrying in his hands and returned it to her. He smiled at the child once more and returned to his car. Sarah went back to her border-building and Betty clutched the window sill, her head reeling from tension feeling that she might at any moment faint.

Chapter Four

From that day on Betty lived with a secret fear which she dared not divulge to anyone, not even to her husband. She felt that the dreadful suspicion which lingered in her mind had been planted there by the unreliable Hank, and therefore she was wrong in giving so much credence to it. But the dark shadow would not go away. Somehow she managed, as the Inspector had suggested, to cope with it.

Six years passed during which nothing unusual took place. Sarah became a day student at the private school and except for several incidents where she became involved in childish quarrels with other students, she gave little trouble. At twelve she had become a mature, young beauty for her age, remarkable in that she had none of the awkwardness of the average girl of her age. She was self-possessed and sophisticated beyond her years. Betty was repeatedly told this by her teachers.

Betty attributed Sarah's maturity to her habit of reading almost constantly. While other youngsters of her age indulged in games and watched

television, she was reading at an adult level. There was perhaps another reason for her growing up so quickly. Betty and Roland had separated.

Betty felt their estrangement had begun when she held back the important secret from her husband. No matter how warm their relationship was, she kept this dread fear to herself. After a while it enveloped her and made her somewhat frigid towards her husband who came home only at intervals. At one of his homecomings he told her of the secretary with whom he'd fallen in love and whom he wished to marry. Betty coldly consented to an amicable divorce.

Now Roland lived in Boston with his new wife and Betty remained in Bedford with Sarah. Roland had visiting privileges and Sarah occasionally visited her father in Boston. She said little about the visits but Betty had the impression her daughter rather liked her new stepmother. Betty dedicated herself more and more to her work. Mrs. Doherty remained a stalwart in the house. One of her brothers had become a priest and she kept his framed photo in a conspicuous place in her room.

The Osborne house next door had passed through several owners in those six years. It did not seem to be a lucky house. One of the men who bought it became ill and had to move. Another couple divorced and now there were new owners, the Winsteads. Betty hoped they would remain as they had a daughter, Velma, who was Sarah's age. Velma was not a pretty girl but she had a pleasant smile and manner. Her hair was a mousey brown and her narrow face was covered with freckles. She

was as awkward and gawky as Sarah was neat and poised. And while she had her broker father's quick mind in mathematics, and her quiet mother's pleasant disposition, she was not a brilliant student like Sarah. As a result she worshipped Sarah and became her constant companion.

Both girls attended the same school as day students and now that Sarah was older, she often walked part of the way home, leaving the school station wagon when it reached the main street of Bedford. It was natural that Velma should do the same thing and as a result the girls were often late getting home. Betty found this worrisome, especially during the dark afternoons of late autumn and winter.

"What has kept you so late? I've been home for almost an hour and I drove from Boston," she told a sullen Sarah one evening when she returned home at six-thirty.

Sarah impatiently threw down her school bag.

"We were just around!"

"You and Velma?"

"Yes," Sarah said, her green eyes flashing with anger at Betty. "*Her* parents don't torment her with questions about how she spends every minute!"

Betty faced the indignant girl. "You are only twelve, no matter how old you think you are! When I was your age my parents kept a strict accounting of my time and I expect to do the same with you!"

"That was years ago! Everything's changed!"

"Taking care of a child has not changed," Betty

said sharply. "And you are still a child. Where were you and Velma?"

Sarah sank into a nearby chair and pouted. "We went to the shopping center and spent some time in all the stores there."

"You know I don't approve of that!"

"What harm is it?" Sarah wanted to know.

"The shopping malls seem to be gathering places for all sorts of unpleasant people," Betty said. "The first thing you know, you'll have some man following you or you'll get into some other kind of trouble."

"No one pays any attention to us!"

"So you think," Betty said. "But there have been a lot of nasty things happening lately—shoplifting and people being robbed. All at the shopping mall. I don't want you hanging around there."

"But everybody goes there!" Sarah told her.

"And you can go when you have me with you," Betty said. "I just don't want you going there alone."

Defiantly she retorted, "I wasn't alone. I was with Velma!"

"That doesn't count!" Betty warned her.

The argument was brought to an end by Mrs. Doherty sticking her head through the doorway and telling them, "Dinner is ready and waiting for those who want it!"

With that the discussion was dropped for the moment. But a few nights later Betty went over to have after-dinner drinks with Robert and Anita Winstead, and it was natural that they should

discuss their children.

Betty said, "I understand Velma has been getting home late along with my Sarah."

"If one is late you can be sure the other one is with her," Anita said as they enjoyed the privacy of the living room for their drinks.

"Your girl is a natural leader," stout Robert Winstead said. "And ours is a follower. We've noticed that."

Betty said, "I hope Sarah is a good influence on Velma."

"She's bound to be," Anita said. "She's your daughter."

Betty smiled ruefully. "I don't know if that counts too much."

The balding, stout Bob Winstead, who had an obvious crush on Betty, said, "It counts a great deal! Sarah is a little charmer. We're happy about their being friends."

"I'm not happy about their coming home so late," she said. "Especially on these dark nights."

"That worries me as well," Anita Winstead said with a sigh. "But Robert thinks it's all right."

The stout man poured himself a fresh drink. "Any more for your two?"

"No, thanks," Betty said. "One is my limit."

"And mine," Anita told him. "I think you drink far too much, Bob."

The stout man raised a hand to fend off the idea. "I need to relax!"

"I can only tell you that our liquor is disappearing at a rapid rate," Anita said with concern. "I was sure we'd bought enough last time

to do us for a while. Now I find we're down to our last bottles of vodka and scotch."

"We entertain a lot," her husband said. "It takes more booze than you think to serve five or six people. And most of our friends, unlike Betty, are heavy drinkers."

Betty smiled. "I don't dare. I can't have a bad head when I go to work in the mornings."

Robert Winstead beamed approvingly at her. "You're a wonder! A fine mother and an artist as well! I think that husband of yours was a fool to walk out on you!"

"He didn't walk out," Betty said, wincing slightly. "We came to the decision that we'd both be happier apart."

"I'd be happier with you!" The stout man said with a wink.

His mousey wife reproved him, "Robert! That's no way to talk!"

"Sorry," he said with a smile and another wink for Betty. "It just slipped out."

"I hope Velma isn't a nuisance, going over to your place to study with Sarah in the evenings," Anita said.

"No. I'm often out to meetings or over here," Betty told her with a smile. "I'm fond of Velma. She's always welcome."

Robert Winstead said, "Sarah has helped her a lot in her studies."

"I'm glad," Betty said. "But I do worry about them hanging around that shopping mall."

Anita nodded agreement. "There's been so much crime there lately."

"The papers make too much of that stuff," Robert Winstead scoffed.

Anita and Betty, who were seated together on a divan as he stood opposite them by the fireplace, joined at once in a chorus of protest.

"You're very wrong in that!" Anita said.

Betty agreed, "There's a regular epidemic of shoplifting and robberies going on down there. I don't want Sarah placing herself in danger of such criminals."

"Kid stuff!" The stout man said, enjoying his drink.

"Don't forget, a girl was raped in a car behind the mall last summer," Anita reminded her husband.

"They were kids from out of town," he said. "And who's going to rape twelve-year-olds? You're scaremongers, both of you!"

"Younger children than that have been raped," Betty warned him.

Anita said, "That's true! I think we should call the school and tell them that Sarah and Velma are not to be let out of the station wagon in town."

Betty said, "I tried that. But they have different drivers all the time and so it doesn't work. We have to depend on the girls."

"I'll give Velma another good talking-to," Anita promised.

Betty smiled, "According to Sarah, you never say a cross word to her."

"I'm at her all the time," Anita protested.

Robert Winstead nodded. "I'll vouch for that. I say you're both too hard on those kids!"

Betty looked up at him reproachfully. "I'm afraid you're wrong in that, Bob. In addition to the shoplifting that has gone on in the stores, there have been some really violent incidents."

He raised his eyebrows. "Violent?"

"Yes," Betty said. "Principally involving elderly women. Several of them have been attacked in the dark on their way to their cars or the street."

"I didn't know about that," he said.

"It's been in the newspapers but you never take any interest except in the financial and sports pages," his wife scolded him.

Betty said, "One old woman suffered a broken hip and is in the hospital now. She was shoved to the ground and her pocketbook snatched from her. They found the empty pocketbook later in a ditch along the roadway near the mall."

"And that's only one case," his wife said. "There have been others. They mostly seem to attack old women!"

Robert Winstead's florid face showed concerned. "Now, look here, I know what's going on! I'm not one of those ostrich types who keeps his head in the sand! I know all about crime! We have plenty of it in the area where I have my office in Boston. They walk right into a bank or some place and snatch briefcases off the counter and run off with them! Happened to a friend of mine last week!"

"Then you should understand," Betty said.

"I do," the stout man insisted. "I've been so upset I've had a gun in the house here ever since we moved in. I leave it for Anita to defend herself if

she has to. It's pretty quiet in this dead end by the lake!"

"You keep a loaded gun here?" Betty said, startled.

"I'd never touch it," Anita vowed. "Not if a burglar was taking all my silver right in front of me. I'm afraid of guns!"

Her husband glowered. "You'd better use it or you might find yourself dead."

"But isn't it dangerous?" Betty said.

"It's protection," he protested.

"But suppose the wrong person should get hold of it?" Betty asked.

"Who?" Robert Winstead scoffed. "The delivery boy with the paper? The cleaning woman? The meter-reader from the power company? Anita is the only one who knows where it is."

"I think that's wise," Betty said.

"I'll *never* use it!" Anita reiterated. "I don't know why he leaves it here."

"You see what I'm up against?" the bald man said. "And yet you two do all this worrying about the girls."

"I'll speak to Sarah again," Betty promised. "And I hope she will listen."

"She's a great kid!" Robert Winstead said warmly. "Wish she was mine."

Aware of the more than childish appeal of her daughter, and Sarah's habit of deliberately trying to enchant older males, Betty made a mental note that her daughter must be kept away from Robert's company as much as possible. She was not sure she could trust either of them.

A little later on Velma came in red-faced and nervous, spoke to them all briefly, and rushed upstairs to bed. Betty didn't think too much about it at first, but on her way back across the lawn to her own house she decided that Velma's behavior had seemed guilty.

But guilty about what? She tried to tell herself she was wrong, but the impression she'd received was unmistakable. She was rather surprised that Velma's doting parents hadn't seemed to notice it. Betty decided to speak to Sarah and see if she could find any clue to the other girl's behavior.

When she reached the house she locked the doors, put out the downstairs light and went directly upstairs to Sarah's room. Ever since her early sleepwalking episodes, Sarah had always had a tiny night light in her room. The door to the room was partly ajar and Betty silently made her way inside.

Sarah was asleep with an arm tossed over her dark curly hair on the pillow and an expression of innocent bliss on her face. Betty advanced a little further into the room and at once was alerted by a familiar smell that was completely out of place in her young daughter's room, the smell of scotch whiskey!

She moved closer to the bed and the smell of whiskey was unmistakable. Sarah and Velma must have been drinking! Drinking and smoking, since there was a hint of cigarette smoke mingled with the strong odor of the whiskey. Betty stood gazing down at her daughter with dismay.

So this was where the Winstead liquor supply

was disappearing to. Velma and Sarah must have stolen some of her father's ample store of liquor hoping it wouldn't be noticed. And it hadn't been until now!

Betty retreated from the room and closed the door. Then she went on to her own bedroom and a sleepless night. The next morning she was up early and downstairs before Sarah. She took Mrs. Doherty aside and in a low voice told her, "After we have gone out today, I want you to make a search of this house and Sarah's room!"

The old woman looked shocked. "Whatever for?"

"Liquor and cigarettes!"

"Liquor and cigarettes?" the old woman said incredulously. "You don't mean it!"

"I'm almost sure of it," she said. "But I don't want to accuse her. Not until I'm positive. So I'll depend on you to make a thorough search and let me know. Don't touch anything you find, just tell me where it is."

All that day she worried. It was a dark, November day and night came early. As she drove into her driveway she saw Mrs. Doherty standing by the dining room window anxiously looking out. Fearing the worst, she left the car in the driveway and went inside to join the housekeeper.

Her first question was, "Is Sarah home?"

"No, she's late again," the old woman said in a troubled voice.

Betty sighed. "Did you find anything?"

The old woman nodded reluctantly. "Yes."

"What?"

"A half-empty bottle of whiskey hidden in the dirty clothes basket in the upstairs bathroom," the old woman said. "She knows the days I do the laundry and must have thought it would be safe to leave it there until tomorrow."

"I was sure of it," Betty said. "Did you leave it where you found it?"

"Oh, yes," the old woman said. "I did exactly as you told me. You won't be too hard on her, will you?"

Betty's face was grim. "I don't know how I'll handle it yet. But it has to be managed somehow. She and Velma stole that liquor from Velma's father."

"They're just foolish children!" Mrs. Doherty lamented.

"I can't be quite that sympathetic," she said. "Stealing is a serious thing, and secret drinking by twelve-year-olds is appalling!"

"It's a great pity her father isn't here to help," the old woman said.

"No use trying to reach him," Betty said wearily. "He's probably away somewhere, in any case."

Mrs. Doherty went to the window again. "Where can the girl be? She ought to be home by now."

"Long ago," Betty said. "That's another problem."

"And the Winstead girl will be with her."

"I'll have to discuss this with the Winsteds," Betty sighed. "It's not going to be easy or pleasant."

The phone rang and Mrs. Doherty took it. After a moment she turned to her and said, "It's for you, Mrs. Ryan. A man's voice!"

With a sense of impending disaster Betty took the phone and nervously asked, "What is it? This is Mrs. Ryan."

"I'm calling from the Bedford Police Station, Mrs. Ryan," the man at the other end of the line said. "We have your daughter and a friend here and we'd like you to come as soon as you can."

She gasped. "Have they been hurt?"

"No, they haven't been hurt," the man said rather coldly. "But it is urgent that you get here. I've already called Mr. Winstead."

"Thank you, I'll be there right away," she said, and with trembling hands put the phone down.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Doherty wanted to know.

She gave her a despairing glance. "That was the police. They have Sarah and Velma there. I don't know what is the matter. But they've obviously done something."

She left Mrs. Doherty wringing her hands and hurriedly got into her car. She drove frantically through the darkness to the village and the brick police depot with its lamps on each side of the entrance door.

A police officer escorted her from the main lobby to a murkily lit side room. There she found Sarah and Velma, silent and shamefaced, on chairs in one corner of the room. Standing across the room from them was an angry Robert Winstead and in a chair at this side, weeping into a

handkerchief, a thoroughly crushed Anita.

Robert Winstead came to greet Betty with, "I'm damned glad you've come!"

"What is going on?" she asked.

"The police are trying to frame our youngsters," the stout man said, his florid face almost purple.

"What happened?" she asked.

Before she could get an answer from the excited Winstead, a door opened and a familiar figure entered the room. It was Inspector Hayward who had investigated the murder of Hank Brenner a half-dozen years earlier. He was the same gray-haired dishevelled-looking figure, only a little older in appearance.

"Good evening, Mrs. Ryan," he said. "Do you remember me?"

"Yes," she said, her eyes fixed on the rather sad, lined face with its gray mustache. "Yes, I do. You were at my house to investigate the murder of Hank Brenner."

"That is correct," he said. "That case is officially closed. But I have often wondered about you and your little girl." He glanced at Sarah who was sitting in the corner with her head bowed. "She's grown a good deal since then."

"She has," Betty agreed.

Robert Winstead came blustering forward. "Let's skip all this nonsense and get down to business. Are you going to dare to charge these children with anything?"

"If you'll be patient, Mr. Winstead," the tall man said mildly.

"I've cooled my heels here long enough,"

Winstead said, pointing a beefy finger at him. "I'm not intimidated by your two-bit police force. I'm an important man in this town and in this state!"

"*You* are not charged with anything, sir," Inspector Hayward told him.

Betty felt she must take over before Winstead made a complete mess of things. She said, "I know you wouldn't have our children here without a reason. I'm in the dark about it all. Will you please fill me in?"

"Gladly," the Inspector said. "You know we've been having a lot of shoplifting and some fairly violent thefts at the shopping mall."

"I know," she said.

"Tonight a woman was attacked as she went to unlock her car in a dark area of the mall's parking lot," the Inspector said. "She was shoved from behind by someone and at the same moment someone else snatched her pocketbook from her. She recovered, drove here and reported the crime."

"Please go on," Betty said.

"Shortly after the attack, one of my men on highway patrol saw your daughter and this other girl standing by the roadside, apparently ransacking a pocketbook before tossing it into the ditch. He stopped his car, asked them what they were doing. They left the pocketbook behind on the pavement and ran. But they ran almost directly into the arms of the mall security police who turned them over to my man, and he brought them here."

"It's all a farce! A coincidence!" Robert

Winstead shouted angrily.

Inspector Hayward ignored him and continued to address Betty directly, saying, "They were searched and we found they had the contents of the pocketbook between them. Both girls also had some small jewelry articles stolen from one of the department stores. The tags were still on them. And your daughter had a medicine bottle of rather small size which was half-filled with vodka. I have to assume the girls had been drinking from it."

Sarah looked up angrily, crying, "It's all lies!"

Betty told her in a sharp voice, "Be quiet!" Her head was reeling and she thought she might faint.

Inspector Hayward sensed her condition and quickly brought her a chair. "Sit down," he urged. "Can I bring you a glass of water?"

She sat in the chair dejectedly. "No," she said. "I'll be all right in a moment."

The Inspector said, "The girls deny the assault on the woman. They claim they found the pocketbook on the highway shortly before the police car came along. Their story is that the thief must have dropped it in the midst of a hasty retreat."

She nodded, knowing that Sarah would be clever enough to make up a good logical alibi, if indeed she were guilty.

She said dully, "And the jewelry?"

"The girls admit taking it, but they say they did it as a joke. On a dare, in fact. They say they intended to return the items before going home."

"There you are," Robert Winstead said with an expansive wave of his hand. "The girls have

explained. Why are you holding them like criminals? They've told you their story!"

"I'm holding them because it *is* a story," Inspector Hayward said with a grim expression on his weary face. "I don't believe one word of it!"

"My daughter is not a liar," Winstead raged.

His wife looked up from her hankie to plead with him, "Bob, do shut up!"

Winstead looked at her with hurt dignity. "Don't you want to stand up for your own child?"

Betty turned to the stout man and said, "The explanations are very pat. But I have many doubts. Would you kindly ask Velma where she got the medicine bottle of vodka?"

Winstead opened and closed his mouth, as if he had meant to protest and then changed his mind. He took a few steps over to the girls and in a quieter tone asked Velma, "What about the vodka?"

Velma looked up nervously. "We stole it. From your liquor cabinet."

Winstead stared at her. "Good God!"

Betty spoke up, "I also found a half-bottle of whiskey hidden at our place, also probably stolen from you. I realized Velma had something to hide last night, and then I found Sarah asleep and reeking of scotch. So we made a search and found the bottle."

Sarah gave Velma a vicious look and said, "You didn't have to tell. They couldn't prove anything!"

Betty told her daughter sternly, "No matter how you lie, we know you took the liquor."

Sarah looked confused, her pretty face

crimsoned and she said, "All right, we *did* take it! We saw you people drinking all the time and we wanted to try it!"

"We're adults! Grown-ups," Robert Winstead said in a shocked tone. "Children don't have the same privileges."

Velma looked at him contritely. "I'm sorry, Daddy."

Sarah stood up defiantly and pointed at the Inspector, "But he is wrong! Everything else we've told about today is the truth. We *did* find the pocketbook and we *did* intend to return the jewelry after we showed it around the school to prove we'd taken the dare."

Betty said, "I understood your first story was that you were going to return them before you came home."

Sarah hesitated. "I did say that. But what I've told you now is the truth. We'd have returned the things tomorrow."

Betty asked, "What about the pocketbook and its contents? What would you have done with that?"

"I don't know," Sarah said, very plausible now. "I guess if the police hadn't come along we'd have turned it in to the mall police."

"You see?" Robert Winstead said to the Inspector. "I still say you're making a lot out of nothing."

Betty asked Inspector Hayward, "What are you going to do with them?"

Inspector Hayward hesitated and stared at the two girls. He said, "I wish I could believe them."

"Why shouldn't you?" Winstead asked aggressively.

"Please, Bob!" Anita Winstead pleaded.

"But you aren't convinced, are you, Inspector?" Betty said quietly.

"No, I am not," he said.

"So?" Betty asked.

"The woman who was attacked is unable to identify her attackers, but she thought she heard young, thin voices as they fled. That proves nothing. So it is very likely we can't directly link the girls with the theft."

"And the jewelry?" Betty said.

"The stores in the mall dislike prosecuting minors," the Inspector said. "As long as the goods are returned and you undertake the responsibility of keeping them out of the mall unless they are in your company, they will not press charges."

"Thank you," Betty said, some of her tension easing.

The Inspector nodded. "I often wondered if our paths might cross again. If I would ever see this young lady again." He glanced at Sarah. "And so I have."

"You're going to let them go?" Robert Winstead hopefully.

"Let us say I'm going to parole them in your custody," the inspector said. "They must be at home by dark. They must not appear in the mall without an adult. And they must avoid any further trouble with the law. The matter of the stolen liquor is your personal concern. I should surely punish them for it."

"We will, I promise," Betty said, rising. "I thank you."

So an uneasy truce was established. Betty and Anita took responsibility on alternate days for meeting the girls at the school and driving them home. This meant that Betty had to reduce her working schedule to three days once again, but it seemed the only logical answer. Both she and Velma's parents lectured the two girls on the dangers of alcohol and extracted their promise not to experiment again.

To back this up, Robert Winstead installed a liquor cabinet which could be locked. So all seemed well, considering the hazard in which the girls had placed themselves. Betty tired of trying to reach her ex-husband on the phone and so wrote him a long letter explaining what had happened, and stating that she was seriously concerned about Sarah's behavior.

And she was. She fully believed the two girls had been responsible for the attack on the woman whose pocketbook was in their possession, and perhaps for some of the other cruel attacks on old ladies. She was convinced that the two had been playing a game of shoplifting in which neither of them planned to return any goods. She also was certain that Inspector Hayward believed all these things as well.

The things that had happened in the past still haunted her—the mysterious circumstances in the deaths of little George and the drunken Hank. Though she tried to keep these beneath the surface of her thoughts, they continued to torment her.

She wanted desperately to believe in Sarah's innocence, but it had come to the point where she was living in a state of constant apprehension.

Betty also noticed a difference in the friendship between Sarah and Velma. It was clear to her that the two were not nearly as close as they had been. When she questioned Sarah about this, she received only curt replies.

"Velma's too much of a drip!" was one common expression of disgust Sarah used for her former close friend.

"You seemed to like her well enough a little while ago," Betty protested.

Sarah's reply was a shrug and, "I'm tired of her!"

Betty found herself bothered and sometimes embarrassed by her daughter's attitude. Often when she drove the two girls home from school, Sarah would go out of her way to taunt Velma about anything which came into her head. Several times Betty knew Velma was near tears. The plain, mousey-haired girl still clearly admired Sarah and wanted her friendship. But none of her overtures of having her father or mother take them to the movies or to plays in Boston worked very well. Sarah offered Velma only a grudging acceptance and hardly ever helped her with her lessons as in former days.

Betty was certain it dated back to the afternoon the two were caught at the mall. Velma had quickly admitted to stealing the liquor from her father, and Sarah had showed deep resentment at her confession. Knowing Sarah as she did, Betty was

sure this would be all that was needed for her moody daughter to hold a grudge against the other girl.

All Roland offered by way of help with Sarah was his monthly payment for her upkeep and an occasional phone call. On the receipt of Betty's letter concerning the mall incident, he called about ten days later, filled with indignation.

"Is this the best you can do with our daughter?" he wanted to know.

Betty felt a surge of anger. "You never come out here anymore. She needs a father's discipline."

"I'm busy," Roland said. "You expect me to send along money regularly. I have to work. You don't. You should stay home and keep a closer watch on Sarah."

"I've cut down to three days a week," she said.

"You should give it up altogether," her ex-husband snapped.

"I need something!"

"You have Sarah," he said. "She's your responsibility and you're failing her."

"Let's have no more recrimination," she said wearily. "You know as well as I do that Sarah has always been a difficult child. She needs you to talk to her seriously. I think she misses you."

"The last time I came to see her she hardly remained in the house ten minutes before she ran off next door. I consider the visit wasted time."

"Give her another chance," Betty pleaded. "I think she feels awkward with you."

"No reason she should," Roland said with annoyance. "I'll get out when I can. I won't make

any promises."

It was an old story. Betty doubted if he would ever journey out to Bedford again. He felt that as long as he sent money for child support he was doing all that was needed.

The days went on and now it was early December. Betty seldom saw the Winsteds except when she dropped Velma off at their place. Sarah went over there only rarely. The rest of her free time was spent in solitary walks by the lake or in reading. Betty was aware that her child was reclusive to an unusual degree, except when she had the chance to charm older men.

One December afternoon after she'd brought the two girls home, Sarah went off by herself. A phone call came for her from the school about the annual Christmas party and Betty went to look for her. She was nowhere to be found in the house. Worried, Betty went over and glanced out the window at the neighboring house just in time to see Sarah hurriedly leave by the Winsteds' back door and rush off along the path which led to the lake.

Betty was immediately worried since it was dark. She wondered why her daughter had made a visit to Velma's and then left so suddenly. She asked Mrs. Doherty if Sarah had mentioned where she might be going.

Mrs. Doherty, busy preparing the evening meal, shook her head. "No," the old woman said. "She just dropped her books and ran off!"

"I think she went walking down by the lake," Betty worried. "I wish she wouldn't do such things. It could be dangerous."

"You know what she's like," Mrs. Doherty said.

As she anxiously waited for Sarah to return, Betty heard the Winstead car as it came in to their driveway. She glanced out the window and saw Robert Winstead and his wife getting out. Evidently Velma had been home alone when Sarah visited her. This did not ease her mind; she worried about what the girls might have been up to.

The next thing she knew, she heard a knocking and shouting at the back door. She hurried to the door and opened it, and was confronted by a pale Robert Winstead still in his hat and topcoat.

"What's wrong, Bob?" she asked, shocked by his appearance and manner.

"Something terrible!" he said weakly. He stumbled and she had to quickly catch him and support him. She brought him inside and called for Mrs. Doherty to bring her a glass of brandy for the stricken man. Then she guided him to the nearest chair. He sank down in a dazed manner.

He glanced up at her. "It's Velma! We found her just now! She found my gun and somehow it went off and put a bullet through her heart! She's dead!" He bent over with his head in his hands and sobbed.

Horried, Betty gave him the brandy which Mrs. Doherty had brought and said, "Drink this, at once!"

He obeyed her. Then he quavered, "I must go back to Anita. She was there holding her in her arms, like a crazy woman. She wasn't crying or anything, acting like nothing had happened!"

"Are you sure Velma is dead?"

"Yes, I checked," he said brokenly. "Will you call the police? I must get back to Anita!" He got up unsteadily and made a weaving exit.

Mrs. Doherty crossed herself and whimpered, "God save us!"

Betty, trembling and in a kind of daze, went to the phone and called the police, telling them there had been an accidental shooting at the Winstead house. Then she turned away from the phone and for the first time she remembered—remembered Sarah furtively running out of the back door of the house! She closed her eyes and uttered a small moan. Then she dashed into the kitchen, found an old coat and told Mrs. Doherty, "I'll be back in a few minutes!"

She headed straight down the path in the direction in which she had seen Sarah go. She hoped that Mrs. Doherty would assume she had gone over to the Winsteads. In the confusion, the fact that Sarah had been absent from the house at the time of Velma's death might be forgotten.

But Betty could not forget it, as she ran breathlessly down the path to the very edge of the lake. She moved across to the wooden wharf of the marina and then, as her eyes became more accustomed to the black night, she made out the figure of Sarah standing at the far end of the dock where the wind lashed black, ugly waves almost over it.

"Sarah!" she cried. But her cry was lost in the wind. She ran out the length of the dock until she reached her daughter. Then she grasped her fiercely by the arm. "Sarah! What are you doing

here?"

The lovely, green eyes gazed at her with injured innocence as Sarah said, "I just came down to be alone and think. I was going back in a minute."

"You were over at Velma's house, weren't you?" Betty said, tears in her eyes, and shaking the child violently by the arm.

"Let me go!" Sarah complained. "I didn't do anything!"

"Answer me! Were you at the Winstead house?" Betty demanded.

"No!" her daughter said struggling. "Let me go!"

"I saw you," Betty shouted wildly in the face of the wind. "I saw you, you little liar!"

Chapter Five

Sarah suddenly stopped struggling and began to weep loudly. Her narrow little shoulders under her leather coat heaved convulsively. Betty herself was sobbing with anger and despair.

"Why are you lying to me?" she asked.

Between sobs, Sarah said, "I was afraid!"

"Afraid of what?" Betty asked as they both stood at the end of the dock in the windswept darkness with the icy waves lapping hungrily at the pilings.

"Velma shot herself!" the child sobbed.

"Oh, no!"

"I went over there for a few minutes, and she got out her father's gun to show me. While she was showing it to me it went off and I was afraid she'd killed herself! I was afraid to stay there so I ran away and came down here!"

"Why didn't you come to me?"

Sarah looked up at her tearfully. "Because I knew you'd only be angry and blame me!"

"What does anger or blame mean when a life has been lost?" Betty demanded in a broken voice. "Don't you have any judgment at all? You ought

to have come for me at once! I might have been able to save Velma's life!"

"No," Sarah said unhappily. "The bullet went right through her heart! The blood scared me!"

"And so you ran down here!"

"I didn't know what to do!" Sarah wailed.

Betty placed an arm around her daughter's quivering shoulders. "You're a foolish child. You should have come to me at once."

"They'll all blame me!" Sarah worried. "That inspector hates me, I know it! If he hears I was there, he'll try to blame me!"

"If Velma shot herself by accident you can't be blamed," Betty said, trying to placate the hysterical Sarah, as well as her own dark fears.

"But they will! I know they'll blame me!" her daughter said wildly.

As Betty clung to her there in the windy darkness she realized there was more than a hint of truth in what the girl was saying. It was an ugly situation. Certainly questions would be raised. It would be wondered why Sarah had run away from the scene of the accident. Her behavior could not help but raise suspicions.

At the same time, Betty realized that she was the only one who had seen her daughter leave the Winstead house. She had not mentioned it to anyone, not even to Mrs. Doherty. Sarah had behaved foolishly, but surely it was a mother's duty to protect her daughter. The best way to save her from this ugliness would be to forget she had ever seen her on the Winstead property.

She said, "I must get you back home before the

police come!"

"Will they arrest me?" Sarah asked tremulously.

"Of course not," Betty said. "We'll get back to the house before they arrive. I'll go in the back door while you go in the front way and hurry up the stairs before Mrs. Doherty sees you. Then undress, put on your nightgown and get into bed. I'll say you came home with a stomach ache and went up there without my knowing. That you were up there in bed all the time after you returned from school."

Sarah was shivering. "I'm afraid!"

Betty led her back along the dock, saying in a comforting voice, "It will be all right. No one saw you but me. No one need ever know!"

"You won't tell?" her daughter pleaded.

"No," she said. "It will work out all right as long as Mrs. Doherty hasn't been up to your room, and I don't think she has."

Sarah said, "If she did go up and didn't see me there, I can say I was in the bathroom."

"That would cover our story," Betty agreed, impressed by her daughter's quick thinking. At the same time it gave her a slight feeling of apprehension. Was Sarah a little too smart for her own good?

When they reached the house, Sarah went in the front door while Betty went around to the back to engage Mrs. Doherty's attention, allowing Sarah to slip upstairs unnoticed.

Mrs. Doherty was sitting bleakly in a chair by the stove when Betty came in. The old woman asked,

"Have the police arrived?"

"Not yet," Betty said. "I was out there watching for them."

"What a terrible thing!"

"I know," Betty said.

"The poor little girl!" Mrs. Doherty mourned. "Sarah will be in a terrible state when she hears about it."

"No question about it," Betty said tautly. "We'll all miss her."

"Where is Miss Sarah?" the old woman said.

"Up in her room with a stomach ache," Betty told the old woman. "I checked on her before I went out. She's been up there since she came home from school."

"A blessed thing!" the old woman declared. "So she knows nothing about it."

"No. I haven't told her yet," Betty said. "Better to wait as long as we can."

Hearing sounds of cars arriving she went to the window and looked out. She saw from the flashing lights that the police had finally arrived. She waited for a few moments to compose herself, then went across the lawn to the Winsteads.

It did not surprise her that Inspector Hayward was in charge of the investigation. Nor did it surprise her to hear him ask crisply, "Where is your daughter?"

"In bed in her room," Betty said, striving to appear calm. "She went straight up there when she came home from school. She wasn't feeling well."

"Can you vouch for that?" he wanted to know.

"Surely," she said. "I was here all the time."

The inspector's lined face was grim. He said, "This is a terrible thing that has happened."

"I know," she said. "Mrs. Winstead has often complained to her husband about keeping a loaded gun in the house. She didn't want any part of it."

"A bad practice," the gray-haired man in the rumpled suit said. "I've known two or three cases where people have been accidentally shot with their own weapons."

"Velma is dead?" she asked.

"She's dead," the Inspector echoed in a desolate voice. "You're fortunate your daughter wasn't with her. She might have been hurt as well."

"I understand that and I'm most grateful," she said quietly. "What about Mr. and Mrs. Winstead?"

"The doctor has given them both sedatives," the inspector said. "Mrs. Winstead is in a bad state. She may have to be taken to hospital."

"That might be best for her," Betty agreed. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I think not," the inspector said.

"Do you wish to speak with Sarah?"

"No . . . At least not now. I'll keep the option open."

"Come any time," she said in a low voice. "If there's nothing for me to do, I'll go home."

"Does your daughter know about this?" the inspector asked.

"I haven't told her yet."

His eyes met hers. "They were close friends. It is bound to be a shock to her."

"I'll break it as gently as I can," she promised.

"Do that," he said. "I will likely be by in the morning to ask some questions—such as, did Velma ever mention the gun to her? And did the girl ever speak of getting it out."

Betty said gravely, "I'm sure she'll be anxious to help."

The inspector looked around him. "This has not been a happy house. I remember it as far back as when the Osborne boy was drowned here."

She looked down. "Yes. Another tragedy."

Inspector Hayward saw her to the door and talked casually about Velma, asking whether Betty thought she was a courageous girl. Betty was forced to say that she didn't think so, that Velma had always been rather timid. He showed an interest in this and she realized that he might be attempting to betray her into saying that it was Sarah who was usually the leader in all the girls' escapades. And what that might suggest sent fresh fear surging through her.

She quickly said goodnight and hurried down the stairs and across the lawn to her own house. As she stepped inside, she looked back over her shoulder and saw that he was still standing there on the steps, a shadowy figure, watching her.

Betty's heart was pounding as she took off her coat. She had a dreadful sensation that he knew she'd lied to him. There had been a certain something in his manner in the last few moments they'd talked. He believed that Sarah had been there and was involved to one degree or another in the tragedy!

But she could not change her story now. Sarah

had acted rashly, not evilly, Betty told herself, and she must be protected. Her head was reeling and she felt nauseated.

Mrs. Doherty came to her. "What went on?" the old woman wanted to know.

"It's very grim," she said. "The police are there and the parents are distraught!"

"Just like before," the old woman reminisced, "When the little Osborne boy was drowned."

Betty glanced uneasily at the housekeeper and said, "I know. The inspector mentioned the same thing. That the house seems a bad luck place."

"I don't know what to make of it," the housekeeper lamented. "Just one dreadful thing after another!"

"I must go upstairs and try to make Sarah understand," Betty said tensely.

"Poor little thing!" Mrs. Doherty sighed.

Betty slowly made her way upstairs, all energy seeming to drain from her. She hesitated at Sarah's door, then went in to find her daughter quite calmly sitting up in bed, reading. Sarah lifted her lovely face from the book to offer her mother a questioning glance.

Betty closed the door behind her and leaned against it weakly. "You're reading!" she said incredulously.

"Yes," Sarah said. "It's a very exciting story."

"How can you?" her mother gasped. "How can you read a novel at a time like this?"

"You told me to get in bed and stay here," Sarah said with sheer guilelessness, all her deep emotion seeming to have vanished.

"Doesn't it upset you to know that Velma is over there dead? That you'll never see her again to talk to or go anyplace with?"

The green eyes showed contempt as the child said casually, "She was stupid anyway!"

Betty moved a few steps towards her daughter and whispered, "What did you say?"

"I've been tired of Velma for a long time," Sarah said in that all-too-familiar arrogant tone. "And she kept running after me and trying to be my friend!"

"You!" Betty said with angry contempt. She strode across the room and slapped the pretty face hard, twice. Then she stood there staring down at her astonished daughter.

Sarah placed a hand on each of her flaming cheeks and in a small voice asked, "Why did you do that?"

"Because you are *evil*!" Betty said in near hysteria. "You have no warmth in you and no love for anyone! Not me! Not your father! And not your friends!"

"Why are you angry? I only told the truth! I didn't like Velma," Sarah said in a hurt tone.

Betty gave a tiny groan. "Don't you have any feeling for that poor little girl? She loved you! I'm sure she did! Now she's dead! Gone!"

"I know that," Sarah said, looking at her mother in calm amazement. "I saw it happen!"

"I lied for you," Betty said. "I protected you. Now, I wonder if I should have."

A knowing look showed on her precocious daughter's lovely face, "It would have been bad

for you, too, if you hadn't lied. You'd have been mixed up in it as well."

"Perhaps that would have been better," Betty said wearily. "I want you to put that book away and go to sleep. And before you do, I want you to pray for forgiveness and have some sorrow in your heart for Velma, who was your friend."

"Yes, mother," Sarah said, carefully closing the book with a slip of paper in it to mark her place.

"The inspector was there," her mother said tensely. "He'll probably be here tomorrow to question you, so you'd better be prepared."

Sarah winced and in a matter-of-fact tone said, "The careless way she handled the gun, I might have been the one who was killed."

Betty stared down at her as the full weight of her words struck deep. Then she sobbed, knelt and placing her arms around the lovely dark-haired girl who was her daughter, hugging her tightly.

Sarah said gently, "I love you, mommy."

"And I love you," Betty said, tears brimming in her eyes. "It's just that sometimes you cause me so much worry!"

"I'm sorry," her daughter said meekly.

Betty kissed her again and, putting the book aside, tucked her tightly in bed. With a shaky smile, she turned out the bedside lamp and left the room.

Sleep did not come easily to Betty that night. As she tossed and turned in bed, she tried to reconcile all the conflicting emotions within her, and at the same time assimilate the shock of Velma's death. She was still awake long after midnight. And as she

stared into the darkness, she found herself again wondering about Sarah. What was the key to her strange temperament? She had seemed to feel no sorrow for Velma's death at all and she should have been shattered by it, especially as she'd been a witness to the tragedy.

Sarah had run off to the lake alone. It didn't make sense. It wasn't right! Any normal child would have come running, screaming and crying to her mother, informing her of the accident. Betty must face the fact that Sarah was not a normal child.

Betty phoned the State Building the following morning and told them she would not be in. She was seated in the kitchen having coffee when there was a knock on the door. Mrs. Doherty opened it, and a broken-looking Robert Winstead came in.

He came straight across to Betty and said, "I had to come by to see you."

She saw he'd been drinking and rose at once, asking him, "Won't you have some coffee?"

"No," he waved aside the suggestion. "I just wanted to tell you they had to take Anita to the hospital this morning. She had a kind of heart attack or something. They don't know yet."

"I'm so sorry," she said.

The stout man looked down. "I know. It beats all! We were so happy here! And now—" his voice trailed off.

"Velma would not want you to suffer so," Betty consoled him.

"If I hadn't kept that damn gun there she wouldn't have found it," he said, near tears. "I

blame myself."

"You mustn't take all the blame," she said. "You did what you thought was best!"

"I did," he said, looking at her with despair on his ruddy face.

At that moment, Sarah appeared in the doorway and as he saw her the stout man uttered a cry of pain. He turned and hurried out, slamming the door after him.

Mrs. Doherty gazed after him. "The poor man!"

"Yes," she said. And turning to Sarah she explained, "I'm afraid the sight of you upset him."

"Why?" Sarah asked.

"You reminded him of Velma," she said.

Sarah asked, "Will I be going to school this morning?"

"No," Betty said. "You will stay home out of respect for your dead friend. I'll phone the school. They'll understand."

Sarah looked at her nervously. "Will that inspector be coming here?"

"I don't know," she said wearily. "Do sit down and have your breakfast while I make some phone calls."

She went to the phone in the living room to call the florist, the funeral home and the school. Then she tried to reach Roland, but his secretary said he was in New York until the end of the week. She left a message for him to ring her when he got in touch with his office. His secretary promised she would deliver the message, but Betty had no great hope of

any immediate reply.

Sarah had barely finished her breakfast when Inspector Hayward arrived. The tall gray-haired man looked as rumpled and tired in the early morning as he did at night.

He asked to talk with Sarah, and she meekly came in and sat in a big chair. Betty stood close by her and the inspector stood facing her, a few feet away.

His first words were, "I suppose you feel very sad about losing your close friend."

Sarah looked suitably sober. "Yes, sir," she said.

Inspector Hayward asked, "Would you say you were her best friend?"

"I guess so," Sarah said. "She always followed me around at school. And we lived next to each other."

"She always followed you around," the Inspector repeated. And he eyed her sharply, "Didn't you like that?"

"I didn't mind," Sarah said, looking down at her hands clasped in her lap.

"But you weren't actually delighted with her attentions?" the inspector suggested.

Betty felt the need to interrupt, saying, "I'm not sure your questions are either fair or necessary. My little girl is still in a state of shock at hearing of her friend's death."

"I'm sorry," the inspector apologized. "I'll try to be brief." He asked Sarah, "Did Velma ever talk to you about a gun?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes. She told me her father had

one and she was going to find it and shoot rats."

"She told you that?" the Inspector said.

"Yes," Sarah said. "She had seen a big rat in their cellar and she was afraid of it and she wanted to kill it."

The inspector gave Betty a significant glance, then asked the child, "And what did you say to all this?"

"I told her guns were very dangerous," Sarah said dutifully. "And I said she had better tell her father to kill the rat."

"And what did she say?"

"She asked me if I would help her and I said I wouldn't," Sarah told the inspector, looking up at him from under her long lashes.

"When did this conversation take place?" he asked.

"Yesterday morning at school, during the study period."

"Was anything more said about the gun?"

"No," Sarah said.

The inspector sighed. "I see. And you didn't see Velma again after your mother brought you both back from school?"

"I had a stomach ache and went straight up to bed," Sarah said. "I didn't know about Velma until my mother told me."

"I can vouch for that," Betty said.

"Thank you," the Inspector said. He told Sarah, "That will be all. I'm sorry about your friend."

"Thank you," Sarah said rising quickly. She asked her mother, "May I go upstairs to my

room?"

"Go along, we'll excuse you," Betty said. Sarah lost no time in ascending the stairs.

The inspector stood for a moment lost in thought. Then he told Betty, "She answered the questions very well."

"She is intelligent."

"And she's growing more lovely every time I see her," he went on. "She has extraordinary charm."

"Thank you," Betty said. "She's also a very sensitive little girl, and moody at times."

"I can well believe that," he said. Then looking directly at Betty, he asked, "Do you think, by any chance, your daughter might have gone to her room and, when you weren't aware of it, left it for a time?"

Betty felt her throat tighten. "Why do you ask that?"

The inspector said, "Because I wonder if she didn't at some time go over to see her friend Velma without your knowing it."

"No!" she said, too vehemently. Then, regretting it, she added, "I was worried about her and so I kept a close watch on her. It was impossible for her to leave without my knowledge. Why do you suggest that she did?"

"Certain puzzling things about the shooting tragedy," he said suavely. "Nothing specific. The way the body lay when found, the position of the gun, some other small details. All have served to make me wonder if Velma were alone."

"Sarah wasn't there," she repeated.

"Then it's unlikely that anyone was with the

unhappy girl," the inspector said. "The accident could have occurred under those circumstances. The wound could have been self-inflicted. Yet I'm not completely satisfied."

"I'm sorry I'm not able to help you," Betty said, wishing he would go.

"I studied the two girls when they were at the police station," the Inspector said. "It was my impression that the bold one liable to take risks was your daughter."

Betty said, "And the clumsy one, more apt to be nervous with a gun and have an accident, certainly was Velma."

"You have a point there, Mrs. Ryan," the Inspector said rather grimly. "So I guess that once again we will have to leave it at that."

"It is a very sad business," she said.

He nodded. "Yes. I'm beginning to think this may be an unlucky neighborhood."

"Yes," she said grimly. "It would seem so."

He moved towards the door and then turned to say, "Well, goodbye, Mrs. Ryan, until we meet again." And he went on his way.

Betty sank down in one of the easy chairs as soon as he had gone and rested for a little, feeling as if she'd been working hard for hours. She was exhausted from the tension generated during the interview. Once again she felt they had been only a hairline from disaster. If the inspector had known that Sarah had been with the dead girl when the gun went off, she feared there was a good chance that he might have tried to charge her with the crime.

Once again disaster had been barely averted, but Sarah was bound to remain a problem. Betty thought bleakly of the future. She also knew the immediate days ahead would be difficult, with Velma's funeral, and visits to the girl's ailing mother in the hospital. It was a bad time.

Roland surprised her by calling back before noon. He seemed shocked and asked her, "Did I get the message right? Did the little Winstead girl accidentally kill herself with her father's gun?"

"Yes," she said. "You received the message correctly. Velma is dead."

Roland gasped at the other end of the line. "That's the very Devil! What kind of a house is that? This is the second time a youngster living there has come to a violent death."

"We're all very upset," she said.

"I can imagine," he said. "How is Sarah?"

Betty hesitated. "She's in a state of shock. I don't think she fully realizes yet."

"Death is hard for young people to deal with. You must give her time and be gentle with her."

"I'm doing the best I can," she said. And added, "Alone."

"I'd like to be there," he said with faint annoyance in his tone, "but I'm all tied up here."

"Roland, she needs you. Needs to see you and talk with you," Betty said.

"I'll make it as soon as I can!"

"You were always closer to her than I have managed to be," Betty told him. "Your leaving us as you did was a rude shock to her. I think it had a bad effect on her."

Her ex-husband groaned. "Don't start that again!"

"I have to say what I feel," she told him. "I think it is urgent that you come here and see Sarah as soon as you can. I haven't told you everything."

"What do you mean, you haven't told me everything?"

She said, "I can only beg you to come here as soon as you return from New York."

"All right," Roland said sullenly. "I'll phone you as soon as I'm back in Boston. Then I'll come and see you and Sarah."

"I'm depending on you," she insisted.

"I'll be there," he promised.

And so the conversation ended. She knew that the only reason she'd been able to extract his promise was her reference to not having told him everything. And this faced her with a new problem; when he did come, how much dare she tell? She decided she must at last share some of her suspicions with him.

The funeral was over. Betty had attended with Sarah. A lot of Velma's other school chums were at the simple service in the tiny chapel near the school. Anita Winstead was still in the hospital and unable to receive visitors. Robert was living in the small hotel in the village and appeared at the funeral drunken and pathetic. Betty thought he was going to topple into daughter's open grave before a friend caught him by the arm and drew him away.

The house next door was temporarily empty

again. Betty had to return to the State House to catch up with her work and so arranged for a local taxi to drive Sarah back and forth to the school. She gave the elderly driver full instructions and made him understand that under no condition was he to allow her to leave the taxi at any points but the school and home.

But the placid routine was not to last for long. One evening in mid-January on a cold, windy night Betty came home to find poor old Mrs. Doherty in a state.

"What's wrong?" she asked, when the old woman met her with tears in her eyes.

"It's Sarah," the old woman said unhappily. "She didn't want to tidy up her room. I told her it was your order and she sassed me. And I told her I'd tell you."

"You did right," Betty said, removing her heavy coat and hat.

"So then she began tidying up and not saying anything to me," the old woman said.

"Let her sulk," Betty said. "You have to be strict with her."

"A little while later," the old woman said, "she came down as meek as you please and poured herself a glass of milk and went to the living room to read one of those books of hers."

"So it worked out all right," Betty said.

Mrs. Doherty shook her head. "I thought she looked too smug. So I said to myself, 'That one's got something on her mind beside her prayers.' And I went up to inspect her room, thinking to find it still in a mess. But it was all tidied as nice as you

please."

"Where is she now?"

"Back in her room again," Mrs. Doherty said. "But I haven't told you the rest."

"What is the rest?"

"I went on to my own room to take a little rest. And the minute I went into it I saw that something was missing! The framed photo of my brother, the priest!"

"Oh, no!" Betty said in dismay.

"It was gone from the dresser," the old woman said. "And I looked down at the carpet and there was my poor, dear brother's picture torn to bits, if you please! And the frame and glass beside it, all stamped on and broken!"

"What a dreadful thing!" Betty gasped.

"It near broke my heart," Mrs. Doherty said sorrowfully. "It's the only photo I had of him and the poor dear is ill in a monastery now. Hell never have another one taken!"

"Can it be repaired?"

"Torn to little bits!" The old woman sobbed. "Like it was confetti!"

"I don't know what to say!"

Mrs. Doherty touched a hankie to her eyes and nose. "I have a mind to leave, that's what I have!"

"What would I do without you?"

"It's not you, ma'am. It's that one upstairs. I've been watching her. The prettier and more grown-up she gets, the more nasty she is. It's too bad her father isn't here to take her over his knee."

"I agree," Betty said. "I don't know how to repay you for your loss."

"There's no way. My brother's likeness is gone. I'll never be able to look on his good face again," the old woman lamented.

"Maybe it can somehow be replaced. Is there another print?"

"My nephew in Providence used to have one," Mrs. Doherty said with a touch of hope in her tone.

"Then you can call him and ask him about it. If he has one I'll pay all the expenses for having it reproduced and framed."

Mrs. Doherty looked a little less shattered. "I won't call him. He's deaf and never able to make out what I say on the phone. But I'll write him this very night."

"Do that and I'll look after everything," Betty promised. "And I'll see that Sarah apologizes to you!"

"She should learn to curb her temper," the old woman said. "I'll finish getting the dinner now."

Betty left the kitchen and went up to Sarah's room. Sarah was standing by the window looking out and the first thing that Betty noticed was the smell of cigarette smoke.

She said, "You've been smoking again!"

Sarah turned around, her pretty face stubborn. "I was not!"

"I can smell the smoke!"

"There's no smoke!" Sarah protested.

Betty brushed by her and went to the window, where she found the stubbed out butt of a cigarette on the sill. She picked it up and showed it to her daughter.

"What about this?"

"I didn't know it was there," Sarah told her.

"Why must you always lie?"

"You're always spying on me and looking for trouble," Sarah sulked.

"Do the other girls at school smoke?" Betty wanted to know.

"Most of them do," Sarah said. "That's where I got the cigarettes. That mean old taxi-driver won't let me stop at a store or anything!"

Betty nodded grimly. "He has his orders." And then she asked, "Why did you destroy Mrs. Doherty's photo of her brother?"

"Because I hate her!"

"She's always been good to you. She's like your grandmother."

"I don't *want* a silly old grandmother!" Sarah said.

"You've upset her terribly."

"I wanted to. She's always after me to do something!"

"For your own good," Betty said sternly. "And I expect you to apologize to her."

Sarah stamped her foot. "I won't! She's nothing but a servant!"

Betty felt her anger rising. "Don't let me ever hear you say anything like that again."

"That's what she is!"

Betty said. "She's a human being, and she's cared for you all your life. She must be shown respect. You have treated her disgracefully. So you must apologize."

"I don't know how," Sarah said, looking down.

"Just tell her you lost your temper. You're sorry

and you won't do anything like it again," Betty said.

"Oh, all right," her daughter said disgustedly. Before dinner that night she made a kind of sullen apology to the old woman. It wasn't at all gracious but Mrs. Doherty accepted it and peace was restored again for a little.

But the incident impelled Betty to call Roland as soon as Sarah went up to her room for the night. She reached him at this Boston town house and accused him of not keeping his word to visit her.

"I was going to call you tomorrow," he said lamely.

"Let's meet tomorrow," she said. "At lunch. You name the place."

He hesitated and then said, "Very well. The Union Club. It's just down the street from the State House. I'll meet you there in the ladies' dining room."

"I need to talk to you where we won't be overheard," she said.

"At this time of year the dining room for ladies is often empty," he said. "And if anyone should be there, we can make use of one of the private side rooms later."

As it turned out his prediction proved true. They had arranged to meet at one-forty-five, and the only two ladies using the room were on the way out as she arrived. She took the table for two overlooking Boston Common which he had reserved for them, and had a glass of white wine while she waited for him.

He came in hurriedly about ten minutes later.

"Sorry not to be on time," he said, smiling at her and perfunctorily kissing her on the cheek. "You look tired."

"I am tired," she said, studying him as he sat across the table from her. "You're putting on weight."

Mention of his weight caused a disgruntled look to cross his handsome face. He said, "You always know where to plant the knife."

"In good, solid fat," she said with a thin smile.

The waitress came in, and he ordered a martini, then studied the menus and wrote down their order for lunch, to be picked up when the waitress returned with the martini.

He said, "Well, what's all the fuss about?"

"You have to spend more time with Sarah," she said.

"It's almost impossible! I'm going to the West Coast again in a few days."

She eyed him gravely. "Put it off!"

He frowned. "That would be difficult."

"There is nothing more important than Sarah at this moment," she told him.

Still annoyed, he asked, "Since you were given custody, isn't it up to you to see she's brought up properly?"

"I have tried."

"And failed."

"I can only do so much on my own."

"That's an old story," he grumbled. The waitress came with his martini and took their orders. He nervously took a gulp of his drink.

Now that they were alone, she said, "For a long

while I've kept some truths about Sarah from you."

"What sort of truths?" he demanded.

She paused for a moment. Then said, "I'm terribly afraid there's something about Sarah that isn't—normal."

He put his glass down. "What did you say?"

"I'm trying to tell you I'm worried about her. I have been for longer than you can guess. I've tried to deal with her and protect her. But now I can't go on any longer!"

"Stop talking in riddles," he said angrily.

She looked directly at him and, leaning across the table, said, "The dreadful things that have happened at Bedford Lake may somehow be connected with Sarah!"

"You're crazy!"

"No, listen to me," she said earnestly. "Long ago, that drunken man who did our lawns came and told me he saw Sarah deliberately shove George Osborne from the boat and let him drown!"

Roland's shock showed clearly. He said, "You didn't believe him?"

"I didn't, and I kept it to myself," she said. "I should have told you but I didn't. Then not too long later the man was found dead in the garage next door. His head was crushed in by a rock. Sarah found him."

"What about it?"

She said with grim meaning. "The inspector investigating the death wasn't satisfied. I'm sure he thinks Sarah found him there dead drunk and

deliberately found a rock and killed him!"

"She wouldn't!" Roland protested. "A child like that! She couldn't! Why should she?"

"She heard the handyman tell me his story and she was angry and frightened. She denied it. But then he was killed by someone."

Roland was a ghastly white. He said in a low voice, "Are you sitting there telling me that you actually think our little girl did those awful things?"

"I'm not sure," she said, "I don't know. But I do know she was with Velma when the girl accidentally shot herself—or was shot!"

Chapter Six

At this point the waitress returned with their meals and a heavy curtain of silence fell over them. They waited until the woman had left them alone again before they spoke.

Roland said, "Explain!"

"Sarah was with Velma when the gun went off, and she ran away. I happened to see her when she left the house and fled into the darkness."

"You actually saw her leave?"

"Yes. And instead of coming to me and trying to get help for Velma she ran off by herself. I found her down by the lake shortly after I heard the news from Velma's father. Until then I didn't know anything had gone awry in the house."

Roland ignored the food before him and said, "What did she say?"

"She lied to me at first," Betty said. "Claimed she'd not been in the house. When I rebuked her and told her I'd seen her, she broke down and admitted it."

"What was her excuse for deserting the other girl as she did?"

"She said she was afraid she'd be blamed. That

it was all Velma's doing. She was certain the wound was fatal and so ran as far from the scene as she could get."

Roland gave a deep sigh. "None of this came out at the time?"

"No," Betty said. "I gave her the benefit of the doubt. I lied for her, but I cannot help but worry if I acted right. I say this because of her attitude since Velma's death. There's no hint of sadness in her."

"Are you telling me we may have a psychotic daughter?" he asked in alarm.

"She has always been different."

"Independent, yes," he said. "But she's a lovely girl and I consider her completely normal."

"You haven't seen much of her lately."

He looked down but still did not touch his food, nor had she eaten anything from her own plate. After a short pause, he said, "All these stories are based on circumstantial evidence, starting with the ravings of a drunken handyman who may have been out for a little blackmail. You should have told me instead of keeping it to yourself as you did!"

"I know that now," she said quietly. "It was the start of a withdrawal of trust on both our parts. And it ended with our marriage broken."

He shook his head wearily. "I don't say that. What is so wrong with our finding that we preferred to live with someone else?"

"*You* found that. I, unfortunately, have not been so lucky. And I know Sarah has suffered from losing you as an integral part of her bringing up."

"Get back to our original discussion," he insisted. "It so happens that this handyman turns up drunk, collapses in a nearby garage, and some other down-and-outer murders him and steals his money. The fact that Sarah was the first to find him is merely coincidental."

"Just as her being in the boat with little George and being in the house with Velma when she was killed by a bullet wound was coincidental?"

"The wound was presumably self-inflicted," he said angrily. "I think you're the sick one. You seem to have decided that Sarah is a murderess who's committed several killings!"

"I'm worried about her. I have doubts," she said. "I may be completely wrong. I have protected her at a considerable cost to my own peace of mind."

"I think you're making a lot out of nothing," he said. "I refuse to believe that Sarah is anything but an average girl growing up with average problems. Everyone has trouble with their kids these days but you want to label our daughter a murderess!"

"That's not true," she cried. "I simply think she should be seen by a competent doctor."

"A doctor?" He frowned.

"Yes. A psychiatrist who could somehow reach beyond the wall of her reserve, discover why she is such a liar, and why she is generally so cold towards people. I'm even affected by her attitude myself in that I don't show her enough tenderness. And you try to avoid her."

"Harvey Breck," her ex-husband said after a moment's thought.

"Who?" she asked.

"A friend of mine, a psychiatrist. He's a first rate man. I could take her to see him. Perhaps he might be able to help her."

Betty was at once hopeful. "That's wonderful! It's what I think should be done."

Roland warned her, "But I'm not going to tell him any of the nonsense you've told me!"

She protested. "Shouldn't you? Otherwise how can he know what's really worrying us?"

"I want him to find that out from her," Roland said. "I don't want him prejudiced by your suspicions."

"But the things I've talked about *happened!*"

"You give the incidents a special slant," he said. "Let him talk to Sarah first and come to his own conclusions."

She was reluctant to agree to his terms, but decided she had better compromise. She said, "I don't think it will be so helpful this way. But I'm willing to try it."

"Good," her ex-husband said. "I'll get in touch with Harvey Breck and arrange a private evening appointment with him. I'll take her personally. I don't want you in the picture until he's given me an appraisal of her."

"If you think that's necessary," she said.

"I do," he told her. "Now eat something. Our meals are getting cold." They ate sparingly of the grilled salmon, neither of them really feeling hungry. They finished with coffee, then left the club and went their different ways.

Betty returned to her studio, put on her smock

and began a restoration job on the portrait of some long-ago member of the legislature. She was beginning to tire of working on so many similar subjects. And the pace demanded of her was almost too much. She needed more free time.

She had reached the point where she was debating whether to give up the job completely. As she worked that afternoon a visitor came to her studio with a proposal that was most welcome.

Her visitor was a pleasant man in his early forties with prematurely gray hair. He had the general look of an academic, or perhaps someone in the arts. As it turned out, he was both.

"I'm Richard Frost," he said. "I was historian at the museum. But with the retirement of our curator I have been elected to take his job. I know you used to work for us, Mrs. Ryan."

She smiled at Frost and decided he had an appealing look of intelligence in his gray eyes and somewhat long face. She said, "That's so. I was with the museum quite a while before I came here. I began my restoration work there."

He nodded. "I've always admired your skill. We haven't had as competent a craftsman since you left."

"You're very kind," she said.

"My reason for visiting you today," he said, "is to find out if there is any possibility of your coming back."

"I think not," she said. "I've been divorced since I was at the museum. My daughter is growing up, going through a difficult time in her life. I've about decided not to work for a while."

Richard Frost looked sympathetic. "I can understand that," he said. "But you do such excellent work it would be a shame for you to give it up altogether."

"One is torn many ways," she said. "My little girl must come first."

"Let me leave a thought with you," he said. "I'd be willing to add you to the staff on a part-time basis, and I'd arrange the insurance on the paintings so that you could do the work at the museum or in your own home."

She brightened. "I've never had a true studio at home."

"It might be a solution for you," he said. "Allow you to continue working and at the same time spend more time at home."

"You're very kind," she said. "I'll think about it."

"Please do," Richard Frost said. "You probably don't remember me as well as I remember you; I was a very minor member of the staff when you were at the museum. But I am delighted to meet you again."

"And I to meet you," she said.

He moved to the door and paused to say, "When you've made up your mind, come and see me and we'll work out details. Or you can phone me."

"I'll probably come over," she said. "It's not that far. And I'd like to see the place again."

"We have new acquisitions, but one of your restoration jobs is a star of our collection. It remains attractive to most people who visit the galleries. I swear the painting looks more vivid each

time I see it.”

Betty found herself interested. “Which painting is that?”

“It’s called, ‘Daughter of the Vine Family’,” he said. “It’s a study of a lovely young girl.”

She smiled. “Of course. I remember it. I was working on it when I was pregnant with my daughter. I fell ill when the work was no more than part-way completed and I was frantic that they’d give the finishing of it to someone else.”

“But they didn’t?”

“No. I came back to it when I recovered and finished it before my daughter was born. I shall be anxious to look at it after all this time.”

Frost said, “It is one of several paintings we’ve kept on continuous display over the years. Don’t forget to be in touch with me.”

“I won’t,” she promised, and saw him out.

Betty thought about this offer for the balance of her working day. The more she considered it, the better an opportunity it seemed. She especially liked the idea of being paid on a fee basis for each painting she was commissioned to restore. Best of all was the suggestion that she could do much of the work at home.

There was an upper bedroom which had excellent light. Since she had no need of a spare room, she could easily convert it into a home studio. The small changes which would have to be made would be relatively inexpensive and she would have a new freedom in her working hours. She decided that when she next talked with her superior, she would give her notice. And within the

next several days she would visit the museum.

The following day she heard from her ex-husband. Roland called and said, "I've set up the interview with Dr. Breck."

"When?" she asked.

"A week from tonight," he said. "I'll come down and have dinner with you, then drive Sarah back to the city to see the doctor. I'll bring her back afterward."

"Very well," she said. "I'll try to explain to her why you're taking her to see Dr. Breck. She has to be told. It can't wait until the last minute."

"Be careful," he cautioned. "I don't want this spoiled. She mustn't be frightened. Give her the idea she is to take a kind of I.Q. test so we can plan her future schooling."

"I think that might make her accept the idea," Betty agreed.

"All right then, I leave it to you until next week," Roland said. "How has she been since we last talked?"

"Things have been surprisingly calm," she said. "I must admit I like these uneventful periods. She's caused no trouble at home nor have there been any bad reports from the school."

"I think you've exaggerated the other incidents way out of proportion," Roland said. "And I hope Dr. Breck's findings will prove I'm right."

"I want to be proven wrong," she said. "I don't dare think what I'd do if my worst fears were shown to be true."

"Stop worrying about that," he said. "Sarah is a beautiful little girl, entirely incapable of the kind

of acts you have suggested.”

She said rather bitterly, “I felt I had to fill you in on the facts that had come my way. I added nothing to them.”

There was a sigh from the other end of the line and Roland said tersely, “A week from tonight, then. I’ll be there for an early dinner at six. I’ll plan to leave for Boston at seven in time for the appointment with Dr. Breck at eight. It will be at the doctor’s house and that should be less frightening to Sarah than his office.”

Betty agreed to have dinner early, and the conversation came to the usual not-too-satisfactory end. She and Roland no longer seemed to communicate well with each other; most of the time they were in violent disagreement. But she did need his help with Sarah now, and she thought his plan of having her seen by Dr. Breck was a good one.

As she drove home in the late winter afternoon, she was lost in thoughts of how she was going to break the matter of seeing Dr. Breck to the girl. She didn’t want to wait until the last moment. Daylight was fast vanishing and it was a typical bleak winter’s day. Darkness would settle in an hour and the night would be even colder than the day.

When they’d first moved to Bedford, she had liked commuting. Nothing had worried her much. Now she saw it in a different light and the prospect of being able to work at home and not drive a long distance to and from work every day seemed more and more inviting.

She told Mrs. Doherty of the change which might come about and asked, "What do you think?"

"I think your working at home would be grand," the old woman said.

Betty smiled at her and started upstairs. She asked, "Is Sarah at home?"

"Came in about a half-hour ago," the housekeeper said. "She's in her room."

Betty went upstairs and stopped by the doorway of her daughter's room. Sarah was wearing a heavy pair of brown woollen slacks and a wool sweater to match. She was seated at the desk in her room doing her homework.

Betty stepped inside, went over and kissed her on the forehead. She glanced at the paper on which the girl had been working and said, "So you're busy with your mathematics."

"I hate mathematics, but I have to do these exercises," Sarah said disgustedly.

"I talked with your father today," Betty said.

Sarah looked up without enthusiasm. "What did he say?"

"He asked a lot of questions about you."

"He never comes down to see me," Sarah complained.

"Your father is a very busy man," she said. "But he is very interested in you. He's going to take you to see a doctor next week."

Her daughter's lovely face shadowed. "I don't want to see any doctor!"

Fearing the onset of a tantrum, Betty said quickly, "This man is not a regular doctor. He'll

interview you to decide what your best talents are, and what should be done with your schooling."

"I hate math," Sarah said. "Do you think the doctor might decide that I shouldn't have to take it?"

"That's his job," Betty told her. "I can't say what his attitude would be to your taking math, but there's only one way to find out. See him."

"I could ask him," Sarah suggested.

"You could, and I'm sure he'd give you the proper answer. He's a very smart man and your father selected him because he wants you to direct your study efforts in the most rewarding way."

"Why is Daddy taking me instead of you?"

"Because Dr. Breck is a friend of your father's," she said. "Your father will come here for dinner and then drive you up to Boston and back."

"I'd like to go to a different school," Sarah said with a sullen expression on her attractive face. "The girls keep talking about Velma and it's a bore."

Betty gave her a shocked look. "I hope you didn't say that to any of them!"

"I know better than that," Sarah said with a curl of her lip. "But I think it's silly to make such a fuss over her, especially since she's been dead for weeks now."

"People should respect their friends and miss them," Betty said.

"Do you miss Daddy?" Sarah asked, looking up into her face.

Betty blushed fiercely and said, "That's very

different. By the way, I may be changing my job and working at home."

"Working here?" Sarah said as if it were unwelcome news.

"You don't sound very happy about it," Betty said. "Why?"

"You'd be here all the time, then?"

"A good deal more of the time than I am now, but not all the time," she said. "I need to get away a few hours a week. I'm tired of working at the State House."

"Well, I think it would be fun to work in Boston!" Sarah decided.

"And have a long drive back and forth every day? It's hot in the summer and cold in winter, and on nights like this the roads can be very dangerous if there's a storm. The traffic is heavy at the Boston end."

Sarah had returned to her math problems and was plainly no longer listening to her. Betty gave her a tolerant little smile which she did not look up to see, and then went on to her own room.

Dinner was not especially interesting. Mrs. Doherty mentioned that her nephew had a photo of her brother which she had so treasured, her copy of which had been torn to bits by Sarah.

"He'll be sending it on to me and I'll get a print made here," the old Irish woman announced, not looking Sarah's way at all.

"That's very good news, Mrs. Doherty," Betty said. "I'll take care of the expense." She watched her daughter for some sort of reaction, but none showed on Sarah's face. She kept her eyes down as

she busily finished her soup.

After dinner Betty went upstairs and Sarah curled up in a chair in the living room. Betty came down after a while and as she descended the stairway heard that the FM radio in the living room was turned on. A voice finished an announcement with some words about “. . . dances of two hundred years ago.”

The announcement was followed by bright chamber music played by a string quartet. Betty was interested and surprised that Sarah should have turned on the radio rather than the television, and that she should have chosen this semi-classical program.

She slowly made her way down the stairway, halting a third of the way when she saw what was going on in the living room. Sarah had put down her book and left the chair and was dancing gravely in time to the music. Most startling of all, she gave the appearance of doing real dance steps suitable to the era. She appeared lost in the music; there was a dreamy smile on her pretty face as she moved around and up and down the room as if she were a member of some group of dancers.

Amazed, Betty watched until the music ended and Sarah stopped dancing. Then Betty came the rest of the way down the stairs and applauded her daughter.

“That was lovely! So graceful!” she exclaimed. “Did you learn that sort of early dancing at school?”

Sarah looked startled and guilty. “No,” she said.

"But you did it so well," Betty said.

"I just went along with the music," Sarah said, and turned off the radio as another piece of quaint dance music began.

Betty saw her resentment and apologized, "I didn't mean to intrude on you."

Sarah curled up in her chair with her book again, and without looking at her sullenly, "You're always spying!"

"That's not true!" she said, unhappily. "I can't help taking an interest in what you do. I thought you danced very well!"

Her daughter made no reply as she concentrated on the book. A despairing Betty went on to the kitchen and the more friendly company of Mrs. Doherty. It seemed she could never do the right thing where Sarah was concerned. She could not think why her daughter was becoming more and more withdrawn. It was very worrisome and she welcomed the coming appraisal of her mental state by Dr. Breck.

The week passed quickly. Betty remained home the day that her ex-husband was coming to dinner, and she was glad that she had. In the early afternoon it began to snow and the flakes came down fairly heavily. It didn't pile up too much but gave way to strong winds and a quick dip in the temperature.

"I don't like the weather," she said, glancing out the window.

"The roads will all freeze over," Mrs. Doherty agreed. "It's going to be that kind of a night. It's a

blessing you're not driving from Boston."

"Mr. Ryan will be coming down soon," she said. "You know he's to be here for dinner. He'll have a bad drive."

"He's a good driver, ma'am," Mrs. Doherty said. "He'll be all right."

Still gazing at the partially ice-covered windows, Betty worried, "The trouble is that he has to drive Sarah back for her doctor's appointment, and then bring her home again."

Mrs. Doherty's lined face showed concern. "I hadn't thought of that."

Betty turned to her. "I think if he comes and continues his plan to take her back to Boston she had better stay there for the night. She spent a few days with Roland and his new wife last summer."

"That would be the best plan," Mrs. Doherty agreed.

"It isn't important if she misses school the next morning. Not as important as the doctor seeing her."

Mrs. Doherty halted in her cake-making to ask, "Would you mind telling me what she's going to see the doctor about?"

Betty went over to her and said confidentially, "It is supposed to be sort of an I.Q. test to decide about her studies. But it isn't that at all."

"Oh?" Mrs. Doherty's mouth gaped.

"Dr. Breck is a psychiatrist. I'm very concerned about Sarah's behavior. I'm worried that she may need help, that she may be suffering from some mental trouble."

"Lord save us!" the old woman said.

"I know it's an unpleasant thought," Betty said with a sigh. "But the time has come when it must be faced. Roland has agreed to help by taking her to the doctor."

"She's high strung!" Mrs. Doherty said, neglecting her cake mix as she coped with the problem.

"I think it's more than that."

"The poor little mite has gone through so much," the old woman said sympathetically. "The divorce and all. And then the awful things she has seen. The little boy drowning, that poor Velma shooting herself and all the rest. It's no wonder she's so nervous."

Betty said, "She's withdrawn and sullen to the point where it scares me."

"And there are her tempers."

"Almost every time she is crossed," Betty said. "It's almost as if she's living an existence apart from us and doesn't want to be interfered with. That's not right, and I won't put up with it."

"Maybe the doctor will be able to help."

"I only hope so. It's apt to take time and a series of sessions with him."

"She's so pretty," the old woman said. "If only she didn't have those bad spells!"

"Well, that's why her father is taking her to the city tonight," she said. "But you mustn't let on you know."

"You can depend on me!" The old woman said and returned to mixing the cake.

Sarah arrived a little later and was full of excitement about the drive home. "That silly old

taxi driver put on the brakes too hard once and we skidded right around!"

"Is it that bad?" Betty worried.

"The roads are slippery," Sarah said, taking off her coat and woollen hat and shaking out her long dark hair. "Can I go down to the lake and skate for a while? It's a lovely afternoon for skating!"

"No," Betty said. "I want you to rest. Don't you remember? Your father is coming for dinner and taking you to Boston to see the doctor tonight."

Rebellion showed on Sarah's face. "I don't want to see any doctor."

"You must. Your father wants you to and you promised!"

"I don't care," Sarah said petulantly. "I'd rather skate!"

Betty decided on a compromise. She said, "Very well. You can go down and skate for a half-hour. But *only* a half-hour. And stay on the cleared area where the skating is safe. Don't go off on your own."

Sarah was already on her way to find her skates and put on her coat and hat. Within a few minutes she vanished, skates in hand. Betty continued to worry about whether Roland would arrive on time or not.

As it happened her worries were needless. He came a short time later. His first question when he took off his hat and coat was, "Where's Sarah?"

"Down skating on the lake. She should have come back by now. But she forgets about time. I'll have to go for her."

Roland looked disapproving. "Is it safe down there?"

"Yes. It's a community project. All the children and their parents use it," she said. "How was the drive down? I hear the roads are treacherous."

"They've sanded most of the way," he said. "You have to be careful about stopping and braking. But I'm used to winter driving. I don't mind icy roads."

Betty began dressing for the journey to the rink. She suggested, "Don't you think it might be a good idea to let her stay the night with you? It would be safer to drive her back in the morning."

Her ex-husband frowned. "That wouldn't be convenient, but I'll do it if the driving is really bad."

She tightened the belt on her coat. She said, "I only suggested it to make things easier for you."

"Your suggestions rarely do that," he said, turning his back on her.

She went out into the cold, windy night and scrambled down the path to the lake. When she reached it she saw that several lights were on but the frozen lake was deserted. She at once felt a rush of panic. She went out on the dock and stared into the near darkness for some sign of the missing Sarah.

After a moment she saw a lone figure skating in the darkness a distance away. She put her hands to her mouth and shouted, "Sarah! Come back! Your father is waiting for you!" She first thought Sarah would pay no attention to her but then she began skating back.

Betty reached out and took her daughter's hand and helped her up onto the dock. She asked, "Why did you go out there?"

Sarah took her mother's arm to steady herself as they walked back to the lake's edge where she'd left her shoes. "I saw someone skating out there," she said. "Someone I thought I knew."

"Who was it?" Betty asked.

Sarah was on the snow changing her shoes and in a distant way said, "A boy. No one you'd know."

"He would be very silly to go out on the lake where the ice may be weak, and you were just as wrong to follow him," Betty rebuked her.

"Please, mommy!" her daughter protested and stood up with her skates in hand, ready to leave.

"Your father is up there waiting for you to join us at dinner. You have to go to Boston tonight to see the doctor."

The child's pretty face became stubborn. "I don't want to go!"

"You must go," Betty said. "Your father has come all the way down here. He'll be in a rage if you refuse."

"I don't care," Sarah sulked.

"Come along," Betty said, taking her arm. "We mustn't keep him waiting too long, and you have to change your clothes."

While Sarah was upstairs changing, Betty joined her husband who was having a cocktail in the living room and confided, "She's in a rebellious mood again. She doesn't want to go with you."

He frowned, "I thought it was all arranged. That you had settled it."

"So did I," she said.

"Well, she simply must go," Roland said angrily. "If there is anything wrong with her mental state I want to find out. I think it's all nonsense, personally. But you started it and you had better see she goes through with it."

"I'll do my best," she said. "I think she will."

Their conversation ended when Sarah appeared coming slowly down the stairway, her hand on the railing. The lovely dark-haired young girl was wearing a stylish green dress which heightened her charm, but there was a strange expression on her face which made Betty wonder if by some mischance she might have overheard part of their discussion about her. She fervently hoped not.

Roland went to greet his daughter and kissed her warmly. Then they all moved to the dining room and the roast beef dinner which Mrs. Doherty had labored over for the occasion. Betty noticed that Sarah was unusually silent and thoughtful. Roland tried to cover this up by talking most of the time. But when the moment came after dinner for Sarah to leave she put up no arguments at all. This further puzzled Betty in view of her emphatic statements by the lake.

Roland said as they left, "If the driving is bad I'll phone you and we'll bring Sarah back tomorrow."

"Very well," Betty said. She bent and kissed her daughter and said, "Do what the doctor tells you. He will only want to help you."

Sarah gave her mother a cold look and went on out. Betty gazed after the two until they got in the

car and drove off. Then she went back inside with a feeling of deep apprehension. She was sure that somehow the evening would not turn out as they all hoped.

She chatted with Mrs. Doherty for a little, congratulating her on the dinner. Then she went into the living room and turned on the television. She'd been watching for perhaps twenty minutes when the phone rang.

She answered it and an urgent female voice on the phone asked, "Am I speaking with Mrs. Betty Ryan?"

"Yes," she said. "What is it?"

"I'm a nurse," the woman said, "calling from Danvers hospital. There's been an accident involving a car and a truck on Highway Ninety-Five. I'm sorry to tell you your daughter and your former husband have been injured."

The world stopped still for a moment. Beads of perspiration stood out on Betty's temples, her hands were clammy and cold. She tried to fight off the faintness which threatened her, holding on to the phone tightly.

Finally, she managed, "How bad is it?"

"Your ex-husband and daughter are both alive," the woman said. "But they are in the intensive care unit. We've tried to reach the second Mrs. Ryan but have not been able to as yet. We found your address in your daughter's purse."

"Tell me how to get there from the highway," Betty said weakly.

The nurse proceeded to give directions to the hospital. Betty made the drive alone, refusing to

risk Mrs. Doherty's safety just so she could have company on the icy roads. The driving was bad but she barely noticed it. Part of the time she sobbed in her grief and there were many moments when she prayed.

When she reached the emergency room, someone brought her a cup of hot coffee while she waited for the doctor in charge to give her a report on Sarah and Roland.

A big, burly man sat across from her in the room. Finally he came awkwardly over to her and said, "I want you to know I was the driver of the truck."

She looked up at him, her eyes brimming with tears. "Tell me about it," she said.

He shook his head in frustration. "I can't begin to explain it. The road was slippery so I stayed in the middle lane. Then this sports car came up on my right and I thought it was going to pass me."

"And?"

"At the very last minute, just as it went by me, the car swerved right in front of me! It was as if whoever was driving had deliberately swung the wheel around and put the car squarely in front of me. I couldn't help hitting it!"

Betty said, "It must have been the ice. A skid!"

The trucker frowned. "Maybe. But the State Police say there were no bad spots where it happened. I don't understand it and I'm sure sorry."

"You couldn't help if it the car cut in front of you in that way," she said. "It's a bad night for driving."

"It sure is, ma'am," the man said. "And I'm awful sorry. I called my company and told them about it. My truck needs work. It's in a garage here and I felt I ought to be here and see how your husband and daughter were making out."

"That's very kind of you," Betty said. "I'm sure they will appreciate it when they're well enough to be told."

"I've never had a bad accident before in all my driving," the burly man lamented. "I guess it was bound to happen sooner or later."

"I don't see how you can be blamed," she said.

"I'm more worried about your daughter and husband," the big man said. "I'm not bothered about what it may do to my record."

The nurse returned and, coming over to her, said, "Doctor Webster will see you now, Mrs. Ryan."

"Thank you," she said and followed the nurse down a short corridor to a small ante-room. Dr. Webster was waiting for her, still in his operating smock with his mask hanging about his neck and his blue cap on. He was a youngish man with a gaunt face. His expression was troubled.

He said, "Sit down, Mrs. Ryan."

She did and, looking up at him, asked, "What is the news, Doctor?"

"Not the best," he sighed. "Mr. Ryan has bad head injuries. I've just come from operating on him. I hope he may live, but I'm not by any means certain of it."

"I see," she said, trying to keep back her tears. "And my little girl? Is she badly hurt?"

The doctor said, "Her right arm has multiple breaks and her right leg is broken between the knee and the ankle, but she has no internal damage. She's still in a state of shock. But I see no reason why she should not recover completely!"

"Thank you for that, Doctor," Betty said.

"I've done what I could," the doctor said. "Her fractures have been looked after. It's now just a case of watchful waiting. She may come out of her coma in a few hours, or it could take as long as a day or even a week or two. The sooner she comes out of it the better."

"May I see her?" she asked.

"Yes. But you must make no effort to speak with her. It would be pointless anyway," the doctor said.

"And my ex-husband?"

"Mr. Ryan is in intensive care and his state is too precarious to permit a visit."

"You don't think he will recover?" she said.

"There is always a chance," the doctor told her. "One possible side effect could be permanent brain damage. I must warn you on that score."

She closed her eyes and prayed silently. Then she asked, "Did either of them say anything?"

The doctor said, "As I explained, your daughter has been in a coma ever since she arrived."

"And my ex-husband?"

"He was in the same state when he arrived," the doctor said. "But as he was moved off the stretcher he cried out a few disjointed words before he lapsed into unconsciousness again."

Tensely, she asked, "Could you make out what

he said?"

"Yes," the doctor scowled. He cried out something about the wheel. I think he cried, 'Don't! Keep away!' It was all probably a traumatic reaction to the accident. I doubt if it meant anything at all."

"True," she said quietly. But she was thinking of Sarah's strange behavior before she left and the stubborn look on her face. Was it possible that in one of her tantrums she had deliberately grasped the wheel from her father and turned the car into the path of the truck?

Chapter Seven

Roland died before morning, and Sarah remained in a coma for more than three weeks. During that period Betty lived in a kind of vague nightmare, subsisting almost entirely on liquids and tranquilizers. She visited the hospital several times a day, and managed to get through the ordeal of Roland's funeral, despite the bitter insinuations of Roland's second wife that Betty was largely to blame for his death.

She made an attempt to explain that he had made the trip because of Sarah's urgent need for medical help, but Roland's widow was not interested. Mrs. Doherty remained a staunch support and was her almost constant companion.

The doctors were puzzled and worried about Sarah's remaining in a coma for such a length of time. The specialist in charge told Betty, "Long periods of coma are not unknown where there are serious head injuries. But we have found no significant damage of that kind in your daughter."

She stared up at his grave, thin face and asked, "What do you think the answer may be?"

"We are baffled," he said. "It has to be

something to do with shock. Traumatic experiences of the sort she endured can produce strange results."

"But you do believe she will recover?"

"I sincerely hope so," the specialist said. "We are doing everything we can. We're making every test possible. Her fractures are healing nicely. But it is almost as if she were willing herself to remain in an unconscious state."

So the tense waiting continued. Betty lived in a kind of fog. She managed to make the hospital visits but otherwise she remained at home. She learned that Roland had left a sizable amount for his daughter's upkeep and education in his will. Sarah would have the best of everything if and when she recovered.

One afternoon when Betty reached the hospital floor on which Sarah's room was located, she was at once aware of a subdued excitement among the nursing staff.

Sarah's private duty nurse came to greet her with a smile and told her, "She's come out of it! She's conscious! She came around about an hour ago!"

Betty could barely answer as emotion choked her. Then she said, "How wonderful! May I see her?"

"Only for a few minutes," the nurse said. "The doctor is with her now. He said I could bring you in."

Betty followed the white-clad nurse down the broad corridor to Sarah's room. The specialist and another nurse were standing by her daughter's bedside.

Sarah's green eyes were open and they fixed on her at once. "Mommy!" she said weakly.

"My darling!" Betty said and bent over and kissed her on the forehead.

"Have I been ill?" Sarah said in a tiny voice.

"Yes, but you're better now," she said. "And just as soon as you're strong enough I'll take you home."

"Yes," Sarah said. "I'd like to go home."

The specialist made a gesture to tell Betty the exchange should end at this point. Sarah had closed her eyes again and Betty kissed her once more before leaving the room. The specialist followed her out.

Betty asked, "Do you think she's out of danger now?"

"Definitely," he said. "It's merely a matter of time until she makes a full recovery."

"When can I take her home?"

"Don't be in such a rush," he warned. "There are tests to be made. I want to watch her progress personally. That can best be done here."

"She seems entirely lucid."

"She is. There was no brain damage. I'm sure all she was suffering from was severe shock. But there is one thing I must warn you about."

"What is that?"

"Her mind has erased all the details of that night and the accident."

Her eyes widened. "She remembers nothing of it?"

"She has no memory of the event of that night at all, no idea of the sort of accident which brought

her in here."

"Then she doesn't know her father is dead," Betty realized.

"She doesn't. And in view of her condition I think it ought to be kept from her for a time."

"You think the knowledge might send her into shock again?"

"There is that possibility," the specialist said. "I don't wish to risk it. I would wait until she is able to leave the hospital before telling her of her father's death. Then I would go into no detail. Just was it was an automobile accident."

"I'm glad you warned me," Betty said. "I'll follow your instructions."

In the weeks which followed, Betty gradually weaned herself from the tranquilizers and began to eat properly again. She also did the shopping for Mrs. Doherty and took long walks along the slushy side roads which were typical of the region in late March. She had received a letter of sympathy from Richard Frost at the museum, and when she felt better she phoned him, thanking him for the letter and said, "My daughter is recovering at a great rate. She's now walking about in her room."

"Excellent," the young curator said. "Have you returned to work?"

"No," she said. "I resigned from my job."

"Indeed?"

"I've been thinking," she went on. "And I like your offer of allowing me to do piece work at home, especially as I'll want to be near Sarah during her convalescence."

"I'm delighted," he said. "Consider yourself on

the staff again. I'll have work for you whenever you're ready to begin."

"It could be as much as a month," she warned him. "I need to spend all my time with my daughter when she first returns from the hospital."

"I understand that," Richard Frost said. "And we'll wait until you are ready."

"Meanwhile I'll work at fixing up a studio at home," she promised.

The visits to Sarah at the hospital and the renovation work took up all Betty's time. She decided the room needed much more natural light and had three modern skylight windows installed. With the furniture removed and the walls painted white, the room began to resemble a proper studio. She moved all her own materials up there, added two large easels and paints, varnishes, cleaners and brushes. By the time Sarah was well enough to be brought home, her studio was a reality.

Sarah's improvement had been speedy at the start. There were days when she almost seemed to show no gains, but overall she was recovering. She still had no memory of the accident but understood vaguely that she'd been in a car crash. Not once did she ask whose car it was, nor did she ask about her father or show any surprise at his not visiting her. It was a macabre situation for Betty, having to keep silent on the delicate subject.

The investigation of the accident had established that it had come about as a result of weather conditions. She had given up worrying about what Roland had said before he'd lapsed into unconsciousness. She'd also closed her mind to

what the truck driver had said about the car seeming to swerve in front of him without reason. The coroner's inquest had mentioned ice patches. That had to be the answer. She could not believe that Sarah had deliberately grasped the wheel from her father, causing his death and almost bringing about her own.

Yet far in the back of her mind there was a shadow of doubt, a doubt she would not admit to, but which was hidden there along with all the other dark suspicions.

Nevertheless, it seemed that a small miracle had taken place. Sarah was amiable and cooperative with her nurses and loving towards Betty whenever she visited her. Betty dreaded the time when she must sketch in the bare details of the accident and tell her of her father's death.

She put it off until Sarah arrived back at the house at Bedford Lake. Sarah was extremely grateful to be out of the hospital and took pleasure in even the smallest detail of her home and familiar surroundings. Betty walked down to the lake with her and Sarah stood for a long time gazing in silence at the wide expanse of water.

Back by the fireplace that evening, Betty first broached the subject of Roland's death, saying, "I have some sad news for you, darling. In the accident which sent you to the hospital your father was killed."

Sarah's eyes widened and glazed over with tears. She said, "All this time I've known they were keeping something back from me. So that is it!"

"We did not want to concern you with it until

you were strong enough to deal with it," Betty said.

"So Daddy is dead," Sarah said musingly.

"He didn't recover consciousness and died a few hours after the accident," Betty said.

A strange expression had come across Sarah's pale, lovely face. "I'd rather not talk about it," she said.

"Then we won't," Betty promised. "I simply wanted you to know."

So the subject was never mentioned again. Betty warned Mrs. Doherty to keep silent on Roland's death as well, and the old woman understood and agreed. "It's best," she said. "Since she doesn't remember anything, talking about it could only do her harm."

"That's what the doctor feels," Betty said.

Privately she thought that Sarah had taken the news with very little emotion. Nor did she show much afterwards. It was as if, for Sarah, Roland had never existed. Once again the dark doubts attempted to come to the surface of her mind but she fought them back. She gave up the idea of having her daughter see a psychiatrist. At the moment it seemed enough to have her alive and improving in health.

They bundled up and took long walks together down Sarah's favorite paths near the lake. Some of them were new to Betty. They talked of many things, and she felt she was growing closer to her daughter than in the past. But just as she was gaining some assurance in this, Sarah would have one of her silent days when she barely said

anything at all. This, along with the rather haunted expression which came into her daughter's eyes at times, worried Betty.

Then one day in late April Richard Frost phoned and asked Betty, "Are you ready for your first project?"

"My studio is all prepared," she said. "But I haven't been to Boston for some time."

"I have a painting I'd like you to work on," he said. "I wondered if I might drive down and drop it off."

"Why not?" she said. "And please plan to stay for dinner. Sarah and I would enjoy company."

"You're very kind," he said. "What about tomorrow evening?"

"As good as any," Betty told him. "Come around seven."

There was a new excitement in the house all the following day. Mrs. Doherty worked and worried over the preparation of dinner, Betty assisted her and put the house in neat order as well, and an excited Sarah wondered what she should wear to make the best impression on their visitor.

Betty smiled at her daughter and suggested, "Why not your black velvet? It is very mature and it suits you so."

Sarah approved of her mother's choice and began a search for high-heeled shoes she could wear to make her look even older.

Betty donned a red knit dress just in time to greet Richard Frost who arrived with a carefully crated painting in his arms. "Shall I put this in your studio?" he asked as he eased the large painting on

the floor.

"Yes," Betty said, leading the way, "do bring it upstairs."

"It's a lovely spot down here," the curator said as they mounted the stairs.

"I like it despite the fact I've known a lot of tragedy here," she said. "Some very grim things have happened in this neighborhood."

"I've heard," he said. "But they might have happened in any place."

"I tell myself that," she said as they entered the studio.

"You've done a wonderful conversion job," he enthused, looking around the room, "I think you should do good work here."

She smiled. "You can place the painting on this easel. I'd like to see it."

Frost at once went to work uncrating the large painting. He said, "It's dry and in poor shape. I think it has been retouched a good deal over the years. But the interesting thing for you is that it is supposed to depict a house in this area which burned down many years ago." He placed the painting on the easel and she saw a study of a house of the 1750's, a large square house of white clapboard with a dark door and trim. Some trees grew around it and at the extreme right stood a horse tethered to a post. It was dark, primitive in style, and indeed badly faded and blistered.

She said, "It is a fine primitive. I suspect it was beautiful once though it is so discolored now. Where was the house located?"

"Somewhere along the main highway, which

was a cow path in those days," he said.

"I'll enjoy working on it," she said. "The restoration will present a real challenge."

"I felt that since the house once stood on the main highway between here and Menton, it ought to be of great interest to you."

"It is," she said. "And it seems to be of the same period and style as the other one you like so much, my restoration of the daughter of the Vine family."

Richard Frost nodded. "I believe it could have been painted at the same time and perhaps even by the same itinerant artist."

"Do you suppose it could be the Vine house?" she asked.

"The records we have indicate that it isn't," he said. "It was listed on the back as the Laidlaw house. Of course, it could have passed into their hands later."

She smiled at him. "You're an historian. You ought to try to trace it."

"I will when I have time," he promised.

They went downstairs again, where Betty gave him a drink and had one herself. They were standing by the fireplace chatting, when Sarah came down the stairway in her dark velvet dress and high heels, looking more like eighteen than thirteen.

Betty introduced them and told Sarah, "Mr. Frost is to be my new employer. He's the curator at the museum."

"Please call me Richard," he asked them. And giving Sarah a look of amused wonder, "I didn't

expect you to be so grown-up," he said. "You're a very attractive young lady."

"Thank you!" Sarah said, her green eyes shining from the compliment. "I'm glad that Mommy is going to work for you."

Richard smiled at Betty and said, "We consider ourselves fortunate to obtain her services. She's a fine artist."

"I know," Sarah agreed, giving her mother a rare admiring glance.

"This is so nice, our being able to meet this way," Betty said sincerely. "And it's all due to your idea of my doing work in my own studio, Richard."

Richard smiled and said, "I occasionally come up with a good one."

"I'd call this an excellent one," Sarah said, moving closer to him and using her most seductive manner.

He gazed intently at her, then apologized. "I'm sorry if I'm staring at you, but you seem so familiar to me. Are you certain we haven't met before?"

"Sarah has never been to the museum," Betty explained. "So you didn't meet her there."

"Somewhere else perhaps," the handsome curator said.

"I can't think where," Betty said, staring at her precocious daughter and startled to see how Sarah was flirting openly with the art expert.

Because Sarah was in such a pleasant mood, dinner proved to be an enjoyable experience. Mrs. Doherty was introduced as the cook who had prepared the excellent meal.

"Mrs. Doherty even made the mint jelly from her own recipe," Betty said as they sat over coffee in the living room.

Sarah spoke up, "I picked the mint. I always do. I gather many herbs."

"Amazing! You're to be congratulated," Richard said.

"Thank you," Sarah said with a small smile for Betty.

Betty was too taken aback to reply. Her daughter had not picked the mint—Betty herself had purchased it at the greengrocer's at Mrs. Doherty request. She could not imagine why Sarah had made such a statement. She decided it must have been in a misguided effort to try to win still more approval from Richard Frost.

The evening was unusual in that Sarah was on her best behavior. She brought out her stamp collection and showed it to Richard and listened, apparently enthralled, as he explained the background of some of the long-ago figures pictured on the stamps.

At last Betty was able to persuade her daughter to say goodnight and go up to bed. By this time Richard Frost was about to leave.

He paused at the door to say, "It's been a wonderful evening, made so, in part, by your very lovely daughter. She is most mature for her age."

"She's not always so outgoing," Betty confessed. "I think she liked you. And I'm sure she misses her father, though she never says so."

"You must be very grateful that she survived the tragic accident," he said.

"I am."

Richard smiled, "I must take you both out to dinner some time. I'll be on my way now. I trust you will enjoy working on the Laidlaw house painting."

"I'm sure I shall," she said. "Thanks for bringing it down to me."

"My great pleasure," he said. "Say a special goodnight to Sarah for me."

Betty stood on the verandah and waved to him as Richard drove away. She was herself much attracted to him, and found it easy to understand her daughter's being so impressed by him. Sarah had always showed a precocious desire to have men pay attention to her, but never had she been so openly seductive as on this evening.

Betty decided it was a harmless example of her daughter's growing up. Sarah had reached the "crush" stage, which would doubtless continue until she had grown to womanhood. Then in good time, if all things went well, she would fall in love with the right man, or so Betty hoped. And yet, Sarah's statement about collecting the mint was beyond her. She could only accept it as a small white lie, and so she decided to make nothing of it and not mention it. Sarah had apparently enjoyed herself, and so had she; that was enough to be grateful for. There was also the painting waiting in her studio upstairs to be restored. She loved her work and this battered canvas was in bad enough shape to test her ability to the utmost.

When Betty went to bed, she had a night filled with strange dreams. In one of them, she and Sarah

were walking in the woods. Along the path they met little George Osborne running and playing as he had in life. Then Velma came and joined them. When they returned to the house, Roland was on the steps talking to Hank, who was leaning on his lawn mower. Betty turned to speak with Sarah and make mention of the strangeness of meeting all these dead people, apparently returned to life, but Sarah had vanished. Betty was standing alone on the path by the house, and when she looked back, Roland and the handyman had also vanished. The only sign of life or motion was the wind gently whispering through the birch trees. She awakened with a chilling feeling as the nightmare remained vivid in her mind.

At breakfast Sarah was radiant. She teased her mother about having a beau, asking, "When is he coming back again?"

A blushing Betty told her, "I have no idea. Probably when he comes for the painting."

"The old one he brought you?"

"Yes."

"Can I go up and watch you work on it?" Sarah wanted to know.

Betty was surprised. Her daughter had shown no interest in her work before. She said, "If you like. It won't bother me."

"I'll be oh so terribly quiet," Sarah promised.

Betty smiled. "You may chatter like a magpie if you wish. I'm used to working with people around me."

When she went up to the studio and arranged the painting on the easel so it received the best of the

morning light, she was soon joined by Sarah, who sat on a high stool behind her and gazed at the painting with deep interest.

As Betty began an initial cleaning of it, she said, "It's supposed to be a house that stood somewhere between here and Menton about two hundred years ago. It was burned down, but this portrayal of it remains."

Sarah surprised her by asking, "Are you sure it was burned down?"

Betty turned from the ancient, peeling painting to gaze at her with astonishment, "That's what Richard told me. Why?"

"It seems—familiar to me."

"It does?" Betty asked.

"Yes," Sarah said with a frown of concentration. "I think it's on the big bend of the highway just before you enter Menton. We've passed it often."

"Richard may have been wrong about it," Betty said, interested in what Sarah had said.

"I think so," was her daughter's reply. "I like the house."

Betty smiled, "It will look better later on, though it isn't really an outstanding example of the period. It has a very ordinary line. A typical two-story affair of that day, low ceilings, simple windows and doors, low, slanted, peaked roof."

"I still say it looks like a nice place. I think I'd like to live there."

Betty turned back to her work and laughed. "Perhaps. But you'd miss many of the modern conveniences."

"Some modern things frighten me," Sarah said. "I'm very nervous about cars."

"You mustn't be," said Betty, feeling sympathy for the girl who had been through such a harrowing experience in a car. "They're fine as long as you're careful."

"I suppose so," Sarah said doubtfully, and after a little while she went for one of her morning walks.

Mrs. Doherty needed some groceries, so Betty stopped her work to drive to the supermarket in the shopping plaza at Menton which she preferred. She looked for Sarah to join her but could not find her, so she went on her own. As she drove towards Menton, she recalled what Sarah had said about the house still standing on the only sharp bend in the road. When she came to the spot she looked.

There was no sign of the house. On one side of the road there was a quick-food stand and on the opposite side, on a slight hill, there were three billboards. Betty made a mental note of this and drove on to pick up the groceries. When she'd completed the shopping and was on her way back, she had a strange impulse to pull her car to the side of the road by the billboards and examine the area for traces of the house.

She parked and locked the car well off the busy highway, and stepped down into the wide ditch and up the embankment to where the billboards stood. From this spot she had a magnificent view of the distant ocean and part of the town of Menton. She went around back of the advertising boards and saw the usual piles of trash, bottles and the like

which one seemed to find everywhere. Then she walked further on, back into the field, and to her delight at last came to what were clearly the remains of an old rock foundation. Grass grew in the middle of the oblong area which still clearly marked the spot where the Laidlaw house must have once stood.

She stood studying the old foundation for some time, thinking it was strange that though Sarah had been wrong about the house still standing, she had very accurately marked the spot where it had once stood. It was amazing that such a coincidence should take place. Betty decided that perhaps the old taxi driver had told her about a house once being there, and it had stayed in her mind.

Satisfied with her discovery, Betty walked down to her car again and drove home. Sarah was in the living room with her usual book. After Betty had gone over the groceries with Mrs. Doherty she went in to see her daughter.

"I looked for the Laidlaw house on my drive to Mention," she said.

Sarah glanced up from her book. "Did you find it?"

"No," she said. "There are billboards up on the hill."

"I was sure the house was there!"

"Used to be there," Betty said. "I went up and found the old foundation. Someone must have told you about it."

"Yes," Sarah agreed docilely. "Someone must have." And she went back to her book.

Betty thought no more about it. She continued

working on the restoration. The painting had been much worked over. Beneath previous retouchings, she found a dog in the forefront of the painting, and she removed the layer of paint and restored the small black and white terrier.

Sarah's interest in her work continued, watching the progress for an hour or so each day. Betty was pleased by this.

One day as she worked with Sarah watching, Betty said, "We'll soon have to think of your schooling."

"Do I have to go back to school?" Sarah wanted to know. "I'll soon be old enough to be married."

Betty, surprised and amused, turned to her and laughed. "That's pretty ambitious for a thirteen-year-old! You have four more years of school to go and after that, college."

"It sounds like such a waste of time," her daughter pouted.

"I don't think you'll always feel like that," Betty said. "School and college can be fun. You learn a great deal, make good friends, have helpful experiences which will be useful to you all your life."

Sarah looked doubtful. "I don't want to go far from here."

"I've been thinking of a boarding school," Betty said. "You spend too much time alone. You need more company than just me. In a boarding school you wouldn't have to commute all the time and you would live with other girls your own age."

"When would I come home?" Sarah wanted to know.

"On holidays and all summer, of course," she said. "And I'd be able to visit you. I think it would be good for you."

Sarah sighed. "I'd rather be married."

"There's lots of time for that," Betty told her. "Whatever made you think of such a thing?"

"I might die young," Sarah said. "I'd like to have a husband and a child before I die."

The seriousness of Sarah's words and the tone of her voice sent a chill down Betty's spine. For some reason, what the lovely, dark-haired girl had said was no longer amusing or even brash. It frightened her and she did not know why. Everyone thought of life and death and wished to get what experience they could before the cold fingers touched them. But to hear this expressed by her teen-age daughter sent cold fear through her.

Betty managed a casual smile of assurance and said, "Very few young girls die nowadays. Long ago, back when this painting was originally done, it was different. There were many illnesses which carried off the young people. Now that we have greater medical knowledge, that's no longer the case."

Sarah did not seem to be listening to her. She was very intently studying the painting. Suddenly she said, "That's a fine horse! I wish more of it was shown in the painting. I must have gone horseback riding sometime. I'm sure I remember it."

"Your memory is playing you tricks," Betty said. "You have never, to my knowledge, been on a horse."

"Perhaps at the fair on the ponies," Sarah said. "I think Daddy let me ride."

"It's possible. If so, I don't know anything about it." It was remarkable to hear Sarah speak of her father—she so rarely did.

"I'd like to try it again!"

"Perhaps if you go to boarding school, they'll have a riding instructor and horses," she said.

"That would be grand fun," her daughter said.

Betty stood back and looked at the painting with a critical eye. She said, "I think I've brought back all the detail. The little doggie and some of the poultry which were painted out. Now all I have to do is apply a proper coat of varnish."

"No!" Sarah said sharply, startling her.

Betty looked saw that her daughter had left the stool and was now moving closer to the canvas. She asked, "Why not?"

"It's not right," Sarah said emphatically.

She joined her daughter before the painting of the house. "I don't understand."

"I think something is—missing."

"Missing?"

"Yes. Like the dog and the poultry that were painted over."

Betty stared at the painting. "I see no hint of anything."

"I do!" Sarah said excitedly and she touched a finger on the canvas. "Right there, between the house and where the horse is standing. There seems to be the outline of a well!"

"A well?" Betty stared at the canvas.

"Yes," Sarah said, excited, "Right there! It has

a circular wall of round stones and a bucket hangs from a support over it!"

Betty searched the canvas and shook her head. "I think you are using your imagination."

"Try!" her daughter pleaded with her. "I know I'm right! Try and see if you can find the well!"

"I'm almost certain there has been no repainting in this area," Betty said. But to satisfy the girl, she reached for her paint removal paste and gently applied some to the spot.

Sarah's green eyes were bright with interest as she watched her work slowly. She said, "There! I see a faint trace of it now!"

Betty was too absorbed in what she was doing to answer. She kept removing a small amount of paint at a time and slowly but surely the outline of the well, just as Sarah had described it, began to appear.

"You were right!" she said with awe. "I didn't believe you, and you were right!"

"I *knew* it must be there!" Sarah exulted.

"How did you know?" Betty said, pausing to stare at her.

Sarah hesitated and said, "I saw a faint shadow of it through the paint. I knew there was something, and I thought it looked like a well."

"I could see nothing," Betty said. "Your young eyes are better than mine."

"Now the painting will be right," Sarah said, pleased.

Betty gave her attention to the well, which now could be seen plainly in detail. She said, "It's amazing! I would never have noticed it."

"Richard will think you very clever," Sarah said, slyly.

"I'll tell him how much you helped."

"He probably won't believe you."

"I'm sure he will," Betty said. And she asked her daughter, "Would you like to be an artist?"

"I don't know," Sarah said. "I like to watch you. But I think I'd rather be married to someone on a farm and cook and raise animals."

Betty looked at her in wonderment. "You continually surprise me," she said.

Betty received a phone call from Richard Frost a few days later, inviting her to a meeting at the museum and to go out for dinner afterwards. She was anxious to meet the other new members of the staff, and agreed.

He said, "I intended to entertain both you and Sarah, but because of the meeting I'll have to wait for another time to invite her."

"She won't mind," Betty said. "I'll explain to her."

"Good," Richard sound relieved. "The meeting is at four-thirty and we can go for an early dinner at six-thirty. That won't make it too late for your drive home."

Betty hadn't had a date with a man since before her marriage to Roland, and she found herself more than a little excited. She debated as to what she would wear and decided on a brown tweed suit.

When Sarah came in from her walk Betty told her of the invitation. "Richard said he'd have you along next time," she added.

Sarah looked suddenly sullen. "I guess you were glad!"

Betty reached out to put an arm around her, but Sarah drew away. Betty said, "I'd like you to come, but the meeting makes it impossible."

Her daughter's green eyes showed anger. "I'm prettier than you!"

"I agree you are," she said mildly. "You'll be a beauty when you grow up."

"I'm grown up *now*!" Sarah said defiantly.

Betty shook her head. "Not quite, darling. We all want to be grown up when we're young. You have all the time in the world."

"You're afraid I'll take him away from you!" Sarah spat out.

Startled, Betty attempted a laugh. "Don't talk that way! Richard and I are merely friends and I work for him. No one could 'take him away from me,' there's nothing romantic between us."

"That's what you want me to believe!" Sarah said. And she ran upstairs to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Betty turned to Mrs. Doherty, who had been a witness to the scene. "What do you make of that?"

"Growing pains," the old woman said. "I guess every youngster has them."

"She has some very adult ideas, it seems to me."

"I wouldn't worry," the old woman said. "She'll straighten out when you send her to boarding school. She'll be with other girls her own age and learn how to behave properly."

"I surely hope so," Betty worried.

Sarah did not leave her room. When Betty was ready to go, she knocked at the door to say goodbye, but there was no answer from the other side. The radio was on and Sarah was listening to the chamber music on the university channel, the early music which so seemed to fascinate her.

Betty encountered a good deal of traffic on the drive to the museum and pulled into the parking lot a little late. She found Richard waiting for her at the rear entrance to the main building and he at once escorted her to the meeting. She was warmly received and listened to the others with interest. Afterwards the various members of the staff remained to chat for a while. Eventually she and Richard were left alone.

He smiled and said, "As director, I have to stay to the bitter end."

"I enjoyed it all."

"I'm glad you did," he said. "They were very interested in your work on the painting of the Laidlaw house."

"Sarah seems fascinated by it," she said. "She helped me find the detail I might otherwise have missed."

"A remarkable young lady!" Richard observed as they walked out to the main corridor together.

"More so than you think," Betty smiled. "I very much fear she has a crush on you."

"I like the idea," he said cheerfully. "I'm only sorry we couldn't have her join us for dinner today."

"She was quite disappointed."

"I'll take you both out later in the week."

"There's no need," she protested.

"I want to," he said. "Youngsters like Sarah can be easily hurt. I'd like to be sure she understands."

"You're very kind," Betty said.

"By the way," he said. "I've discovered who she reminded me of. Come into the main gallery for a moment."

They entered the main art gallery Betty had known so well a dozen years ago but had not visited in almost that long a time. Richard paused to switch on the lights so she could see properly. There, almost directly in front of her, was the glowing restoration of the daughter of the Vine family. The young woman looked almost alive as she looked down at Betty, a faint sly smile curving the corners of her mouth. Betty was shocked to see that the painting was almost an exact likeness of Sarah!

"It's uncanny! she gasped. "How is it possible it never occurred to me?"

"You haven't seen the portrait in a long time," Richard said. "The likeness struck me the moment I entered the gallery this morning. As you said, it's uncanny."

They stood before the painting for a few more moments in silence.

Chapter Eight

A half-hour later she and Richard sat in a brick-lined alcove in a popular restaurant not far from Boston Common. A violinist and piano player provided background music in the main room. A candle burned on the plain wooden table. They might have been living in an earlier century.

Betty said, "It's even more attractive than you told me."

"You have to be lucky enough to get one of these alcoves to really enjoy it," Richard said.

"I agree. It's so very intimate."

He ordered drinks and they sat back to relax. He said, "Weren't you amazed at how much that painting resembles Sarah?"

"Sarah does bear a startling resemblance to the Vine girl," she agreed. "I can't imagine why it never struck me before."

"I wanted you to see it."

"I was working on the painting when I was pregnant," she said. "I fell ill and almost didn't finish it."

"You did an excellent job," Richard said. "If I were superstitious, I'd think that your working on

the portrait in some way influenced Sarah's looks. There's an old wives' tale that a pregnant woman's experiences will be reflected in her child."

"I've heard that, too," she said with a faint smile. "But I can hardly imagine myself imprinting my unborn baby's face with that of the Vine girl."

"Yet the resemblance exists."

"I have to agree," she said. "We'll just have to put it down to coincidence. There are just so many types of faces. I'd say Sarah and the girl in the portrait have the same bone structure and coloring, so we exaggerate the likeness."

He nodded. "And one is a painting and the other a living girl. So there can be no real comparison. I agree, you make it all sound satisfyingly logical."

She sighed. "I wonder if I'm not trying too hard."

"Meaning?"

"Perhaps there are mysteries we don't fully understand."

"Go on," he said.

"Sarah has been a strangely mature and difficult child all her life. She changed somewhat for the better after the accident. Now I'm worrying about her lapsing back into her old ways."

"I can see she has a mind of her own," Richard said.

"Very much so," Betty agreed. "Sometimes she does things which surprise me." And she proceeded to tell him about the painting, and Sarah's discovery of the well. She also mentioned that Sarah had known exactly where the house had

stood.

"Pretty spine-tingling," Richard said. "Sounds as if she might be able to see ghosts."

"It makes me wonder."

"Maybe she did see something through the paint that you missed."

"My eyes have years of training to see such things."

"But hers, as you mentioned, are younger and perhaps a little sharper."

"But she also knew the exact spot where the house had stood."

He considered. "I expect somebody told her about it."

"That's what I decided," she said with a wry smile. "So we come back to the logical explanation again."

"And yet the essence of all art, and of life, is mystery."

Betty looked at his handsome face in the glowing candle light. "I have the feeling it was somehow ordained that I should return to the museum to work," she confessed.

"Don't forget I had something to do with it," Richard smiled.

"Meeting you has also been rewarding."

"For me as well," he said. "I'd like us to become close friends."

"I hope we will," she said. "At the moment, there's Sarah. I have to make school plans for her. I'm thinking of a boarding school for the next few years."

"It could be very helpful to her. Get her away

from Bedford Lake. I wouldn't think the memories there are very good for her."

"I'm sure that's a part of what makes her so strange," Betty agreed.

"I'd shop around for schools. There are many good ones."

She said, "We have a new neighbor in the house next door, a widow and career woman. She has an important post in the Boston public school system. I think she might be able to give me some help in that direction. Her name is Wentworth."

"I don't recall meeting her, though we've met many of the school people," Richard said.

"She is a rather striking-looking middle-aged woman with graying hair. She wears glasses and is very authoritative in manner. She's only home nights and weekends but she makes a quite ideal neighbor."

"I should imagine," he said.

"Since you were an historian," she went on, "I wish you'd do something for me."

"If I can."

"I'd like you to investigate the history of the Vine family in this area. I'm curious to know more about that girl in the painting."

"Really?"

"Yes. Since Sarah resembles her so much, I'm beginning to wonder what she was like."

"I understand," he said. "And since I pointed out the likeness, I'll be glad to try to dig up what you want to know."

"I'd appreciate it very much."

"It may not be easy," he said. "And I may not

be able to come up with anything. The best source is family journals or diaries, if they can be found. And they are bound to be rather scarce after two centuries."

"So there is really not all that much hope of learning anything about her," Betty said.

"Not a lot," he said. "I've traced some of the old families before, with varying degrees of success, so I don't want to build up your hopes."

"I'll be satisfied if you'll only try."

"Depend on me to do that."

"I'd really like to know about her," she confessed. "Seeing that painting tonight brought so much back."

"I'll work on it whenever I have a chance," he said. "But you'll have to be patient. It may take a long while."

"I don't mind."

"Are you going to tell Sarah she resembles the painting?" he asked.

"No. She's egotistical enough as it is. It might only put more ideas in her head."

"She may come into the museum and see it for herself one day."

"I doubt if she'd see the likeness as we do. Most people don't see themselves as others see them."

"I agree," Richard said. "It's probably best to let it stay our secret for a while."

Betty said, "I wish I could communicate with her better. So often we quarrel about things which aren't really important."

"Most mothers and daughters do that, not to mention fathers and sons," he said.

"I want to do well by her, especially now that Roland is not here to help."

"I understand," he said. "I'll keep my word and take the two of you out for dinner as I promised." He signalled the waiter to take their dinner orders.

Except for the night light on the stairs, the Ryan house was in darkness and completely silent. Having enjoyed her evening with Richard Frost, Betty made her way quietly up the stairs, then on to her own room. She lost no time in preparing for bed and fell asleep almost at once.

It was a bright, pleasant morning and when she went down to breakfast she was surprised to see that Sarah had already eaten and left.

"Where's Sarah?" she asked as she sat down.

"Out on one of her walks," Mrs. Doherty said, coming in with a glass of orange juice.

"Isn't she out earlier than usual?"

"In one of her moods since last night. She's always early when she's in a mood."

Sarah sighed. "I hope she doesn't intend to be spiteful the rest of the day."

"You can never tell with her," the old woman said. "Did you have a nice time with Mr. Frost last night?"

"Yes. The meeting was interesting and we had dinner at a good restaurant."

"I didn't hear you come in."

"It wasn't really late, but I was tired and went straight to bed. Did Sarah come down after I left?"

"No. She never came out of her room again until this morning," Mrs. Doherty said.

After breakfast Betty went out and stood on the front steps for a moment, but she could see no sign of her daughter. She decided to go upstairs and put the second and final coat of varnish on the painting of the Laidlaw house. She went up to her studio and when she crossed to the painting she stood frozen in shock.

Someone had dipped one of her paint brushes in vivid yellow and red, and had painted crude flames coming up from the roof of the house. The rough strokes were the worst sort of vandalism and Betty was appalled. She knew at once who had done it, and went downstairs immediately in search of Sarah.

She found her at the lake, standing moodily on the dock. Betty went out to her, saying angrily, "Why did you deface that painting?"

Sarah smiled innocently. "You said it went up in flames."

"I don't find that funny," Betty snapped. "It's fortunate that I had applied the first coat of varnish so the paint won't harm the original painting. I'll be able to remove it easily."

Sarah said calmly, "Then no harm has been done."

"It's not your fault the valuable painting wasn't ruined!"

"But it wasn't," Sarah said. Then, changing the subject, "Did you have fun last night?"

"It was very pleasant," she said. "Richard sent a message to you. He's coming down the night after tomorrow to take us both in to Menton for dinner."

Sarah's mouth opened. "He is?"

"Yes," she said. "So you see, your wild anger was for nothing."

Her daughter's mien changed at once to contrition. She said, "Because of what I did you're not going to stop me from going to dinner, are you?"

"I should tell him not to come."

"Please," Sarah begged. "I'm sorry. I won't do anything like that again. I'll help clean the painting if you'll show me."

"I think you should help," Betty said. "And since you admit you were wrong and seem to regret what you did, I'll not tell him what a little villain you are!"

Sarah surprised her by impulsively throwing her arms about her and saying, "I do love you, Mommy!"

The damage to the painting was no worse than Betty had said. Back in the studio, Sarah helped her remove the yellow and red paint. When it was all cleaned away, Betty applied the second coat of varnish.

She surveyed it with satisfaction, "When it is fully dry it will be ready to be returned to the museum."

"Are you going to take it there?"

"No, Richard can pick it up when he comes to take us to dinner," she said. "Then he can take it back in his car and deliver it to the museum next morning."

"I want to look my best," Sarah worried. "May I wear my new pink dress?"

"Well, let's see how you behave between now and then," was Betty's reply.

Richard came as he promised and they went to a good restaurant near Menton. Sarah wore her beloved pink dress and did her best to outshine Betty. Betty let the child put on her grown-up act and every so often she and Richard exchanged knowing, good-natured glances.

Richard said, "I hear you helped in restoring the Laidlaw painting."

She gave Betty an anxious look and said, "I did my best."

Betty hadn't told him about the painting of the flames. She said now, "She was a great help."

Richard said, "Maybe you'll be an artist some day too, Sarah."

"I mean to get married," she said in her mature way.

"Indeed," he said. "Have you picked a husband yet?"

Sarah gave him a dazzling smile. "I know someone I'd *like* to marry. But my mother wouldn't let me."

He laughed. "I think your mother would object to your marrying anyone until you're a lot older."

"That's right," Betty said.

"When will that be?" Sarah wanted to know.

"Not for several years," Betty said.

Sarah grimaced and finished her ice cream.

Richard said, "I hear you may go to boarding school."

"If they have a riding stable," Sarah said. "I want to ride my own horse."

Richard said, "I'm sure your mother can find you a school that has riding instruction."

"Will you see that she does?" Sarah asked.

"I'll try very hard," he said.

Sarah smiled. "I don't really mind you being my mother's beau. Not if you're my friend as well."

Betty gave a tiny gasp of dismay. "Sarah!"

Richard laughed. "It's all right. I intend to be friends to both of you. And I won't forget about the riding."

Sarah seemed satisfied. Betty was slightly embarrassed, but thankful things had gone as well as they had. Richard seemed to be enjoying their company.

He mentioned as they were leaving the restaurant, "I'm working on the Vine business but I have no word as yet."

"I didn't think you would have," she said.

They stepped outside. The restaurant was on the highway with a large open field behind it. The parking area was to the right. Twilight was settling as they went to get in Richard's car.

Sarah suddenly halted by the car and gazed down into the field. Pointing, she said, "There used to be a barn right there."

Betty asked, "What are you talking about?"

"A barn! It was old and gray and tumbledown. It used to be down behind where the restaurant is now."

"I don't recall it," Betty said. "And I've driven by here often."

"I'm sure it was here," Sarah insisted.

Betty noted the strange far-away look on her

lovely child's face and once again felt apprehensive. But she attempted to brush the matter aside by saying lightly, "It's really not all that important!"

But the incident remained in her mind long after all the other details of the pleasant dinner had been forgotten. Just when she was beginning to hope that her daughter was growing into a much more healthy state of mind, something like this happened. And it made her more determined to get her set on a path of learning which might help her.

That very weekend Betty phoned her next door neighbor Mrs. Wentworth and asked if she might call on her. Mrs. Wentworth at once cordially invited her over for coffee and to meet her sister from Boston, a Mrs. Hatford. Betty accepted the invitation and went across to the other house to sit with the two middle-aged ladies on the screened porch.

Mrs. Hatford was younger than her widowed sister and a jolly, plump woman with a friendly smile and auburn hair which hinted of dye. She was married to a Boston banker and had three children, two in college and the youngest, a girl of about Sarah's age, in a Wellesley boarding school.

Betty smiled over her coffee cup and said, "That's just what I came over to discuss with Mrs. Wentworth. I'm looking for a good boarding school for my daughter. She's a very mature thirteen."

Mrs. Wentworth said, "I'm sure my sister can help you more than I."

Mrs. Hatford eyed Betty amiably and said, "If

you want the very best, you'd do well to send her where my Amy is attending. She is a slow learner, I'm afraid, and she's fourteen."

"Is the school doing well with her?" Betty wanted to know.

"It has worked miracles," Mrs. Hatford said. "Amy is a rather restless, difficult girl. For the first time she seems happy with a school. She hates to come home on holidays."

Mrs. Wentworth gave Betty a meaningful glance and said, "Which strongly suggests she must get along with the other girls there."

"I agree," Betty said. "Is it expensive?"

"Yes," Mrs. Hatford said. "They only take about forty girls. So it has to be expensive with things costing what they do these days."

"They have a regular three year program?" Betty asked.

"Four years actually, but I would assume your daughter would go at once into the second form," Mrs. Hatford said. "My Amy is in the second. She's an attractive child, but too light-headed. Her father says she takes after me!" And the stout woman laughed at her own comment:

"Does the school by any chance have riding instruction?" Betty ventured, marveling at how wonderful it all sounded and hoping they might indeed offer such a course.

Mrs. Hatford's eyes widened. "Do you know, they do! The husband of Mrs. Mannering, the head mistress, was a cavalry officer in the British Army. He's now retired and helps his wife with the school. He keeps a stable and gives the girls riding

instruction."

"It sounds exactly what I want," Betty enthused. "Do you think they might accept Sarah?"

Jolly Mrs. Hatford said, "In spite of their high fees, they often have a waiting list. It's one of the few really exclusive schools left. I suggest you go up personally and see Mrs. Mannering and take your daughter with you."

"That way she can judge if she'd be happy there," Mrs. Wentworth said.

"I'll do it," Betty promised. "I felt I should start early. I'll phone for an appointment."

"You can mention that I recommended the school, if you like," Mrs. Hatford said.

"Thank you," she replied gracefully.

She later phoned Mrs. Mannering and was impressed by the woman's British accent. She was given an appointment for the following Tuesday, and Sarah was also invited.

Sarah's first reaction was negative. "I don't want to be so far away from here," she protested.

"I think you need a change," Betty said. "And it's not really all that far away. Only an hour's drive or so if you use back roads. And they have horses and a riding school."

Sarah's pert face brightened. "Do they really?"

"Yes. But we must go there on our appointment day. It is a difficult school to get in. I think Mrs. Mannering only agreed to see me because I mentioned Mrs. Hatford, whose daughter, Amy, is a student."

"I'd like to have another girl friend," Sarah said

wistfully. "There's been no one since Velma."

"Perhaps you'll meet Amy and like her, if the school accepts you," Betty suggested.

On Wednesday they drove to the picturesque town of Wellesley. With its fine homes, gardens, great shade trees and many public buildings of red brick with white trim, it gave the immediate impression of wealth and good breeding. The school, known as Mannering Hall, was on the outskirts of the village, located on the grounds of the mansion of a former railroad magnate. The main house and its outbuildings had been converted into a school and dormitories.

As it was the holiday season, the grounds were deserted except for a few workmen when they drove up before the tall, red brick mansion. A short, elderly woman greeted them and at once showed them into Mrs. Mannering's private office. The principal of the school proved to be one of those angular, gaunt-faced women so typical of Britain, dressed in a very plain black knit dress. Her lined face was without makeup and she had the air of gentility unhappily reduced to commerce.

She stood and waved them to chairs before her desk. "Do sit down, both of you," she said warmly in her BBC accent. "May I order tea for you and the little girl?"

Betty said, "If you would be so kind."

"I normally have tea at this time in the afternoon," Mrs. Mannering said grandly and sat down and pressed a buzzer on her desk. The small, near-sighted secretary entered and was ordered to bring tea.

Betty said, "It was very kind of you to see us."

"You are friends of the Hatfords?"

"Yes," she said. "Her sister is a neighbor of ours."

"Delightful," the woman said and she eyed Sarah with a cool smile. "So this is the young lady who wishes to join us?"

Sarah volunteered, "My mother wants me to go to school."

"And so she should," Mrs. Mannering said with what she must have felt was warmth. It was plain that the woman was not at ease with the young. No doubt she preferred her executive duties.

"My mother says you have horses and a riding school," Sarah said.

"We do," Mrs. Mannering said. "My husband, is a former cavalry officer and he is not only an expert horseman himself but a fine instructor."

"I want to ride," Sarah said.

"You'll have no problem here," the British woman told her. She glanced at Betty, "You have a brochure with our rates. Each quarter is paid in advance."

"That is perfectly satisfactory," Betty said.

Mrs. Mannering's sharp eyes fixed on her would-be pupil as she said severely, "Sarah, we welcome you. But I must also warn you that our rules here are strict. The slightest infraction, and your mother will be notified and you will be sent home."

Sarah took it well. "Will I have a room to myself?"

"You will share a room," the tall, thin woman said. "And since Amy is the daughter of friends, I

may be able to arrange for her to be your roommate."

By the time they left, not only had Sarah been enrolled in the charming old school but Betty had left two hefty checks for the first term, covering both lodging and tuition. As Mrs. Mannering accompanied them to their car, the figure of a stout man in riding clothes appeared at the other end of the year. In his crimson hunting jacket he looked like a huge, solemn red-breasted bird.

"My husband," Mrs. Mannering said, "just back from a ride in the country. You will meet him later." And she hurried them into the car and on their way.

As they drove back to Bedford, Betty asked. "Well, what do you think?"

"She's a funny lady and her husband looks like a bird with a red breast," Sarah said with childish laughter.

"You must be respectful towards her," Betty warned. "I'm sure she's a fine teacher. And this is an exclusive school. Mrs. Mannering says there is none other like it."

"And I'll be able to go riding," Sarah said.

"Yes. Think of that! Every day when the weather is good! And you will have Amy for your friend and perhaps as a roommate."

Sarah was not wildly enthusiastic, but she was now able to contemplate the upcoming school term with some anticipation. Betty was grateful to Mrs. Hatford and drew a sigh of relief that the school problem had been settled.

In August Mrs. Wentworth had her niece, Amy, come down for a short visit. The precise woman spoke to Betty privately before the girl arrived, saying, "I must tell you the Mannering school has worked wonders with Amy. Before she went there she was inclined to be rather wild."

Betty said, "It's a difficult time to bring up children."

"And they are still children though they seem so grown-up," the older woman agreed. "But now Amy is polite, well-behaved and happy and we put it down to Mrs. Mannering's good work."

When Amy arrived, she proved to be an attractive blonde with the same infectious laugh as her mother. She had long hair which fell about her shoulders and a tanned, attractive face. She and Sarah became good friends almost on sight and the two of them became almost inseparable. Sarah continued taking her long walks, only now Amy went along.

Betty was delighted with the course of events and the improvement in Sarah's disposition. She was no longer so moody. The strange quirks in her behavior vanished, she often joined Amy in laughter.

On one of her frequent dinner dates with Richard Frost in Boston, Betty confided, "I can't begin to tell you how much Sarah has improved already! Amy has been good for her and I think the school will be the making of her."

"From what you say, it is small and excellent," her companion said. "Sarah should get the personal attention she needs."

"Exactly," Betty said. And very seriously, "You know, from the time she was a little girl Sarah has been stubborn and very willful. More than once I've worried about her and whether she might have serious mental problems."

"She seems normal enough to me," Richard said.

"She's careful to present her best side to you," Betty warned him. "But lately she has been more relaxed. I feel relieved for the first time since her father's death."

Richard studied her across the table. "What about the future?"

She smiled. "I'll go on working for the museum," she said. "I'll be able to handle a greater volume of paintings than before."

The handsome curator gazed at her intently. "I'm thinking of more personal things."

"Oh?" She felt her cheeks warm.

"You know I'm in love with you," he said.

"Richard," she protested quietly and looked down.

"I think you have to come to look on me as a friend."

"More than that!"

"There you are," he said. "So what about our future? I'd like you to marry me."

Betty was at once upset. She looked at him with anxious eyes. "No, I can't risk that. Not until Sarah has completed school. I must wait until she begins college, at the very least. She's such a sensitive child, and even though she adores you, I don't want to complicate her life at this time with a

stepfather."

Richard showed unhappiness. "Until she finishes school? That means at least three years."

She reached across the table and took one of his hands in hers. "Three years is not such a long time. And we'll be working closely together."

Richard said, "I'd like it settled. I want to build my life and a home around you."

"And I want to be with you, darling," she said gently. "But my first allegiance is to Sarah. If she were a perfectly normal child, it would be different. You don't know everything about her. One day I will tell you."

He smiled with grim humor. "Always mysterious! I swear you like to deal with the unknown."

"If you say so."

"By the way," he said. "I haven't had too much luck in tracing the Vine family. I thought I was on the right track, and then the branch of the family I was following appear to have taken off for Vermont in 1740. So I have to begin all over again."

"I would like to know more about them and about that girl in the portrait," she said.

Richard said, "Not only is she a star attraction of the museum, she has assumed important in your private life since Sarah resembles her so."

"It has been a haunting experience," Betty said, "Since I was partly responsible for the creation of them both."

"I'm not giving up my research," he promised.

"How do you go about it?" she wanted to

know.

"I visit various museum and historical societies," he said. "All within a forty mile area. I then look up any mention of a Vine family in the records there. If there is anything I jot it down. If there's nothing I move on to another source. I have also advertised in genealogical journals."

"So you ought to eventually learn something?"

"Almost every family leaves some record at some time," he said. "The ideal source, of course, would be a diary by some member of the family, something which will tell us some facts. By good fortune it was a fairly common custom for people of two centuries ago to keep such daily journals."

"I have seen those of sea captains," she said. "They were called log books, weren't they?"

"Yes," Richard said. "The diaries are much more personal and thus likely to be filled with more information."

September came and Betty took Sarah away to school. Now the grounds were occupied with girls of Sarah's age, all of them wearing the green school uniform. Mrs. Mannering greeted them graciously and introduced Betty to a homely, round-shouldered young man with heavy horn-rimmed glasses.

"This is Mr. Bostwick, who heads our academic department," she said mincingly. "An Oxford graduate, of course."

Mr. Bostwick offered her a limp, damp hand and said, "Most delighted, Mrs. Ryan. You may trust your daughter's education to us."

Amy met them later, skipping across the green to take Sarah by the hand. She smiled warmly at Betty and said, "You must see the room Sarah and I will be sharing!"

The room was on the lower floor of the larger of the secondary buildings. It probably had once been part of the living room of the house. It had high ceilings, bay windows, and against each wall a bed covered tastefully in the same bright chintz as the window curtains. The impression was of homey brightness and Betty was well pleased.

Before she left, Betty was introduced to Colonel Mannering, who looked less like a red robin in his gray tweeds. He was a rather small man with an enormous pot belly and a red, mustached face. He was courteous and military in his manner and Betty forgave the fact that she smelled faintly of whiskey. One could not expect perfection, though it seemed to her that Mannering Hall was close to it.

The letters which came weekly from the school, written in Sarah's quaint hand, continued to be comforting. Her daughter was enthralled by the school, and Amy was a perfect roommate. She was learning Latin and math at a rate she had never managed before. She was also riding almost every day, and every two weeks the school held a dance in conjunction with a nearby boy's academy, when young males came over for an evening of dinner and dancing under Mrs. Mannering's personal supervision.

Betty showed the glowing letters to Mrs. Doherty as they arrived, always commenting, "How lucky

we found the perfect school for her!"

"It has made all the difference," Mrs. Doherty agreed.

"A lucky twist of fate after all the bad times," Betty said. "I can't believe it."

She was enormously happy. As the autumn progressed, she did a great deal more work for the museum, some of it at home and some of it in the studio at the museum. She was in Richard's company a great deal and soon they had become lovers as well as friends.

She never brought the handsome curator to Bedford overnight, but she often stayed in town and spent the night at his apartment. Mrs. Doherty asked no embarrassing questions, and Betty knew that she and Richard must be together or she feared she would lose him. He proved a gentle and undemanding lover and an overnight visit at least once a week became part of her pattern of living. The weekends she spent at Bedford and nearly always worked in her studio after completing the shopping for Mrs. Doherty.

One gray morning in November she received a bright letter from Sarah, already anticipating the Christmas holidays, and asking to spend part of them at Amy's house. The letter was that of a happy carefree young girl, and Betty was deeply thankful.

She went out for a stroll around the ground with the thought of raking some leaves. She was looking up at the cloudy gray sky when she heard footsteps behind her. She turned and was startled to find herself looking at tall, weary-faced Inspector

Hayward in a battered hat and rumpled trenchcoat.

The inspector tipped his hat to her and said, "Do you remember me, Mrs. Ryan?"

"Of course," she said nervously. "It wasn't that long ago!"

He nodded. "No, it actually wasn't," he said carefully.

For some reason, Betty felt panicky. She asked him, "Are you here for any special reason?"

The inspector moved closed to her, studying her closely with those tired eyes. "No," he said. "I had some business nearby, and I suddenly remembered this house and the tragedies which had taken place here. I came back to look at it."

"I see," she said. "A Mrs. Wentworth lives next door now, and there has been no more tragedy."

"I'm glad to hear it," he said, with sincerity it seemed. "Those were bad times."

"Yes," she said in a small voice.

"I understand your ex-husband and your daughter were in a bad accident when their car swerved in front of a truck. Mr. Ryan was killed but the girl survived."

"She did."

"Tragedy seems to stalk her," the inspector said, his eyes never leaving her face. "Is she having better luck now?"

"Yes. She recovered from the accident, and now she's at a boarding school and doing very well."

"I'm glad to hear it," he said. "So life has changed for her and for you."

"It has," she said nervously.

"All to the good," the inspector said. "You'd not want her to be involved in any more tragic accidents."

"I would not," she said fervently.

"Strange," he said with a sigh. "Well, I'm glad things are quiet here. And that life is better for you and the girl."

"Yes." She wished he would leave, and stop standing there staring at her in that strange fashion.

"I have always been interested in your Sarah," he said. "If you ever need me, I'm still with the Menton Police Department. My retirement doesn't come up for another five years. Thank goodness, things have been more placid lately. As they say, a policeman's lot is not always a happy one."

"I'm sure it isn't," she said. "I'll tell Sarah you were asking about her when I send her my next letter."

The inspector smiled wryly. "I doubt if she'll remember me, or if she wants to. Good day, Mrs. Ryan."

He walked slowly away, the leaves crackling under his feet as he went. She watched after him with an anxious look on her face, and the gray day seemed suddenly bleaker than before their meeting.

She stood there lost in thought, worrying whether his sudden appearance had been merely by chance, or if he had cleverly planned it in order to question her. She could not make up her mind which it might have been, but she did know there had been a certain strangeness in his questioning of her. There was an air about him which had

suggested he was thinking one thing while he said another. And he had succeeded in leaving her in a state of near panic.

His allusion to the car accident in which Roland had met his death had unnerved her. He had linked it to the series of earlier tragedies, and it brought them all back to her with full force again. As a result she found herself once more wondering what she had feared at the time, and what the police inspector might be thinking. Had Sarah in some way contributed to the accident that had caused her father's death?

Chapter Nine

In Richard Frost's apartment the following Tuesday night, after an ardent session of love-making, she and the handsome curator lay side by side under the sheets. Betty turned to him, reaching out her hand to run it gently along his cheek.

"I love to have you near," she whispered.

"You know I want you here always," he said, kissing her hand.

"I want it as well, but not for a while."

"Why?" he asked, turning to her in the dark.

"Why must we go on waiting?"

She met his question with another of her own.

"Have you learned anything more about the Vine family yet?"

"What has that got to do with us?"

"Maybe more than you know."

He turned to her and said urgently, "I'm afraid I don't see any connection between that painting and our problem."

"You know that Sarah resembles the Vine girl."

"I first pointed that out to you."

"And you know I restored the painting while I was pregnant. We have discussed how certain

things happening to pregnant women later seem to have an effect on their children. I'm wondering if that painting in any way had an influence on me? Whether something of the Vine girl might have been implanted in my Sarah?"

"That's pretty far-fetched, isn't it?"

"You may think so," she said. "But I've held back some things from you."

"Why?"

Wearily she crossed an arm across her forehead. "I didn't want to needlessly involve you."

"If you have a problem, I want to share it, no matter what it is."

"You don't know what you're saying," she said in a hushed voice.

"I insist you tell me!"

Betty hesitated, then said, "Sarah was always different, even from the time she was a tiny girl. Tragedy seemed to haunt her. When she was six, a little boy she was in a boat with was drowned."

"Such accidents happen. What is so unusual about that?"

Betty said, "A witness came to me and told me he had seen my little girl push the boy into the water to his death."

There was a long moment of silence between them. She could not see his face clearly in the darkness but when he spoke she noticed the slight tremor in his voice.

He asked, "Was the witness reliable?"

"I wasn't sure," she said. "Sarah's father didn't think so. That was what first caused the trouble between us."

"I see."

"That isn't the end of it," she said. "Not long after, the witness was found dead—by Sarah. I won't go into the details, but a police inspector who investigated the murder of the man, who was killed while stretched out drunk on a neighbor's garage floor, almost suggested that he thought my little Sarah had used the heavy stone which was the murder weapon and was found by his crushed skull."

Richard raised himself on a elbow and stared down at her. "You're suggesting that a child not yet seven might be evil enough to kill two people?"

"I have never wanted to believe it, but I think that inspector believes it."

"Then there must be something wrong with him!"

"I don't know," she said. "Some years later he picked up Sarah and a girl chum for theft and on suspicion of attacking old women at the shopping mall and taking their pocketbooks. The evidence was strong against them, but he let them go. Sarah was angry at her friend because she thought the girl had been weak under police questioning."

"Some youngsters go through a phase like that."

"I know," she said. "But there's more. The other girl later died when a gun her father owned went off accidentally. She was supposedly alone. But I saw Sarah leaving the house after it happened. She told me she ran away because she was frightened and that she'd not been to blame."

"Don't you think she told you the truth?"

"I want to," she said. "I lied to protect her. I made no mention of knowing she'd been in the house at the time of the girl's accidental death. But the same inspector investigated the case and I know he suspected Sarah was involved."

Richard asked, "You surely aren't going to let yourself be influenced by a neurotic police inspector?"

"I'm not sure he was wrong."

He gasped. "You can actually say that?"

"Yes," she said. "I called Roland and asked him to take her to a psychiatrist. Sarah overheard me discussing it with him. She didn't want to go. On the drive to the doctor's office, the car mysteriously went out of control and Roland was killed and Sarah badly hurt."

"You think she may have been responsible for that as well?" she asked incredulously.

"I met Inspector Hayward the other day and that is what he hinted."

"I think he must be mad."

"He doesn't strike me as mad," she said.

"You're not trying to tell me you suspect your teen-age daughter of multiple murders beginning when she was six?"

"I've told you what has happened and what the inspector has hinted to me," she said. "You will have to draw your own conclusions."

"Is that why you are so worried about Sarah all the time? Why you keep refusing to marry me?"

"Yes," she said. "I want to be sure about her."

"How can you be?"

"I'm giving her some more time to see if

anything else strange happens."

"I think you're making too much of this," he objected.

"Perhaps," she said. "But that is why I wanted more information on that painting. I wanted to find out if the girl was in any way evil."

"So what if she was?"

"I'll be inclined to think that in some way the evil was transferred to my daughter," she said. "Just as the likeness of the Vine girl shows in my daughter's face."

"Are you talking about reincarnation?"

"In a sense," she said. "I collapsed while I was working on the portrait of the Vine girl. None of the doctors understood what was wrong with me. Then I became well again just as suddenly as I'd fallen ill. What I'm wondering is, what happened to the baby I was carrying during my illness?"

"Obviously nothing. Sarah was born healthy."

"And has grown to look like the Vine girl to an eerie degree."

"The same physical type."

"I think it's more than that. Why isn't there something of me in Sarah's face? Something of her father? I can see no resemblance to either of us."

"All this supposing is only going to worry and confuse you," Richard said. "My advice is to forget it altogether."

"I want to," she said. "I've tried. But somehow I keep waiting and expecting something else terrible to happen."

"That is wrong," he warned her.

"I suppose so," she said. "But now you know

why I'm afraid. And why I have to learn more about that girl in the portrait."

Three happy and uneventful years passed. Except for the various holidays at home, Sarah remained at school and seemed to love it. Sometimes Amy came to visit her during the holidays and more often she went to Amy's home to stay with her. Betty felt the lifting of an awful weight from her, and her suspicions of her lovely daughter again ebbed. She even stopped nagging Richard to find the true story of the girl in the painting.

At sixteen, Sarah had ripened into full beauty and looked more than ever like the portrait of the Vine girl. She had always seemed older than her years and now she was a thoroughly sophisticated and seductive young woman. Mrs. Mannering had instilled learning to develop her mind and given her a social polish which would be useful to her all through her life.

Amy told Betty that her daughter was the heartbreaker of Mannering Hall. She had most of the boys at the nearby academy vying to date her and dance with her at their combined social evenings. One boy who was being groomed to attend West Point had been specially smitten with her. But he had tried to keep her to himself and frightened off the other boys and Sarah had resented this. Amy had confided all this while Sarah was down at the lake showing Richard around one August afternoon.

The blonde Amy giggled, "Never mention any

of this to Sarah! She'd kill me! She doesn't like to have anything told about her."

"I know," Betty said. "Don't worry. I'll say nothing."

Amy went on, "She didn't have to worry about Don thinking he owned her too long!"

"No?" she said.

Amy suddenly looked solemn. "It was awful! She and he were out swimming in the lake. He dived from the high rocks and hit his head on the bottom, and he drowned. Sarah wasn't able to save him."

Betty suddenly felt numb. She said, "Were they alone at the lake?"

"There had been a group with the swimming instructor, but they wandered away from the rest," Amy said. "Of course when she saw what had happened, she screamed and screamed. And we all came running around the bend and found her sobbing on the beach."

"But the boy drowned," Betty said in a taut voice.

"Yes. It was dreadful," Amy said. "She and he had been having awful quarrels. But that day they made up. We were having a picnic for the academy boys. She was so friendly with Don again, and then that had to happen. It ruined the picnic!"

"I'd expect it would," said Betty dryly.

"Sarah felt bad for a few days but she got over it," Amy went on cheerfully.

"Yes, yes, I can imagine," Betty said wearily. "One recovers quickly from the shock of death when one is young."

"But it bothered her a lot."

"You think so?"

"Yes," Amy said with a serious face. "Since then I've been wakened in the night by her having nightmares and calling out Don's name."

"Really?" Betty said, striving to hide her growing concern.

"Yes," Amy said. "But don't you *dare* let her know I told you any of this."

"I'll never mention a word," she promised.

Amy impulsively threw an arm around her. "I like you, Mrs. Ryan! And Sarah is my very best friend."

Betty said, "I hope that will be true always."

When Sarah came back with Richard, she was looking rather smug. Almost at once, Mrs. Wentworth came out of her house and drove the two girls off to Menton to have dinner at one of the several restaurants. Richard and Betty were left alone on the front verandah, as Mrs. Doherty had gone upstairs for a nap.

Richard stared at Betty and said, "Don't you feel well? You look as pale as a ghost!"

She gave him a troubled glance. "I just heard something I hoped I would never hear."

"From whom?"

"Amy."

He frowned. "Something about Sarah?"

"Yes."

"Tell me," he begged her.

She did, ending with, "I heard this just when I've been so happy that there has been no violence around Sarah since she entered the school!"

Richard said, "You're talking about an accident. A boy dives in the river, strikes his head on the bottom, either breaks his neck or is drowned. It has happened many times."

"They *were* alone when it happened. Just the two of them. They'd wandered away from the others."

"So?"

Betty stared ahead grimly. "She had been quarreling with him up to then because he'd held too much power over her. But that day she changed and was more than usually friendly to him. Perhaps she led him away from the others." Betty stared ahead, picturing what might have happened. "Or perhaps she encouraged him to make the high dive. And while he stood poised there she came up behind him with a rock and struck him hard enough to stun him, so that when he dropped into the water he drowned."

"That's just too fantastic!" he protested angrily.

She turned to him. "After everything that has happened, do you honestly think so?"

"All the things that you know from the past, you've surmised, except for seeing her leave the house next door after her friend accidentally shot herself. And she explained that satisfactorily to you that you protected her. Now you're surmising again and I don't think you're being fair to her."

She looked directly at him. "You don't think she killed that boy?"

"I don't think her capable of it, or of any of the other horrible things you've mentioned."

"I pray you're right," she said. "But it has brought it all back again."

Richard smiled at her. "Don't be so morbid. I'll tell you something about your daughter that I didn't intend to, but I will now."

"What?"

"That young lady has her mind on other things besides murder!"

"Why do you say that?"

He looked embarrassed. "You remember she insisted I go down to the marina with her? And she discouraged you and Amy from coming along?"

"Yes, I suppose she did," Betty realized. "I didn't pay much attention to it."

"Neither did I," he said. "But after we went down by the lake, she took me along the woods path so I could view the harbor from up on the hill."

Betty stared at him. "She took you up there?"

"Not all the way," he said. "She halted along the path and threw herself in my arms and began kissing me. I was never so near being seduced by a young girl in all my life!"

"She didn't!" Betty said in dismay.

"I swear I had to fight her off," Richard said. "I gave her a nice fatherly kiss on the forehead, resisted all her blandishments, and firmly trotted her back here at once."

"What am I going to do with her?" Betty asked in despair.

"Nothing," he said. "It's merely girlish exuberance! I told you only because I want you to see what's really on her mind. It's not murder!"

"I think her actions anything but girlish! More like a young prostitute!" cried Betty, appalled.

The handsome Richard said, "Take it easy! Girls grow up quickly these days. They're aware of all kinds of things by the time they reach sixteen. Sarah's no different from the rest of them!"

"How dare she make advances to you?"

"Older men sometimes appeal to teen-agers," he said. "I doubt if she'd behave that way with someone she didn't know. She must have been relatively sure she was safe with me!"

"I wonder!"

He gave her a warning look. "You mustn't reprove her for it. Or even let her know I told you. I hope to be her stepfather one day and I don't want trouble between her and myself."

"I still don't know what to do," she said.

"Just keep it to yourself," he advised. "She'll come through this stage as she has everything else."

"You think so?" she asked.

"I know it!"

"Let us hope you're right!"

Betty was to remember this conversation later that night. She was in bed when Sarah came in, wearing her nightgown, to say goodnight. She kissed her mother dutifully.

Betty kissed her in return and asked her, "Did you have a nice dinner at the restaurant?"

"Yes," she said, standing there looking tantalizingly beautiful. "But I was sorry Richard was gone when we came back."

"He had to go to the city early on business,"

Betty said.

Sarah pouted. "I think he just wanted to get away!"

"Why do you say that?"

"I think I made him uneasy. He doesn't like being near me."

Remembering what Richard had told her, Betty said carefully, "Whatever would make you think that?"

Her lovely daughter shrugged. "He's so prim and prissy!"

"Not at all!"

Sarah turned to look at her directly. "I mean with *me*. I know he isn't with *you*!"

Betty gasped. "Why do you think he'd treat me differently from you?"

"Come on, mother," Sarah taunted her. "Mrs. Doherty has told me that you sometimes stay in Boston overnight."

"I have extra work to do!"

"I'll bet," Sarah said with a sly smile.

"How dare you snoop and insinuate!" Betty exclaimed.

"Mother! I'm not a prude," Sarah rebuked her. "I know you're sleeping with Richard, and I think it shows good taste on your part. I wouldn't mind sleeping with him myself!"

Betty remained speechless for a second and then cried, "Don't you let me *ever* hear you talk like that again! I hope you never say such things to Amy!"

"Why not?" Sarah jeered. "Amy'd like to sleep with him along with me! What fun! Three in a

bed!" And with soft laughter she ran out of the room.

Betty sank back on her pillow, feeling drained. Had her relationship with Richard been so obvious that everyone could see and gossip about it? Even her own child? She had slept with the handsome curator and could not deny it. But she had not expected such talk from Sarah. Not only did she feel guilty for her own behavior, but she could not help but wonder what standards Sarah was growing up with.

Richard had said that Sarah had made a definite attempt to seduce him, and she believed what he'd told her. She also knew that was why he had left earlier than usual to avoid meeting Sarah soon after the incident. Sarah had confirmed what he'd said, by sensing what was behind his early departure. Richard had said it was all part of the complicated process of growing up. But she could not help but be upset. Sarah's words still echoed in her mind.

Then there was the other dreadful news she had heard earlier in the day, Amy's account of the boy's drowning. Betty determined when she took Sarah back up to school to discuss the boy's death with Mrs. Mannering, and try to clear her own mind of the dark suspicions about what might have taken place.

Two weeks later she drove Sarah up for the fall term at Mannering Hall. As soon as she'd left her daughter on the green greeting other returning friends, she walked over to the main office and asked to speak with Mrs. Mannering.

The gaunt, aristocratic woman kept her waiting, and when she was ushered into her office, received her coldly. She said, "I hope you are not here to complain about the necessary rise in fees, Mrs. Ryan. I assure you it only reflects the rising costs of operating our school."

Betty sat awkwardly before the annoyed woman. "I didn't come here about that. I'm willing to pay the increased fees."

Mrs. Mannering's frigid attitude became slightly less cold. "This is a very busy time for us. What can I do for you?"

"It's about my daughter."

"I would expect it to be," the principal said, drumming her bony fingers on her oak desk top. "What about Sarah?"

"I understand that a boy died here in an accident at the lake, and Sarah was with him."

Mrs. Mannering's watery blue eyes met hers. "That is true."

"They were alone."

"They wandered off for a few minutes. The main party was within shouting distance. They heard Sarah's screams and came to her aid."

"I see," she said. "Were there any suspicious details regarding the boy's death?"

"These things are always investigated by the authorities," Mrs. Mannering said coldly.

"And the investigation proved it was an accident?"

"Yes," the gaunt woman said. "Why do you ask such a peculiar question?"

She replied, "Because my daughter was there at

the time."

"No one ever blamed your daughter in any way," Mrs. Mannering said loftily.

"I'm very glad," she said. "I worried that perhaps some might wonder exactly how it happened and why she wasn't able to help him."

"I think that was all gone over at the coroner's inquest," the principal said. "You could get the details from the court records."

"Thank you."

Mrs. Mannering glared at her. "But I would surely be angry if you *did* question the matter."

She was startled. "Why?"

"I should think that, as a mother of a student at Mannering Hall, you would not need an explanation," the woman said loftily. "We must not have even a breath of scandal here. Even unfounded rumors can cause schools such as this one to suffer," Mrs. Mannering said. "I urge you to be discreet, Mrs. Ryan. Be discreet!"

"I shall," she said, rising. "I only wanted your version of the matter."

Betty drove back to Bedford not thoroughly satisfied but at least reconciled to dropping the matter. But she could not help wondering what the dour Inspector Hayward might make of it if he were informed about it. Happily, Wellesley was a good way from Menton and so it was thoroughly unlikely that he would ever hear anything about the boy's death. Her relief in knowing this brought back new feelings of guilt.

But within the next few days there was an exciting new development which made her

temporarily forget about everything else. Richard drove down to the house one Saturday morning to find her working on the restoration of a still life in her upstairs studio.

Mrs. Doherty informed him where she was and he came racing up the stairs like a lad. He burst in breathless and triumphant to declare, "Great news! I've made an important break in tracing the Vine family!"

She put down her brush and palette and hurried to him. "Do tell me! Don't keep me waiting!"

"I'm sure it's the right family. I've traced them here to this very district. They lived in a house outside Menton."

"Near Menton!"

"Yes. And would you believe it? The house still exists! It is there after more than two hundred years and someone has remodeled it and is living in it!"

She sank into a chair. "You have found out all this? And you're sure?"

"I could almost swear to it," he said. "The head of the family was Matthew Vine. And the house I'm telling you about was his house!"

She smiled happily. "You're a wonderful detective!"

He kissed her and said, "I can even take you to the house."

"What else did you find out?" she wanted to know. "I mean, about the girl?"

"Nothing."

Her face shadowed. "Nothing at all?"

"Not yet. I've been tracing land grants and

deeds," he said. "But isolating the house is one of the major steps. Next I'll try to dig up some documents pertaining to it. You never know how far such things get dispersed."

"Meaning?"

"I'll have to advertise in the journals again," he said. "It is possible that some other museum will have more records or perhaps some diaries. These things are discovered and bought and sold. It will be another job of tracing. But at least we have a definite point now from which to continue our search, Matthew Vine of Menton."

"The house is the one they really lived in?"

"Yes. Would you like to visit it?"

"I would," she said. "I would very much like to see that house." The impulse was so strong in her that she could not understand it.

"I've arranged it all," he said. "It's owned by a childless couple named Howard and Pauline King. He's done well as a stockbroker in Boston, she was a legal secretary. But her leg was crippled in a riding accident (they have a stable near their house), and now she leads a quiet life as a housewife."

"How far is the house from here?" she asked.

"Far enough," he said. "It's only about a mile this side of Menton. You may have noticed it and thought nothing of it. The house is smaller than the new stables Howard King has built. He is interested in riding and raising racing stock. He's poured everything he has into his hobby."

"I'd like to meet them," she said.

"You can," he promised. "I asked their

permission to bring you and they were quite willing. We can go after lunch."

And they did. The house was large, three stories and a widow's walk. The building was covered with aging white clapboards. Behind it were the modern new stables which Howard King had recently constructed.

As Richard drove up the hill to the house, Betty felt her heart begin to pound more quickly. So this was the place! This was where the Vine girl, whom Sarah so resembled, had once lived. The girl so much like her daughter had walked about in this very yard, used the plain front door, slept in one of the low-ceilinged rooms.

Howard King received them in riding breeches and tweed jacket. He was a brown-haired, broad-faced man with a ruddy skin tone. His eyes were a bright blue and his round face offered them a friendly smile.

"So you did decide to visit us," he said. "Pauline will be ever so pleased."

Pauline greeted them in the living room. She was a slender woman, frail in appearance, with bright black eyes and dark hair which was slightly graying. She walked with a limp and motioned them to sit down.

Betty sat in a high backed antique chair in the shadowed room and said, "This is an exciting experience for me!"

Pauline smiled as she sat across from her. "I hear that you restored a painting of the original daughter of the house."

"I've seen it," Howard King said in a hearty

voice. "Mr. Frost had me drop by the museum the other day. I must say it made me value the house more. That Vine girl was a beauty and the painting is superb!"

"Chiefly due to Betty's fine restoration work," Richard said.

Pauline offered her another gentle smile. "And I understand the amazing thing is that your own daughter looks remarkably like the Vine girl of two centuries ago."

"Yes, she does," Betty said. "I've never mentioned it to her. And she's not seen the painting."

Howard King seemed surprised. "You haven't told her anything about it?"

"No," she said. "I suppose I must, now that we've discovered the house in which the Vine girl lived. I didn't tell her before. I worried it might make her self-conscious."

"I can't see that," Howard King said. "I should think she'd be amused and pleased."

"That's probably how she will feel. She's a very modern young lady," Betty said.

"How fortunate you are to have a lovely daughter," said Pauline King wistfully.

"Yes, indeed," Howard King said. "I shall want to meet her."

Betty smiled. "I'm sure that can be easily arranged when she returns home for the Christmas holidays. She's presently at school in Wellesley."

"How I envy you," the frail Pauline said. "We like children and young people. I lost my chance to have any of my own when I had the riding accident

that caused internal injuries, as well as crippling my leg."

"We considered adoption," Howard King said. "But we couldn't make up our minds. Then we started the stables, and now the horses are our children."

"And I promise you they take a lot of looking after," Pauline said with a small smile. "We'd be lost without them."

Betty asked, "Do you think there were originally stables attached to the place?"

"Definitely," Howard King said. "The real estate agent who sold us the place is dead now. He was an elderly man, and he said he remembered his grandfather talking about the Vine place. They had at least a small stable and horses for riding and the family farm work."

Richard nodded. "No house as nice as this would be without stock, including horses and cattle, in those days."

Betty said, "My daughter is wild about horses and riding."

"Great thing for a young girl," Howard King exclaimed. "Nothing like horses and riding to give a female tone and poise!"

Pauline offered him another of her wistful smiles. She said, "I'm afraid it didn't work out that way for me. I was left an invalid."

"But you love horses!" her husband insisted "And you still do some riding!"

"I ride better than I walk," his wife agreed wryly. "It's true. My accident didn't turn me against horses. And Howard's love of them had

something to do with my falling in love with him.”

Betty said, “I’m sure you’re both very happy here.”

“A comfortable house,” Richard agreed. “And you’ve furnished it with valuable antiques.”

“Has cost me a bit,” Howard King said glancing around him at the paintings, silver, china and the heavy furniture of an earlier era.

“Originally the real estate agent wasn’t too anxious to show us this place because he said it had a bad reputation,” Pauline said.

“Really?” Betty said, all interest.

Howard King scoffed. “He was an old man, full of local lore and superstition.”

“I think he really believed the story,” Pauline said.

“What was the story?” Richard wanted to know.

Pauline smiled wanly. “We never did get it straight. Something about a curse on the place.”

“It had been empty for about ten years when we looked at it. It was owned by a real estate company and they had about decided to tear it down and put up a new house,” Howard King said.

“That would have been a shame,” Richard protested. “This house has historical value. There are not too many of them left, even here in New England.”

“Exactly how we felt,” Pauline King agreed. “But the old man didn’t show it to us until the very end of our visit. And he did it then because we’d decided to try somewhere else.”

Her husband nodded. “Then he brought us

here, and we fell in love with it at once."

"That would be easy to do," Betty said. "Though I don't suppose it looked anything like it does now."

"It was badly run down," Howard King agreed. "The last owner lost his wife after he moved into the house. He lived here alone and became an alcoholic. He fell down the steps from the attic and broke his neck. No one was ever able to guess why he'd gone up there, but they all blamed it on the family curse."

"So that was why no one hurried to buy it?" Richard said.

"Exactly," Howard King said with a frown. "When the house was empty there was some nonsense about lights being seen in windows, and a figure in white moving around through the rooms. The usual ghost stories you hear in these small towns."

"Because of the way the previous owner died, no doubt," Betty said.

Pauline King spoke up, "No, I really think it goes back somewhat further than that."

"Oh?" she said.

"Yes," the older woman said. "According to the elderly real estate agent, his grandfather had always referred to it as an evil house."

"I wonder what started the gossip about it," Betty said.

"It often doesn't take much, especially not in the old days," Richard explained. "Often a fever, or consumption as they called it then, would devastate a family and the evil of the disease would

be put down to the house in which they lived. The deaths could often have been avoided if they had isolated the sick, and taken the sort of precautions we know today. They found it easier to blame the house and do nothing."

"I agree," Howard King said. "When I heard the price I could buy the place for, I said, 'It may be evil but it's damn cheap! And I want it!'"

"So we bought it almost over the old real estate man's protests," his wife said with a tiny laugh.

Richard said, "From the looks of the place, I'm certain you haven't regretted it."

"Never," the gruff, horsey owner said. "I built the stables and it has been ideal. I leave Boston and come back here and it's like enjoying life in another century. I don't think we'll ever leave it."

"Still, there are some odd things," his wife said vaguely. "I'm here a lot more than Howard, and when he is here he spends much of his time in the stables."

Howard looked annoyed. "I have to take care of the horses. And I only have one part-time man to help."

She smiled, "I'm not complaining, dear. I'm merely trying to explain something to our guests."

He continued to frown as he mumbled, "My wife is a very nervous woman. She suffers from insomnia and that sort of thing."

Pauline smiled again. Turning to Betty, she said, "My husband doesn't like me talking about certain things. But I must admit to you, there are sometimes sounds which I can't quite explain. I hear what seem to be sighs, then the creaking of

floor boards, and often in the night if I wake up I hear slow footsteps on the stairs."

"It's an old house," her exasperated husband declared. "And any old house creaks and makes noises. That's part of its charm!"

"Then this house has *lots* of charm, dear," his wife said.

Betty asked rather hesitantly, "Have you ever seen anything?"

Howard King spoke up bluntly, "By 'anything,' I presume you mean, anything supernatural. We haven't, I assure you. No ghosts in white sheets, no lights in the rooms when they're empty. Nothing at all. It's a completely normal house!"

Pauline King made no comment on this but there was a look on her face which made Betty feel she might have answered differently if her husband hadn't quickly interrupted.

They talked a little more and then left. The Kings saw them to the door and both of them expressed a desire to meet Sarah and have her ride some of their horses.

"The beasts need exercise," Howard King said. "Tell your daughter she'd be doing us a kindness."

"I do so want to meet her," Pauline King smiled.

When Richard and Betty drove away, he turned to her and said, "A spooky old place. But they're very friendly. What did you think of them?"

"I liked them," she said. "But Mr. King struck me as protesting too much that he liked the house. And I don't think Mrs. King had a chance to enlarge on her feelings about the eerie sounds which seem to have troubled her."

Chapter Ten

The Kings' house became a place which Betty and Richard increasingly visited. Richard continued his search for more information on the family of Matthew Vine, who had been the original owner of the house in the 1750's. Thus far only minor finds had turned up. From a museum in Providence there had come some bills of sale and credit transfers, which were signed by Matthew Vine, but nothing so far which would really tell much about the family.

Both the Kings were deeply interested in finding out more about their ancient house, Howard because he felt that such knowledge might increase its value, and Pauline because she was curious about the people who had lived in the rooms which were their dwelling place now.

Despite the many visits they paid nothing more was said to Betty and Richard of the ghosts and the other eerie manifestations which some claimed were associated with the house. Betty would have pursued this with Pauline, but Richard warned against it. He felt it might intrude on their new friendship and so she agreed to ask no more questions.

But there were many things which made her

wonder. The Kings continued to entertain them as host and hostess and they kept enquiring about Sarah and voicing their desire to meet her. Betty wrote Sarah and told her about these new friends, making a lot of the fact they had a stable and good horses and that Sarah would be welcome there. She did not yet mention anything about the portrait or the fact the long dead girl who so resembled her had once lived in this house. She would do that later.

Sarah wrote back, "The Kings sound like lovely people and I look forward to meeting them. Their old house sounds very nice and I have always favored Menton over Bedford. I look forward to the holidays when I shall see you all."

It was early in November and Betty was busy in her studio at home working on the restoration of a rather primitive shipwreck scene done by some New England artist perhaps a hundred years or more earlier. It was not an especially inspiring task, but the museum felt it represented a type of painting done in that period and wanted to use it in a new display.

Betty was hurrying to get the last of the afternoon light before she would have to turn to artificial lighting, which was not as well suited to her task. Then she heard the doorbell ring below and Mrs. Doherty speaking with someone, and after that, footsteps coming up the stairs.

Turing to see who it was, she was startled to see that it was the plump Mrs. Hatford who had been so helpful in suggesting Mannering Hall and whose daughter had become Sarah's best friend. Mrs.

Hatford at this moment looked slightly rumpled rather than her usual stylish self, and there was a bleak look on the usually jolly face.

Betty put down her palette and went to greet her. She said, "You look exhausted. Let's go downstairs and I'll make you a martini."

"I could certainly use one," the stout woman said. "And make one for yourself as well. I'm not the bearer of good tidings today."

As Betty took off her smock, she said, "Surely it can't be all that bad."

"You can judge for yourself," the stout woman said as they went downstairs.

Betty hurried to make the martinis and served one to Mrs. Hatford who was slumped in an easy chair. She took one herself as she sat on the end of the divan by her guest. "Now tell me," she said.

"It's exploded!" Mrs. Hatford said dramatically. "Gone up in smoke!"

"What?"

"Mannering Hall!"

She felt a surge of panic. "You mean there's been a fire or some sort of explosion? What about Amy and Sarah, are they all right?"

Mrs. Hatford waved a calming hand at her. "They're all right. Don't get upset. I didn't mean the school itself had blown up, I was speaking metaphorically."

"Oh?"

"The state authorities have closed the school," Mrs. Hatford said.

"Closed it? Why?"

"That's a long story. But they didn't do it before

Colonel and Mrs. Mannering left suddenly for Switzerland where all the money we've been donating to the new building fund has found its way to await them!"

"You're saying that aristocratic woman and the Colonel have turned out to be criminals?" Betty demanded.

"You couldn't have put it better," the stout woman said, and sipped her martini. "They're a couple of crooks!"

"Surely the law will catch up with them!"

"It would cost too much," Mrs. Hatford said wearily. "I've just come from my lawyer's office. He says no one will bother. They made a nice little haul, but not enough for huge lawsuits."

"What about the girls?"

"They are starting to send them home tomorrow," the stout woman said. "I think I'll put Amy in a convent school."

"Really?" she said. "I don't know what I'll do with Sarah."

Mrs. Hatford said, "I feel guilty about all this. That is why I came straight to you. I was the one who persuaded you into sending your daughter to Mannering Hall."

"It seemed a wonderful place. Sarah has been so happy there. I'm sure no other school will ever be the same for her."

"Not a doubt about that," the stout woman said grimly. "I think there are a few things I should tell you about Mannering Hall."

"Please do!"

"The trouble began when one of the new

students wrote a detailed letter about the school to her parents. Her parents just happened to be friends of the governor of the state. And that is how the state authorities moved in. Unhappily the Mannerings had been tipped off in some way, and moved out just ahead of the law. They had already sent all their liquid assets away against this very contingency.”

Betty began to sense there was a great deal more to the story than she'd heard so far. “What did the girl write her parents?”

“A long account of what was going on. I can't think of why any of the girls hadn't done it before, unless it was because they were having such a wonderful time.”

“Please explain,” she begged.

Mrs. Hatford leaned over confidentially. She said, “Brace yourself! The school was being operated like no other school in the world. The Mannerings are both alcoholics, both drunk before eight every night. The Oxford educated Mr. Bostwick is a rapist with a long record. And all the others on the staff are either perverts or criminals of some sort!”

“It can't be!”

“I'm telling you exactly what went on,” the stout woman said. “The boys from the nearby academy made regular raids on the girls' dormitories. I can promise you there are few virgins left at Mannering Hall, and Amy and your Sarah won't be among that minority.”

“And my innocent Amy!” Mrs. Hatford said grimly. “Those girls have had the kind of

education they'll never forget, I promise!"

Betty was stunned. "And all the time I felt she was so safe."

"Marijuana, pills, booze, you name it," Mrs. Hatford said grimly. "The house mother had the franchise for selling contraceptive devices. It was all worked out beautifully. No girl would ever want to leave the place."

"I don't know what to say," Betty said dismally.

"Be glad you're not in my shoes," Mrs. Hatford said dramatically. "You're not the only one I touted this place to. I'm going to have to do a lot of explaining to a good many of my friends."

"It's just tragic," Betty lamented.

"Some boy drowned there, as well, no doubt because a proper watch wasn't being kept on either the boys or girls. It will be in all the papers. A proper scandal!"

"What will I say to Sarah?"

"Take my advice and say nothing," the stout woman said. "That's what I'm going to do with Amy. But I'm going to keep a tight rein on her. And I think it would be wise for us to keep those two apart in the future. No telling what deviltry they'd hatch up with the training they've had!"

"I agree," Betty said. "I surely agree."

"The whole world seems to have gone crazy," Mrs. Hatford said gloomily. "It's hard to raise a teen-age daughter these days."

Betty shrugged. "Well, I guess they won't have learned anything in there that they wouldn't have eventually learned elsewhere."

"That's one way of looking at it," Mrs. Hatford

said dryly.

"Sarah seemed better than before in many ways," Betty recalled. "I suppose now it was because she was free to engage in so much vice at the school."

"That's what it was! A vice school!" Mrs. Hatford said rising with a small groan. "I'd like to have my hands around that thin neck of the Mannering woman!"

Betty finally saw the bedraggled Mrs. Hatford on her way and then told Mrs. Doherty what she'd just learned, ending with, "We can expect Sarah home tomorrow some time. They're sending all the girls home by bus."

"I can't believe it," the old Irish woman moaned. "Poor dear, little Sarah. It's a mercy she's not pregnant!"

"Don't be too sure she isn't!"

"Not that!" Mrs. Doherty protested. "That would be to cruel, altogether."

"I doubt if she is," Betty said. "The housemother did a lively trade in contraceptives, according to Mrs. Hatford."

"It was a cesspool, not a school! And all the money you gave those people."

"They will have most of it in Switzerland with them," Betty said. "Despite being alcoholic, they were far from stupid."

It was one of the nights she was supposed to join Richard in his apartment in town but she could not bring herself to do it after the grim news. She phoned him and gave him a brief account of what she'd heard.

"Sounds outrageous," he declared. "I'll drive down after work and you can tell me more."

"I'll prepare dinner for you here," she said.

"Excellent idea," he agreed. "It will give us a place to talk without a chance of being overheard, at least by anyone except Mrs. Doherty."

"She already knows all about it," Betty assured him.

Betty tried to go back to work but with poor results. Finally she simply stood by the studio window and gazed out at the darkness gradually settling in. Far off in the distance lights began to show as tiny bright specks in the blackness. She wished that she could accept the situation in the half-bantering fashion of Mrs. Hatford. But the gravity of having Sarah exposed to such an existence for three years shocked her. The Mannerings had been experts at covering up. Exam results had been mailed promptly and were always satisfactory. Parents were invited to the school only on special occasions and then Mrs. Mannering staged everything as one might stage a play. Nothing had been real but the vice going on behind the facade of strictness and decency.

Parents had been discouraged from phoning students except in the gravest circumstances, and even then it would be one of the staff who would be the intermediary of the calls. Writing was the basic means of contact and probably most of the letters home were censored, and those which were derogatory were simply destroyed. Somehow this one letter had managed to get through and upset the whole vile organization.

Fortunately Sarah had been precocious when she went to the school. There was a chance that mingling with girls her own age had done her some good, despite the evil things which many of them must have engaged in. At seventeen Sarah was still young and malleable, and with good luck this dark episode might soon be forgotten. The one dark shadow which troubled Betty was the part Sarah might have played in the violent death of that boy. None, she hoped.

Richard arrived shortly after and they sat and talked over the excellent fish dinner Mrs. Doherty had prepared on short notice.

Richard grumbled, "The authorities always seem to bungle things. It's too bad those two got away to enjoy their ill-gotten spoils."

"I agree," she said. "But they're essentially beyond the reach of the law now."

"Sarah will be here tomorrow?"

"Yes."

He said, "You must keep her busy. Get her mind off the things that went on there."

She nodded. "I'll spend all my time with her—take her on some shopping trips to Boston, things like that. And I've been thinking about the Kings."

"What about them?"

"They've seemed so anxious to meet her and have her enjoy their stables. Maybe she could help with the stable work and ride their horses in return. That would keep her busy."

Richard's handsome face showed approval of her suggestion. "That's a good idea," he said.

"But don't you think we ought to explain something about her coming home so the Kings will understand?"

"Probably," she agreed.

"Let me phone them," Richard said. "If they are home and free we can drop by there for a little."

The Kings were both home and free. At nine o'clock Betty and Richard arrived in the driveway of the old house. Howard King welcomed them and served drinks all around.

Then the jovial stockbroker said, "What's on your minds? You said you had a special reason for coming over."

Richard glanced at Betty and said, "You'd better tell them."

"I'll try," she said with a bleak smile. And she went on to give them the background about the school and what had taken place. She ended with the news that it meant Sarah would be returning home at once.

Howard heard her out and said, "It's too bad. But we will be the gainers. We'll get to meet Sarah that much sooner."

"You surely can't blame the poor girl," Pauline said. "You sent her there."

"I know," Betty said. "I had no idea."

"How would you be expected to have?" Howard King said. "I don't think there's any cause to worry. Youngsters are very wise in experience today."

"Exactly what I told her," Richard agreed. "I think the main thing is to keep Sarah healthily

occupied. We came over to tell you the truth about it all and see if you'd like to use her as a stable girl part-time in exchange for her having the use of one of your horses."

"She doesn't have to be a stable girl!" Howard King declared. "And she can certainly come over here and ride whenever she likes."

"You're very kind," Betty said, meaning it.

"Not at all," Pauline told her. "She can come over at any time. I'd be glad of her company."

"Sure," Howard said. "We need someone young around here. I mean, really young. We're getting woolly-headed from being alone."

Richard smiled. "You'll find Sarah charming."

"Have you told her about the painting yet?" Pauline wanted to know.

"I will before she comes here so she'll have more interest in the house and better understand why you wish to meet her."

"We'd want to meet her anyway," their host said generously. "We've been looking forward to the holidays. Now we won't have to wait so long."

Betty went home feeling that something had been accomplished. Richard kissed her goodnight and told her to take a week or so off until Sarah had adjusted to coming home. It was another case of their personal plans being upset, but Betty felt she was becoming used to it.

She knew that now she must finally take Sarah up to see the painting of the young woman whom she so much resembled, and in due time she'd take her over to meet the Kings.

Once again she had a restless night's sleep. In her

dreams the thin Mrs. Mannering whipped a naked Sarah and then thrust her into a room filled with naked boys and girls. Sarah screamed and tried to escape. But no matter which way she turned, Mrs. Mannering or some other threatening member of the evil staff were there to block her way. Betty woke the next morning feeling weary and ill.

Around eleven the next morning, in a rainstorm, a sorry Sarah was delivered at the front door. Mrs. Doherty hovered over her like a mother hen, helped her with her bags, and removed her wet raincoat and hat. Betty hurried downstairs to meet her daughter and took her in her arms for a long embrace.

Sarah sobbed, "It was awful, Mother! They closed the school and sent us all home!"

"I hear there was good reason," she said, her arm still around the girl.

"Lies!" Sarah said fiercely. "All lies! That silly girl made all those things up! She hated the school and hated all the rest of us!"

"But why did the Mannerings run away as they did?"

"I suppose they were afraid they couldn't prove her wrong," Sarah said, wiping her eyes. "It wasn't fair!"

"Well, you hadn't long to remain there in any case," Betty said placating her as best she could.

"The Colonel was wonderful to me," Sarah told her. "We went out riding every day and he let me use one of his best horses. I can handle a horse very well."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said. "The Kings want

you to help them with their stable. And their horses need someone to ride them. Mr. King is in Boston much of the time and Mrs. King is crippled and can only ride occasionally."

Her daughter's lovely face lit up for the first time since arriving home, and she said, "That at least gives me something to look forward to."

"I hoped you'd be pleased," Betty smiled.

"When can I meet them?" her daughter asked.

"Soon," she said. "A day or two!"

"I don't want to wait!" Sarah said with a pout, much like her old self.

"There is a reason," Betty said. "Come upstairs to your room and I'll help you unpack and explain to you."

Sarah obeyed her and as they unpacked Betty told her about the painting which so resembled her, and that the Kings lived in the house in which Matthew Vine had raised his family two centuries earlier.

"Fantastic!" Sarah said. "I can't wait to see the portrait, and the house in which the girl I look like lived."

"We'll go to Boston for some shopping tomorrow if it is fine," Betty promised. "We can stop by the museum and have lunch with Richard after we have seen the portrait. It's in a special place in the main gallery."

"My portrait!" Sarah said, her eyes shining.

Betty glanced at her. "Hardly that! But someone who lived long ago and looked a good deal like you!"

Sarah flashed a tantalizing smile. "Never mind.

I'm going to pretend it's me! Wait until I write Amy and tell her my portrait is hanging in a Boston museum! She'll be *green* with envy!"

Betty closed the empty suitcase which they'd unpacked. "Mrs. Hatford seems to think we should wait a while before you and Amy start being so friendly again."

Sarah's smile vanished and she looked angry. "That fat old woman is a fool if she thinks she can part Amy and me."

Betty said, "She was upset. I'm sure she'll be all right later on."

"She'd better be!" Sarah said with vehemence.

It was apparent that her daughter had lost little of her spirit. The rain ended and Sarah put on a jacket and was off at once on a walk—to the lake. It seemed the marina and its surroundings had a special fascination for her. Betty hoped that this first day would be the most awkward and Sarah would settle down as the days passed.

The sun shone brightly the following morning, so they drove to Boston arriving early enough to shop for a new winter coat for Sarah before going to the museum. By the time they arrived there, Sarah was pleased and excited by the shopping expedition and in a good mood. Betty took her straight into the main art gallery which was deserted except for the two of them and pointed out the portrait to her.

"It really *is* me!" Sarah exclaimed. "Of course I would never wear a dress like that!"

Betty smiled. "I'm certain it must have been stylish in that period."

"The colors are so true," Sarah said, gazing at it in awe. "They are really alive. The painting is alive!"

"I worked very hard on it," Betty told her. "When I was given it, the entire painting was covered with grime and I had to remove that and several coats of varnish before I could bring back its true colors."

"You have so much talent," Sarah said, turning to her. "What a wonderful mother you are!" And to Betty's pleased embarrassment she emotionally threw her arms around her.

"All right," Betty laughed. "You've praised me enough. You'll give me a swelled head!"

"Never," Sarah said studying her with tenderness. "You are the most modest person in the world. You made that painting live! You made *me* live!"

An odd feeling coursed through Betty as she listened to her daughter. She said, "Well, I think we've seen enough of the painting!"

"I'll never see enough of it," Sarah said, studying it again with bright eyes. "I want to come back and see it many more times!"

"We can do that," her mother said. "Just now I expect Richard is outside waiting to accompany us to the cafeteria for lunch."

And he was. He kissed Sarah, and Betty noted with some trepidation that her daughter kissed him warmly and full on the lips in return. Then they linked arms and happily discussed the painting as they walked towards the cafeteria with Betty a step behind them.

Richard told Sarah, "Of course I think you're much more beautiful than the portrait."

"That's because I'm the *real* one," she said.

Betty was already worrying what to do about trying to gain Sarah's admission to some college, the examinations she might have to take and all the rest. She also wondered how the Kings would cope with her unpredictable daughter when they met her.

She didn't have to wait very long to find out. Sarah insisted that she be taken over there on the weekend. Richard had also come down, so the three of them drove over together. Before they turned off the road to drive up to the house, Sarah pointed ahead excitedly and said, "That's the house there!"

Richard glanced at her, surprised. "How do you know?"

Sarah smiled at him wisely. "You and Mother have told me about it so many times!"

"I don't think we described it that well," Betty said.

"But you did," Sarah insisted and fixed her eyes on the road and house as they turned into the drive.

Sarah seemed transfixed. She was completely quiet and devoured the scene with her lovely green eyes. The moment Richard stopped the car she jumped out and stood gazing about her. Then she turned and looked out at the distant ocean.

In a low voice, she murmured. "Yes. This is the place!"

Betty touched her arm. "What did you say?"

Sarah turned to her, still lost in her rapture for a moment. Then she said, "Such a wonderful place!"

From the stables Howard King appeared, dressed in his working clothes. He waved to them and shouted a friendly, "Hello!" Then he came striding towards them. He at once singled Sarah out and said, smiling, "This is the girl I've been waiting for!" He embraced her warmly. Sarah laughed and kissed him on the cheek in return.

"Now there's a likely young filly if I've ever seen one," Howard King said with enthusiasm. "Can you ride well, Sarah?"

"I think I ride very well," she said. "At school, I was on a horse every day the weather allowed, and the Colonel said I had a good seat."

Howard King roared with laughter. "I'll bet the Colonel was an expert!"

"He was," Sarah said seriously, not seeing the joke. "He was an officer in the British cavalry and won a lot of medals."

"No offense meant," Howard King hastened to say. "No doubt you'll be wanting to see the stables and the horses."

"Yes," she said. "But first I'd like to see the house. It's so old and I've heard so much about it."

"Why not?" Howard said.

Again Betty had that strange apprehensive feeling. Normally, she would have expected Sarah to rush to the stables first. But she had instead shown a desire to see the house, and there had been a look of intensity on her face which her mother

could not understand.

Betty and Richard followed Howard and the girl into the house where they were met by Pauline, who limped forward, a smile on her pleasant face.

"Welcome, Sarah," she said.

Sarah did not react at all warmly this time. In fact, she was barely polite as she said, "Thank you!" in a small cool voice.

"She wants to look around the house," Howard explained to his wife.

Sarah rushed forward, moving from room to room as if caught up in an enchantment. The two men followed close behind her as Howard King pointed out the special features of each room, the mahogany paneling in one, the leaded windows in another.

Betty remained behind with the frail Pauline and said, "You must not mind Sarah. She is sometimes strange and impulsive."

"I understand," Pauline smiled. "The house excites her. I felt much the same way when I first saw it."

They followed Sarah and the two men into the kitchen. Betty watched with troubled eyes as Sarah halted and touched one of the wooden door frames with what was almost a caress. Then she turned and ran off up the stairs to the second floor. Again she darted from room to room.

Howard King looked amused. "We have the making of an antiquarian here. Your daughter is truly taken with our house, Mrs. Ryan."

Betty managed a smile. "She certainly seems to want to see it all."

"I have always found old houses fascinating," Pauline said, as if to try to cover up Sarah's almost irrational behavior.

Now Sarah had reached the stairs leading to the third floor and her entire manner changed. She hesitated and then turned and with a smile for Howard King, said, "I've seen enough. Not let me see the stables."

It did not surprise Betty when her daughter borrowed a pair of riding breeches from Pauline and was soon astride the liveliest of the King horses. Howard mounted his prize mare, and the two galloped off up the hill together.

Richard said, "She was not bragging without something to back it up. She does ride very well."

"She's a fine horsewoman," Pauline agreed.

Betty smiled wryly. "At least we can thank the Mannering School for something."

They went back into the house to wait for Howard and Sarah to return. Pauline served them tea and cakes and told Betty, "You must allow your daughter to come and stay with us for a few days. That way she can really get to know the house."

"I don't want her to become a nuisance," Betty said.

"Never," Pauline protested. "I know I'm going to like her and it is obvious that Howard already thinks she is wonderful."

At last the two returned, Howard in his most jovial mood and Sarah breathless and happy. They also had tea and something to eat.

Sarah declared, "This has been a marvelous

day!"

"There will be many more of them," Howard King promised.

Richard and Betty prepared to leave and Sarah reluctantly went with them. But before she left, Pauline had invited her to return the first of the week and spend at least three or four days.

"This is a lonely house," Pauline said. "We badly need some young company."

Howard promised, "I'll come by to pick Sarah up Monday on my way home from Boston."

So Sarah's return visit was all arranged before they left. She sat in the rear seat, waving to the Kings as they drove back on to the main road. Then she sat very still, an expression of contentment on her face.

Betty glanced back at her. "You're very quiet," she said.

Sarah looked at her calmly and said, "I'm thinking about the house. It was just as I expected it would be. I loved it."

Richard said, "When your mother and I are married, we must find an old house you'll enjoy living in with us."

"Are you really going to be married?" Sarah asked.

"Yes," Richard said.

"When?" Sarah asked.

Betty turned to smile at her in reassurance. "Not for a long while. Not until we've found a good college for you."

"I don't want to go to college," Sarah protested as they drove along.

At the wheel, Richard said, "You'll be sorry if you don't. And this time your mother will find you a good place."

"I liked Mannering Hall well enough," Sarah said, smiling mischievously.

When they reached the house at Bedford Lake, Sarah excused herself and went up to her room. Betty put some logs on the fire and she and Richard sat before the blaze. It felt good at the end of the late autumn day.

Richard gave her a wry smile and said, "I didn't notice your daughter jumping with joy at the news we plan to marry."

"I know what you mean," she agreed.

"What did you make of it? I thought she liked me!"

Betty gave him a teasing smile. "Maybe she wants to marry you herself."

"I don't think so," he laughed. "At the moment she seems to have eyes mostly for Howard King."

"And he for her. They both of them ignored poor Pauline."

"Howard's old enough to be careful," Richard said. "I don't think there's any problem."

Betty reminded him, "You know how she sometimes is with older men."

"Pauline is always around. She can keep an eye on him."

"That's what I pin my hopes on," Betty said. "There are times when Sarah still frightens me."

"Such as?"

"When she goes into one of her intense moods, like the other day when she first saw the painting.

She didn't think of it as someone who'd died two hundred years ago. Because she resembles it, she at once identified with it. She referred to it as *her* portrait.

"I noticed that."

"And today. Did you think she behaved normally in the house?"

He said, "You mean the way she rushed about?"

"Yes. As if she were coming home and all at once recognizing everything."

Richard stared at her. "You're not going to read anything into that, I hope?"

"What do you think?" she asked. "I watched her face. She was lost to all of us. The house was all that mattered."

"I don't buy that," the handsome man on the other side of the fireplace said as the flames highlighted his face. "I think it was simply girlish excitement."

"I wish I could fully believe that," she said. "Her reaction sent a shiver down my spine. It was as if she was returning home after a long absence."

He said, "An absence of two hundred years?"

"Perhaps."

"Fiddlesticks," he reproved her. "That's foolish thinking. You mustn't allow yourself to fall into it."

"I'm sorry, but that's the way I felt."

"You're wrong."

"Even the Kings saw she was acting strangely. And then the odd way she halted at the last flight of stairs and refused to go further. That made me

wonder . . .”

“Wonder what?”

“If she had some reason for not wanting to go up there. If it had something to do with the past!”

Richard reached out for her hand. “Don’t!” he said. “It’s madness to think such things.”

“I saw it all,” Betty said. “The way she touched that door frame in the kitchen. I swear she felt she’d been there before and so did I.”

“Which is complete nonsense.”

“Even Pauline King sensed it, I’m sure.”

“She didn’t show if it she did.”

“Pauline is too fine a lady,” Betty said. “I’m beginning to wonder if we made a mistake in letting Sarah see that painting and then telling her that the girl had once lived in the King house.”

“What harm can come of it?”

“Sarah is too imaginative. You saw how she acted today. I think she’s fantasizing, thinking of herself as the Vine girl returning. I wish you’d find more about the history of that house and the Vines.”

“To tell Sarah?”

“Heaven forbid! We may have told her too much already. It’s just to satisfy my own mind. You recall that the elderly real estate man told the Kings the house had a tragic history.”

“That was because the last owner fell down the attic stairs and broke his neck!”

“You say that, but are you sure?”

“What do you mean?”

“The old man might have been referring to events which took place in the house long before

that."

Richard rose and said, "Time for me to drive back to Boston."

She also got to her feet. "I wish you could stay."

"So do I," he said. He took her in his arms and kissed her gently. Then they walked together to the door. He picked his topcoat up from the chair where he'd thrown it and put it on.

"When will I hear from you?" she asked.

"I'll phone tomorrow and see how things are going," he said. "Also, I guess I'm going to have to work harder on tracing the Vine family."

"You mean that?"

He nodded. "Yes. I want to lay all the ghosts. We've found the house. There must be more information around. I'm going to start working the town offices in the Menton area. Maybe some of them will have material useful to us."

"Thank you for trying," she said.

"Give me a little more time," he told her. "These things aren't done in a month, or even a year. Sometimes it takes several years."

"I'm not sure I can wait that long," she said with a wan smile.

Richard kissed her again, and left. She locked the door, turned out the lights and went upstairs. She paused by the closed door of Sarah's room and listened for a moment.

She found it hard to believe what she heard. Sarah was singly softly to herself what seemed to be some ancient folk song. Once again Betty felt cold fingers touch her spine.

Chapter Eleven

For Sarah Ryan, the autumn of 1977 was surely that of the Howard Kings. The stockbroker and his wife all but adopted Sarah as their own, and she seemed to delight in it. Howard's skill with horses was equalled by Sarah's eagerness to join the hired stable hand and help take care of the animals and the stables. It reached the point where Sarah spent at least half of her time in the old house in Menton.

Betty was both pleased and a little worried. She felt that her daughter's friendship with the Kings had come at a time when such a diversion was badly needed. But she worried that Sarah might misuse her undoubted charm in some devious fashion. It was all too plain that Howard King was enchanted with her. And knowing Sarah's proclivities, Betty worried about just how far such a friendship might be safely pursued.

Thus far it had been a mild winter with only a few snow flurries and the predictions were that it would be a green Christmas. Betty continued to work at home and see Richard whenever she could. He promised her that he was following up some interesting leads to the history of the Matthew Vine

family.

One afternoon in early December when she was at home, Sarah came up to the studio to watch Betty working on an ancient farm scene for a while.

Suddenly Sarah said, "I want to spend the holidays with the Kings. I'd like to be there for Christmas and New Year's."

Betty stopped work and turned to her in surprise. "But you've always spent the holidays here with me!"

"I don't care," she said, that all too-familiar sullen look crossing her lovely face. "I want to go there this year."

"Have they invited you?" Betty wanted to know.

"Howard has," Sarah said. "He's really eager for me to be with them."

"What about Pauline?"

Sarah shrugged and turned to stare out the window. "She never has much to say to me."

"Did she also invite you?" Betty persisted.

Sarah kept her back to her. "Not yet, but she will. Howard will make her ask me."

Betty said, "In that case, you may not be truly welcome. Perhaps Pauline would like them to have their Christmas and New Years to themselves."

Sarah turned to her bitterly. "If she had her way they'd be by themselves all the time!"

"I don't think that's true. They welcome company. They've been more than hospitable to you."

"That's because of Howard! I don't like her!"

Betty was at once alarmed. She had experienced Sarah's unreasonable hatreds before and knew all too well where they sometimes led. She wanted nothing like that to happen again.

"You must try to like her. I'm sure she thinks kindly of you!"

"She pretends to!" Sarah said with disgust. "She doesn't fool me. She's jealous of Howard and me!"

Betty gasped. "If I thought you seriously meant that, I would never allow you to go over there again!"

Sarah's manner quickly underwent a transformation. She was once more the pleading young girl. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I think she envies me because I'm young and I'm not crippled like she is. She can barely get on a horse and she doesn't ride well. It makes her jealous of me."

Betty listened with dismay. "You should look at things from a different viewpoint," she said. "Think of Pauline as someone who once was a very good horsewoman, suffered a terrible injury, and still has the courage to mount a horse and ride. I don't believe a woman with that much character could be capable of the sort of jealousy you describe."

Sarah looked away again, gazing out the window. "Maybe I was wrong."

"I'm sure you are," she said. "And I will only allow you to go to the Kings' if Pauline also extends a warm invitation."

"I don't see how it can matter to you," Sarah

complained. "You'd be happier alone with Richard. You'd never miss me! And anyway, you and Richard are over at the Kings a lot of the time. We'd all be together!"

Betty said, "I make no promises. Why are you so set on being there for the holidays?"

Sarah looked at her again, a strained expression on her lovely face. "I can't really explain. It's just that when I'm there I feel really happy! Happier than when I'm anywhere else."

Betty listened and again wondered. She recalled Sarah's excitement and complete obsession with the old house.

On the weekend Sarah stayed with the Kings, as had become her custom. On Saturday afternoon, Betty drove over there on her own. Richard was to join her later for dinner with the Kings. When she arrived at the rambling house she found that Sarah and Howard were out riding. Pauline was doing some needlework by the fireplace.

Betty decided it was her chance to sound out the frail, pleasant woman's feeling about Sarah. She began by saying, "Do you mind my daughter coming over here so much?"

Pauline paused in her work to offer her a surprised smile. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I've worried about it. Most people don't like outsiders continually intruding."

"We don't consider Sarah an outsider."

"You know she wants to spend the week of Christmas and New Year's with you," Betty said. "And Howard has actually invited her."

"I didn't know about the invitation," Pauline admitted. "But I think it's a good idea. I wouldn't mind her being here."

"But do you really want her?"

"Yes," Pauline said decidedly. "It will make Howard happy."

"And you?"

Pauline smiled. "My pleasure is to see Howard contented. So it will work out fine."

"I see," Betty said with a sigh. "I don't wish to speak against my daughter, but she has some very grown-up ideas and that school didn't help. Frankly, I'm worried that she may have a crush on your husband and that there could be the danger of an affair."

Pauline looked mildly shocked. "I've never even thought of such a possibility. For one thing, Howard has never been unfaithful to me and he would certainly never be interested in a child like Sarah."

Betty listened with a wariness which she did not reveal. Instead she said, "I'm glad you're so certain of this."

"We enjoy sharing your daughter with you," Pauline said. "And I have never seen anyone take to a house as she has to this one. She seems to adore it."

"I've noticed that. It's strange."

"I don't think so. When I was young, old houses thrilled me. They speak so of the past, and the past is a mystery to young people."

"To all of us," Betty agreed.

"There is one strange thing," Pauline admitted.

“And what may that be?”

“Sarah doesn’t show as much interest in the upper part of the house as she does down here. She sleeps on the second floor and that is no problem, since we use only minimal heating on the third floor. But she has also refused to go up and view the countryside from the widow’s walk. She claims she has an aversion to it. Was she always so afraid of heights?”

“I have no memory of it,” Betty said. “She has always been too daring about heights and other things.”

“It’s not the case here,” Pauline said. “I don’t know why, but she refuses to go above the second floor. And of course we don’t press her.”

Betty sighed. “She has always been a strange child, given to impulses I’ve found it hard to understand at times.”

“But she is so beautiful you must be proud of her.”

“I am, of course,” Betty said. “But she is also willful and moody. I’m constantly trying to cure her of these traits.”

“I see little bad behavior on her part when she’s here.”

Betty said, “Because she seems to love this house and she enjoys being with you both. Perhaps the reason she doesn’t want to go up to the lonely unoccupied areas of the third floor is because she has heard some of the ghost stories about the place.”

“Perhaps,” the other woman said, working at her needlepoint again. “But she has never

mentioned such things to me.”

“You once spoke of some strange manifestations—footsteps, doors opening and floor boards creaking as if from the passage of phantoms. Have you experienced any of these lately?”

Pauline paused in her work again. “As a matter of fact, no. I hadn’t thought about it, but since Sarah has been coming here I’ve known none of those spooky happenings to take place. I’m sure my nerves had been playing tricks on me and Sarah’s arrival has made us all more healthy and less tense!”

Richard arrived a little later. He and Betty went for a late afternoon walk as they waited for Howard and Sarah to complete their ride and finish work at the stables. They walked away from the house and stables along a path which ran in the same direction as the road below.

She said, “I suppose Sarah will be spending the holidays with the Kings. I talked to Pauline today.”

“They both want her?”

“Yes.”

He smiled at her. “Good! I can come down and spend some time with you and we can pay a few visits over here as well.”

She returned his smile. “It sounds like a comfortable, old-fashioned Christmas. Sarah has fallen in love with the house, not to mention Howard.”

Richard halted, “You don’t still think that seriously?”

"I'm worried," she said. "But Pauline knows him better than I do and she says I shouldn't be."

"At least you mentioned it to her."

"I felt I must," Betty said. "She doesn't know how seductive Sarah can be."

They walked in silence for a moment. Then, "I have a surprise for you," Richard told her proudly.

"What is it?"

"I've finally made some headway," he said, halting at the top of the hill.

She gazed up at him, her breath showing in the cold air. "You mean, you've found some information about Matthew Vine?"

"Yes," he said. "It's extremely interesting."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense!" she protested.

"I found an old family Bible which some long-ago member of the Vine family gave to the museum in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. In it are recorded almost all the Vine births and deaths from the time the Vines came to America."

"Go on," she said eagerly.

"Matthew Vine built the house all right," Richard said. "He had a daughter named Eliza, and a wife, Jessie. There were no other children, for Matthew died at age thirty-two in 1741 when his daughter Eliza was only six."

"Then Eliza is the girl in the painting," Betty said excitedly.

"At the time the portrait had been painted Eliza was sixteen. Ten years had passed since Matthew's death. Eliza's mother had married again, three years after her husband's death. Widows could not

manage very well on their own in those days."

"Whom did she marry?" Betty asked.

"A farmer named James Prescott, five years younger than herself. They were married in 1744 and he came to live here and work the Vine farm."

"So Jessie became Jessie Prescott."

"Yes," Richard said. "And now we come to the mysterious part."

"What is that?"

"In 1751, probably the year in which the portrait was painted, all three died."

She stared at him with wide eyes, "You're saying that Eliza, her mother and stepfather all died in the same year? Probably at the same time?"

"Yes. That was the end of Matthew Vine's line. Some cousins presumably took over the property."

"What on earth could have happened to them?" Betty wondered.

"My guess is one of the virulent fevers which decimated whole communities in those days. Further research may unearth more information on that score."

"What a strange story," she said. "That is all you were able to find out?"

"I think I did rather well," Richard told her.

"But you must keep trying," she urged him. "You can't give up now."

He laughed. "Don't worry! I'm as curious about the Vines now as you are. I'm hoping that somewhere I may find a diary of one of the Vines or their contemporaries which will give us the information we're seeking."

They began walking back to the house. Betty

said, "That must be how the house got its evil reputation—those three deaths."

"Yes. In those days when a family was suddenly wiped out by disease the house was usually regarded as cursed."

Betty gazed up at the house with smoke drifting from its two chimneys and said, "I think the Kings have removed any such stigma."

"I agree," Richard said.

When they reached the living room with its blazing log fire, Sarah and Howard were there warming themselves. They turned to greet Betty and Richard.

"You look frozen," Howard said.

"It got terribly cold on the way back," Betty admitted as Richard helped her off with her heavy jacket.

"Come to the fire!" Sarah invited her.

Richard removed his coat and joined the group. "How was the riding?"

"Wonderful!" Sarah said. "We went way up the bridle path. The woods protected us from the worst of the wind. It was super fun!"

Howard King heartily agreed, "Best riding in a long while. If the snow holds off through the Christmas season we should be able to continue."

"You think it will?" Betty asked.

"It looks good so far," he replied.

From her chair where she was still working her needlepoint, Pauline said, "I wouldn't count on it for too long. The predictions are for big snow storms the first of the year and right on until Spring."

Richard laughed. "The important thing to remember about weather predictions is that they are hardly ever right!"

"True," Howard King said laughing.

Sarah was staring ahead of her in a kind of ecstasy and she said in a strange, faraway voice, "But when the snow came, it was wonderful. Everything was so white and clean and you were able to get around more easily once the muddy roads were frozen. Oh, the clamor of the harness bells and the pounding of the horses' hooves on the hard snow!"

They all paused, staring at her. It was Betty who voiced the question on her mind and that of the others. "What are you talking about, Sarah? Sleighs have never been used here in your time."

Sarah gave her one of her defiant looks, immediately her old, contentious self. "You're wrong! We had sleigh rides at the school whenever there was snow. The Colonel and Mrs. Mannering used to come along!"

Relieved, Betty said, "I see. You didn't tell me. At least the fees I paid were used in some proper ways."

Sarah said angrily, "The school was never as bad as that silly girl made out!"

"I'm sure it wasn't," Howard King said with his usual good humor. "They surely taught you how to handle a horse."

Sarah smiled at him sweetly. "Thank you, Howard," she said in a warm voice.

Betty saw the look which was exchanged between the two and all her worries about Sarah's possibly

seducing Howard returned. She knew what chaos and pain it would cause, and did not want to see this happy family destroyed. Yet she knew her beautiful daughter was capable of doing just that.

The days went by rapidly as the holidays approached. True to Howard's prediction, the snow held off. Sarah and he continued their daily riding. Sarah was spending the usual amount of time at the house in Menton, and Betty had invited Richard down to Bedford Lake for Christmas Eve. They would have a late brunch on Christmas Day, then join Sarah and the Kings at the King home for a traditional Christmas dinner.

There were a few snow flurries on Christmas Eve, just enough to give a light layer of white as a sparkling decoration for the holiday. Richard brought presents for everyone, and on Christmas Eve he gave Betty a large diamond engagement ring.

Standing under the mistletoe which Mrs. Doherty had secretly tied to the ceiling light fixture, Richard slid the ring on Betty's finger and they embraced.

Smiling down at her, he said, "We'll announce our engagement at the Kings' tomorrow."

"Should we?" she worried.

"Why not? There's no reason for us to postpone our marriage any longer."

Betty reminded him, "I still haven't made Sarah's college plans."

"That shouldn't prevent our wedding."

"I don't know how she'll react," Betty worried.

"Does anyone ever know?" Richard asked.

"She's happier with the Kings as she has never been before."

"It's not the same!" she protested.

"I agree," he said. "But it's not as if I were a stranger. I may have taken second place to Howard King, but Sarah seems to still like me."

"She does!"

"So there should be no problem." he said.

Next day Mrs. Doherty served them an elegant Christmas brunch and Betty and Richard gave her their presents. She was like a delighted child, especially pleased with the portable battery radio for her room which Betty had bought for her in Sarah's name.

"The darling!" The old Irish woman said. "She didn't forget me after all! It's a shame she didn't stay here for Christmas!"

"You know how much she likes the Kings," Betty said by way of placating her. "And then there are the horses for an extra attraction. It's hard to compete with that."

"I suppose so," the old woman sighed as they prepared to leave.

They arrived at the Kings' full of the Christmas spirit and laden with gifts, only to receive a surprise. There was a strange car in the driveway and when they went inside Betty was shocked to find they had a visitor—the tall, gray-haired Inspector Hayward.

Howard King quickly explained the inspector's presence by greeting them with, "Sorry, folks, you mustn't let it disturb you, but we had a robbery here last night!"

"On Christmas Eve?" Richard gasped.

"What better night?" Howard asked. "We had all gone to bed early. Someone broke into the stables and stole several valuable saddles, some harness, and then they smashed the lock on the stable office door and stole a half-dozen large silver trophies from one of the shelves. They're likely melted down by now. I understand they travel in trucks with their melters right in them."

Inspector Hayward came over to Betty, bowed and said, "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Ryan. You didn't expect to see me on Christmas Day?"

"No," she said. "I didn't. But I understand now why you are here."

"Unpleasant," the inspector said, "but relatively minor. Mr. King's loss is covered by insurance, though the trophies are irreplaceable."

Richard asked, "Whom do you suspect?"

"A chap who came by a few weeks ago offering special bargain rates in supplies," Howard said. "He promised to return and never did, though he showed a great interest in the stables. I'm sure he was casing the place."

"It's too bad," Betty said, still made uneasy by the presence of the inspector and his rather wry way of looking at her.

"Well, there are some compensations as far as I'm concerned," the inspector said with a thin smile. "Mr. King kindly gave me a glass of excellent whiskey and I have had the pleasure of once again meeting your daughter, Mrs. Ryan. May I say she has surely grown in beauty."

"Thank you," she murmured. She saw that

Sarah was standing by Pauline, who was in her usual chair, her hands busily knitting with some crimson yarn. It seemed to Betty that her daughter looked frightened.

The inspector turned to Howard King and said, "Thank you for the drink. I never accept one when I'm working, but after all, it is Christmas. Have to make exceptions. I'll make a report and we'll see if we can locate the man you suspect. I don't promise anything."

"I understand," Howard King said. "Just as long as the horses weren't harmed."

"I agree," the inspector said. He turned and said, "Goodbye Mrs. King, and Miss Ryan." Then he moved towards the door.

He paused there for a moment to smile at Betty and add, "It's strange Mrs. Ryan, I always seem to meet you at the scene of a crime. But then, I'm rarely anywhere else." And with a nod of farewell, he went out.

When he was gone, Sarah came to them with her fists clenched. "I hate him!" she cried. "So slick and wily! He doesn't care about the robbery! He just wanted to make himself important!"

Richard kissed her on the cheek and told her, "Christmas is no time for tantrums. Here, take your presents!"

Her lovely face slowly relaxed and she smiled. "Thank you, Richard," she said. "And Merry Christmas!" Then she ran to Betty and, kissing her, wished her the same greeting.

Howard King came back stomping the light snow off his boots and saying, "I thought I'd never

get rid of that fellow. He's almost more of a nuisance than the robbers."

"He seems like a strange person," Pauline agreed.

"He seems to know you well," the stockbroker said giving Betty an interested look. "He spoke of your meeting several times before."

"That's right," she said tautly. "We've had our share of tragedies at Bedford Lake. The inspector was generally there to look into them."

"Well," Howard said, "let's forget all about crime and inspectors and open our presents!"

It was a jolly, pleasant Christmas. Sarah helped Pauline prepare and serve the dinner and Betty could not help feeling pride in her.

As they all sat around the candlelit table in the mahogany paneled dining room enjoying the excellent turkey, there were the usual toasts offered in sparkling, ruby wine and it seemed that the robbery had been completely forgotten.

Pauline complained, "I only wish we had a more direct route between the kitchen and the dining room. Coming down that narrow hall is awkward."

Before anyone else could make a comment, Sarah said, "You're right! I don't know why you don't use the door which connects the dining room with the kitchen!"

Everyone glanced at her with varying reactions. Her mother indicated the solid paneled wall. "You're mistaken! There is no door there! Not a sign of one!"

"There *was* one there! I'm sure of it!" Sarah

protested.

“How do you know?” Pauline asked her quietly across the round table.

Sarah’s lovely face crimsoned and she hesitated and then stammered. “I mean, it seems right there should be one there!”

Howard beamed at her, his ruddy face all approval. “Why must we always be so quick to jump on this poor child!” he exclaimed. “We barely give her a chance to explain anything.”

Betty said nothing and the slightly awkward moment was forgotten in finishing the main course and the arrival of steaming hot mincemeat pie. But later, after dinner, Betty took a moment to examine both the dining room and the kitchen side of the wall. In the kitchen she saw definite hints of a door under the busy patterns of wallpaper and despite the baseboard across the bottom.

Despite the robbery, Christmas ended on a warm and happy note. Sarah remained at the Kings’ right through the New Year. Richard and Betty joined the company for the celebration of New Year’s Eve.

Sarah seemed very much at home with the Kings now. Betty was alarmed to note that her daughter literally swarmed all over the jovial stockbroker, at times sitting on his knee like a dutiful daughter. None of the others raised an eyebrow at these actions. Betty made up her mind to speak to the girl as soon as she had a moment alone with her.

There were no intrusions to spoil New Year’s Eve, no robbery and no Inspector Hayward turning up. Meeting the inspector had brought up a

lot of old memories, not all of them pleasant.

Betty and Richard had announced their engagement Christmas Day and the Kings and even Sarah had shown approval. Now she wore the diamond on her finger. As she stood gazing into the fireplace and going over many things in her mind, Richard came up and put his arm around her.

"You look too gloomy for this festive occasion," he teased her.

She turned to him with a smile. "I'm sorry. I was doing some thinking."

"About what?"

"Many things. Seeing the inspector on Christmas Day brought back such bad memories."

"You must rid yourself of such thoughts," Richard said.

"I'll try," she agreed.

"Some good news," he told her. "I have a lead on some other material pertaining to the Vine family. I received a letter from a friend in the Worcester museum and he thinks he has something that may interest us."

"Wonderful," she said. "I've been worried that you might have become discouraged."

"Not when I've gone as far as I have now," he said. "It's too much like reading a mystery thriller. You have to know the ending."

"Yes," she said. "Exactly like that."

Everyone joined in the living room to watch the ball drop in Times Square on television and then toast the New Year with champagne. They joined hands and sang "Auld Lang Syne," and next there

was a general embracing and the exchange of kisses. The coming of the New Year took precedence over everything else. It was now 1978!

Pauline came and kissed Betty on the cheek and held her by the hands, saying, "This is bound to be a happy year for you, the year when you'll be married!"

Betty kissed their hostess in return and said, "Thank you, so much!"

Howard came up to them and asked, "Where's Sarah? She vanished just after the celebration. Could the champagne have made her ill?"

His wife said, "Perhaps she has gone to her room."

Howard nodded. "She's been absent for quite a while."

Richard glanced at Betty and said, "Perhaps you should go up and check on her."

"I will," she said, thinking it might be a good moment to put in her word of caution to the girl.

She made her way up the dark stairway to the second floor and found Sarah, not in her room, but standing at the foot of the stairway to the third floor, gazing upwards.

Startled, she crossed to her daughter and asked, "What's the matter?"

Sarah turned to her, and to Betty's distress there were tears streaming down her lovely face. Her daughter wore a look of infinite sadness.

Betty touched her on the arm. "What's wrong? Aren't you well?"

Sarah stared at her and said, "It's the New Year! I always have the feeling it will be the last!"

"That's ridiculous!" Betty exclaimed. "You're sixteen, not sixty!"

"What has age to do with it?" Sarah wanted to know. "Young people die also."

Betty was shocked and alarmed by her daughter's mood. She said, "You must be ill or you wouldn't be thinking such things, or talking in this fashion!"

Sarah took a handkerchief from a pocket in her long blue gown and wiped the tears from her cheeks. "I'm sorry," she said. "I suppose it was silly of me. Maybe it's the old house. I just realized that so many people have lived and died in it. You won't tell the others?"

"Of course not," Betty said. "They missed you. That's why I came up." She had decided not to say anything about what had probably been no more than a harmless kiss between Sarah and their host. She was sad enough to see her daughter so emotionally strained without adding new fuel to the fire. She wondered if she would ever truly understand her.

"I'm all right now," Sarah said. "I'm ready to go back down."

"Fine," Betty said, smiling at her and putting a protective arm around her as they descended the stairs.

After the New Year, the predictions of heavy snow in the latter part of the winter came true. There was one huge storm after another. Banks of snow were forever evident on the roadside and the fields and lakes were deeply covered by thick layers

of white flakes.

However, the weather made no change in Sarah's infatuation with the Kings and their house and stables. When it was too stormy to ride, she helped Howard in the stables, and she continued to spend three or four nights a week there.

Betty had become so accustomed to the routine that she thought little of it when Howard came by in a jolly mood to pick Sarah up or leave her off. Sarah seemed to be happy and the stable work kept her busy. Pauline King was also teaching her to do needlepoint.

In the meantime, Betty had written several colleges and explained the educational predicament of her daughter. And two of them, one a college in Boston, had expressed a willingness to interview Sarah.

One Tuesday when Sarah was at the Kings' a phone call came from Richard, inviting Betty up to Boston for dinner and to stay the night in his apartment. "I have special news for you," he promised.

She accepted his invitation, having an idea it might have something to do with the mystery of the Matthew Vine family that obsessed her. She and Richard did not make as many visits to the Kings now that winter had set in with full fury. Menton was quite a few miles from Bedford and much further from Boston, so when Richard came down he was inclined to remain at Betty's home in Bedford.

The night was clear and the roads were passable. She made the drive to Boston in good time and met

Richard at the quaint restaurant with its brick dining alcoves which he favored. After they were seated and had a drink, he gave her a gloomy look.

"Prepare yourself for a shock," he said. "I've finally solved our mystery."

"About the Vine family? Tell me!"

He said, "The fellow in Providence sent me a diary written by the cousins who eventually took over the house after the three sudden deaths."

"I remember," she said. "The stepfather, mother and the girl in the portrait all died in the same year, and perhaps at about the same time."

"Correct," he said. "But not as we thought."

"No?"

"Prepare yourself for something pretty grim," the curator told her.

A familiar chill ran through her again. "Is it really horrible?"

"Yes. Like an old melodrama."

"I must know," she said. "I must know what happened to that girl whom Sarah so resembles!"

"According to the diary, the girl Eliza was as lovely as her portrait, and her doting stepfather was the one who found an artist and commissioned the painting. It was done shortly before her death."

She nodded tensely. "Go on."

"She was a strange girl, and according to the old man who wrote the account in his diary, some said her governess had been a witch who had fled from Salem. The woman was said to have instilled all manner of evil in her charge. Then one day she vanished without trace, as witches are wont to do."

“Then what?”

“Eliza was as strong-willed as she was lovely. She had nothing but disdain for her mother, who was a frail, ineffectual woman, but she cared deeply for her stepfather. In fact, her love for him became overwhelming. He was flattered and showed some response. This goaded Eliza on to what seems to indicate erotic madness.”

“The lovely Eliza waited until one night when her stepfather James Prescott was busy in the stables. Then she very deliberately took a large knife from the kitchen made her way up to her mother’s bedroom. She plunged a knife in her back. Then she waited to make sure her victim was dead!”

“Oh, no!” Betty whispered in frightened protest.

“It’s all in the diary,” he stated. “She then went down to meet her stepfather when he returned from the stables. She told him what she had done and pleaded with him to run away with her. He went up and found his wife’s dead body and was stricken with remorse. He came back down and told Eliza he would never leave with her and they must pay for her awful crime. He went back out again, leaving her crying in the kitchen.”

“Then what?”

“Eliza waited for more than an hour in a turmoil of fear and despair. She went out to the barn to plead with her stepfather again, and made the grisly discovery of his body hanging from one of the barn rafters. He had taken his own life!”

“And the girl?” she whispered.

“Eliza apparently ran back to the house, quite mad now! She went to her mother’s room and for the first time fully understood what she had done. Then she ran out and up the stairs to the third floor. From there she mounted the ladder leading to the tower and the widow’s walk. She opened the trap door and stepped out into the night, and after a moment, hurled herself from the tower to the rocky ground, three stories below. They found her there, dead!”

“So that’s what happened to her!” Betty said in a hushed voice. “We must never tell Sarah.”

Richard nodded, “I agree. She must never know.”

Chapter Twelve

On that night Betty and Richard made a sacred vow of silence, which they kept, but the account of that long-ago tragedy haunted Betty. She kept thinking of all the strange deaths with which Sarah had been associated, and the likeness between her daughter and the girl in the two-century-old painting. She must somehow protect Sarah against the knowledge of Eliza Vine's fate.

She wished she could keep her away from the ancient house which had been dubbed evil because of the happenings there. But Sarah was still most happy when in the company of Howard King and his wife, and Betty could not explain why she didn't want her there without telling her the horrifying story of Eliza Vine. So she remained silent.

Storm threatened again as she worked in her studio one early evening. She had just talked to Richard on the phone and he told her a blizzard was predicted for all along the coast. She warned Mrs. Doherty to close everything up and felt grateful that Sarah was safely at the Kings'.

As she worked, the storm began, starting lazily with big flakes and then soon coming down in a torrent of white which blanked everything out. She was surprised when she heard the doorbell ring and Mrs. Doherty let someone in. She was about to go down and see who it was when she heard heavy footsteps coming upstairs. She advanced to the door and was startled to be confronted by Howard King, looking dejected in a snow-mantled overcoat and hat.

"You've been out in the storm!" she exclaimed. And she moved closer to him, "Let me have your hat and coat. You need a drink!"

"No," he said, holding a hand to halt her. Taking off his hat, he stood there, a look of misery on his florid face. "I have to return to Boston."

"Tonight? Aren't you going home?"

He looked down. "I can't! I can't face them!"

"What is it?" she demanded. "What is wrong? Has it anything to do with Sarah?"

Howard King looked up and nodded grimly. "Yes," he said. "I'm ashamed to tell you that I met your daughter yesterday and instead of taking her to Menton, I took her to a hotel in Boston. I phoned Pauline and told her I had to remain in Boston overnight on business."

Betty gasped. "Sarah told me she was going to your house!"

"We planned it," the stockbroker said despondently. "I was crazy, I guess. I can't explain why or how I allowed her to seduce me. I was as much to blame as she. We spent the night together, drank a lot and—all the rest. In the morning I

realized what I had done.”

“Where is Sarah?” she asked tautly, repulsed by the big man and his efforts to make her condone his actions with her child.

“We had breakfast in the hotel and I talked with her. We talked all morning. She expected me to leave Pauline and marry her. I told her I couldn’t do it, that we had made a dreadful mistake and I would try and make amends in any way I could!”

“Where is she?” Betty cried with fists clenched.

“We had a terrible row and she said she was going to take the bus back to Menton and tell Pauline everything, and ask her to divorce me. I tried to reason with her but it was no use. She ran out of the hotel room and left me. She left hours ago, so she must be with Pauline now. Have you heard from them?”

“No!” she said in disgust. “You’re not only corrupt, you’re also a coward!”

“I can’t face them!” the big man said beginning to blubber. “I don’t know what made me do it!”

“You brutual lecher!” she cried in rage. “That young girl!” And she struck out at him with her fists, pounding him in the face so that he stumbled back against the wall.

He grovelled on the floor in front of her, and half-crawled to the door. “I’m going back to Boston,” he sobbed. “I don’t know what else to do!” And he stumbled down the stairs.

Betty closed her eyes and moaned. Then she crossed to the phone on her studio desk and, mustering all her courage, she dialed Pauline’s number. After a moment, the other woman’s

mild voice came on the line. "Yes?"

"It's Betty," she said, trying to sound normal. "Isn't it a terrible storm!"

"Yes," Pauline agreed. "Howard is on business in Boston. I hope he'll have the good sense to stay there."

Betty posed the all-important question, "And Sarah?"

"She's not here," Pauline said. "I haven't seen her for a day or two."

"Oh, I thought she might be with you," Betty said. "She's no doubt next door. She visits Mrs. Wentworth sometimes. I want to locate her because of the weather."

"Of course you do," Pauline said. "Let me know how you make out. You don't want the poor dear out somewhere in this weather."

"No, I don't," she said. "Thank you, Pauline." And she put down the phone, her hand trembling violently.

She stood there swaying slightly, her terror mounting. Sarah had left the Boston hotel hours earlier to take the bus to Menton, but she apparently hadn't arrived. Or perhaps she had reached there and in her overwrought state of mind had decided to hide in the stables, trying to bolster her courage to face Pauline.

The more Betty thought about the situation, the more fearful she became. She found herself recalling the grisly story which Richard had told her. What if Sarah might somehow be impelled to repeat the crime of Eliza Vine? Her daughter might be crouching somewhere in the darkness of that

evil house, waiting for the moment when she would commit a murder!

Betty opened her eyes and glanced out the window. The storm was worse, but there was only one thing she could do. She had to make her way to Menton despite the blizzard, and somehow save her daughter and Pauline. She raced downstairs and dressed for the storm while Mrs. Doherty implored her not to leave. Then she made her way down the snow-covered back steps and brushed the snow off her windshield and the top of the car. Once behind the wheel, she started the engine and after several attempts was able to back out onto the road and head for the main highway through the driving snow.

She was huddled in the car of the State Police now and they were trying desperately to get her through to the huge old house near Menton.

The man at the wheel called out, "I think the King house is just ahead on the right!"

"I see it now," the trooper beside him said, "We're lucky all the windows seem to be blazing with light!"

Betty clutched the back of the seat and peered ahead through the confusion of snow through the headlights. She said, "My daughter! I must get there!"

"Take it easy, ma'am," the trooper at the wheel said. "We're almost there. I'll never be able to get up that steep side driveway to the house. But we can leave the car at the bottom and my buddy and I will see you up there!"

"Sure," the other trooper said.

"Thank you! Both of you!" she sobbed gratefully.

They managed to get the car just a little off the road and then turned off the engine. One of the policemen opened the door and told her, "It isn't going to be an easy walk, ma'am. The snow is deep and it's blowing hard!"

"I don't care," she said. "Just get me up there!" And she stumbled out into the deep, wet snow.

The trooper who'd been driving said, "We'll each take one of your arms. That will be the easiest way!"

The three climbed the snow-filled driveway battling all the while against the storm. Betty was a pathetic figure as she struggled along, supported by the two stalwart State Troopers. By the time they reached the front steps of the King house, she was breathless and weary. But she saw the door ajar, and knowing what this might mean, her desperation gave her the strength to surge forward ahead of the police.

"Sarah!" she screamed. "Sarah, my poor darling!" She ran straight for the stairs, up to the second floor and the doorway of Pauline's bedroom. The tableau that waited for her there froze her in the doorway. Sarah was standing above Pauline, who was stretched out on the floor in a pool of blood, with the handle of a carving knife protruding from her back!

Sarah slowly looked up and saw her mother. Her lovely face was contorted with horror. Crying out,

she came rushing at Betty and brushed her roughly aside as she made a dash for the next stairway to the floor above.

The troopers appeared at the top of the first stairway, looking astonished at the screams they had heard. Betty ran to them and cried, "Stop her!" And she pointed to the other stairway.

They made no reply but scrambled up the stairs after Sarah. Betty leaned weakly on the railing with her back to Pauline's doorway, waiting numbly for what she feared most to hear and yet knew would most surely come.

And then she heard it—the piercing scream from far above!

She moaned softly as a knife of pain twisted in her breast. And then the two young troopers came noisily down the stairs. The taller one came towards her, white-faced.

In a hushed tone, he asked, "Was that your daughter?"

"Yes," she said. The other trooper was on his way down to the lower floor.

"She jumped from the tower up there," the trooper said in a shocked tone. "I don't know why!"

With her eyes still closed and tears coursing down her cheeks, Betty pointed to the doorway. "In there," she said in a taut whisper.

"My God!" he cried. And she heard him go into Pauline's room.

As she waited, the other trooper came back upstairs. He looked as if he might be ill. He said, "I've brought her in, ma'am. I'm afraid she's done

for."

"Yes," she said dully. "I know. We didn't get here in time."

The other young policeman emerged from Pauline's room and said, "This is bad. We're going to have to stay here until the inspector can come."

"What about the highway patrol?" his partner asked.

"Forget it," the other trooper said. "We probably couldn't get the car going again anyway." And to Betty in a more sympathetic tone, he said, "We're liable to be here for a long while, ma'am. Better go down below where it's warmer. I'll try and find some coffee and make us a hot drink."

By the time she made her way downstairs with the trooper's help, the other young policeman had placed Sarah's body on a sofa in the living room and covered it with a blanket. Betty went over and raised the blanket so she might look at her daughter's face one last time.

Sarah's eyes were closed and all the horror had vanished. She might have been peacefully sleeping. She seemed at rest. Betty stood gazing at the lovely face and began to sob again.

One of the policemen took her by the arm and led her gently away, saying, "A real beauty, ma'am. What was wrong? Was she on drugs?"

"Something much more complicated than that," Betty said as he helped her into an armchair by the log fire the other young man had built.

Their vigil was a night-long one. It was almost

noon before the first plow cleared a path in the main highway. All around, it looked like an Arctic scene. The power and phone lines had lasted until dawn, so the police had managed to get a report through to headquarters.

At one o'clock with the sun out again, the inspector at last arrived. He conferred with the two troopers, went upstairs and then came back and examined Sarah's body before he came to her.

He stood above her tall and gray as she remembered him. The weary face and voice were familiar. He said, "My men tell me they think you knew something was going to happen, that you tried to get here and stop it."

"Yes," she said dully. "I tried. The storm was too much."

The inspector nodded. "The storm is over now."

"Yes," she said.

"I should be surprised to find you and your daughter here," Inspector Hayward said. "But in a way I'm not. We have met so many previous times in circumstances similar to this."

"I know."

There was a pause. Then he added, "It's not likely we'll ever meet in the same way again."

"No, I think not," she said in the same quiet voice.

He sighed. "You have my sympathy, Mrs. Ryan. I have never been able to understand it all from the start. I'm still puzzled. But perhaps there is some comfort in knowing that Sarah is at last at rest."

"Thank you," she said, looking up at him.

He nodded. "You can fill me in on the details later. We'll first get you back to your own home and have a doctor take a look at you. And of course, we must get in touch with Howard King."

They finally found Howard King. He was in his car where it had become stranded in a huge drift on the highway. He was dead from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Long after the funerals and the furor in the papers, after Betty had put the house at Bedford Lake up for sale and Mrs. Doherty went to live with her sister, Betty and Richard were married. She moved into his apartment and did not work for a long while.

When she did return to work, she went back to the studio in the museum. One day her husband came to her there and said with a frown, "I have a problem and I don't know how to discuss it with you."

Betty had found she could smile again after her long ordeal. She turned from her work and said, "Surely you're not afraid of me?"

Richard smiled in return. "Not at all. But I am concerned for you. Let me ask you something; how well have you recovered from the pain of all that has happened?"

Her smile vanished. She sighed. "I'll never be completely over it, Richard. But I can handle it. I think honestly I can handle almost anything now."

He studied her. "You're certain?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to take a chance," he said. "I want

you to come down to the main gallery with me.”

As she accompanied him down the curving marble stairway, she felt her heart beat more rapidly. She became tense and she worried that she might have been too optimistic about her new-found courage. But it was too late to turn back now.

He took her into the main gallery and they stood before the painting of the daughter of the Vine family. She gave a small gasp. The canvas had lost all its glow! It had faded so that the lovely face was barely distinguishable. It was shocking!

Richard stared up at the painting and in a grave voice told her, “It’s been happening gradually, ever since Sarah’s death. In the last weeks it has faded almost completely.”

“Yes, I see that,” she said in a choked voice, looking up at the lovely face which was now merely a faded shadow of its former glory.

“I can’t leave it here like that,” Richard said. “And I can trust no one else to restore it but you. If you don’t wish to do it, I’ll have to put it in storage. It will probably never be seen again.”

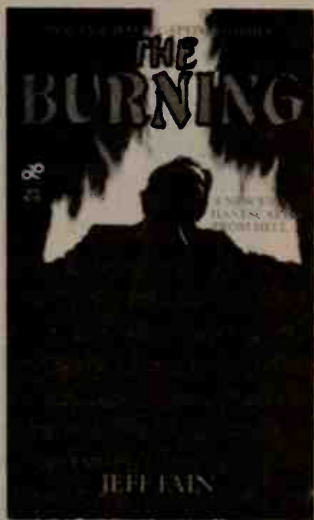
“Put it in storage,” she said quietly. “Let her rest. We know she died a second time!” And she turned and walked slowly from the gallery.

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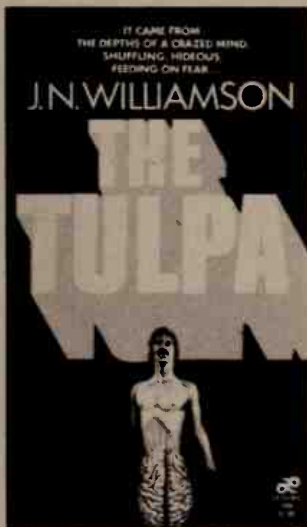
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