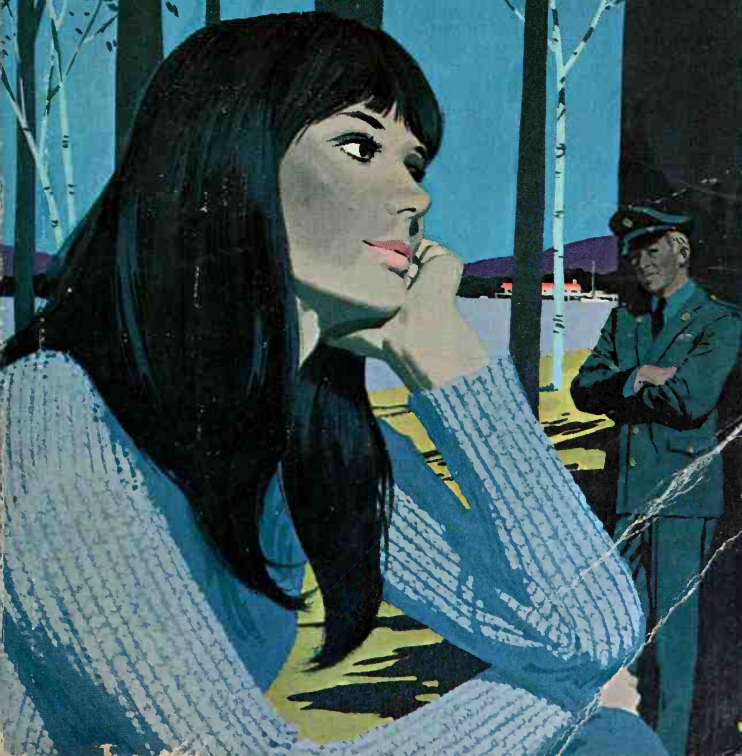


#101

A Red Rose Romance

Whispers in the Night

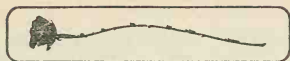
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A Red Rose Romance

Whispers in the Night

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CHAPTER ONE

The sky overhead was leaden on the September afternoon when Polly saw the ancient mansion of Shadow Lake for the first time. Named after the small Vermont lake which it overlooked, the nearly two-hundred-year-old house at once struck her as ornately ugly. Dominating wide lawns and a weather-vaned coach house, it was perched on a small rise by the lake. It was a two-mile drive from the nearest village and not on a main highway. The road to it was paved but not well looked after. Much of it was in bad need of repairs, its surface marred by bumps and potholes. In addition, the road was winding and narrow, fringed on either side by tall bushes and skimpy trees.

There were stone gate posts with round frosted lampshades atop them and a plaque of bronze on the face of one to announce that this was indeed Shadow Lake. Polly leaned back against the seat with a sigh and glanced at the prim, middle-aged man behind the wheel. He was Paul Anderson, one of her husband's uncles; actually the youngest uncle, though he was nearly fifty.

An artist in oils who had gained a minor reputation in the New England region, he lived at Shadow Lawn and did his painting there. In profile he had sensitive features, with a slightly hooked nose. As he drove the station wagon up the narrow private road that cut across the

lawns of the estate, he wore a somber expression. From the moment of their meeting at the main street bus station in the village, he'd struck her as a moody, rather fussy sort of bachelor. As a matter of fact, that was how her young husband, Jim, had described him.

"All the Andersons are a trifle peculiar," he'd teased her, a smiling expression on his tanned, handsome face, on the last day they had spent together before he left for Vietnam, "but Uncle Paul is a definite original. Very devoted to my grandmother and his painting. He's never married and isn't likely to."

Studying the ascetic man at the wheel, Polly decided that Jim's description of him had been accurate. And while Paul Anderson's welcome to her had been cordial enough, she had at once gained the impression he wasn't really glad to see her, and he regarded her as a nuisance and a major error on his nephew's part.

It was awkward meeting Jim's family on her own this way. She would have much preferred that he be there to introduce her. But their meeting and marriage had been one of those hectic wartime romances. And no one knew better than she that this was indeed a time of war. She'd graduated from college in the spring of the year and had been busy working on a volunteer basis for a political candidate whose main platform plank was his stand against Vietnam.

Polly also had strong feelings on the subject. And she'd been in a restaurant passing out literature against the war when she'd met Jim, who was already wearing a private's uniform. A mutual friend had introduced them. And this had led to a two-week period of hectic dating, culminating in the romance which had ended in their marriage just a few days before Jim shipped out.

She'd talked to Priscilla Johnson, Jim's widowed mother, only on the telephone: a frantic long distance call to

announce that they were married. Naturally, the older woman had sounded surprised and upset. Polly had apologized for the swiftness of the marriage, and Jim had arranged for her to go to live at Shadow Lake with his mother and the rest of the Anderson family for the period of his assignment overseas.

In the intimacy of their motel room, she'd sat on the side of the bed as he lay stretched out and, looking up at her fondly, told her how it would be at Shadow Lake.

"Our family is an old one," he'd explained. "We've been in that part of Vermont for nearly two hundred years. And we've lived at Shadlow Lake most of that time. During the war of 1812 we were involved. In fact, there has always been an Anderson in either the Army or Navy, so I've had no choice but to carry on the tradition."

She'd stroked his blond hair and said, "I wish you didn't feel that way."

He smiled up at her. "Too late to argue about it now. But to go back to Shadow Lake and the family: It was during the War of 1812, when the British had an expedition against us on the shores of Lake Champlain, that one of my female ancestors became involved with a spy from the Canadian side of the border. She didn't know he was a spy until she'd given her heart to him. He came to the village posing as a refugee doctor."

"And what happened?" Polly had asked, her curiosity aroused.

Jim's smile had become a grin. "She was a lovely and high-spirited girl, from all accounts," he'd said. "And her pride was severely hurt when the truth about the man she loved was revealed. She made a rendezvous with him in the garden back of the house one night and shot him to death with a tiny ivory-handled pistol. It's still in the library of the house in a glass case. You'll be shown it."

Polly had frowned. "What ever happened to her?"

"It was a time of war, and so her action was regarded by most of the village as a patriotic deed, though some termed her a murderess and felt she should be made to pay for her crime. Many of the people in New England weren't in favor of the war and sided with the British."

"I know that feelings were mixed."

"At any rate, Caroline—that was her name—was apparently torn by her own feelings of remorse. A few weeks after the shooting, she went out on the lake in a canoe she often used and vanished. The canoe was found empty, and it was assumed she had drowned. Shadow Lake is said to be bottomless, with a quicksand that devours anything that sinks into it. The body was never found. And almost at once rumors began to spread that Caroline had succumbed to her tormented feelings and deserted to the enemy, anxious to make up for what she'd done by giving them any information she could."

"And no one ever saw her again?"

Jim had given her an odd look. "Not alive," he said. "But within a few years a legend built up around her disappearance. And there began to be claims that the ghost of Caroline was seen on the lawns and in the corridors of the house. My Grandmother Melissa is a devout believer in the existence of the phantom. She says she has seen it many times."

Polly had stared at her young soldier husband in disbelief. "Do you accept the story?"

He had shrugged. "I guess not. But Shadow Lake is a strange old mansion. It suggests ghosts and such things. At any rate, if you should encounter the phantom, you can rest assured she's as much against war as you are."

She'd smiled thinly at this. "I'm more worried about the living I'll be meeting at Shadow Lake than the dead."

"You'll have no trouble with them."

"I'm a second-generation American of Swiss-Italian an-

cestry," she had reminded him. "And a Middle-Westerner at that. My background isn't going to stack up very well against your New England blue blood."

Jim had taken her hands in his. "That's precisely why you're so wonderful for me. You're alive with a kind of vitality you won't find at Shadow Lake. Up there, the house is dominated by my Grandmother Melissa. And she's kept all her living children around her. My mother lived in Boston for a while while my father was alive, but I think she always felt guilty about it. Uncle Patrick and Uncle Percy manage the family lumber business. Both are in their fifties and sedate, as are their wives. Uncle Paul is a bachelor and an artist, definitely an oddball. And there's Mother, of course. Don't expect too much from her at the start. She's always resented any girl I took an interest in, so she's bound to be a little difficult with you at first."

Polly had shown mild alarm. "Perhaps I'd better forget about going to Shadow Lake altogether."

He had pressed her hands tightly. "No. I want you to be there. It's your home now. I'm an only grandchild, and one day Shadow Lake will be my responsibility."

"I'm not sure I look forward to that."

"It will be all right," he'd assured her earnestly. "It's people who make a house. And we'll make Shadow Lake a good place to live in once it is ours."

"And in the meantime?"

"I'll ask you to show patience and understanding," he'd admitted. "You'll probably need some of both. But I will be easier in my mind, knowing you're there."

She'd leaned down and kissed him gently. "Then I'll go."

He had smiled. "And you'll meet Josephine Graham, who's our housekeeper and also a sort of companion to my grandmother. She used to be her personal maid. She's

a straight-backed, thin old spinster who shows a formidable front but can be an old dear when she likes."

"I'll remember that," Polly had said.

Jim had leaned on an elbow with a slight frown. "Josephine came to Shadow Lake years ago." She was first engaged to take care of my grandmother's sister, who was a little mad. They say she was a lovely-looking girl but suffered spells of depression. In any case, her health was fragile. Her name was Amelia, and she died in her late teens. It was then that Josephine became a maid for my grandmother. And she's stayed on through the years until now she's more like one of the family than a servant."

"I'll have trouble remembering all you've told me and coping with the household," Polly had worried.

"You'll manage very well," Jim had assured her. "They're bound to like you."

Now, as Paul Anderson drove her up to the front entrance of the sprawling gray and white house with its dark green mansard roof and tall brick chimneys with white painted strips at the tops, Polly wondered how she'd make out. She was a petite, dark-haired girl with the olive skin and Italian beauty of her mother's side of the family. And she felt completely an outsider, meeting this old New England group of Anglo-Saxon ancestry. The deserted air of the grounds surrounding the grim old house added to her apprehensive feelings about it.

Paul Anderson turned to her with a resigned expression on his sallow, lined face. "Welcome to Shadow Lake," he said. "I hope you're going to like it."

Polly hesitated in the station wagon, gazing at the shadowed entrance with its four slim white columns and portico. The many windows were curtained and stared at her blankly, showing no sign of life.

Mustering a thin smile, she glanced at Jim's artist uncle. "It seems very quiet."

"We are all elderly and middle-aged people," Paul Anderson said. "At this time of year and on this kind of a day, it can be bleak outdoors." He eyed her appraisingly. "You took a long while getting here."

She was embarrassed. "Yes, I know. I had a parttime job in Boston and didn't want to leave it until they found a suitable substitute. I had no idea it would take months. Every time Jim has written to me, he's expressed concern about my delay getting here."

"Well, you're here now," Paul said in his dry voice. "I'll show you inside, and then I'll get your bags."

Polly got out of the station wagon, and the prim artist accompanied her to the front door of the house and opened it. As soon as Polly stepped inside, she was startled by the warm air of the hallway. Evidently the elderly relatives of her husband liked the house well heated. Paul opened another door to allow her to enter a big, elegantly appointed living room. Directly across from her there was a white marble fireplace, and above it the portrait of a long dead Anderson male in dark coat and high white collar. The general decor of the room was a pale blue.

Before Paul could say anything, a patrician old woman leaning on a black cane entered the room by a side door and came across to them in regal fashion. She was wearing plain black, with a cameo at the severe neckline of her dress. Her hair was white and her face was wrinkled, yet there were indications that the imperious countenance with the sharp blue eyes had once been touched with beauty.

In a husky voice of authority, the old woman inquired, "Is this Jim's wife?"

Paul Anderson nodded. "Yes, this is Polly. Polly, this is my mother."

The sharp old eyes were fixed on her. "Call me Melissa," she said. "That's what Jim does. I'm always Grandmother Melissa to him. You look too young to be a wife. But then Jim is only a boy, and he's your husband."

Polly swallowed hard. "Jim is old enough to fight in Vietnam. And I've graduated from college and worked a little."

"And you're against this war Jim is helping fight?" Grandmother Melissa asked in her imperious manner.

Polly nodded. "Yes, I am."

"You won't find that view popular in this house," the old woman warned her, tapping her cane on the hardwood floor to emphasize her point. "We have always sent an Anderson son to help defend the country."

The wizened Paul Anderson looked uneasily at his mother and at Polly, as if he feared a scene. Quickly he said, "I'll go get your bags."

As he started out, the old woman called after him, "She's to have the room overlooking the garden, the one across the hall from mine on the second floor."

Paul Anderson hesitated at the door and gave his mother an odd look. "Yes, of course," he said. "The Rose Room." And he went out.

Grandmother Melissa was regarding Polly sternly again. "We had begun to think you didn't want to come here."

"I'm sorry," Polly said. "I was working. It took me a while to get away."

The old woman said, "I expect you'll find it dull after the city. We live quietly here."

Polly managed a smile. "It's exciting for me, meeting all of you. I'm especially looking forward to seeing Jim's mother."

Jim's grandmother seemed coldly amused by this. "She's in the village visiting a friend at the moment," she

said. "But she'll be back in time for dinner. We gather in here for a before-dinner drink most evenings. We will tonight in honor of you."

"Thank you," Polly said.

The old woman leaned on her cane. "You'll meet the others then. Not likely you'll be impressed by them. I'm sure I'm not. But then what can you expect when a family loses its pride and begins to fall apart?"

Polly was embarrassed by this sharp comment and tried to cover up by saying, "It is a very old family, isn't it, You must have a wonderful history."

"And no one has done anything about it," Jim's grandmother snapped. "Oh, twenty years ago Percy's wife began to compile a history of the family. But she was a weak little creature who took an overdose of sleeping tablets one night and killed herself. So the project died with her."

"How sad!"

"It was sad to have the history cut short," Melissa declared grimly. "I didn't fret much for Percy's wife, though he's whined over her loss through the years." The sharp eyes were fixed directly on Polly again. "Aren't you some kind of a librarian or history specialist?"

"I majored in history. And I've been working for a Boston library."

Melissa showed interest. "Then you're exactly the person we've been waiting for. You can pick up the family history where Percy's wife left off. It will give you something to do while you're waiting for Jim to return."

"I'd be glad to try," Polly said, anxious to win the old woman's friendship, "if you think I'm equal to it."

"You look intelligent enough, though it's hard to tell these days," was the old woman's sharp reply. "But I don't imagine Jim would have married you if he hadn't seen something in you. He's a smart boy."

"I can't argue about Jim's qualities."

"Once you're settled, I'll see you get a key to the drawers in the study with the ledgers of the family records," Melissa promised. "You'll see what Percy's wife compiled and can go on from there."

As she finished speaking, another woman, about the same age and dressed with striking similarity, came into the room. Polly at once decided this must be the housekeeper-companion her husband had mentioned: Josephine Graham.

Melissa quickly confirmed this. She turned to the tall, gray-haired woman with a gaunt face and said, "Josephine, this is Jim's wife. Take her up to the Rose Room and see that she has everything she needs to make her comfortable."

The gaunt face of the housekeeper showed a faint smile of welcome. "I'm happy to meet you, Mrs. Johnson," she said. "If you'll just come along with me."

Polly excused herself and left the elegant living room by a side door that led to a small, dark hallway and a stairway to the second floor.

Climbing the richly carpeted stairs at the side of the housekeeper, Polly said, "Jim told me all about you, Josephine."

"I'm very fond of Mr. Jim," the old woman said. "And please don't hesitate to call on me for anything while you're here, Mrs. Johnson."

"Please call me Polly," she said. "I'm not used to Mrs. Johnson yet, and there's no need of all that formality between us."

Josephine's gaunt face brightened. "Thank you," she said as they reached the landing. "Your room is off the hallway on the right."

Polly noticed there were two hallways, one at each side of the house. She followed the housekeeper to the right. When they'd gone down the narrow hall a few steps,

Josephine opened a door and showed her into a large bedroom whose walls and drapes were done in a rose shade. The covering of the wide bed was of the same color. The walls were wood-paneled in a light oak. The dresser and other items of furniture were substantial and of rich period styling.

Polly turned to the elderly housekeeper and said, "It's a lovely room."

"It has one of the best views," Josephine agreed, moving over to the window. "You have a fine view of the gardens and the lake."

Polly went over and saw that this was true. There were some lawn chairs set out in the garden and several large umbrellas of gaudy red and yellow designed to act as protection from the sun. About fifty yards distant and down a slight slope of lawn was the edge of the lake. There was a wharf with several small boats tied to it. Beyond, the lake stretched into the distance, placid and blue even under the gray late afternoon sky, and on the distant shore a forest of evergreens formed a backdrop.

Polly told the housekeeper, "I hear the lake is very deep, bottomless."

Josephine frowned. "That's what they say."

"And long ago a woman named Caroline was drowned out there."

The elderly housekeeper looked gaunt again. Her thin hands worked nervously at her sides. "There have been more than a fair share of tragedies at Shadow Lake."

"Really?"

Josephine studied her with serious eyes. "I hope it won't be too difficult for you here."

Polly was puzzled by the housekeeper's words and her tone. She said, "I'm sure I'll adjust to it. I'm looking forward to meeting Jim's mother."

The housekeeper looked wary. "Don't depend too much on her."

"Oh?"

The old woman sighed. "It's not for me to condemn. But you'll see for yourself. Miss Priscilla is not like her mother in any way."

"Jim's grandmother says I'll meet everyone at dinner."

"The men will be back from the factory then," Josephine agreed. "And Mr. Patrick's wife will be awake. She always sleeps after lunch. And of course Mr. Paul brought you here from the village."

"Yes, I believe he's getting my bags now," Polly said.

The housekeeper moved toward the door. "The main thing will be to fill the time until Mr. Jim gets back from Vietnam."

"That's true," Polly agreed. "His grandmother has made a good suggestion. She thinks I might work on a history of the family. I've had some experience in doing essays of that nature, and she says that long ago, twenty years ago if I remember correctly, someone else began the project."

Josephine stared at her in surprise. "Yes," she said. "Mr. Percy's wife was compiling a history of the Andersons, but then she died."

"Yes, I heard about that," Polly said quietly.

The housekeeper looked sad. "She was a lovely little thing, and so pleasant. I don't know what made her do that awful thing. Mr. Percy has been heartbroken ever since."

"I hope my decision to take up the history again will not cause him any more grief," Polly said.

Josephine's eyes met hers. "That's something you must think about, I suppose."

"But surely he'd understand."

"Perhaps and perhaps not," Josephine said. "Mister

Percy is a quiet man. It's hard to tell what he is thinking." She went to the hall door, then paused to look back and say, "I'll bring you an extra blanket. It gets cold here at night."

Polly smiled. "I find the house very warm."

"Melissa Anderson insists the furnace be kept high," the housekeeper said. "None of the rest of us dare cross her."

And with that the housekeeper left. Polly decided that she liked the spare, plain-spoken woman. And she was glad there was someone in the house other than the Andersons to turn to. She had an idea they were a clannish group and would stick close together on any question.

Alone in the room, she moved about, testing the dresser drawers and inspecting the ample closet. It was a rich, good-sized bedroom and furnished impressively. Yet there was something about the atmosphere of it that made her feel uneasy.

Her reverie was disturbed by a light rapping at her door. So tense was she that she started at the unexpected sound. And then in a nervous tone, she said, "Yes?"

The door opened, and she saw the wizened Paul Anderson. He said, "I have your bags." And he brought them in.

Polly sighed with relief and supervised the placing of the bags on the bed so she might unpack them more easily. "I'm sorry you had all this bother," she apologized.

Jim's artist uncle smiled bleakly. "I'm glad to be able to do this. When he was ready to leave, "If you find you don't like this room, I'm sure my mother would be happy to give you another."

Polly stared at him with puzzled eyes. "But it's a very nice room."

"Yes, it is," he said dryly, giving her the impression he could have told her more but didn't want to. And he left.

Troubled, she started unpacking her bags. When she finished, she found she was weary. She decided to stretch out on the bed to rest before taking a shower and dressing to meet Jim's mother and the rest of the family.

The afternoon had turned even more gray, and so the room was in shadow. She closed her eyes and almost dropped off to sleep. But all at once the silence of the shaded room was broken by a hard creaking sound, as if a board had been scraped over the floor. Polly sat up on an elbow with a frown. Suddenly she had the strong feeling that unseen eyes were watching her!

CHAPTER TWO

And eerie silence cloaked the grayness of the room again as Polly waited and listened. And then her heartbeat quickened as a distinct sigh came to her, a mournful sigh such as might have escaped the lips of some spectral form. Following quickly after it there came a repetition of that odd creaking sound, and then the hush that seemed to characterize Shadow Lake.

Fear marred her lovely face as she got up from the bed and stood for a moment in the middle of the room. What had the strange interlude meant? Was it an indication of the supernatural? Or were the noises she'd listened to so tensely part of the normal sounds of a very old building?

By the time she'd showered and put on a white and silver dress she thought suitable for the occasion, Polly felt much better. It was after six, and outside a light rain had begun to fall. She had closed the drapes and turned on the lamp on the dresser. In the interval since her odd experience, nothing else had happened to stir her fears. She was certain she'd made too much of the incident.

The corridor that led to the landing and the stairs was nearly completely dark now. She moved along it swiftly and was almost at the head of the stairs when she was confronted by a shadowy figure approaching from the other corridor. This phantom-like creature paused and gave an audible gasp.

An electric shock of fear shot up Polly's spine. In a tense voice she inquired, "Yes?"

The apparition came a step closer and proved to be a thin, middle-aged woman in some kind of long, flowing gown. The woman peered at her anxiously and said, "You must be our visitor, Jim's bride?"

"I am," Polly said, relieved to hear the timid voice.

The woman gave a nervous laugh. "I'm Elizabeth, his Uncle Patrick's wife. I was resting when you arrived. I haven't been well lately."

"Of course," Polly said, striving to put some warmth in her voice. "Jim's grandmother mentioned you."

"It will be good to have somebody young in this lonesome old place," Elizabeth said earnestly. She had a rather long face, faded and hollow-cheeked, and her blue eyes had a watery, sad look. "When I saw you coming toward me in the shadows, I was startled for a moment. I didn't recognize you, and this is the sort of house where you're prepared to encounter phantoms."

Polly decided tactfully to ignore this reference to the supernatural and say, "It is a very old house."

Elizabeth nodded as they started down the stairs together. "And one that has known many strange events," she said.

There was a moment of silence between them.

"I must apologize for not being on hand to greet you," Elizabeth then said in her nervous, fluttery way. "But I haven't been in good health. My doctor insists I rest a great deal. I have a weakening blood condition."

"It didn't matter," Polly assured her.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and turned left to enter the living room, which was brightly lighted, in contrast to the near-darkness of the halls. A tall bald man with stern hawk-like features, wearing a neat dark business suit, stood nearest the door. He had a glass in his

hand, and when he saw them he gave Polly a look of special interest.

At her side, Elizabeth smiled timidly. "This is Patrick, my husband. Jim's new wife."

The severe man held out a bony hand. "Welcome to Shadow Lake," he said with a wintry smile.

Polly shook hands with him. "I've looked forward to coming here."

Patrick Anderson studied her with shrewd eyes. "I trust we don't disappoint you. Have you met my brother, Percy?" And he turned to a shorter, rather stout man, with features that seemed a jolly caricature of his own, who had come up beside him. The stout man wore horn-rimmed glasses and was staring at Polly from behind them.

"I might have known Jim would pick himself a pretty wife," he said with a smile as he shook hands with her.

"You've met everyone but Priscilla." It was Melissa Anderson, seated on the other side of the room in a high-backed chair, who said this in her commanding way.

Paul stood beside the chair with a smile on his thin face. "I approve of your dress, Polly," he said. "It shows an eye for style."

Melissa glanced at her son with raised eyebrows. "I've never known you to show an interest in women's clothes before," she said. And to Polly she added, "You must have made a definite impression on him."

Polly blushed, and told the artist. "Thanks. I took some time picking this out."

Patrick Anderson glanced at Elizabeth in her shapeless gown with its high turtleneck collar and showed an expression of distaste. "I wish my wife had your eye for clothes," he said sharply. "I rarely like what she wears." He had his mother's acid tongue.

Melissa, queen of the brood, held her head high, the

wrinkled face bearing its usual look of arrogance. "At my age one usually settles for something suitable in black," she said. "There's no need to trouble one's mind about other choices."

Polly was preparing to compliment the old woman on her stunning black gown, set off with a single strand of pearls, when from the doorway at the other end of the room a middle-aged woman with a lovely face came lurching in. Polly realized with dismay this must be Jim's mother.

Priscilla was wearing a chic green cocktail gown, and her ash-blond hair was stunningly arranged in an up-sweep. But her face had a slack, blank, drunken expression, and her eyes were glassy. She came to a swaying halt before Polly.

"So you're the one!" she said in a slurred tone.

"I'm Polly, Mrs. Johnson," Polly said politely.

"Don't patronize me because you've managed to steal my son!" Priscilla snapped back drunkenly.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Polly said, shocked into numbness by this greeting from her mother-in-law.

Priscilla Johnson sneered at her. "You've ruined my son's life! He's too young to be married! I know what attracted you—the Anderson money! That's why you're here!"

"Priscilla!" It was Melissa who called out her daughter's name in anger. Now the matriarch of the Anderson clan was on her feet as she instructed Paul, "Take your sister upstairs. She can have dinner in her room tonight. She's plainly not fit to join the rest of us."

Priscilla's mouth dropped open as she wheeled around to face her mother. It seemed she might be going to continue the scene. But the dominant expression on her mother's face appeared to sober her. She made no reply,

and allowed Paul to take her by the arm and lead her out of the room.

There was a second of strained silence after the two vanished. Then, leaning on her cane, Melissa told Polly grimly. "My daughter drinks too much. We may as well admit that at once, since you'll find it out anyway. You mustn't pay any attention to what she said just now. Tomorrow she'll be apologizing to you."

"It's all right," Polly said weakly, wishing she were any place but in this elegant old room surrounded by Andersons.

"She's usually not as bad as tonight," Melissa remarked. "But she was in the village all day with that René. And they always drink too much when they're together."

Patrick Anderson spoke up, "I doubt if Polly is interested in the habits or friends of her mother-in-law. I suggest we go in to dinner and dismiss this unfortunate scene from our minds."

They moved to the rear of the mansion, where the subdued elegance of the paneled dining room awaited them. Lighted candles had been set on the richly appointed table. They all gradually relaxed and began to talk in low tones. A little later, Paul came in quietly to join them.

Polly found herself seated next to the stout Percy. As dinner progressed, he beamed at her from behind his horn-rimmed glasses and filled her in on information about the family.

"Bill Johnson, who was Jim's father," he said, "was the only one who wasn't afraid of my mother. He took Priscilla to Boston to live against my mother's wishes. It was only after his death that she returned. And she's never really been happy since. I say that's why she drinks."

It was an awkward subject, and Polly didn't want to

dwell on it. So she said, "It's just struck me I do have something in common with all of you."

"And that is?"

She smiled. "My name begins with a P. And so do all of yours—Patrick, Percy, Paul and Priscilla. Did your parents do this deliberately?"

Percy chuckled. "I really couldn't say. I've never given it much thought before. But you are right. We do all have the same initial."

"I haven't seen any of Paul's paintings yet," Polly said.

The stout man glanced across the table at his brother and in a low voice told her, "My mother doesn't approve of his work. He paints in the modern abstract style. She won't let him hang anything in the house except in his studio. That's in the attic."

Polly showed surprise. "But he's done very well in a number of shows."

"That doesn't impress my mother," Percy said. "She has definite ideas about almost everything. And nothing changes them. She's a very strong-willed person."

"I've gathered that," Polly agreed.

"But don't put her down as a selfish old woman," Percy Anderson hastened to add. "She's much more than that. My father died early in life, and she has held the family together ever since. She pretends to think she hasn't done a good job. But she has. Patrick and I still turn to her for advice in business matters every so often."

"I find that fascinating," Polly said.

The stout man glanced up at the head of the table, where Melissa sat in regal calm. "You'll be even more impressed when you come to know her better," he promised.

The excellent dinner, featuring Cornish hen, had come to an end. They lingered at the table over coffee and brandy. Melissa Anderson caught Polly's eye and said, "I

must tell them what you propose to do." To the table she announced, "Polly has special training in history and writing. And she agreed to spend some of her time here putting our family history into readable shape."

Patrick Anderson gave Polly a sharp glance. "Would you really enjoy such a dry-as-dust task?"

She managed a smile. "Yes. I'd like to do it."

The stout Percy cleared his throat awkwardly. "But the work has already been done. My late wife, Connie, took care of it years ago. By the time of her death, the records were complete."

"You're wrong about that," Melissa said in her firm, husky voice. "I looked over the material before it was put away. She'd only recorded events up to early in the eighteen hundreds."

"Oh," Percy said, abashed. "I was too upset to make a thorough check at the time."

Paul was studying Polly across the table, his wizened face a mask of cynicism. "Surely you're not all that interested in the Andersons."

"I am." She smiled. "And I think Jim would like me to do it."

A few minutes later they left the table and sauntered towards the living room. The thin Paul Anderson made a point of joining Polly. As they reached the hallway, he asked. "Would you like to go upstairs and see my studio?"

"I would," she said. "I've heard so much about your painting."

Paul glanced grimly in the direction of the living room, where the others had vanished, and said, "If it was from Mother, I'm sure the comments weren't flattering."

Polly smiled. It was Jim who talked about you mostly. He said he liked what you were doing."

"Jim is a rebel like his father," was Paul's pleased

reply. "I place all my hopes for the family in him, and you, of course. Mother laments the fact that he doesn't bear the Anderson name, but at least he has his share of the blood."

He led her up two flights of stairs to the top floor of the old mansion. His studio was at the head of the second stairway, and he opened the door and turned on the lights for her.

"I have modest quarters," he said. "But I manage with them."

"Indeed you do!" she gasped as she followed him in. For the studio was literally filled with paintings.

The canvases were piled thickly against the walls, and all the available hanging space was crowded. As she'd been led to expect, he worked in the modern style. His paintings were garish with loud colors, and cubes and other stylized shapes filled the canvases. She could understand that an elderly conservative such as his mother would not approve of them.

The thin-faced man stood there proudly. "I like to think I'm accomplishing something," he said. "Of course Mother sees my work as a messy assortment of colored patterns."

Polly moved about the studio, examining some of the more interesting of the paintings. One had a completely gray background with a shaft of eerie green light cutting across it. She turned to him. "What's the meaning of that?"

He smile was grim. "I call it Caroline."

"Caroline?"

He nodded and came closer to stare up at the gray canvas with its shaft of green light. "Yes. Surely you must have heard the story of our ancestor who killed her lover during the War of 1812 when she learned he was a spy."

"Yes, I have."

"And you're familiar with the legend that she still stalks the corridors and grounds of Shadow Lake?"

"Jim spoke of it."

"Well, that's what the painting is about. The dark gray area represents the house, and the shaft of green is our ghost, Caroline."

She stared at the eerie shaft of green and gave a tiny shiver. "Now that you explain it, I get the feeling of it. It has quite an impact."

The ascetic-faced Paul was studying her closely. "Do you believe in the existence of ghosts?"

"My feelings are mixed," she confessed.

The artist eyed her wisely. "You may have more definite convictions before you leave here."

Something in the way he said it made Polly uneasy. She moved on around the fairly large room, studying the rest of the paintings.

She said, "I'll be coming up here often."

"Whenever you like," Paul said. He frowned. "I'm terribly sorry about that scene Priscilla made tonight. We all are. She wasn't responsible, as you could tell. In the morning she'll be asking you to forgive her."

Polly looked at him. "I suppose so. But won't she still hate me?"

The sallow face of the artist showed surprise. "Perhaps you are right," he said quietly. "Priscilla has been a very possessive mother. I guess she is bound to hate anyone who comes between her and Jim. But that should pass in time."

"I hope so," Polly replied.

They moved toward the door to go back downstairs. Paul hesitated before turning out the lights and, with a troubled expression, said, "There is one other thing."

"Yes?"

He was frowning. "I'd like to see you get off to a good

start here. And I'm afraid you could spoil things by working on the family history."

Her eyes widened. "But everyone seems anxious for me to do it."

"My mother is anxious for you to do it," he said bitterly. "You can't really know what the others think. I'd personally advise you against it."

"But why?"

"It's a stuffy project, for one thing," he told her. "And there seems to be a streak of bad luck goes with it, for another. You know that Percy's wife killed herself with an overdose of sleeping tablets at the very time she was working on it."

"But that had to be a coincidence!"

"I've often wondered," Paul Anderson said quietly.

Polly was thoroughly confused. "I don't think I know what you're hinting at."

His expression became bitter. "I'm hinting at nothing beyond the fact that Shadow Lake has a dark and tragic history. I wouldn't enjoy spending my days poring over the saga of the Andersons."

But Polly knew there was something else behind it, something he was not yet ready to reveal.

She said, "I'll think about my decision to do the history."

"I would," he said, approval in his tone. And he switched off the lights in the studio.

They stepped out into the darkness of the hallway, and he closed the door shut after him.

"We're in bad need of some proper lighting in these hallways," he complained as they reached the first landing. There was one single bulb there, glowing faintly from a fixture on the wall by the head of the stairs.

"I suppose you have to keep continually making improvements." Polly said. "It is such an old house."

Paul paused on the landing and indicated the wall with a nod. "You'll see there are tiny shelves at intervals on the stairways where lamps were set out in the old days. Fixtures should be wired in all those places to give the same amount of light. It's hard to convince Mother such things are necessary."

"How about your brothers?"

Paul's smile was one of cold amusement. "Patrick never bothers with anything but the business. He has full sway there, and he jealously guards his power, even though mother does occasionally try to interfere. Percy gave up long ago. He takes little interest in anything but food. He's a glorified bookkeeper at the factory, and he rarely offers an opinion about what goes on there."

Her eyes met his. "And you?"

Paul's smile vanished. "I'm the freak of the family. Because I have chosen to devote my life to art, I've lost all status. I'm tolerated but not accepted. But don't think I blame Mother or the others. It's a point of view I understand. I'm deeply fond of my mother. I think she's the most wonderful person I have ever known and the single strong influence in my life."

"Your mother is certainly a strong character," Polly observed.

"Not without overcoming many handicaps," Paul Anderson told her solemnly. "When she married my father, she was the sole guardian of a demented younger sister. Both her parents had died fairly young. And she refused to accept my father unless he agreed to allow her to bring her sister here to live."

Polly frowned. "Wasn't that a great sacrifice on her part?"

"She didn't think so," the artist said. "She brought her sister here and hired Josephine to care for her. It was

either that or condemning the girl to an insane asylum. And mother wouldn't do that."

"No. I suppose not," Polly said.

"Mother's sister was a lovely girl and gentle most of the time, but there were dark spells. Because of these, she needed constant care. Josephine looked after her until she died. By that time both Patrick and Percy had been born."

"And so Josephine stayed on here," she said.

"Yes. We're all devoted to her, especially Mother." They started down the last flight of stairs to join the others in the living room. "Are you comfortable in your room?"

Something in his tone made Polly uneasy again. She glanced at him. "Yes, it's very nice."

"It's a choice room," he agreed. "But I always have a strange feeling about it. Perhaps I shouldn't tell you, but I think I must, because I want you to have every chance to adjust to living here. That is the room where my mother's mad sister lived and died."

CHAPTER THREE

Polly halted midway down the stairway and gazed at Paul in consternation.

In a strained voice, she said, "I must confess I've had an odd feeling about the room."

The artist regarded her sympathetically. "You could ask my mother to have you changed to another."

Polly hesitated. "No," she said, "I think not. It might annoy her, and I want her to like me. There's no reason I should be upset about being in it."

His eyes searched her face. "If you're positive about that."

"I am," she said resolutely, and hoped the fear she felt did not show in her face or voice. She was determined to conquer her nervousness about the room.

"I'm sorry I mentioned it," he said. "But I did want to be honest with you."

Polly summoned a wan smile. "I understand."

They went on down the stairs and joined the others in the living room. Melissa was holding forth about the marvelous winter sports on the lake in the days of her youth, telling about the horse races on the ice and the fancy skating, and how each of the great houses in the district was host to at least one large fancy ball. To hear her describe it was to be convinced all the truly happy days at Shadow Lake had vanished with the past. Polly

listened politely but refused to believe this was true. She was sure that when Jim came back from Vietnam, they would have wonderful times. The thought of her young husband in that far-off land made her unhappy. And she made up her mind to write him as soon as she went up to her room.

With this in mind, she excused herself from the group a short time later. She told them, "I want to write Jim before I go to bed, and I'm rather tired."

Melissa nodded her approval from her chair. "Give the boy my love," she said. "And kiss me good night before you leave us, my dear."

Polly dutifully went over and touched her lips to the elderly woman's cheek. Melissa accepted the tribute in her best regal manner, her hand resting on her cane. Then Polly turned and quickly left the room to go upstairs.

The dark corridors were something she would have to get used to. She hurried so that she was breathless when she entered the room. The Rose Room looked warmer under artificial light. And Polly reminded herself that it must have been decorated and refurnished many times since the mad sister of Melissa had occupied it. There was no reason to link it with those other days, since it was now virtually another room.

Trying to make herself believe this, she sat down at the small writing desk and began composing a letter to Jim. She was as honest as she dared be about her many reactions to the house and those in it. Discreetly she skipped any reference to the unfortunate first meeting with his mother. She merely said she'd spoken to Priscilla. The letter grew to nearly six pages before she finished and sealed it.

Then she changed into her night clothes and got into bed.

It was the sound of footsteps that awakened her—soft

footsteps in the darkness! She could hear them moving across the room. With a tiny cry of alarm she switched on her bedside lamp, only to find the room quite empty, mockingly empty! She frowned and stared about her. No one was there, and nothing had been disturbed.

She sank back on her pillow and told herself she'd been in a state between sleep and waking when she'd heard those phantom footsteps. It had been a bad dream. That had to be it! She closed her eyes in an attempt to sleep again but left the bedside lamp on this time.

The lamp was still on when she awoke the next morning. And the sight of sunshine seeping in between the cracks of the window drapes made her feel ashamed of her nocturnal fears. She quickly got up and opened the drapes. The sunlight made the grounds of the old mansion seem much more appealing than they'd appeared under gray clouds when she'd arrived the previous afternoon. She hoped that it was a good omen.

And it seemed that it might be. She'd barely finished breakfast and gone into the living room to finger through some magazines when Jim's mother joined her there. The ash-blond Priscilla looked worn and jittery in her neat woolen dress.

Standing before Polly, the older woman made a futile gesture with her right hand, then pressed it to her brow and closed her eyes for a second. "I have a dreadful headache," she complained. "But I must talk to you."

"Of course," Polly said.

Her mother-in-law gazed at her with resignation and indicated a nearby chair. "Please let us sit down. I feel as if I might collapse at any minute."

Polly took the chair but asked Priscilla, "Don't you think you should go to your room and rest?"

"I intend to in a moment," the ash-blond woman said with a frown and a touch of her mother's arrogance. She

settled herself in an easy chair and stared a moment at Polly before saying, "Of course I made a dreadful fool of myself last night and behaved abominably toward you."

"I knew you were upset."

"I was drunk!" Jim's mother snapped. "It happens often, though I try not to be obnoxious as I was last night. I usually keep out of the way and don't bother anyone. I don't know why I behaved as I did."

"I think we should both forget it."

Priscilla leaned forward anxiously. "Then you're not going to tell Jim, write him about what I said and did?"

Polly shook her head. "I wouldn't dream of doing that, if only because it would be bound to worry him."

Priscilla's eyes narrowed. "I hadn't thought of it from that angle," she said. Polly could fairly see relief flow through her and knew that Jim's mother was less concerned about how she'd behaved toward Polly than she was about keeping word of her actions from Jim.

Polly said, "I don't blame you too much for feeling badly about Jim getting married so unexpectedly. I only hope I can convince you he made a proper choice."

The ash-blond mother of Jim sighed. "I've had so many hopes for him, so many wonderful plans. Then this Army thing came along to disturb his life. And as if that wasn't enough, he married without even discussing it with me."

"That probably would have happened one day in any event," Polly said.

Priscilla gazed at her bitterly. "I don't think so. Under normal conditions, he would have consulted me on his choice of wife."

"Many sons don't do that."

The older woman forced a smile. "I suppose that is true," she said. "And in spite of my having gotten us off to a bad start. I'd like us to get along."

Polly smiled. "There's no reason we shouldn't."

"When I'm feeling better, we must have a longer talk and really get to know each other well," Priscilla said in a weary voice as she got to her feet. But there was little conviction in her words. It seemed that at best there would be a kind of grim truce between them; a truce that might culminate in a bitter struggle for Jim's love when he returned home.

Polly also was standing. "I do want to be a good daughter-in-law," she said. "If there's anything I can do to help you—"

Arrogance showed in the ash-blond's manner once more. "I need no help, thank you," she said. "When I drink too much, it's because I'm unhappy. And you would be the last to understand my unhappiness." With that cryptic statement, she strode out of the room, leaving Polly standing there alone, slightly astonished.

After a moment she decided she would like some fresh air. With the sun shining so brightly, she suspected it would be reasonably warm outside, even though Vermont could be cool in late September. Her hunch proved correct. It was a pleasant morning. She strolled through the gardens and then down to the narrow jetty where the boats were tied.

A light breeze rippled the water of the lake, and the boats rocked gently against the weathered gray wood of the jetty. She stood there gazing across the lake, her dark hair ruffled slightly by the breeze. The air was so fresh and invigorating that it gave her a happier feeling about her plight. The old mansion had a lovely location, and once she had broken down the first barriers between herself and Jim's family, things might be all right.

It was in the midst of these encouraging thoughts that she all at once had the odd feeling she was being watched again. She could feel distant eyes fixed on her. With a

troubled expression she glanced in the direction of the ugly old mansion, and was just in time to see a curtain move at one of the second floor windows. Somebody had been staring at her and now was moving back out of sight. Making a quick reckoning, she decided that it was from her own room those eyes had been gazing at her.

She stood there a moment staring at the ancient house. There was no reason she should be so upset because someone had been watching her. It needn't mean anything at all. Perhaps a maid had entered her room to make up the bed and had happened to glance out of the window and see her. But to counter that was her conviction that there had been malevolence in those eyes. She had almost felt the hatred in them!

Her mood of enjoyment broken, she left the jetty for the shore again and began walking back to the house. When she reached the gardens, she came upon the wife of Patrick Anderson seated in a chair under one of the red and green umbrellas. Elizabeth was wearing a heavy brown coat and had her arms pressed close to her as if warding off a chill. Polly remembered the older woman had complained of a serious blood deficiency.

Elizabeth greeted her with a knowing smile on her hollow-cheeked face. "I saw you on the jetty," she said. "You looked so pretty, like the illustration for a calendar. Please sit down with me for a moment."

Polly hesitated. "I should go inside and try to find Jim's grandmother. I want to talk to her about working on the family history."

"Oh, that can wait!" Elizabeth said, dismissing it in a tone that indicated she felt it was of no importance. "Do sit down with me. I have so few people I can really talk to. Here I am, a poor invalid, tied to this place and knowing that not even Patrick cares what happens to me."

Polly listened to the pale woman's lament and took the

chair beside her. "I'm sure your husband is very concerned about you," she said.

"No," Elizabeth said with unexpected firmness. "All he cares about is that factory and his mother. Here they all worship Melissa. They've made a regular cult of her. Even Priscilla bends to her will in a showdown, though she drinks constantly to stop communication between them. And I warn you, if you want to be accepted, you also must become a Melissa worshipper."

Polly was puzzled by the woman's words. She said, "I do think Melissa is a wonderful person for her age. She's still rather beautiful, and she has such assurance."

Elizabeth made a grimace. "Oh, she's the grand lady now! There's no doubt of that! And she makes them all give in to her. Percy's wife was the only one who didn't bow down to her. And you know what happened to her."

"She was a suicide, wasn't she?"

"So they say," Elizabeth went on bitterly. "But I never could see her as the suicidal type. Oh, I know it was supposed to be an accident. She took an overdose of her prescription. Maybe she did and maybe she didn't."

Polly stared at the older woman. "I'm sure her husband would be careful to find out the truth about that."

"Percy?" Elizabeth asked with mockery in her voice. "You've met him. You know what a weak fish he is. Do you see him taking a stand against his mother. Never."

"I take it you don't approve of Melissa."

The faded woman became abject. "I know she's wicked. She's an evil old woman."

Polly was shocked by this. "Why do you think so?"

There was a malevolent glitter in the faded blue eyes as Elizabeth leaned forward confidentially. "Melissa was never a good woman. When she came here and married Jim's grandfather, she did so chiefly to get a rich husband and a home for herself and her mad sister."

"I've heard about the sister."

Elizabeth glanced nervously at the house. "Dark things happened here in those days. Josephine could tell you if she wanted to, though she's another one who gives all her loyalty to that evil Melissa. Why, I heard from someone who should have known that Melissa was cruel to that poor insane girl."

"I can't believe that!" Polly agreed. "She made her husband allow her to bring her sister here so she could supervise her care."

"And torment the pretty creature when it suited her whims," Elizabeth said. "I know what I was told."

"It doesn't sound right," Polly protested.

Elizabeth glanced toward the house again and then at Polly. "I don't suppose you heard about the scandal Melissa was involved in when she came here fifty years ago as a bride."

"Hardly," Polly said. "And I'm not sure that I want to."

"You may as well hear it from me as from anyone else," Elizabeth said with relish. "Everyone in the area knows the story. It's part of the history of the place. Even after Melissa came here as a bride, there was a rich young lumberman named Richard Brown who continued to call on her here brazenly and pay court to her."

Polly nodded. "Her son Paul mentioned something about her popularity last night. But he said after her children were born, she changed into a very dedicated wife and mother."

Mockery showed on Elizabeth's ruined face. "After the murder," she said slyly.

"Murder?" Polly gasped.

"Richard Brown was murdered only a short distance from where we are sitting now," the older woman said. "It happened one night after he left the house. He'd

been here to see Melissa. Her husband was on a business trip to Boston. He often made such trips, and Richard Brown always showed up here to take advantage of them, so the stories go."

"Village gossip can't be trusted," Polly said.

"This was more than village gossip. Richard Brown had a wife and two brothers-in-law who had warned him against philandering. Melissa wasn't the only other woman he was courting. When he went to get his horse and carriage at the stables, he was shot down in the moonlight. There was a dreadful scandal, and because he and Melissa had quarreled that night, a lot of people thought she was the guilty one. But there were no witnesses, and the gun was never found. I'd say it was dropped in the lake."

"And his murderer was never discovered?"

"No. Suspicion shifted from Melissa to one of his brothers-in-law, but nothing could be proven. Fifty years have gone by without the murder being solved. But I say that Melissa was the guilty one. Naturally, she changed her ways after that."

Polly was stunned by the revelations of Patrick's wife and felt that the older woman was probably enlarging on the facts because she hated Melissa so much.

She said, "I find it hard to think of that fine old woman as a murderess."

"I don't," Elizabeth said. "And all this talk about the house being haunted by the ghost of Caroline seems like balderdash to me. I say if there are any ghosts here, they are the victims of that Melissa."

"Victims of Melissa?" Polly echoed.

Elizabeth nodded. "Yes. I can imagine the ghost of Connie returning here to try and tell us she wasn't a suicide but the victim of a murder. And I can't help thinking of that poor mad sister who died so suddenly.

Maybe she's coming back to try to tell what Melissa did to her."

It struck a nerve. Polly thought of those staring eyes and the footsteps she'd heard in the darkness of her room, footsteps that couldn't be explained. She got up quickly. "I don't think you should dwell on such things, especially when you are ill yourself."

Elizabeth looked at her. "My mind isn't sick, if that's what you're hinting."

"I'm sorry," Polly said. "I didn't mean to offend you."

The older woman sighed. "I'm beyond taking offense. I've only tried to warn you what sort of place this is. You should know that, and the kind of people you're dealing with. It's your only protection."

Polly stood there, hesitating to start back to the house. "If Melissa is such a wicked person, why do her children and all the others adore her so?"

"The devil's own always have their worshippers," Elizabeth said. "None of them see her clearly as I do."

"Are you certain you are being fair?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I said yes," Elizabeth said wearily, all her strength seeming to have suddenly deserted her. She looked out at the lake with eyes that were glazed over. "I've talked too much. It's not good for me."

"I'm sorry," Polly said. "I suppose I led you on."

"No," Elizabeth said forlornly. "I said what I wanted to say. But I realize I made a mistake. Don't use it against me with her. She'd find a way to destroy me."

Polly stared at the sick woman. She was now convinced that Elizabeth's illness had affected her mind. She said, "Don't worry. I'm going to forget all you've told me."

"Do that," the older woman said in a vague tone, not looking at her. "Do that."

Polly left her still staring out at the lake in a stricken fashion.

She entered the sprawling mansion by a side entrance that opened directly on the gardens and found herself in a shadowy hallway. Standing there was the housekeeper, Josephine Graham. The elderly woman had apparently been there long enough to have seen her talking to Elizabeth through the glass of the door.

Polly looked up into the gaunt old face and said, "I've just had a chat with Elizabeth. She doesn't seem too well."

Josephine looked grim. "She gives Mr. Patrick a good deal of trouble. The doctor told him it is her mind and not her body that is sick."

Polly heard this with interest. "Really?"

"It's been coming over her gradually," the housekeeper said with a distasteful expression on her thin face. "She has too little to do, I say. Just sits around and feels sorry for herself."

"That can be bad," Polly agreed.

Josephine frowned. "I wouldn't be too friendly with her if I were you," she warned. "That woman hates Melissa Anderson, and everyone here knows it."

"I see," Polly said.

"It's not really my place to speak of such things," the tall, gaunt woman said. "But I've been here long enough to learn a great deal."

"I'm sure you have," Polly said. "You first came here as nurse to Melissa's sister, didn't you?"

"Yes, more than fifty years ago. I was only a slip of a girl myself."

Polly said, "I hear she was very pretty in spite of her madness."

"She was."

"And I imagine Melissa was very devoted to her."

Josephine showed a kind of wariness. "They were sisters," she said simply.

"Yes, of course," Polly agreed hastily. It was apparent

that Josephine was loyal to the old woman. "Have you any idea where I can find Melissa now?"

"She was in the study when I went by a few minutes ago," the housekeeper said.

"Thank you," Polly said, and took a step down the hall. Then she turned and asked the gaunt-faced woman, "About my room, the Rose Room—"

"Yes?" The face of the tall, gray-haired woman showed no expression.

"Is that the room where the mad girl was kept?"

"That was her room," Josephine said.

Polly nodded, slightly flustered. "I was told it was."

The tall woman eyed her knowingly. "It's one of the best of the guest rooms. I'm sure that's why it was given you."

"I have no doubt of that," Polly said awkwardly. "I wasn't questioning it."

Josephine's eyes were shrewd. "Then perhaps you're thinking the room might be haunted. I don't think you should let that worry you. If the poor mad creature does come back, her ghost is a gentle one."

CHAPTER FOUR

One evening a few days later, when she went up to the attic studio to watch Paul at work, Polly summoned enough courage to mention the Richard Brown story to him. She began by saying, "A man was murdered here on the estate, wasn't he?"

Paul, brush in hand, turned from the canvas he was working on. "You're referring to Caroline and the shooting of her lover during the War of 1812?"

"No," she said quietly. "The murder I heard about occurred at a much later date."

He stared at her hard. "Who mentioned it to you?"

She didn't want to betray Elizabeth, so she said, "I can't really be certain. I think someone brought it up in the living room after dinner the other night."

"I see," he said. "What do you want to know about it?"

"I was interested in it because it seemed to be almost a repetition of that first murder, at least according to what I heard. How long ago did it happen?"

"A half-century back, soon after my mother came here as a bride."

"Oh," she said, pretending this was news to her. "Who was killed and who did it?"

Paul's thin face showed contempt, as if he knew that she was pretending innocence, deliberately leading him on. He said, "A man named Richard Brown was shot in

the stable yard. He was supposed to have been an admirer of my mother's. And the mystery of his murder has never been solved."

"I see," she said.

The artist smiled crookedly. "Gossip had it that my mother had followed in Caroline's footsteps and killed him. But this wasn't true; though my mother was questioned, she was able to prove her innocence."

"That was fortunate," Polly said.

"It was ridiculous to suppose Mother could have committed such a crime in the first place," Paul said angrily. "Richard Brown was a friend of both her and my father, a family friend. There was no truth to the rumors that she and this Brown were in love and quarreled. At the moment Brown was murdered, my mother was in the room of Amelia, her mad younger sister, and Josephine was also there to swear to it."

"I see," Polly said. "So this Amelia didn't die until some time later."

"Not long afterward," Paul said with a frown. "During one of her mad spells, she wandered out of the house. By the time she was missed, she had fallen from the wharf into the lake. A shawl she was wearing was found on the wharf."

"Was her body ever found?"

"No. Only on rare occasions are bodies recovered from Shadow Lake. They call it bottomless."

"A sad business," Polly said with a sigh.

"I've always felt it was a release for the poor mad creature," Paul said. "And it surely made it easier for my mother. She'd always had to give Amelia a large share of her time, though Josephine had been hired as the girl's nurse. With us children coming along, it would have become an unbearable burden for my mother."

"Yes, I suppose so," Polly agreed.

He considered her in silence, his expression mocking. "Well, does that satisfy your curiosity?"

Polly blushed. "I wasn't just morbidly curious. I do feel I'm one of the family now. And the mention of this second murder whetted my interest."

"The local people still gossip about it." He shrugged. "In a small village like this, even fifty-year-old murders remain news, especially when a few of the principals involved are still alive and on the scene. I don't doubt there are some who still whisper that my mother did kill Brown."

She lifted her eyebrows. "But she was able to prove her innocence."

"Gossips prefer to ignore facts," he said rather peevishly. "I'm sure my mother is still sensitive on the subject, so I wouldn't mention it to her if I were you."

"It's almost bound to come up if I go ahead and compile the family history," Polly pointed out.

The artist gave her a knowing look. "As I remember, I warned you against that task."

"And Melissa is still talking about my going ahead with it," Polly protested.

Paul grimaced and returned to his painting. He worked with his back to her, as if the discussion were at an end. But after a moment, he said, "You'll be sorry if you allow yourself to be persuaded into doing the history. Too many unhappy events will be dragged up, not to mention the suicide of your predecessor at the task, Connie."

"Are you certain she was a suicide?"

He glanced at her over his shoulder derisively. "Do you think it might have been murder? We Andersons seem to have the reputation of being experts at it."

"Please don't misunderstand me," she begged him, rising. "I only meant that she might have taken the overdose of medicine by accident."

"That's Percy's theory," he said lightly. "But I've never put much stock in it. I don't think her marriage to my rather weak brother was a happy one."

Polly sighed. "At least I'm learning more about the family."

"Yes," he agreed. "But I wouldn't carry that too far. You might wind up so disillusioned you'd decide to break up your marriage with Jim."

She smiled. "That's not likely to happen."

And she left the artist to go back to her own room and read for a while before retiring.

It seemed no coincidence that again that night she was awakened by eerie sounds in her room. The sliding, creaking noise was followed by the nervous breathing of someone unseen, a specter lost in the shadows of the big bedroom. She stared into the darkness, her eyes wide with terror, certain that she was being watched. The weird experience ended with the creaking sound grating on her nerves. And then all was silence!

She woke up the next morning with unhappy memories of the midnight intrusion. In the bright sun of another day, the theory about the ghost of Amelia seemed far-fetched. And yet last night she'd been convinced that somewhere in the room the apparition of the mad girl had lurked.

When she left her room, she saw Josephine down at the end of the hall. The tall, slender woman was trying a door at the end of the long corridor. Out of curiosity Polly passed the stairs and went down to see what she was doing.

The door was partly open. Her hand on the knob, Josephine turned to Polly with a thin smile on her wrinkled face. "This is the fire exit," she explained. "I check on the door every so often to make sure it is working freely."

"I hadn't noticed it, since it isn't marked," Polly said. And she glanced out to see that the door opened onto an iron fire escape and a ladder-like flight of steps leading to the next level and eventually to the ground.

"It's a good job you saw me here," the housekeeper said. "Because only the family and guests are concerned, we didn't bother marking it. But it is well to know where it is. You can never tell about fires in an old building like this."

"Of course," Polly said. "Is this the only fire escape?"

Josephine nodded as she closed the door tightly and let the lock snap into place. "We didn't have this one until a few years ago. Melissa read about a fire at some country house and had this exit made from a window and the fire escape erected. It goes to the top floor. The only trouble is that she ordered plain wooden doors for the exits, and they don't let any light into the corridors."

Polly smiled. "Nothing ever seems to work out perfectly."

"I'm well satisfied with what we have," the housekeeper declared. "The servants' quarters present no problem. We're mostly in rooms below at the rear of the house on the other side of the kitchen."

Polly remained a few minutes longer talking to the elderly woman before going down to breakfast. She liked Josephine and felt she had a good friend in her. But she still wondered if the devoted servant had not sworn to lie to keep Melissa from being dragged into a messy murder investigation years before.

She'd barely finished breakfast, when a maid called her to the phone in the lower hallway. She went to the phone, actually trembling. She couldn't imagine who would be calling long distance now unless it was the War Department with some bad news about Jim. She'd not had any

letters from him for nearly ten days and had begun to worry a little.

Picking up the receiver, she announced her presence and waited to be connected with a dry-voiced official. "Mrs. Johnson?" the voice inquired rather urgently.

"Yes, this is she," she said, a tremor in her voice.

"I have a message concerning your husband," the voice said. "Nothing to be too alarmed about. But he is presently in the hospital in Saigon, suffering from malarial hepatitis. Because this is a recurring disease, he is being given an honorable discharge at once. And as soon as his condition allows, he will be sent home."

The message sent Polly into a tumult of mingled joy and apprehension. The word that Jim would soon be returned to the United States and freed from further military service was wonderful. But the fact that he had a serious ailment was frightening and moderated her happiness.

"Is his condition serious?" she inquired anxiously.

The voice at the other end of the long distance line was reassuring. "He has passed the crisis in his illness and should be leaving Vietnam in a very short time."

"But he must be very ill or they wouldn't be giving him a discharge, would they?" she asked, worried and eager to get more information.

"I assume it is because of the recurring nature of his illness they are releasing him," the voice said crisply. "It would be impossible to send him into combat again. You'll have further notification within a few days." And the conversation was over.

At once Polly went upstairs to Priscilla's room and knocked on her door. After a long moment, the bored voice of Jim's mother answered, "Yes, what is it?"

"It's Polly," she said. "I have some word about Jim."

"One minute," Priscilla said.

Polly waited in the hallway; it was a full two or three minutes before the woman opened the door to her. Priscilla was wearing a rich purple satin robe and looked as if she'd just gotten out of bed. A reek of whiskey fumes mixed with stale cigarette smoke emerged from the room.

"What about Jim?" the older woman demanded nervously.

"He's all right," Polly told her. "Or at least he's not in serious danger. He's contracted malarial hepatitis, and they're discharging him and sending him home as soon as he's well enough to make the journey."

Priscilla still seemed in the fog of a hangover. "But he's going to recover?"

"Yes," Polly said. "But he may have recurrences of the disease from time to time."

Priscilla closed her eyes and moaned. "They've wrecked his health—taken my only son from me and wrecked his health!"

"I'm sure it won't be that bad," Polly said, attempting to offer her some comfort.

The older woman's reaction was entirely unexpected and almost frightening. Leaning on the door for support, she opened her eyes in a wild fashion and, her face distorted with anger, cried, "You don't care! You want him an invalid or dead! You married him for a name and money! Now you've got that, you don't care what happens!"

Polly took a step backward. "How dare you say that to me!" she exclaimed.

"I know what you are!" Priscilla said in the same wild way as she began to sob. Then she slammed the door shut in Polly's face.

The young woman stood there in disbelief for a moment, then sadly turned from the closed door to make her way to the stairs and down to the first floor.

The next person to whom she told the news was Jim's grandmother, Melissa. The matriarch of the Anderson clan was seated at the desk in the study when Polly came to her with the word.

"Does Priscilla know?" the old woman asked.

"Yes," Polly said with a sigh. And she gave the stern, patrician Melissa a brief account of what had happened, ending with, "I try very hard to get along with her, but it seems no use."

Melissa's lips set in a thin line of disapproval. Her right hand firmly grasped the silver handle of her cane. She frowned as she said. "I fear Priscilla is going to become a serious problem. I see no solution but to place her in some institution where she'll not be able to go on drinking. At the moment I can't call her responsible for her actions."

"I realize her condition," Polly said. "But I think she'd have the same jealousy of me even if she was well."

"That could be," Melissa said. "It is something we'll have to face and try to cope with when Jim returns."

Polly sighed. "Surely I'll soon get word from him personally. I'm so worried about his illness."

"The word will probably come shortly," the old woman comforted her. "I'm sure he'll write as soon as he is able." She gazed at Polly with her sharp blue eyes. "I think this would be an admirable moment for you to begin work on the family history. You need something to occupy your mind and fill your time."

"I hope I'll be able to concentrate on it," Polly said with a wan smile. "My mind is so filled with thoughts of Jim."

"You'll find the material engrossing once you get into it," Melissa said. "I know that Connie did. And I don't think she was nearly as smart as you. There are all the old ledgers kept by the first Andersons who ran the lumber mill. And then there are diaries of various members of

the family down through the years. Along with them, there are newspaper clippings, letters and other papers. There are even a few letters written by the famous Caroline."

"The girl who shot her lover in the War of 1812?"

"Yes," Melissa said. "Some have called her a murderess, but I prefer to think of her as one of the family heroines."

"I suppose there are bound to be a variety of opinions," Polly ventured.

Melissa sat back in her chair, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. "I have delved into the history of Caroline," she said. "And I'm sure she didn't go over to the enemy. I think she was broken-hearted because of the loss of her lover and drowned herself in the lake."

"Isn't that how the story of her ghost appearing here came about?" Polly asked.

The sharp blue eyes bored into her. "I have seen her ghost, more than once."

There was such conviction in the old woman's husky declaration that it was difficult not to believe her.

Polly asked, "In the house?"

"Several times," the old woman said. "And once on the lawn in the moonlight. I never did get a good glimpse of her face. She appeared as a wraith-like figure in a flowing gown."

"Are you sure it wasn't some living person you assumed to be the ghost of Caroline?"

Melissa shook her head. "It was her ghost," she said, and, leaning heavily on her cane, she lifted herself up from the chair. She reached in a pocket of her black dress to produce a key ring with two odd-looking keys on it. Then she slowly proceeded to one of the room's book-lined walls. As Polly watched in fascination, the matriarch pressed firmly on one of the books, and the whole section

from floor to high above her head swung out silently to reveal a hidden doorway.

Melissa glanced at Polly with a grim smile. "Shadow Lake has a few secrets which most people still haven't discovered."

Polly was on her feet. "I never would have guessed there was a door behind those books."

"My husband's father had this constructed," Melissa said. "He was a man who insisted on keeping much of his money and most of his business papers here in the house. So the vault hidden by this secret door is large and supposed to be fireproof. Patrick doesn't use it at all. His money is in the village bank and his business papers in a safe at the factory. So I took over this vault for the records of the family history."

"You certainly should take good care of them," Polly agreed.

Melissa nodded. "I shall give you the key while you're working on them. And you will be responsible to me for the contents of the vault." The old woman moved through the dark doorway and inserted one of the ancient keys in the steel face of the vault. After a moment she inserted the other one in a lock above it. Then she took the handle of the vault in one of her thin veiled hands and easily swung it open.

Polly was close behind her and saw the stack of ledgers, books and bulging files of personal papers in the interior of the vault. She said, "It looks as if there is a tremendous amount of material to sort out."

"Connie did some of it before her death," Melissa said. "But her notes were skimpy, and I would guess you'll want to go over all that material again and handle it in your own way."

They were standing in the shadowy entrance of the vault, and the mention of Connie's name made Polly

study the slender, black-clad figure of the old woman with suspicious eyes. Had Melissa had anything to do with the tragic death of Percy's wife? And if so, for what motive?

Polly said quietly, "I think I would prefer to begin again. The story of Caroline and the murder of her lover is most interesting. And it takes place early in the history of the house."

"Yes," Melissa said in a voice strangely tense for her. "Caroline has had a great influence on what has happened at Shadow Lake down through the years. When you bring the records up to this century, you will learn there was a second murder on the grounds of the estate shortly after I came here as a bride."

"Oh?" Polly tried to hide the excitement the old woman's words had inspired as she waited breathlessly to hear what revelation Melissa might have to make.

Melissa's eyes were burning, and there was a haunted look on her thin face. "A friend of my husband and me was shot to death one night. The murderer was never found, and neither was the gun." She paused and stared at Polly strangely. "Do you know who I think fired that gun?"

"No."

"The ghost of Caroline," the old woman said calmly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Polly could only stare at Melissa in shocked silence for a moment. Then she broke the tension by saying, "That is a very remarkable theory."

"It's not a conclusion I arrived at quickly," Melissa said. "I have given it deep thought for most of my life. And that is what I truly believe."

"I doubt if your solution of the mystery would be accepted by the law," Polly said.

"Ha!" the old woman snapped with a return of her usual arrogance. "I wouldn't expect those wooden-heads to have the imagination to see things as I do. But there'll be plenty of time to discuss the case later when you're ready to set it down in the family history."

Polly stared at the well-filled vault again and said, "I really don't know where to begin."

Melissa leaned on her cane and made an impatient gesture with the other hand. "Begin with the early ledgers. They date back to the construction of the house. Lose yourself in another century, and you'll not fret about Jim in Vietnam."

Polly smiled forlornly. "I'll do my best."

Melissa remained with her for only a few minutes longer; then she left the study and closed the door behind her. Polly knelt before the vault and began to pull out the worn ledgers with their leather bindings. The smell of

musty paper made her sneeze as she lifted several of them up and took them to the desk.

She flipped their pages and glanced at the entries in faded brown ink on the yellowing paper. Her pretty face took on a rueful expression as she debated whether or not she could settle down to this difficult task with her mind in such a turmoil.

Not only was she upset about Jim, but she was also troubled by many of the happenings at Shadow Lake. The impossible attitude of Jim's mother was making her miserable. And she was shocked to discover that the stern façade of the matriarch, Melissa, might merely be a moral front for a murderess.

In the meantime, while she waited for Jim's return, she would try to make something of the jumble of books and records in the vault. She kept wondering what sort of person the dead wife of Percy had been. And with a view to discovering this, she began rummaging in the vault for Connie's notes.

She did not find them right away. And so she spent the rest of the day trying to sort the ledgers so she might begin copying material from them. She was sitting at the desk, engaged in this task, shortly before the dinner hour, when the bald, austere Patrick Anderson came bursting into the study. Seeing her, he showed surprise.

"I didn't know you were in here," he said.

She smiled at him over the stack of books. "I've begun work on the Anderson history."

His brow furrowed. "So my mother finally talked you into it," he said. "I thought you'd be smart enough to dodge the thankless job."

"I think I'll enjoy it," she said. "At least I'll stay at it until Jim gets back." And she told him about Jim's illness and discharge.

"He's probably fortunate," was the bald man's comment. "He might have been killed in combat."

"I try to tell myself that. But his health may be permanently damaged."

"Medicine does wonders these days," the head of the Anderson factory said crisply, "I wouldn't worry."

"I hope you're right," Polly said.

The bald man came over, took one of the ledgers in his hands and opened it. He scanned its pages, and his face assumed a dour expression. "The business has grown a good deal since those early days. One forgets the small beginnings."

"That is why a family history will be so interesting," Polly said. "The idea will be to take the important facts and put them together in a narrative which will be readable and easily available."

Patrick snapped the book shut, the dust sprang from it. He placed it back on the table beside her. His cold eyes on her, he said, "There may be some facts we'd just as soon not be reminded of. That's why compiling this history will be a very touchy job."

"In a history, one should tell everything," she said. "That is what gives it value."

The bald man's smile was grim. "I assure you I have no scandal to conceal. But there are others who may not feel the same way. I'm merely warning you."

She spread her hands in a gesture of resignation. "They'll have to make themselves clear and give me a good reason for any deletions they request."

"I have no doubt they will," he said. "I'm sure Connie was approached when she attempted this task you've embarked on, though I didn't actually have a chance to discuss the matter with her. She killed herself before I had the opportunity."

Polly said, "I believe that was something no one expected."

"I'll vouch for that," Patrick agreed. "But then Shadow Lake is a house of the unexpected." And with that dry comment he left her.

She broke off work before dinner and carefully locked all the material in the vault again. Melissa had given her the keys so she could open it whenever she liked. She planned to continue work after the evening meal.

Priscilla didn't make an appearance at dinner. Polly learned from Melissa that the ash-blond had gone in to the village to spend the evening with her friend René.

After dinner, Paul came over to her with an accusing look on his wizened face. "You promised me you wouldn't begin work on the history," he said.

She showed surprise. "I didn't promise anything."

"But you did," he insisted.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You must have misunderstood."

"Quit," was his advice.

"I can't now."

"You can stop any time you like."

"Your mother is counting on me to go ahead."

His expression was grim. "This is one case where I question my mother's judgment. And so will you, if you're wise."

She smiled wanly. "Isn't it a small matter to make such a fuss over?"

"I don't see it that way," he said. "Remember, I've warned you." And he walked away from her.

She watched him go with a sinking feeling. Paul was the one member of the Anderson family to whom she'd felt really close. And now she'd made him angry with her.

Feeling tense and depressed, Polly decided to return to the study and bury herself in her new endeavor.

She found it heavy going as the evening went on. The

air in the study seemed filled with the musty odor of the ancient ledgers. It was stifling, and her head began to ache. But she forced herself to keep on copying what seemed significant details from the crabbed hand-written entires in the heavy leather-bound volumes. The hands that had written these various entries had long since been reduced to dust and bones. But here were the records of their days and thoughts.

Earlier in the evening, she'd made a thorough search for the notes Connie was supposed to have made. But she hadn't found them. And she began to think they might have been destroyed, or that perhaps they were in the hands of her husband, Percy.

It was close to eleven, and she was on the point of ending her work for the night, when the study door opened and Percy Anderson hesitantly entered the book-lined room.

The stout man with the horn-rimmed glasses stood a few feet inside the room and said, "I hope I'm not interrupting you."

"Not at all." Polly smiled, rising from the chair behind the desk. "As a matter of fact, I was on the point of trying to locate you, if you hadn't already gone up to your room."

"Really?" The stout man looked relieved and pleased.

"Yes. I've spent a lot of time trying to find the notes your wife was supposed to have made about the history of Shadow Lake. I haven't come upon them anywhere in the vault."

"You're sure?"

She indicated the vault with a gesture of her hand. "I've searched every corner of it. I thought perhaps the notes had been given to you."

"No." The stout man shook his head in a bewildered fashion. "I never had a look at them."

Polly stared at him. "What happened to them after your wife's death?"

"I really can't say. My mother took charge of the keys. I believe all the material was stored away. And it has been kept in the vault until she turned it over to you."

Polly stood there with a thoughtful expression. "Perhaps your mother saw fit to destroy Connie's notes. Or Connie might even have burned them herself in a fit of despondency."

Percy Anderson looked dubious. "I don't think so." He sighed. "Connie was a quiet sort of person, but she wasn't neurotic. And she seemed in good spirits right up to that awful night when I found her dead and the bottle of sleeping tablets half empty on her bedside table."

"Something must have troubled her to make her kill herself."

"I think it was an accident. She'd not been able to sleep. And I stayed late at the office that night. I returned to the factory with Patrick to work out the figures on a special order. I believe she swallowed a couple of pills which made her groggy and then woke up again. Not really knowing what she was doing, she took enough extra pills to make a fatal dose."

Polly looked at him. "I've heard that some of the family thought she shouldn't be compiling the history."

The stout man looked down. "We rarely all see eye to eye."

"Could someone have found a way to give her that overdose of sleeping pills without her knowing what was happening, and then have made it seem that she had taken them herself?"

Percy Anderson looked as if he might faint. He raised a pudgy hand and gasped. "You're saying she might have been murdered?"

"I suppose so. Yes."

"But why?"

"I have no idea," she said. "This all happened twenty years ago. I have no real knowledge of the people involved or the period."

"Then why should you make such an outrageous statement?"

"I'm sorry if I offended you," she said. "But your wife's death does seem a mystery even to you."

"I've explained how it happened," the stout man said angrily. "There's no mystery!"

"I see," she said quietly. "Please forgive me."

At once his manner changed. His anger seemed to drain away. He gave a deep sigh. "I didn't mean to lose my temper that way. I don't do it often. But I was very much in love with my wife."

"I understand."

But he was not willing to stop his unhappy confession. "Her loss altered my life. I've merely gone through the motions of living since. It was such a tragic thing, so needless."

"I know," Polly said, sorry she had gone into the matter. She was touched by the stout man's obvious suffering.

"Shadow Lake is not a happy house," he went on. "I don't know how you can stand it here, or why Jim suggested that you come to stay with us."

"I don't think he is aware what the true atmosphere here is," she said. "He spent so much of his time at school and college he didn't get to know the unhappiness that exists here. He realizes you're all devoted to his grandmother, and this amuses him."

The eyes behind the heavy glasses studied her. "You appear to have had no trouble seeing through us."

"I think I understand you better," she told him, "though I'm still pretty much in the dark."

The stout man's eyes had become cold. "Perhaps it might be better for you to remain in the dark."

"Perhaps."

"Melissa was a fool to turn those papers over to you," he said, indicating the vault, "to entrust the family secrets to someone not much more than a stranger. How do I know that you haven't found Connie's notes and taken them for your own purposes?"

"What purposes?"

Percy Anderson was suddenly at a loss for words. He took a deep breath and then, in a dejected tone, admitted, "I don't know. I'm saying a lot of things that make no sense. But if I were you, I'd think twice before I'd tire myself out with a project that hasn't any real importance."

"Your Connie thought that it did, or she wouldn't have begun it."

"She might be alive today if she hadn't."

"Oh?" she waited for his explanation.

He quickly added, "I mean it was through overwork that she became a victim of insomnia, and through taking sleeping tablets for the insomnia that she lost her life."

"I see," Polly said.

He stood there uneasily. "I didn't intend to bother you or stay this long," he said. "And I'm sorry I can't help you. I know nothing about the notes Connie made."

He abruptly left the study. And after standing a moment in thought, Polly began the necessary but monotonous routine of returning all the materials to the vault again.

Polly closed the heavy vault door with a frown and heard it click in place. Then she swung the concealing bookcase section to its closed position and was ready to leave the study for the night. She still had the key ring with the two vital keys in her hand. She was about to turn

out the lights in the study and go to her room when she had second thoughts.

Studying the keys, she debated what she should do with them. For some reason she didn't want to keep them herself. There was the danger they might be stolen from her room or even lost in some way. She went over to the desk and rummaged in one of the drawers until she found a large roll of Scotch tape. Then she took out the top left desk drawer, very carefully taped the key ring and the keys tightly against the back of it. When she'd made the keys as neat and secure as possible, she returned the drawer to the desk. And when she pushed it closed she was pleased to see that the thickness of the keys at the rear made the drawer protrude no more than a mere eighth of an inch. This would never be noticed. She put the Scotch tape back in its place, and turned out the lights and started upstairs to her room.

Nearing the landing, she had a strange feeling of uneasiness. All at once she felt a cold draft that gave her a start. She glanced down the hallway and saw that the door leading to the fire escape had been left open.

Slowly she made her way down the dark and hushed corridor. Again she was conscious of the silence of the old mansion. A board creaked under her foot, and the sound, seeming agonizingly loud, caused her to start. She was getting very tense. The gloom and quiet were making her think of the more sinister aspects of the ancient house; of the ghost of Caroline, which Melissa solemnly vowed she had seen.

Through the open door ahead, she could see a pale shaft of moonlight. The outside was much brighter than the shadowy confines of the gloomy mansion. As she drew near the door, her sense of insecurity and danger increased. She began to wish she'd gone to her own room and ignored the open door or at least tried to rouse

someone else to close it. But it had seemed silly to bother anyone else to take care of such a simple chore! She was allowing herself to give way to ridiculous fears.

Now she was only a foot or so from the door, yet she was so filled with terror that it actually pained her. She was about to reach for the knob and push the door shut when she heard a quick rustling sound from directly behind her and froze into immobility. The fear of whatever might be lurking there in the darkness robbed her of the power to move or think. All she could feel was sheer horror!

CHAPTER SIX

Then, without any further warning, Polly was suddenly shoved by someone in the shadows behind her; shoved so hard she pitched forward onto the iron fire escape and then fell screaming down the steep iron-ribbed steps. It all happened so quickly she wasn't able to protect herself. She reached out frantically, and one of her hands hit against hard metal. Now she clawed to catch onto anything to arrest her fall. A twist of her wrist sent a hot fire of pain shooting up her arm, and she fainted. . . .

"Polly!"

She opened her eyes to the cold moonlight night as she heard her name called sharply from above. She was sprawled part way down the steep steps in a precarious position, her head down. It was a miracle she hadn't toppled off the fire escape, to be killed or seriously hurt, rather than plunging only part way. Her hand still clenched the iron support she'd used to arrest her fall, and her wrist was aching in agonizing fashion.

"Polly! Are you badly hurt?" The words came from someone standing on the upper level of the fire escape just outside the door. And as her mind cleared, she saw that it was Melissa.

"I think not," she said, moving very slowly and using her good hand to right herself on the iron steps.

"Can you make it safely back up here?" Melissa asked in a troubled voice. "Just give me a moment," Polly gasped weakly.

"What happened?" the old woman wanted to know.

"The door was open, and I tried to close it. Someone shoved me out onto the fire escape." Polly slowly climbed to the upper level to join the matriarch.

Melissa was standing there dressed in her usual black and leaning on her cane. It was clear she hadn't gone to bed before the incident took place. How had she come to show herself so quickly if she hadn't been the one responsible for shoving Polly into danger?

Melissa must have read Polly's thoughts, for she stood there like a thin wraith in the moonlight and said, "I heard your screams from my room. I came at once."

"I was attacked in the darkness," Polly told her.

Melissa's thin features showed disbelief. "You surely don't mean that!"

"But I do," Polly insisted. "I came up the stairway, heading for my room, and saw the door was open. I decided to close it. When I got this far, I heard a movement behind me, and then I was shoved."

The old woman stared at her. "There was no one out here when I came."

"Then they must have hidden themselves or left very quickly."

Melissa led the way back into the dark corridor and, when Polly had joined her, slammed the door closed against the cold. She said, "I find your story preposterous."

"I'm sorry," Polly said. "All I've told you really happened."

"Are you sure you didn't merely lose your balance and topple down the fire escape?"

"Very sure," Polly said firmly.

At this moment Patrick Anderson, wearing a dressing gown, came down the dark corridor to join them. He held a flashlight which he shone on them.

"What's this all about?" he wanted to know.

His mother spoke up querulously. "Somebody left the fire escape door open. Polly attempted to close it and toppled down the steep iron steps." The old woman paused before continuing indignantly, "She claims she was pushed by someone."

"I was," Polly told them angrily.

The bald Patrick was scowling as he held the flashlight so he could see their faces under its strong beam. He let it linger on Polly a moment and then come to rest on his mother's thin face.

Melissa raised a fragile hand in protest. "Don't pester me with that thing!" she said.

Patrick, always the obedient son, lowered the flashlight and gave his attention to Polly. "Your story is fairly fanciful," he said. "Are you sure that's what happened?"

"Yes."

There was a brief silence; then he asked, "Were you hurt when you fell?"

"I'm bound to be bruised some," she said. "And my left wrist is badly sprained or broken. It's paining me a great deal."

Patrick said, "I'll take you downstairs, and we'll look at it."

Melissa spoke up. "Shouldn't we have the doctor?"

"There's only Dr. Farris in the village," Patrick told his mother. "And I happen to know he's away for a few days. If there's any suggestion of a broken wrist, I'll have to drive Polly into Burlington in the morning."

"Times have changed!" Melissa grumbled. "We always had two doctors in the village until Dr. Matthew died."

"This is no time to discuss the failure of the medical

profession," Patrick said with a hint of anger. "We'll want to make this young woman as comfortable as possible and then all try to get some sleep."

Another figure approached in the darkness. Patrick turned the flashlight on the newcomer, who turned out to be Josephine, with an old-fashioned brown dressing gown wrapped around her spare figure. She had what looked like a shower cap on her head.

Peering at them anxiously, she asked, "Is there anything I can do?"

"You're just in time, Josephine," Patrick Anderson said. "This young woman has had a fall and needs first aid. I'm taking her downstairs. Will you get me the first-aid kit?"

"Yes, right away," Josephine said rather breathlessly, and scurried off along the corridor and down the stairway.

"Let me give you my arm for support," the bald man suggested to Polly as he waited to take her down below.

"I'm much better now," she said. "And I think my wrist is getting less painful. I can manage by myself."

"Watch her, Patrick," Melissa warned as they started along the corridor.

They made their way down the main stairway, Melissa grumbling as she followed them. They were at the foot of the stairs when a swaying figure appeared in the doorway of the living room. It was Priscilla, back from her excursion to the village.

She stared at them and then, in a somewhat slurred voice, asked, "What's going on here?"

"Polly had an accident," Melissa said sharply. "And since there is nothing you can do to help, I suggest you go straight up to your room."

Priscilla stood there, the smell of liquor strong on her breath. "If that's the way you feel," she said with drunken

dignity, and unsteadily made her way past them and grasped the railing as she started up the stairs.

Patrick looked grim. "We'll go into the family room," he said. And they moved on, leaving Priscilla to get to her room as best she could.

The family room was directly connected to the living room by a double door which was kept closed much of the time. Patrick led Polly in and switched on some lights. She seated herself on the end of a divan, and Melissa came in and settled down in an easy chair almost directly opposite her. Patrick had gone off to get the first aid outfit from Josephine, so Polly found herself alone with the old woman.

Melissa's eyes were strangely bright as she peered at her. "I wish you wouldn't say anything more about someone pushing you off the fire escape," she said.

Polly regarded her with surprise. "But that's what happened!"

"Perhaps," the old woman said, gripping her cane fiercely. "But I'll ask you not to dwell on it now."

"Why?"

"I'm not able to answer that at the moment," the old woman said with a stern expression on her thin face. "And may I remind you that people are not in the habit of questioning me in my house?"

"Someone tried to injure me, perhaps kill me," Polly said, astonished. "You can't expect me not to mention it."

"I can and I do," Melissa said grimly. "You must trust to my judgment and depend on me to look into this."

"I'm not sure I can do that."

"You will if you wish to be a good wife to Jim," was Melissa's surprising statement. "I'm an old woman, and I've seen a good deal more than you. There are forces in this house you don't understand."

Polly stared at her. "You're not trying to say I was attacked by a ghost?"

The pale, wrinkled face of the woman who had reigned so long over the Anderson clan regarded her arrogantly. "Stranger things have been known to happen."

Ignoring the pain in her wrist, Polly jumped to her feet. "I'm sorry," she exclaimed bitterly, "I won't have you put this off so easily. I think it was someone living here now who attacked me; not the ghost of Caroline."

"You're very young and impetuous," Melissa said grimly.

"I won't have what happened blamed on the supernatural!"

The stern blue eyes of the matriarch met hers. "I'd be willing to swear that you'll have more respect for the supernatural before you leave Shadow Lake."

Polly wanted to shout out her conviction that Melissa herself was the one responsible for the attempt to kill her. But the look of madness in the old woman's eyes restrained her.

Patrick came back into the room, carrying the first aid kit, with Josephine following him. The eldest son of Melissa looked annoyed and weary from being aroused at such a late hour. He had Josephine open the first aid box and pass the various items to him as he needed them.

After he'd examined Polly's swollen wrist, he said, "There's a lot of swelling, but I don't think its broken. It looks like a bad sprain."

"I agree," Polly said, though she winced as he worked on it.

"We'll try iodine and a bandage for support," the bald man said. "And in the morning we'll decide about taking you into Burlington."

Polly said no more about the circumstances of her accident, not because she wished to cooperate with the

autocratic Melissa, but because she felt it was the best way to handle the situation. After Patrick had bandaged her wrist, she went upstairs to her room. Once again she fell asleep thinking of Jim and wishing he were at the old mansion to give her protection and guidance.

The following morning she received her first letter from him since his illness. His handwriting was shaky and gave evidence that he still was weak from the disease that had struck him so suddenly. But he was optimistic about his recovery and hinted that he should be back in the United States within a week or two. It was the best possible news. He asked her in his letter to tell his mother and the others.

She folded the letter and put it in the pocket of her dress, intending to show a part of it to Priscilla if the opportunity presented itself. She had done a good deal of thinking about her nearly fatal accident and had narrowed down the suspects to Melissa and Priscilla. Jim's mother had not shown herself until after they'd all gone downstairs, but that didn't mean she couldn't have been in the house. And Polly knew Priscilla hated her.

On the other hand, she believed the elderly Melissa to be mad and already a murderess.

Patrick Anderson in a neat business suit looked little like the tired man in the dressing gown of the night before. He received her news about Jim with polite restrained interest when they met in the hallway. And then he queried her about her wrist.

"How does the wrist feel this morning?" he wanted to know. "Do you think I should take you to Burlington?"

"No. It's sore, but not anything like last night," she said, holding it up for him to see.

The bald man examined the bandaged wrist with a frown. "I can't say that the swelling has gone down any."

"You couldn't expect that," Polly said. "Give it another day at least."

"It would only take a little while to have an X-ray in Burlington," Patrick Anderson observed. "Then we'd know. Since this unhappy accident occurred here, I feel responsible."

"You needn't," she said. "I know the wrist will improve with rest."

He studied her with eyes that were as shrewd as his mother's. "Do you still think someone attacked you?"

"That is my impression at the moment," she said. "But I want to think it over."

"Please do," he agreed. "Under the stress, you may have imagined things."

"It's possible," she said quietly, but she sounded dubious.

The bald man looked uncomfortable. "We can talk about it later. I must get to the factory now." And with a stiff little nod, he left her.

Despite the pain and nuisance of her injured wrist, Polly made up her mind to go on with her work on the family records. So she went straight to the study, rather awkwardly pulled the drawer from the desk and retrieved the keys that were taped to the back of it. She then returned the drawer to its place and set about opening the vault.

It took her longer to assemble the material on the desk top. But she still felt it was fortunate she'd injured her left wrist rather than the right one.

In a short time she was absorbed copying down pertinent facts about the first Andersons who had lived in the old mansions. She was deep in her work when the study door creaked slowly open. The sound caught her attention, and she glanced up to see Elizabeth peering at her from the doorway.

In a conspiratorial tone, Patrick's invalid wife asked, "May I bother you for a moment?"

"Of course," Polly said, still remaining seated behind the desk.

The hollow-cheeked face of the nervous Elizabeth showed a timorous smile at this. She carefully closed the door behind her, then advanced slowly to the desk and stood gazing at Polly with a knowing look.

"I heard what happened to you last night," she confided.

"Oh?" Polly felt she should be cautious in what she said to the invalid. She had the feeling Elizabeth would carry tales freely and couldn't be depended upon.

The faded woman bent near her. "I wasn't surprised. I know someone wants to kill you. This is an evil house."

Polly frowned. "Why should anyone want to kill me?"

"You present a threat to them," Elizabeth said in her odd way.

"Who?"

The invalid smiled slyly. "I can't tell you that. But I've warned you about Melissa. She is a bad old woman. And when she came here as a girl, she tormented that poor mad sister of hers until the unhappy creature broke into tears."

"How do you know that?" Polly asked sharply.

"Someone told me," the woman said cunningly. "And you needn't ask me who. I can't say."

Polly didn't have any intention of questioning her. She suspected the invalid was making her story up. The best thing was to humor her and try to get her out of the room.

"I'm very busy here," Polly said.

The watery blue eyes showed a strange crafty gleam. "Did you find Connie's notes yet?"

Polly stared at the older woman. "No."

"And you won't!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Ever since her death they've all been searching for

those notes, and none of them have managed to find them. That's why old Melissa set you to work on the history. She thinks maybe you'll turn them up."

Polly frowned. "Melissa told me she'd read the notes and said I'd probably want to do them over. So she must have seen them."

Elizabeth shook her head and chuckled softly. "No. She was lying. None of them found what Connie had written. And isn't that a pity, when you think that's probably why she was murdered! Someone wanted those notes very badly."

Polly listened in amazement, remembering her own fruitless search for the material. She also recalled the odd reactions of the others to whom she had spoken about the missing notes. Could there be some truth in the invalid's words?

She said, "You're jumping to a lot of conclusions. We don't know that Connie was murdered."

"I say she was," Elizabeth said with unusual defiance.

"That doesn't make it true," Polly pointed out.

Elizabeth looked bleak. "You don't believe me. Nobody here wants to believe me. They all go about their evil ways and ignore me."

"You're allowing your imagination to rule you," Polly warned her.

"They put you in the Rose Room," Elizabeth said, "the room where Melissa kept that mad sister of hers. Don't you think they did it for a reason?"

An eerie sense of fear touched Polly. She said, "That happened long ago. Why should I mind being in the room now?"

Elizabeth looked wise. "If you don't know, I'd better not tell you. You'd only go to them and repeat what I'd said. You are on their side."

Polly got up from the chair. "I'm on no one's side."

Please remember that. But I don't like all this whispering behind backs. If you have anything you think important to tell me, you should say it and not go about hinting at dark secrets."

"I'm sorry," Elizabeth said. "I've kept you back from your work too long."

"I don't mind talking with you if there's anything important to discuss," Polly said.

Elizabeth gave her a look that contained both pity and disdain. She turned and silently made her way out, closing the door after herself.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Polly's thoughts were in such a turmoil that at last she decided to give up trying to work for an hour or so. She quickly returned the material to the vault and locked it up. This time she didn't bother to hide the key but stuffed it in her pocket with Jim's letter. Then she went out into the hall. It was a fine day, so she decided to get her coat and go for a stroll.

She went down to her room, and when she entered it she found Josephine there making the bed. Usually the housekeeper delegated a maid to do this work, so Polly was surprised to see the tall, spare woman changing the sheets.

She smiled at the housekeeper and said, "Isn't this extra work for you?"

The gaunt-faced woman looked up at her. "Yes. I have a maid sick today. And the work must be done."

"I might have looked after it myself if I'd known," Polly said, going to the closet and getting her coat.

"No need of that," Josephine assured her, "especially not when you have that bad wrist."

Polly slipped into her coat. "I almost forgot that you were there last night. I'm going out for a stroll. I have a nasty headache."

"And not much wonder." The thin woman halted in

her work to commiserate with her. "You could just as well have been killed last night."

"I prefer not to think about that," Polly said bleakly.

"And it was only yesterday that I pointed out the fire escape to you," the thin old woman recalled. "Little did I think what would happen so soon after."

"Nor did I."

"Of course I've never held with that fire escape," Josephine complained. "I've always said it's too dangerous, especially for somebody as old as Mrs. Anderson. Too easy for a body to lose her footing."

"I know," Polly said quietly. And then she asked, "Is there anything wrong with this room?"

The housekeeper looked at her blankly. "I'm not sure I understand."

Polly eyed her earnestly. "I mean this was Amelia's room when you first came here as her nurse."

"It was," Josephine said.

Polly swallowed hard. "What I'm trying to say is that I've had several strange experiences in here. Things have happened that I can't quite explain. I've heard footsteps and sighs. Has there ever been talk of this room being haunted?"

The wrinkled face of the housekeeper showed a frown. "They say the house is haunted, ma'am."

"I'm not talking about the house but about this room," Polly persisted.

"I can't tell you, ma'am," Josephine said, looking down at the unfinished bed. "Mrs. Anderson was talking to me this morning, and she claims that she saw the ghost of Caroline walking on the lawn last night. She watched from her window. Then Caroline disappeared. And a few minutes later she heard you screaming in the hallway. She thinks it was the ghost that opened the door and attacked you."

"A pretty fantastic story," Polly said with a grim expression.

"Caroline has been seen before," Josephine told her.

"But you've never heard of Amelia's ghost being seen in here?"

The wintry face of the old woman took on a gentler look. "No, ma'am. Miss Amelia was a gentle, lovable girl when she didn't have one of her spells. I can't picture her as a ghost."

"I see," Polly said, noting the effect her words had had on the old woman. "Did she and Melissa get along well?"

"Better than most sisters, especially considering that Miss Amelia was often not in her right mind."

"That would make it difficult," Polly agreed. Still searching for information, she asked, "What was supposed to be the cause of Amelia's madness? Was it something that ran in her family?"

Josephine nodded solemnly. "The poor dear was born to madness. And they do say that she had an aunt who was the same way. And there were others before that."

"Very sad," Polly commented. At the same time she made a note of the fact that madness was common in Melissa's family. She started for the door.

Josephine called after her, "Mrs. Johnson!"

"Yes?" She turned.

The housekeeper had a sheet in her hands, and there was an unhappy look on her plain face. "I'd rather you didn't repeat what we've talked about to Mrs. Anderson."

"I won't."

"She doesn't like Amelia mentioned," the housekeeper went on. "Sometimes she speaks of her, but she doesn't like others doing it."

"I understand," Polly said.

"Thank you," Josephine said gratefully, and resumed her work.

Polly went straight out to the gardens. The sun was shining, and even though it was now October, she still felt comfortable wearing her light raincoat. She strolled through the garden and suddenly turned the corner of a hedge to find Jim's mother sitting on one of the wooden benches.

The ash-blond woman looked up at her with a startled expression.

Priscilla said, "I wasn't expecting anyone out here."

"I had a headache. I felt the air would do me good," Polly said, standing there uncertainly.

"I have plenty of headaches and come out here regularly," Jim's mother said with irony. "I was properly put in my place last night."

"You were better off going to bed; there was nothing for you to do."

"My mother wouldn't have trusted me to take on any responsibility if I had been needed," Priscilla said in a bitter tone, and drew her gray tweed coat tightly around her as she gazed out at the lake.

Priscilla told her, "I had a letter from Jim this morning. May I read you part of it?"

Priscilla turned to her again. In a tight voice the older woman said, "Yes. Read whatever was meant for me to hear."

Very tactfully Polly read excerpts from the letter. When she finished, she smiled and said, "I guess that's all."

"Thank you," Priscilla said with cool politeness. She stared out at the lake again. "I hope we see him soon."

"I have an idea it may not be more than a week or two," Polly said.

"That would be very nice," Jim's mother said in a vague tone.

"It will depend on how well he is."

"Of course."

"He may have to spend some time in a military hospital here," Polly went on. "But even then, they often let them have a few days at home between periods of treatment if the patients aren't too ill."

Priscilla eyed her. "You appear remarkably well informed."

Polly blushed. "I have read about other cases."

"I don't think of my son as a case," Priscilla said in her acid way. "I haven't managed to achieve your cold objectiveness yet. But then we are very different, aren't we?" With a sour smile, the ash-blond woman got up and walked back toward the house, leaving Polly alone.

Polly put the letter back in her pocket and with a sigh resumed her stroll down to the jetty. By the time she reached it, she had noticed a small sailboat out on the lake. It was a neat little craft with sails striped dark blue and yellow. And whoever was navigating it was doing a remarkably good job.

She became quite excited watching the graceful progress of the sleek little craft as it cut through the water. There was a light breeze, and whoever was sailing the boat knew how to take full advantage of it and kept the sails billowing in a picturesque and useful fashion. The boat came a bit nearer the jetty, and she was surprised to discover it was Paul, Melissa's artist son, who was such a good sailor.

A few minutes later he brought the sailboat back to the jetty. He waved and smiled at her. When he'd tied the boat safely, he stepped up on the jetty to greet her.

"Do you like sailing?" he asked.

"The little I've done of it," she said.

"We must go out together," he suggested, "as soon as that wrist of yours is better."

"Thank you."

"The weather will be all right for short sails for a few weeks more," he told her. "Too bad about last night."

"It was," she agreed.

He looked grim. "I tried to talk Mother out of that fire escape. I told her it would spoil the appearance of the house. Not that I hit on a strong arguing point there; Shadow Lake is a very ugly building anyway. But I warned her the iron fire escape would rust and look bad. In addition, we didn't really need it. There are so few of us in the house."

"I wouldn't have had any trouble under normal circumstances," Polly said. "The door had been deliberately left open to trap me. Then someone pushed me, and I fell down."

"Someone pushed you?"

"Yes."

He whistled incredulously. "Maybe you just got dizzy and fell."

"I've thought about that. It won't do," she said.

The artist smiled cynically. "It has to have a sinister connotation, is that it?"

"I know what happened," she said quietly.

"I wasn't there, so I won't argue," Paul Anderson said.

"That's wise."

His eyes mocked her. "Remember I warned you there would be trouble when you started work on the family history?"

"So you did."

"And my prediction came true."

A tiny shiver ran through her. "I wonder what that indicates."

He smiled in his taunting fashion. "Not that I'm a prophet, I assure you. I just had a hunch those morbid old ledgers would lead you into trouble."

"I've not been able to find Connie's notes," she told him.

"Indeed?" His eyebrows rose. "Perhaps Mother has them."

"I think not. And Percy doesn't know anything about them, either."

Paul spread his shapely artist's hands. "Well, don't look at me. I know the least of any of them about what she was doing. By the way, when I first saw you from the boat, you were standing in the garden with Priscilla."

"Yes."

"I trust your dear mother-in-law was in one of her better moods?"

Polly smiled ruefully. "At least we didn't have a quarrel. That's something."

"It is," he agreed.

"I've had a letter from Jim," she went on to tell him. "He thinks he'll soon be home. So that backs up what we heard from the War Department."

The wizened face of the artist took on a knowing expression. "I guess you're pretty eager to have him here."

"Yes."

"It could make a lot of difference."

"Not enough to make me want to remain permanently," she said. "I'd prefer to live in Boston."

"And Jim?"

"I think it would be better for him," she said. She glanced at the house with a troubled expression. "I don't see that we can have any happiness with his mother so near."

"That's true," the artist said. "I can't imagine what's going to become of Priscilla."

Polly gave him a searching look. "Do you think there is more than alcoholism involved? I'd say she is terribly neurotic as well. Perhaps that is why she drinks."

"Jim's father knew how to handle her," Paul said. "They

were happy, and things were fine, until he died. Then she came up here. Of course Jim spent a good part of every year in school or college, so we didn't see too much of him. It was after she'd been here a year or two she began to drink so heavily."

"Have you ever discussed it with her?"

He shook his head. "There are some things a brother doesn't dare discuss with Priscilla. She has Mother's strong temper."

"Your mother should deal with her."

"I think she will eventually," Paul Anderson agreed. "But I often wonder if she isn't delaying too long."

They started walking back to the shore together, then continued on toward the house. The grim gray structure of Shadow Lake seemed forbidding even on this pleasant day.

As they walked toward the side door. Paul asked. "Are you still going on with the history?"

"Right after lunch."

"You're not easy to discourage."

She smiled thinly. "I need the task to keep my mind occupied. Waiting for Jim is making me terribly edgy."

"I suppose so," he agreed.

They were at the side door now, and he held it open for her. "I slept all through the commotion caused by your fall last night," he told her. "And so did Percy. But then our rooms are some distance away from the fire escape."

"I'm glad you weren't disturbed," she said, stepping into the shadows of the hall.

He followed her. "I thought you might find it odd that I wasn't there."

"Not really," she said.

They parted, Paul going upstairs to his studio and Polly walked into the reception hall to hang her coat on the rack

there. She felt it might be convenient to have it easily available if she decided to go for another walk later.

Polly made her way through the living room, heading for the study. Her headache was better, and she had decided she would make a stab at working on the history again. She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't notice Melissa sitting in one of the tall-backed antique chairs until the matriarch of Shadow Lake addressed her.

"I hear you've had a letter from my grandson," the old woman said in her husky voice.

Polly halted and wheeled around to see the thin old woman seated there watching her. Once again she was impressed by the suggestion of hidden strength in that spare, black-clad figure. The aristocratic face was solemn, and a thin hand rested on the black metal cane.

Polly said, "Yes. I read some of it to Priscilla. I think Jim will be back in this country soon."

"I'm glad you heard from him," Melissa said, her sharp eyes fixed on Polly. "Are you recovering from last night?"

"My wrist is not nearly so bad."

"Then you don't think it's broken?"

"No," she said. "Patrick offered to take me into Burlington for an X-ray, but I refused."

Melissa's thin, lined features looked less tense. "I'm pleased to know that," she said in her authoritative way. With a sigh, she added, "I trust you didn't think my behavior last night odd."

Polly was on the alert at once. She still saw Melissa as the chief suspect in her almost fatal accident. She said, "Just what do you mean?"

"I asked you not to come to any hasty conclusions about what happened."

"Yes."

The old woman eyed her earnestly. "Would you believe me if I told you I saw the ghost of Caroline last night?"

Polly had been waiting for something like this since her earlier talk with Josephine.

Cautiously she said, "I'm not a convert to a belief in the supernatural."

"I know that." Melissa agreed. "But I beg of you not to put this down as an old woman's fancy."

Polly was determined to play it carefully. If Melissa were mad and a murderess, she was planting this ghost story to protect herself. And she would be watching Polly closely to see if she accepted it.

Polly said politely, "I'm sure you thought you saw a ghost. But perhaps Priscilla or someone else was out there walking."

The old woman nervously moved her cane. "It was not Priscilla. I have seen the phantom before: a lovely creature enveloped in a kind of misty halo. Caroline was out there last night."

"I see," Polly said. "And you think that explains the open fire escape door and my accident."

"That is my interpretation of it," the old woman said, watching her carefully.

"The attack on me was vicious."

"Caroline was a woman of spirit when she was alive," Melissa said. "Perhaps she sees you as a usurper here."

Polly smiled grimly. "I think that might be a more common opinion among the living here at Shadow Lake."

The matriarch frowned. "We have all made you welcome. Why do you say such a thing?"

"I'm sure Priscilla resents me."

"Priscilla!" The old woman dismissed her daughter in a tone of disdain.

"And none of your sons seem to want me to continue working on the family history."

The white eyebrows lifted. "I don't see that it concerns any of them."

"They seem to have strong feelings about it."

"Then I shall speak to them," Melissa assured her. "What progress are you making?"

"It's slow work."

"I'm sure it must be. Connie was months at it before her death. But then, you have her notes to help you." This last was added in a too casual tone; Polly was certain the old woman was trying to discover if she'd had any luck in locating the controversial notes.

She said, "I've had no more success in finding them than any of the rest of you." It was her own tactic to let Melissa know the notes hadn't ever been discovered and that Polly was aware of it.

For just a passing second the matriarch showed confusion; then she quickly became the poised Melissa once again. Ignoring the fact she'd several times claimed to have read the notes, she said, "I'm sure they'll turn up if you make a thorough search."

"Perhaps," Polly said, "unless someone has stolen them."

"Why would they?"

Polly shrugged. "I suppose the best one to answer that would be Connie. And unfortunately, she's dead."

Melissa looked grim. Staring straight ahead of her, she said in a low voice, "Why should we have to endure all this tragedy?"

Polly was interested by this sudden change in the old woman's manner. She said, "Shadow Lake does not seem a lucky place to live."

"It began with Caroline," the old woman declared bitterly. "And a shadow has hung over every Anderson since. That night poor Richard was killed, I saw her ghost just as I saw it last night."

Polly listened in awe. "And you blame her ghost for his murder?" she asked.

Melissa nodded absently. "I have always said so."

"With phantom bullets from a phantom gun? And yet the wounds were real."

The old woman gave her an angry glance, quickly emerging from her rapt state. "You don't understand!"

"I'm afraid not," Polly confessed.

Melissa's eyes were glistening with anger. "You will one day," she said softly.

The venom in the old woman's quiet words was frightening. Polly quickly excused herself and went on to the study to resume her work. But when she opened the study door, she had a surprise. Percy Anderson was there, the secret door was open, and he was examining the front of the vault.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Polly stood staring at the stout man in astonishment. Apparently he became aware of her presence in the study, for he turned with a sheepish expression. The eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses regarded her uneasily.

"I suppose you wonder what I'm doing," the stout man said.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it?" she commented.

Percy Anderson cleared his throat. "Let me explain. I came by to speak to you. I wanted to offer my sympathies on your accident last night. When I entered the room, you had gone, and this secret panel had been left open."

"Not by me," she said dryly.

"This is the way I found it," Percy insisted. "Someone must have come in here after you left and opened it."

"Very strange," she said, going over to inspect the door of the exposed vault. She saw that it was still locked securely.

The stout man blinked at her nervously from behind his thick glasses. "Whoever it was, it did them no good."

"I can see that," she agreed. She was of the opinion that for some reason the stout man had been investigating the vault himself. But she played along with his pretense that this wasn't the case. Turning to him, she asked, "How many people at Shadow Lake know of the existence of the vault and the secret panel?"

He considered. "I suppose all of us know about it."

"I suspected that," she said grimly. "So it could have been anyone."

Percy studied her. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes," she said absently, occupied with conjectures about the vault.

"I won't stay here to bother you," he said apologetically.

"It's all right," she said.

He hesitated a moment longer. "Are you making any progress?"

"I've made a start at least. I've not gotten as far as Caroline yet. I'm looking forward to that and to the account of what really happened."

Percy nodded. "That era fascinated Connie when she was working on the history."

Polly gave him a searching glance. "What were her feelings about Caroline? Did she think there was any sound basis for the legend of her ghost?"

"Yes," the stout man said seriously. "I'm convinced that Connie believed in the phantom. In fact, we had some interesting discussions about it and the general subject of ghosts."

"Indeed?"

He looked embarrassed. "When you mention these things in the light of day, you feel it is so much nonsense. But after darkness comes, there is a change. And this old mansion is the sort of place you'd expect to house phantoms."

"I suppose-so."

"If you remain here long enough, you'll feel the influence of Caroline. You may even see her apparition."

"I'm wondering if I haven't experienced some manifestations of her presence already," she said.

Percy stared at her. For a moment she expected him to

question her about this. But he didn't. Instead, he retreated to the door in a rather guilty manner, excused himself and went out. She stood watching after him with a perplexed look on her pretty face. Then, with a sigh, she took the keys from her pocket and opened the vault. Everything inside was exactly as she'd left it. She knelt and lifted out the ledgers first. It was difficult working chiefly with one hand.

She took the ledgers to the desk and then went back for additional material, wanting to spare her injured wrist as much as she could and at the same time try to save some steps. There was a wooden box with a clasp and provision for a lock. She'd examined it earlier in the morning and found a number of deeds and other documents in it. If it had been locked at one time, it certainly was not any longer.

Deciding she might as well make a quick check of the deeds, she lifted the maple box and started back to the table with it. But she'd grasped it in an awkward way and had to bring her injured hand into play to try to prevent it from falling. Her wrist gave a throb of pain, and she let go of the box. It fell from her hands on the carpeted floor, where its top sprang open and its contents strewed out.

With an exclamation of annoyance, she bent down to gather up the yellowed documents of another age. When she'd gotten them all, she took them to the desk and set them out before her, after which she returned to get the box itself. It was then she learned for the first time that the maple box had a concealed secret drawer in its bottom. The jar of the fall had sprung the drawer so that it was partly open now.

Her heart pounded with excitement as she grasped the box and brought it over to the desk. Then she sat down and proceeded to pry the secret compartment all the way out. There was a thick envelope in it with Connie Ander-

son's name scrawled on it. She stared at the envelope, stunned by the lucky accident which had led to this discovery. Next she ripped the envelope open to find a number of pages with fine writing on them. A yellowed document or two were also included in the cache.

The heading on the first page of Connie's notes was November 18th, 1949. With a frown Polly scanned the pages until she came to one paragraph.

"Today I've discovered facts I would have much preferred never to know. On touching a hidden spring in this box, I came upon two documents dating back to 1920, when they were concealed in a hidden compartment."

Polly held her breath momentarily as she moved on to the next, longer paragraph. Connie had written: "For some time I have had dark suspicions about my mother-in-law. Her domination of all the family, including my husband, has been complete. And I have also been subject to her whims since I came here to live. It was at her insistence that I began compiling the family history. I doubt that she guessed what I would discover among these papers when she set me to the task."

It was the end of a page, and Polly turned to the next one feverishly to continue reading. "The events surrounding the murder of Richard Brown have always been cloaked in mystery. From the newspaper accounts and entries in diaries of 1919 and 1920, I arrived at the conclusion he had been shot and killed by one of his brothers-in-law. He had earned their anger by his cruel treatment of their sister, as his philandering was the subject of gossip in the entire county.

"Neither of the two brothers-in-law had a satisfactory explanation of where they had been at the time of the shooting. There were no witnesses to back up their alibis. So either one of them could have hidden by the stables at Shadow Lake and emerged from the darkness as Richard

Brown left the house. It would have taken only a moment to fire the fatal shots. And because of the isolation of our family mansion, escape would have been easy. The lake even provided a perfect place to dispose of the murder weapon.

"I heard the story of Melissa's brief romance with this married man shortly after I married Percy. But not from Percy, of course. He and his brother carefully avoided any mention of their mother's past. And so did Priscilla, who I think grows more like her mother every day, though she has a drinking problem that I fear could become worse. It was from a woman friend in the village that I heard of Melissa's involvement with the murdered man, and how it had seemed for a time she might be charged with the crime. But James, her husband, stood by her loyally, and as he was popular with the important people of the area, eventually the case was closed. It was not likely they would have had enough evidence for a conviction in any event.

"The friend who gave me the background of the story also told me that Melissa had talked wildly to the authorities when they'd questioned her about the murder of Richard Brown. She spoke of seeing the apparition of the murderess, Caroline, who had killed a man and vanished in the period of the War of 1812. This ancient ghost was said to be occasionally seen abroad at Shadow Lake. And on the night of the murder, Melissa claimed she had seen Caroline in the stable yard where Brown was shot. She blamed the murder on the ghost.

"There was private talk among some of those associated with the investigation of the crime that James Anderson was married to a madwoman. This was based on the weird stories she'd told them, and also on the fact that she had a younger sister who suffered violent spells of madness. Indeed, this girl was having such a spell at the time of the

murder, according to the testimony of the girl's nurse, Josephine, who is now our housekeeper here and a fine woman. And Melissa was with the girl and her nurse at that tragic moment.

"I can't help wondering if Josephine may have told a false story to protect her mistress. For certainly she is very devoted to her and indeed, faithful to all the family. My husband, Percy, is almost as fond of her as he is of his mother. And I believe this to be true of most of the others. In any case, I accepted the version of the crime that had been told me, but always with some reservations. And lately I have been watching Melissa for signs of madness.

"When one looks for such things, it is often only too easy to read dark clues in harmless behavior. But my conviction that Melissa is insane and evil has continued to grow. I'm sure she has a skillful way of covering up her condition, but I now actually fear her. The documents I have included here prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that she is both mad and a murderess. She was shielded by her late husband. And now she reigns over the household, free to continue her evil acts. I haven't decided exactly what I shall do with this terrifying discovery; I'll first approach my husband and ask his advice."

The account ended there. With trembling hands Polly laid it aside and examined the two yellow documents accompanying it. The first one was written in a firm masculine hand but signed by E. Lamb, whose handwriting was awkward and obviously that of an uneducated man.

She read the short statement: "On the night of the murder of Richard Brown, I was in my room above the stables. I heard a door close in the main house and went over to the window and looked out. It was a dark night, but I saw the figure of a man leaving the house and coming towards the stables, where a horse and carriage

were waiting. While I was watching, the rear door of the house opened again and the mistress came out. I recognized it was Melissa Anderson because of her bearing and the silver shawl she wore. While I watched, she raised something in her hand. The next minute shots were fired, and Brown fell down. The mistress ran off in the darkness toward the lake. I knew a terrible thing had happened, but I wanted to protect her, so I remained in my room and pretended to be asleep. I told the police that I had slept all through the killing and they believed me. But I knew I should tell her husband. So I have. This is my sworn statement."

The signature of the stableman and the 1920 date followed. Polly then examined the other sheet of notepaper. The writing was in the same excellent hand as the body of the statement, so she knew it had been written by Melissa's husband, James Anderson, the man after whom her own Jim had been named.

It was the last paragraph of the letter that interested Polly most. James Anderson had written: "After a thorough questioning of my stableman, Edward Lamb, I have come to the unhappy conclusion that his account of the murder is true. I had long suspected that Richard Brown's frequent calls to our home were not made because of me. Also I found out that he had come to Shadow Lake on several occasions when I was away on business. I reprimanded Melissa for her lack of discretion in the matter. And she promised not to see him if he came again.

"She proved that she could not be trusted in this instance. And I have learned from her that she and Richard Brown quarreled on the night of his murder, though she will not tell me what the quarrel was about. She has been unable to give a satisfactory account of her whereabouts at the time of the murder. I discount Josephine's testimony that they were in the room of the unfortunate Amelia.

Moreover, the unhappy mad girl drowned herself soon afterward. Not that she would have been able to supply any dependable answers.

"Melissa was wearing a silver shawl that night. It was a favorite of hers, and she wore it frequently. I have no doubt that Lamb recognized her. I'm paying him a suitable sum to keep the dreadful business to himself and am arranging for him to migrate to Australia. He has shown an interest in taking up farming there. I shall have to carry this guilty secret with me to the grave. My family is too important for me to expose them to this scandal. And I still love Melissa, though she has failed me utterly. I trust by the time this account is read, we shall all of us be enjoying the peace of a better world."

The account ended at that point. Still holding James Anderson's faded letter in her hand, Polly sat back in her chair.

Connie had discovered the terrible truth about Melissa, and Connie had died mysteriously soon afterward. Polly was frightened at the realization of what this could mean. Had she told the weak Percy? And had her husband let her mother or the others know the dark secret?

It was hard to say what had happened. But Polly began to be more convinced than ever that Connie had not been a suicide; that she'd been murdered so as to make it appear suicide. And who would be more capable of that than Melissa?

All of the persons in the old mansion had been concerned about Connie's missing notes. No doubt they had searched hard for them. But they hadn't found the secret compartment in the wooden box. And so Melissa had ordered Polly to undertake the task, knowing that if the hidden documents were found, she wouldn't pose any threat to the family. She could be disposed of as easily as any of the others who had stood in Melissa's way.

What should she do? That was the question that haunted Polly now. To whom would she reveal her discovery first? Whom could she trust? Jim was still far away. None of Melissa's children would turn against her. Not even Josephine would desert her mistress. Polly was alone in the isolated old mansion with her frightening discovery.

Quickly she folded the two ancient letters and the pages of written material by Connie and replaced them in the envelope. Only as she was closing the envelope did she see scrawled on the back of it in Connie's handwriting the words: "There is a chance that P—" The sentence ended abruptly. There was a second letter after the P, but Polly couldn't make it out. The scrawl was faint and had been written in haste. She frowned and put the material away, closing the compartment. It was again completely concealed. The design of the box was extremely clever.

Polly was much too disturbed to continue working any longer. She filled the main area of the box with the musty papers that had been in it and took it back to the walk-in vault. Then she returned the ledgers and the other material and locked them up safely.

She emerged from the study with the feeling she was escaping from a prison cell. She no longer had any taste for compiling the story of the Anderson family. She had found out more than she could digest. She quickly made her way to the stairs and up to her bedroom.

The corridors were as dark and silent as before. She went into the Rose Room and threw herself on the bed. She'd been stretched out there for no more than five minutes when she heard that peculiar sound of wood scraping on wood which had terrified her in the night when she'd first arrived at Shadow Lake.

She sat up suddenly. The sun had vanished, and the late afternoon was gray with the threat of storm.

But it was still daylight, and she was hearing the same ghostly sounds that had tormented her midnight hours.

She got to her feet and moved to the middle of the room. Again she heard the sound of scraping wood. And this time it was followed by a low menacing chuckle. She opened her eyes wide in bewilderment as she stood there, terrified and beleaguered!

Where had the sound come from? What did it mean? Was there truly an evil phantom at large in the old house? Sick with tension, she let her gaze wander about the room.

And then she moved toward the closet. Nervously she hurled open the door and stood staring into its dark depths with fear in her lovely eyes. There was nothing out of the ordinary there. Everything was exactly as it should be.

She turned away from the open door of the closet and walked slowly toward her bed. And then the soft, malevolent chuckle came again, this time from the closet. She whirled around to find Elizabeth standing there.

Polly gasped, and moved forward to ask Patrick's wife, "How did you get in here?"

"Easy," Elizabeth said with a cunning gleam in her watery eyes. "See for yourself."

Polly frowned and took a step closer to the doorway of the closet. Now she saw that there was a low, narrow door in the rear wall. And the door was open.

"Where does that go?" she asked Elizabeth.

"The next room. It opens into the other closet."

"Has it always been there?"

"Yes."

Polly stared at the older woman. "That scraping sound and the chuckling—that was you, too!"

"Yes," Elizabeth said, standing at her side and obviously enjoying herself.

"But how?"

The faded woman smiled. "There are slots in the wall, high above the bed on either side of this room. The strip of woodwork conceals them from this room. But you can open the slots from the other room and see clearly what is going on in here."

"Why?" Polly asked, aghast at the thought that her privacy had been so invaded.

"It goes back to the time when Melissa kept her insane sister in here," the older woman said. "They had slots installed so they could watch her without making her upset. And there was the emergency door through the closet so they could reach her if she locked the hall door and was having one of her mad spells."

Polly listened, open-mouthed. "And Melissa deliberately put me in here?"

The woman nodded. "I tried to warn you about this room."

"But I never dreamed of anything like this."

"I thought it would be more interesting to give you a demonstration than to try to explain."

Polly sat down on the edge of her bed. "Several nights I heard those slots opening. And then there were footsteps in the room. But when I turned on the lights, there was no one here."

Elizabeth's hollow-cheeked face looked wise. "Whoever it was could use the closet door to get away."

"I know that now," Polly said bleakly. "For a while I was starting to believe in ghosts."

"You'd be wise still to believe in them," Elizabeth warned her. "Or didn't you learn that last night?"

"I'm more afraid of the living in this house than I am of ghosts."

Elizabeth's watery blue eyes met hers. "Be afraid of Melissa. She's the evil one."

Polly gave the older woman a searching look. "You're

always saying that. And yet you never offer any explanation."

"She was cruel to her poor mad sister," Elizabeth said softly.

"You can't know that yourself. Someone told you. It could be a lie."

The faded woman shook her head. "It's true. I can tell. You can sense the fear and sorrow in this room. I could feel it the first time I came through the door. I could almost hear the tormented screams of that demented soul!"

Polly felt a chilling sensation once again.

She said, "I'll speak to Melissa and insist that she give me another room." She got to her feet.

Elizabeth looked skeptical. "I doubt if she will. She put you in here for her own reasons. And she always has the final say here."

"Then I'll leave!"

"What about Jim?"

"He wouldn't want me to remain here at the mercy of a murderess." It had slipped from her lips, and at once she was sorry. She'd not meant to say anything of the sort.

Elizabeth was quick to pick her up on it. "So now you have come around to my way of thinking," she said with nervous eagerness. "You know Melissa for what she is!"

Polly was determined to patch up her mistake. She had somehow to persuade the other woman she'd not been referring to the matriarch of Shadow Lake.

"You're making a mistake!" she protested.

But Elizabeth was enjoying the situation. "You shouldn't deny it," she told Polly. "You've found out the truth about her!"

"The truth about whom?" The question came from behind them in the stern, husky tones of Melissa. Both

women turned in consernation to face the grim old woman, who had seemingly discovered the secret closet door open and entered the Rose Room by it.

CHAPTER NINE

Polly knew it was a moment to think and act quickly. She had no idea how much of their conversation had been heard by Melissa. But she wanted to try to distract the old woman from what they'd been discussing. It wouldn't help any for the matriarch to know she was under grave suspicion by both of them. There would be a much better chance to settle things properly if she remained in the dark about some of their important discoveries.

So Polly quickly said, "I know the truth about Amelia: that this was the room she was kept in until her death."

Melissa's thin old face was grim. "Why should it make any difference to you where my sister stayed?"

"Because this room was especially prepared for her," Polly said, facing up to the rage of the matriarch. "There are hidden panels in the walls for spying purposes and this secret door in the closet through which you'd just made your entrance."

"These have no importance," Melissa objected. "They were constructed long ago for a purpose that no longer exists."

"But they remain here for anyone to use."

"And how many have used them?" Melissa demanded with disdain. She now turned her fury on Elizabeth. "I assume you were the one who revealed the existence of the panels and the door to my grandson's wife?"

Elizabeth looked as if she might faint. "I meant no harm," she protested. "I saw no wrong in giving her the information. We all know about Amelia having been kept in here."

Melissa's eyes were bright with rage. "Patrick shall hear what you've been up to. Your husband is the one to reprimand you for this."

"No!" Elizabeth protested, fear showing on her long thin face.

"I wish to speak with Polly alone," Melissa said coldly. "You may go."

Elizabeth hesitated, then cast her eyes down. "Very well," she said, and quickly left the bedroom by the hall door.

When Elizabeth was gone and the door closed after her, Melissa gave all her attention to Polly. The room was thick with shadows as the afternoon came to a gray end.

Melissa said, "I'm surprised that you bother listening to Elizabeth. I believed you to be far too smart for that. From the moment I first met you, I've put you down as an intelligent girl."

"I was upset to hear of the special devices in this room," Polly said.

The old woman's lip curled. "And Elizabeth had to offer you the information in the worst possible way. I've been singularly unfortunate in all my daughters-in-law. My sons seem to have a habit of marrying weak women! I'm glad that Paul has remained a bachelor!"

Polly said quietly, "I don't think you should blame Elizabeth. She meant no harm. She was merely trying to do me a kindness."

"Her kindness seems to have upset you a great deal!"

"I would like my room changed," Polly admitted. "I don't think I'd rest well here now."

The old woman in black nodded grimly. "I'll have

Josephine move you. But you will have to go to the third floor. There is no suitable room down here other than this one."

"I don't mind that," Polly said quietly.

"I felt this room would be larger and more comfortable for you," the matriarch went on. "But you are free to do what you like."

Polly wasn't fooled by her talk. She was positive Melissa had assigned her the room so the old lady could spy on her. And she worried what would happen if the ancient murderess discovered Polly had proof of her guilt? The possibilities frightened her.

She said, "I don't want to be a bother. As soon as Jim returns, I'll probably be going back to Boston."

Melissa's thin face showed a frown. "Are you threatening to leave Shadow Lake, to deprive me of the companionship of my grandson?"

"Not exactly," Polly said. "But I don't think it would be practical for Jim and me to continue living here, not with his mother in the same house. You must know how she feels about me."

The old woman snapped, "You needn't worry about her. I can manage Priscilla when the time comes." She moved a few steps toward the hall door and then halted to tell Polly, "You can get your things ready as soon as you like. I'll send Josephine up at once."

"Thank you," Polly said.

Melissa studied her with those shrewd old eyes. "Didn't you give up work in the study early this afternoon?"

"Yes. I felt tired."

"Oh?" Melissa didn't sound convinced. "How far along have you gotten?"

"I'm copying material from the eighteen-fifties now," Polly told her.

The old woman was watching her closely. "And you haven't come upon Connie's notes yet?"

"No." She hoped the nervousness she felt didn't show in her voice. She had no choice but to lie.

"I don't understand that," the old woman grumbled. "After all the time she spent gathering that material, it has to be there somewhere."

"Perhaps she destroyed it before her death."

Melissa looked suspicious. "Why should she do a thing like that?"

"She might have been depressed," Polly suggested.

"She was very proud of the work she'd done," Melissa said. "I can't imagine her not wanting to see it preserved. Perhaps you may still come upon the manuscript. If you do, let me know at once."

"I will," Polly promised.

And she went over and opened the hall door for the austere old woman. Melissa gave her a nod and went out. Polly closed the door and began to gather her clothes together for the move. Some things were simply thrown in her bags, and she laid out her dresses so they could be carried over her arm. About ten minutes later, Josephine arrived with one of the maids to show her to the room on the third floor.

It was in the opposite corridor from Paul Anderson's studio and not nearly so large a room. Josephine, who seemed none too happy about the change, let her know it was the only bedroom being occupied on that floor. This gave Polly a moment of panic, but she refused to remain in the Rose Room. She knew that Paul remained in his studio until late at night and so would offer some company.

Her room had two small windows set deep in the walls, and the furniture was of maple and not so impressive as that of the Rose Room. There was a hooked rug on the

floor and one small closet. The room's single lamp was on the dresser. So she asked Josephine to provide her with another lamp for her bedside table. The housekeeper promised she would bring one up to her later.

Elizabeth did not appear at the dinner table that evening. And Patrick Anderson was in such an unsmiling, curt mood that Polly wondered if the two had quarreled.

Priscilla was at the table and obviously nervous, as she always was during her sober intervals. Melissa observed her daughter's jittery state with a grim face that showed no hint of compassion. But it was the stout Percy who somehow got involved in an argument with his sister. It started with Percy remarking that a fine chest of drawers in the dining room had been singled out and purchased at an auction by his late wife, Connie. Priscilla at once denied this.

The ash-blonde said, "I remember distinctly that the piece was sent here with several others by the estate furniture dealer in Boston who's been supplying us for years."

Percy's face flushed purple, and the eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses showed anger. "That simply isn't true. Mother must remember. Connie bought the chest on her own!"

Melissa looked annoyed. "What possible difference can it make?"

"It makes a difference to me," Percy spoke up angrily. "Connie was never given her just due when she was alive. And Priscilla never missed an opportunity to make her miserable!"

Priscilla snapped back vindictively, "If anyone in this house failed Connie, it was you!"

At this Percy Anderson jumped up and threw his napkin on the table. "I agree I failed her," he told his ash-blonde sister, "when I didn't protect her from all of

you!" And with that he left the table and strode out of the room.

There was a period of strained silence in the room following his exit. Then Paul's wizened face showed a smile as he said, "Percy is quite unpredictable. At the moment you least expect it, he shows some spirit."

Patrick Anderson glared at his artist brother. "Percy is a fool, as we all well know." To Priscilla, he added, "You shouldn't have argued with him. You know he's touchy on the subject of Connie."

Priscilla's once beautiful but ravaged face showed scorn. "I was only insisting on the truth."

Patrick gave her a knowing glance. "Truth is something we may not be able to afford in this house." And that ended the discussion.

Polly had been an embarrassed witness to this family scene. Patrick's last remark, which seemed to have a sobering effect on all of them, had interested her most. She had the feeling there was more behind his sharp words than seemed apparent. It was almost as if all the family were banded together in a conspiracy of guilt.

Not feeling like talking to any of them, after dinner she made her way up the two flights of shadowy stairs to her room on the third floor. As she reached the door to her room, she saw that it was open. Venturing to the doorway, she found Josephine inside. The housekeeper had apparently just completed plugging in the small bedside lamp. She was standing by it, her shadow thrown against the wall of the plain room in an enlarged, menacing manner.

Polly stepped into the room. "Thank you for the light," she said.

Josephine nodded. "The heat is not so strong on this floor. If you need extra bed covers, let me know."

"I will," Polly said. "I'm sorry to have been such a bother."

"It's all right," Josephine said with no expression on her gaunt face. But there was the suggestion in her tone that she considered Polly's move needless.

In an effort to show friendliness, Polly said, "You've been in this house a great many years, Josephine."

"Yes, ma'am," the old servant said stolidly.

"I keep thinking of that man who was murdered here—Richard Brown, I think his name was. That happened at the time you were taking care of Amelia. Did you ever see him? What sort of man was he?"

Josephine continued to show no particular expression. "He was a handsome man. He came here often to see the master and mistress."

"Did you like what you saw of him?"

The old woman hesitated. "I was only a servant here, ma'am. It was hardly my place to express opinions of guests. But he was always very pleasant with the help."

Polly nodded. "Your mistress was alone when Brown made that last call here the night he was shot in the stable yard. They say that he and she quarreled. Have you any idea what happened between them?"

The prim old woman smiled sourly. "I will say again I was only a servant. I didn't even know they had a quarrel."

"I'm sorry if I appear morbidly curious," Polly apologized, "but working on the history of the family has given me a great interest in the case."

"Yes, ma'am," the housekeeper said.

"No one seems able to offer an explanation of what went on here that night."

"Have you questioned the mistress directly?" Josephine wanted to know.

"As a matter of fact, I haven't," Polly said, blushing a little. "I suppose I should."

"If you want facts, she should know them," the house-

keeper said. And with a nod she bade Polly good night and left.

Polly had not hoped to get much from her. Josephine could be tight-mouthed about the family. Yet there was no question but that she knew a lot more than she was letting on. After moving about the room and checking on everything, Polly decided she might go over to the other corridor and speak to Paul in his studio. She had seen him start upstairs before she did.

The upper hall was narrow and much darker than the one on the second floor. When Polly reached the door of Paul's studio, she saw a slim line of light seeping out from under the door. She rapped gently and waited for word to enter from him.

It came in a moment. "Whoever you are, come in," Paul called out.

She opened the door and went into the studio, with its bright lights which were in such contrast to the dark hallway. She saw that he was at work on a canvas showing a series of colored circles, many of them bisecting one another. The circles were of every size.

Coming up to her with brush and palette still in hand, he smiled. "I've been expecting you."

"Really?"

"Knowing you'd been transferred to this third floor Siberia, I recognized that it was merely a matter of time until you became lonesome enough to seek my company."

She smiled. "The transfer was my own idea."

"So I understand. Elizabeth made the unpardonable error of informing you of the true facts about the Rose Room."

"I couldn't remain there."

He shrugged. "I don't think you'd be bothered by anyone using those contrivances to intrude on you."

"I'm sure somebody did," she said seriously. "I heard a

number of odd sounds while I was there. And several times I felt there were eyes staring at me; cold, hate-filled eyes."

The artist regarded her with interest. "What a vivid imagination you have! Too bad it isn't linked with an artistic talent."

She smiled thinly. "I'd rather leave that to others." She took a few steps toward his unfinished canvas. "What are you painting?"

"I call it confusion," he said. "I've a lot of work to do on it yet."

"It's colorful. I like it."

Paul went back to work on the canvas. His profile was to her as he skillfully completed a green circle. He said, "You may find the atmosphere up on this floor more frightening than that below. It's here that most people have claimed to see Caroline's ghost."

She thought he was deliberately tormenting her, and it made her a bit angry. She said, "I think it should be the ghost of Richard Brown who ought to haunt the place. Or does your mother refuse to allow that? I'm sure her authority extends to the beyond."

Paul glanced at her over his shoulder with a grim look. "I think it might be better to leave my mother's name out of our talk."

"Sorry," she said.

He kept the brush busy. "What made you bring up Richard Brown's name? Why should a murder that happened fifty years ago interest you; a murder that almost everyone has forgotten?"

She stood there thoughtfully. "Perhaps more people remember it than you think."

"Why are you so interested?"

"I've just read about it in the family records," she told him. This was close enough to the truth, she decided.

He paused to give her an interested look. "I'm surprised that Mother would allow any reference to the murder in the family papers. She still feels very badly about it."

Polly met his direct glance. "Melissa was very deeply involved."

"I think you'd be wise to forget that."

"Has she ever discussed the murder with any of you?"

He grimaced with distaste. "What could you expect? Do you think she gathered us all around her as little children and told us stories about Mummy being accused of a murder!" He was unduly sarcastic.

"I didn't know you were so touchy on the subject," she protested.

Paul Anderson spoke in an even tone. "I worship my mother. Anything that hurts her is important to me. I will not have her hurt."

"That wasn't my intention," she said.

The artist's prematurely aged face showed a cynical smile. "I'm not entirely sure about that."

"Put it down to my work on the history," she said. "That's why I'm asking so many stupid questions."

"I warned you that history would get you in trouble."

"So you did," she replied grimly. "I guess I'll go back to my own room and an early bed."

He gave her a mocking look. "Be careful of ghosts. And don't hesitate to call on me if you need help."

"You make the offer much too freely to give me any confidence in it," she told him as she left.

Reaching her own room, Polly snapped on the bedside light and turned the lamp off on the dresser. As she was retiring early, she decided to take a shower first. The bathroom was down at the end of the hall, quite a distance from her room. This was another disadvantage of the third floor, but she was willing to put up with all the drawbacks for the benefit of privacy.

She undressed, put on a robe and took a towel to the bathroom with her. It was a large old-fashioned room with a huge tub and ancient fixtures. She started the water and mixed it to the right temperature. Then she stepped under its strong spray.

The shower eased her nerves. And as she briskly tow-eled herself she thought of the unusual day she'd just gone through. No longer was there any doubt of Melissa's guilt. And the question as to whether Connie had accidentally taken an overdose of sleeping pills or been given them in some other way by a murderous hand seemed to be resolved.

Polly left the bathroom with her mind full of these thoughts. She paused at the doorway to turn off the bathroom light and then started down the dark hall to her own room. She'd gone only a couple of steps when she heard the stealthy sounds of someone coming up behind her. She felt an icy chill surge through her and, glancing over her shoulder, saw a ghastly sight that almost made her heart stop.

CHAPTER TEN

The thing that she saw was vague in outline. But the hooded head and flowing cape gave the ominous appearance of a specter. The ghost was almost upon her. Its hands were outstretched and holding something. She let out a cry of fear and turned to run the rest of the distance to her room.

But her flight was rudely interrupted. Something was looped around her neck, bringing her to a jolting halt. And before she could be really aware of what was happening, the thing tightened around her neck. With a choking scream of protest, she groped wildly at her throat, but to no avail. The pressure continued, shutting off her breath and bringing a ringing sound to her ears. She tried to cry out for help, but she was unable to utter more than a hoarse gasp.

She was on the wooden floor of the hallway, growing closer to unconsciousness each moment. She was aware of someone breathing heavily as he strived to complete the work of throttling her. Then she gave up the struggle to survive and limply surrendered to the phantom.

She felt hands at her throat; they were doing something that eased the terrifying pressure there. She was able to breathe again. She opened her eyes and stared up into the darkness.

"Polly!" It was the artist son of Melissa who was speaking her name so urgently.

She no longer could summon a quick reply. After what seemed an endless time, she said his name in a wistful, questioning fashion. "Paul?"

"Yes, it's Paul," he said worriedly. "Just relax. I'm going to carry you to your room."

It never occurred to her in her abject state to make any protest. The slim man lifted her up in his arms with surprising strength and took her down the hall and into her room. There he placed her gently on the bed.

In the dim light of her bedside lamp, she was able to study his lined, grim face. In a low voice, she asked, "Did you see it?"

He shook his head. "No. What happened?"

"A ghost. I'm sure of that. I couldn't make out any face. But she wore long flowing clothes."

Paul nodded. "It sounds like the phantom figure of Caroline."

"She had something in her hands."

"I know," he said. And he held up a shawl, a long narrow shawl that sparkled with silver threads woven in its white wool. "This was wound around your neck so tightly I had a hard time getting it off."

She stared at the shawl dully and then at him. "How did you know?"

"I heard you scream."

"I didn't think anyone could hear me," she said. "And afterward I wasn't able to manage any sort of call for help."

The artist looked sheepish. "I wasn't joking when I told you to shout for me if you needed me. After you left, I opened my door a little just in case. That's how I heard you."

She touched her throat. "I thought I was going to die."

"Not yet," he assured her. "I'm going to leave you for a moment. I want to get some help. You should have that throat bathed and something put on it." And before she could make any protest, he left her.

Alone in the room, she experienced fear again. Her panic made her find the strength to raise herself on an elbow and gaze about her with terror in her eyes. Then she fought her weakness and managed a sitting position. She was seated there, dazed and frightened, when Paul Anderson returned with Melissa and Josephine.

Josephine at once proved her worth. In a matter of a few minutes she was bathing Polly's injured throat in a warm soothing solution. Melissa sat by, silent and glaring, in a plain chair. Paul stood uneasily near his mother.

Polly was very conscious of the brooding presence of the grim matriarch, and while Josephine ministered to her she kept watching Melissa from the corner of her eyes with a growing feeling of cold terror. For she was sure the vicious old murderess had struck once again.

Josephine completed treating her throat and asked, "Does that feel better?"

"Yes," she said weakly. "Thank you so much."

The spare woman stood up with the washbasin and cloth in her hands. "I'll give it another treatment in the morning," she said. And to Paul the housekeeper suggested, "That girl ought to have something to give her a sound night's sleep."

The artist nodded. "I have some regular sleeping pills. I'll get her a couple."

Josephine went out of the bedroom. Polly felt a tiny panic rising afresh in her. She had counted on the housekeeper so. It worried her to see her leave and knew she wouldn't be back until the morning. The mention of sleeping pills had also alarmed her. She wasn't anxious to follow in the steps of Connie.

Paul came forward. "If you're feeling better, I'll go to my room downstairs and find those sleeping pills."

"I'd rather not take them," Polly said weakly.

He stared at her in surprise. "The pills aren't strong, but they will quiet your nerves and give you a decent night's rest."

"I don't know," she worried.

"Surely you trust me," the artist protested.

"All right," she said with a sigh.

He glanced at Melissa, who still sat there, very arrogant and silent, and then at Polly again. "I'll leave you here with Mother. It shouldn't take me long to find the pills. I'll come back as soon as I locate them."

She wanted to raise a hand in protest, but he left too quickly for her to make any kind of demonstration. And now she was alone in the room with the frightening Melissa.

It was Melissa who made the first move. The tall, thin old woman rose to her feet and walked over to Polly. Whipping the silver shawl from where it had been draped at the foot of the bed, she held it before Polly's eyes.

"Do you recognize this?" the old woman demanded.

"No. Why should I?"

The old woman held it in her hands in an oddly menacing fashion. "You have no idea where it came from?"

Polly wet her lips nervously and said, "That's the shawl the ghost had, the one used to throttle me."

"You've never seen this shawl until tonight?"

"No. Why should I have?"

Melissa glanced toward the door as if to make sure that her son Paul was not yet on his way back. Then she turned to Polly and in an urgent manner said, "This is the first time I've seen this shawl in nearly fifty years."

Polly stared at her. "I don't understand."

"You've been curious about the murder of Richard

Brown," Melissa told her quickly. "Well, the night of the murder I was wearing this shawl. In the excitement I didn't know what happened to it. I never could find it. And suddenly it appears here tonight!"

"It can't be the same shawl," Polly protested; "only one that looks like it."

"It's the identical shawl!" Melissa said angrily, and held up one end of it. "My initials are marked in ink here!"

Polly was stunned. "I don't understand."

"Nor do I," Melissa said grimly. "But it would appear that the ghost you encountered must have had some part in the murder plot against Richard Brown."

"You should know better than anyone else," Polly said quietly.

Melissa still held the shawl, her eyes cold. "Meaning what?"

"You were here at the time," Polly faltered.

Melissa was looking at her strangely. "Yes, I was here at the time," she said. "But I was a mere slip of a girl, younger than you are now. Oh, I was a wife and a mother, but still nothing more than a wide-eyed innocent. And Richard Brown came here with his smooth talk and his charming ways. I was no match for his wiles."

In a tense voice Polly said, "You quarreled that night he was murdered. What did you quarrel about?"

Melissa turned on her angrily. "Do you expect me to tell you that? What business is it of yours, anyway? It's all over and done with!"

"I wondered. You were trying to remember about the shawl. I thought going over the quarrel might bring back what you did with it." It was a weak excuse, but she hoped the matriarch would accept it.

"The shawl—" Melissa said in a dull voice, and gazed down at it. "I don't know," she said, moving away. "I just don't know."

At that moment the door from the hallway opened and Paul came back in. He was carrying a small bottle in his hand, and he smiled for her benefit. "I have the pills. I'll find a glass of water and get you to take a couple."

"I think I could manage without them," she worried.

"Ridiculous," he said. And he proceeded to pour her a glass of water from the pitcher of ice water on the old-fashioned washstand.

She took a few sips of water to get the pills down, all this while Melissa was standing silently in a corner of the room, her back to them.

Paul's wizened face showed a kindly interest in Polly's condition. He said, "Those pills should work shortly. The best thing now will be for us to go and let you drop quietly off to sleep."

"The phantom?" she worried. "Will it come back?"

He gazed at her solemnly. "I think not," he said. "Caroline's ghost never makes more than one appearance during a single night." He turned to Melissa. "Come along Mother. It's time to go."

Melissa slowly turned around and nodded agreement. She passed the foot of Polly's bed and hesitated to give her a troubled glance. Then, with the shawl still in her hands, she followed Paul out of the room.

Polly watched them go and saw the door close after them. A sinking feeling came over her. She was helpless, and so alone. She'd taken those sleeping pills, and in a short time would fall under their sedation. Gradually the pills began to work, and her eyes closed in sleep. . . .

It was morning when she awoke. The faithful Josephine was moving about the bedroom, opening the drapes at the window and ready to help her face the day. The gaunt-faced woman had brought up a breakfast tray. And after briefly bathing her throat again, she served Polly breakfast in bed.

"I could easily have gone downstairs," Polly protested.

The housekeeper said, "Mrs. Anderson's strict orders. You are to have breakfast in your room."

"I'm deeply grateful," Polly said with a sigh.

Josephine did some minor tidying of the room and then left her. She was part way through her breakfast when there was a light knock on her door. She looked up and said, "Yes?"

"May I come in a moment?" It was the voice of Patrick Anderson.

"Of course," she told him.

The door opened, and the bald eldest son of Melissa entered, a worried expression on his stern face. He was wearing a dark business suit and looked very much the sedate executive.

Taking a stand at the foot of her bed, he said, "My mother has told me about your unhappy experience of last night."

"Yes," she said.

"I'm most deeply disturbed by it," Patrick Anderson said nervously. "Did you get a clear picture of who attacked you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Unfortunate," he said. "It was a mistake your coming up here. You're too remote from the rest of us."

"I hadn't expected anything to happen," she said.

His eyes met hers. "I feel it is my responsibility to go into this thoroughly. I have talked to Paul, and he has been of little help. And unhappily, my mother seems in a very confused state this morning."

Patrick Anderson frowned. "She has been going on about a silver shawl and insisting that you were attacked by the ghost of Caroline."

Polly gave him a searching look, wondering if he was really so naïve; if he didn't guess that his mother was

mad and a murderess, trying to cover up her latest attempt at a crime by pretending about ghosts.

She said pointedly, "She said something like that when she was here last night."

The bald man cleared his throat and looked embarrassed. "You must realize she is an old woman. Take that into consideration. Also, this has been a very shattering experience for her."

"And for me," she said wryly.

"Of course!" Patrick Anderson said, looking uncomfortable. "We'll discount my mother's talk about ghosts and try to get to the bottom of this. It would appear you have an enemy in the house."

"Yes," she agreed in a quiet voice.

"Have you any idea who it might be?"

"Not really."

Melissa's eldest son sighed. "I know you had trouble with Priscilla, that she has been most unreasonable since you arrived. But I can hardly see her doing a thing like that."

"It's hard for me to say," Polly told him. She felt it would be better to allow him to eliminate the possible suspects until it became clear that the guilty person had to be his mother.

"She was in the house when the attack on you took place last night," he went on worriedly. "So for the moment I don't think we should count her out." He paused. "There is the matter of informing the police."

"I've thought about that," she admitted.

Patrick clasped his hands behind his back. "I've been trying to make up my mind as to what action to take. I'm doubtful if we can hope for much help from the police in this instance. We have so little to go on."

"I was nearly throttled."

"I realize that," he said hurriedly. "But the circum-

stances are so confused. And yet the guilty person very probably is a member of the family. And I shrink from exposing the Anderson name to fresh scandal."

"What do you suggest?"

"I'm going to ask you to leave it in my hands for at least a day or two. It is possible I may be able to discover who is responsible and see they are punished. If I'm not successful, then we can turn to the police. At least this way you'd be giving the family a fair chance to clean its own dirty linen."

She saw that he was very earnest about this and said, "Very well. I'll allow you to handle it as you think best."

"Thank you," the bald man said with sudden warmth. "I promise you the matter won't be neglected."

"I'm sure of that," she said. She didn't have that much confidence in him, but she wanted to make him think that she did.

Patrick still hesitated by the foot of her bed. "I'd feel much easier if you'd move back to the Rose Room."

"I hadn't thought about it."

"I don't want you to be alone up here," he said. "Perhaps you'll allow one of the maids or Josephine to stay in the room with you. I can have a cot put up here for that purpose."

"I wouldn't want you to go to that bother!" she protested.

"Then move down to the Rose Room again," he begged her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Not with that secret door in the closet and those slots in the walls."

"They can be easily fixed," he argued. "I'll have a lock put on the door on the closet side in your room. And I'll also have the slots nailed in position. Surely that will remove your objections?"

She was still hesitant. But she said, "I suppose so."

"I'll see it's looked after this morning," the bald man promised her. "And by this afternoon you can move back down there."

"On those conditions I will," she agreed.

He frowned. "There is one other thing. I'm concerned about your going on with the family history. I think the project should be abandoned until things are more stable in the house."

"I would prefer not to abandon it," she said. "At least it gives me something to occupy my mind while I'm waiting for Jim to get here."

"I see," he said. "Why not have a helper, then? I believe I could persuade my wife, Elizabeth, to assist you."

She found this a preposterous suggestion. The faded, fluttery wife of Patrick was the last person she'd ever turn to for help or comfort. She said, "She has her own affairs to look after. I wouldn't think of imposing."

"I'm sure she wouldn't regard it as that," he went on. "I'll speak to her about it if you like."

"No, not yet at least."

The bald man looked disappointed. "Don't forget the offer," he said. "When you came here as Jim's wife, it was the wish of all of us that you be happy here. I'm sorry 'that it has turned out otherwise."

"For the most part, you've been very kind," she said.

"I'd like to think so," he said. "Let everything rest with me. I'll try to discover some answers promptly." And with a brisk nod he left her.

Finishing her coffee, she put the breakfast tray aside and got out of bed. She had just thrown on a robe when Josephine arrived back. The spare old housekeeper already had heard about the proposed move down to the Rose Room. And as she picked up the tray to take it away, she halted by the door.

Josephine asked, "What time this afternoon would you like to move back downstairs?"

Polly smiled thinly. "Almost any time that suits you."

"The handy man will have the carpenter work finished by lunch hour," Josephine said. "I could have the maids move your things around two."

"That will be fine," Polly agreed.

Josephine was about to leave with the tray when a third figure appeared in the doorway. It was Melissa, looking strangely upset. The matriarch ignored the housekeeper and advanced across the bedroom to face Polly.

"What did you do with the shawl?" she demanded.

Taken by surprise, Polly stared at her. "What shawl?"

"The silver shawl you had here last night!"

Polly collected her thoughts. "You mean the one that was used in the attack on me. You took it with you when you left the room. You must remember." She appealed to Josephine, who was still standing there with the tray. "You must have seen her take the shawl."

The housekeeper nodded. "Yes. You had it in your hands when you went back to your own room, Mrs. Anderson."

The matriarch of the Anderson family looked from one to the other of them with a shocked expression on her thin, aristocratic face. In a hushed voice she said, "That proves it was Caroline's ghost who made the attack. The shawl is not in my room. It has vanished again, just as it did after that awful night when Richard Brown was murdered!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Polly felt a chill go through her as she heard the words of the old woman.

To try to calm her, she said, "Perhaps the shawl has been mislaid."

"No," Melissa said with that strange light in her eyes. "No. That is not possible."

"I'm sorry," Polly said. "I can't help you in this."

The old woman stared at her a moment in silence. Then she said, "Now you shouldn't doubt that it was a phantom attacked you last night!" And she turned and slowly left the room, leaning heavily on her cane.

Josephine followed her mistress out. Polly watched the two leave, in a worried state of mind.

She went directly to the study and opened the concealed vault. She was becoming familiar with the locks of the steel walk-in vault and lost no time going in and gathering up some of the ledgers and other materials. Her wrist was much less painful, and she was able to use it in an almost normal manner. When it came to taking out the box with the hidden compartment and the all-important documents and notes left by Connie, she hesitated. And she decided to leave it in the vault while she worked on some of the other materials.

She sat at the desk and opened the ledger she had last been making notes from, but found it difficult to concen-

trate. She kept thinking of the account Connie had written and the scrawled warning against someone with a name beginning with P. This morning Patrick Anderson had broadly hinted that he suspected Priscilla might have been the one who had attacked her.

Polly realized she could be making a mistake in not considering Jim's ash-blond mother as more of a suspect. She knew Priscilla hated her. Perhaps she'd disliked Connie as well. And like all the other Andersons, she would probably not hesitate to resort to violence in order to protect her mother and the family name. The more she thought about it, the more Priscilla seemed to fit the pattern of evil.

With a sigh, she tried to concentrate again. She'd copied down a half-dozen lines when the phone on the desk rang. She picked up the receiver; it was long distance calling. The West Coast this time. The operator in San Francisco asked her to wait a minute.

Then, miracle of miracles, Jim came on the line. "Is that you, Polly darling?"

"Jim!" she exclaimed happily, and her eyes blurred with tears of joy.

"I've just arrived at the hospital here," he said. "And I had to talk to you right away."

"How wonderful!" she said. "Since I had word about your illness, I've been waiting to hear from you again."

Jim said, "You don't know how I've been counting the hours until I set foot in the States!"

"How are you?" she asked anxiously. The first thrill of hearing him over, she was now concerned about his health.

"I'm much better," he said. "I'm going to need a lot of physicals and check-ups for months to come. But the doctors all agree I'll come out of it."

"Should I fly out there and meet you?" she asked, hoping he'd say yes.

"No use," he told her. "I hope to be here only twenty-four hours. Then I'll be coming East. I'll get a flight to Boston and then one to Burlington. Melissa can send the limousine to pick me up there."

"How will we know?"

"I'll call again," he promised. "One thing that's made me worry less about you is knowing you're at Shadow Lake."

With irony, she said, "I'm glad you feel that way about it."

He laughed at the other side of the continent. "They're a solemn, crazy bunch, aren't they? But they are my family, and I love them."

"Naturally," she said, striving to muster enthusiasm.

"Especially Grandmother Melissa," he enthused. "I'll bet you two are getting along great!"

"She's very interesting."

"And Uncle Paul! He's your type! You two probably have had a high old time talking about art."

"I have enjoyed him," she said, hoping she didn't sound stiff and forced.

Jim didn't seem to notice in his delight at being in his homeland. But a more wary note crept into his voice as he inquired, "And what about Mother? Has she been nice to you?"

"You know what she's like," Polly said cautiously.

Jim sounded worried for the first time. "She can be bad, especially when she's drinking. Don't let her bully you. Get Melissa to keep Mother in her place."

It was dangerous ground, and she was anxious to get him off it. She said, "You mustn't worry about such things. The main thing is to look after yourself and get well."

"I'm going to do that," he promised.

"Will you be taking your later treatments in Boston?"

"From what I've heard," he told her.

"Then we should try to find an apartment in Boston as soon as we can," she said, excited at the prospect of getting away from the grim threat of Shadow Lake.

"Let's not rush into anything," he said. "We might be able to live up there and commute to Boston when I need treatment."

She felt her heart sink. "No," she said. "That would be too hard on you."

He laughed again. "You're talking like a wife," he said tenderly. "We can work out all those details when I see you."

"Of course."

"I'll probably be phoning again tomorrow before this time," Jim said. "So keep an ear open for my call."

"I'll be ticking off the minutes," she said. And then, in a soft voice, "I love you, Jim."

"And I love you," he said in the same tone. "I'm glad this parting is almost at an end."

"Hurry home, Jim," she begged him, feeling a rising panic as she realized the phone call was close to an end.

"Count on that, darling," he said. And the conversation was over. She held the receiver in her hand, unwilling to admit that it had ended. And as she listened she heard the click of another receiver being placed in its cradle in some other part of the house. Someone had been eavesdropping on the call.

She sat there in the big swivel chair behind the desk and pondered on this. Had it been Melissa? Jim had sounded so fond of his grandmother that it tortured her to think how he'd accept the truth about her when it came out. Grandmother Melissa had always been his favorite person!

Polly was still mulling this over in her mind when the door of the study opened and Priscilla Johnson came striding in. Her ravaged face wore a look of anger. She halted before the desk, scowling at Polly.

"Was that Jim on the phone just now?"

Polly at once guessed who had been listening. "Yes," she said.

"I wonder you didn't lie about it!"

Polly smiled bitterly. "It wouldn't have been practical, since you listened in on the conversation."

"How do you know?"

"I heard the receiver click. And you've lost no time coming here."

"Well, what if I did listen?" Priscilla demanded angrily.

"I'm sorry you didn't hear more complimentary remarks about yourself."

"That was hardly to be expected with you doing everything in your power to turn Jim against me," Priscilla raged.

Polly was standing now. "That's not true," she said quietly.

"Wait until my son comes home," Priscilla said. "I warn you I'll tell him a thing or two about the way you've treated me!"

"I'm willing to take my chances on the truth," Polly said, not flinching.

The ash-blond showed a look of hatred on her drink-ravaged face, turned and went out of the room as quickly as she'd entered. It had been a strange, upsetting confrontation. And Polly couldn't help fearing what would happen when Jim returned home. There wasn't a doubt that Priscilla was going to raise trouble. And Melissa, on whom Jim was depending to keep peace in the family, was deep in a fog of near-madness.

Polly sat down at the desk again but was able to do

only a small amount of work. Then she took the materials into the vault. She stood inside for a moment, studying the wooden box which contained the indictment of Melissa. She was still debating with herself as to the best way to handle the dread secret she'd accidentally stumbled upon.

Locking the vault, she left the study and went upstairs. Early in the afternoon, she moved back to the Rose Room. A brief examination showed her that the promised lock had been installed on the door at the rear of the closet. And she assumed the sliding panels had also been nailed closed as Patrick Anderson had assured her they would be.

It was a pleasant afternoon with a light breeze, and she decided to take a walk outdoors, thinking it might clear her head and perhaps help her decide what she should do next. She put on her topcoat and a kerchief over her head, since it was bound to be a little cool.

Strolling in the garden, she studied the ugly lines of the old mansion and thought of all the strange experiences she'd had since arriving there. It would take time to tell Jim everything that had happened, make him understand the dark tragedy that was closing in on the family.

A footstep in the gravel walk made her turn, and she saw Paul, Melissa's artist son, walking toward her. He was wearing a cap, a suede windbreaker and a dark cravat and tweed trousers. He halted by her side with a smile.

"Well," he said, "so you're out to enjoy the day, too."

"I felt the air would do me good."

He nodded his approval. "A lot more good than that stuffy study. I'm glad to see you away from that stack of musty documents for a while."

She smiled wanly. "I'll eventually have to go back to them."

"We won't think about that," the artist said briskly. "Why don't you come for a little sail with me? There's a

good strong wind, and you won't hit on a more ideal day at this time of year."

She hesitated, looking out at the choppy waters of the lake. "I'm not an experienced sailor."

"You don't have to be," Paul assured her. "Leave the sailing to me. Just do as I tell you."

"You won't be out long?"

"I'll come in any time you give the word," he promised.

Polly still hesitated. But she didn't want to hurt the artist's feelings, so she reluctantly told him, "Very well. I'll go."

His wizened face showed pleasure. "Excellent," he said. "I want to prove I know how to handle a boat." And they started down to the jetty together. "You're back in the Rose Room?"

"Yes. Patrick didn't like my being up on the third floor after what happened."

"He's probably right," Paul said. "I've been giving that a lot of thought." He glanced at her. "Any theories as to who it was?"

"Perhaps," she said. "I'm giving it some thought."

His shrewd eyes were fixed on her. "You interest me," he said.

They were on the jetty now, and he helped her down into the boat. As she took her place in the tiny craft, she was surprised at the roughness of the water. Even here at the wharf, the small boat was moving restlessly. And when Paul let it swing free of the jetty, the motion was more pronounced.

He had the blue and yellow-striped sail raised and was steering the craft so the wind caught the sail. It buoyed out gracefully, and the slim boat cut through the choppy waves at a rapid speed. Occasionally it veered over on its side, so Polly found herself dizzily projected toward the waves.

She gasped out her shock at this and Paul smilingly reassured her. "Just hold on tight, and there'll be nothing to worry about," he told her.

They were quickly out in the middle of the lake. Staring back, she could see the jetty and the shore line with the grim old house in the background. As usual, Shadow Lake seemed deserted.

The wind changed slightly, and Paul was busy manipulating the swiftly moving craft. The sullen, choppy waves showed froth as the boat sailed on. Now he stood up and, without giving her any warning, swung the sail around to catch the wind at a different angle. As he did so, the solid boom changed position and came directly toward her with frightening speed.

Polly screamed and ducked down barely in time to avoid being hit by the boom and toppled into the water. The sailboat careened wildly for a moment before smoothing out before the wind.

Paul called to her apologetically, "Sorry; I should have warned you about that."

She was still crouched down in defense against any other unexpected development. "I'm all right," she told him. But she was badly scared, and her confidence in the artist had been shaken. She should have been warned. Paul had deliberately exposed her to danger and perhaps death. A cold hand of fear closed around her heart. Had he carefully planned this? Was he also conspiring against her?

She looked back toward the shore and was presented with an unusual sight. The tall, black-clad figure of a woman was standing midway along the jetty, waving to them, gesturing for them to return. It was either Josephine or Melissa. At the distance Polly couldn't be sure.

Glancing at Paul Anderson, she said, "Someone on the jetty wants us to come in."

He looked and then nodded. "So it seems," he said grimly.

She felt he was disappointed and wondered if this was merely because he was being forced to cut short his boating or whether it was due to his chagrin at not having any further opportunities to endanger her. Not wanting to chance any more accidents, she kept crouched low in the tiny craft until they returned to the jetty.

It was the housekeeper, Josephine, who had waved to them and was waiting for them. She addressed herself to Polly as soon as the artist had helped her up onto the jetty.

"There's a phone call for you," Josephine told her. "Long distance. I have the number for you to call back as soon as you can."

Polly was excited. "Is it from the West Coast? From my husband?"

"I think so," Josephine said. "I have the number and all the details written down."

Polly turned to the artist, who was still standing in the boat. "Thank you," she said. "I'll have to hurry up to the house."

"Of course," Paul said in a dry voice.

Polly didn't give much thought to him during the next few minutes. At the house she found the number and put the call through to Jim. It was quite a little time before she heard his familiar voice on the line again.

"Polly?" Jim said excitedly. "Where were you? I couldn't get you before."

"Out on the lake with Paul," she said. "What is the news?"

"I leave here tomorrow," he told her. "Have the limousine meet me at Burlington about seven tomorrow night."

"I'll be there in it," she promised happily.

"And I'll be looking for you," he said. "I didn't know

until an hour ago whether they'd let me fly East or not."

"How long before you need to be in the hospital again?" she asked.

"Probably three or four days," he said. "I'm to report in Boston."

Hope rose high in her. "Wonderful!" she said. "I'll go with you and take a room at a hotel while you're there."

"That should be okay," he agreed. "It will probably only be an overnight stay. Until tomorrow night, then. And don't forget I love you very much!"

"Am I likely to?" she asked. And then the conversation was over again. But this time the news had been really cheering. She would be seeing Jim tomorrow, and in a few days they would be escaping together from the grim old mansion. And once they got away, she was sure she could persuade him not to return until some of the dark mystery surrounding the house and its occupants had been cleared up.

She had made the phone call in the hallway to save time. Now she saw Melissa coming down the stairway, looking pale and weary, leaning on her cane as she made a slow descent. She paused a few steps from the level of the hallway to ask, "Was that more news from Jim? Josephine said a long distance call came for you."

Polly looked up at the slender figure on the stairs. "Yes," she said. "Jim will arrive at Burlington around seven tomorrow night. He asked that the limousine be sent for him."

Melissa nodded. "Of course. Does his mother know?"

"I think not," Polly said. "I wish you'd tell her. I'd rather not discuss it with her."

The old woman's eyebrows rose, and she came down the remaining stairs. "Have you two had another quarrel?"

"I'm afraid so," Polly said.

Melissa frowned. "Why didn't you tell me at once?"

Her tone was bitter. "Would that have done any good?"

"I think it might have," the matriarch said sharply. "I still have something to say about the conduct of my sons and daughter in my own house."

"It doesn't matter," Polly said with a shrug. "I want to cause as little trouble as possible, now Jim's coming home."

"I understand that. How long will he be staying?"

Polly wasn't anxious to go into that. She said, "I'm not sure. It won't be too long. He's supposed to return to Boston for treatment."

"I see," Melissa said with a deep sigh. Her shrewd old eyes were boring into Polly as she announced, "You can't wait to get away from here, can you?"

Polly tried to be casual. "Why do you say that?"

"It's written all over you," Melissa said contemptuously. "I may be old, but I'm not simple. What makes you think you can so easily deceive me?"

Polly gave her a meaningful look. "Very well," she said evenly. "Let's face the truth. Don't you think both Jim and I would be better off away from here?"

"What makes you think I'll agree?"

"I don't," Polly said ruefully. "But you would if you really were being honest."

"Shadow Lake is our ancestral home," Melissa said with all of her old arrogance. "One day it will belong to Jim. It is my wish that he should live here and take his proper place conducting the family business. You, as his wife, should support him in that; not try to run away from responsibility."

Polly said, "I'm running away from something quite different from responsibility. You must know that."

Melissa was staring at her oddly. Then the matriarch of

the Andersons said, "I think we need to have some straight talk between us. Let us go into the study where we can speak more freely."

Polly hesitated, then decided it might be best. This way she'd learn what the old woman's attitude might be. She said, "Very well."

Melissa led the way down the shadowy hall and into the study. When they were inside the quiet atmosphere of the book-lined room, the old woman closed the door to insure them privacy. An October late-afternoon sun came through the window, casting golden rays across the carpet, the books and the slender figure of the ancient Melissa.

"Let us sit down," she said in her husky voice. And she settled herself in a large leather armchair. Polly seated herself across from her in a plain chair and waited nervously for the old woman to begin. Melissa stared at her and moved her cane uneasily. Then she asked, "Why have you come to hate me?"

It was an unexpected question. Polly said, "What makes you think I do?"

The old woman grimaced with distaste. "I'm not a fool! I can tell! In the last two weeks your attitude toward me has changed completely. Why?"

Polly considered. How much dared she reveal? Jim would be back by this time tomorrow. Was it fair to make him face all this? Or could she perhaps straighten some of it out on her own?

She said, "Why did you insist on my working on the family history?"

Melissa shrugged. "Only to give you some useful occupation."

"I think not," Polly said evenly. "You were gambling on more than that. For reasons of your own, you've been wanting to find Connie's notes on the family papers for

some time. They never turned up. And you thought that I might discover them."

Melissa's old face held a strange expression. "Well," she asked, "did you find them?"

"Yes," Polly said. "And in them she accused you of having murdered Richard Brown."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Melissa Anderson did not blink an eye at this statement. The old woman sat perfectly motionless, a resigned expression on her thin face. Polly waited for some sort of reaction, feeling sure there would be one.

At last Melissa broke the silence by saying, "That comes as no surprise. Connie told me the same thing before she killed herself."

"If she killed herself," Polly said with meaning.

The matriarch smiled bitterly. "I hope you're not going to accuse me of a second murder."

"I'd like to hear what you have to say about it all," Polly said, striving to be calm.

The smile vanished from the thin, lined face. "Connie claimed she had discovered documents from a stable man and my late husband to substantiate her case. Did you find them as well?"

"Yes."

"I see," the old woman said bleakly. "They were with Connie's papers, I suppose?"

"They were all together in a secret place. They still are."

Melissa sighed and tightened her grip on her cane. Staring hard at Polly, she said, "I can only tell you what I told that poor misguided woman twenty years ago."

"And what was that?"

"My husband was the victim of an evil blackmail scheme," Melissa said. "If only he had come to me, I would have proved that to him. But he preferred to take the word of Edward Bond, a dishonest employee. And he hid the truth from me."

"If he thought you guilty—and he did—he was merely trying to protect you."

"It was the worst kind of stupidity," the patrician old woman said, rapping the cane on the floor with impatience. "And the tragedy is that James died believing me to be a murderess."

"Why should Edward Bond tell such an awful lie?"

"He saw a chance to get money from my husband," Melissa said. "And with the blackmail money he obtained, he went off to Australia. I'm sure it could never have done him any good."

Polly was weighing the old woman's explanations, but still felt certain that she was guilty.

Polly said, "I'm sure your husband was intelligent enough to have been aware of the motive of blackmail behind Bond's story. And I doubt if he would have accepted the story as proof if he hadn't been reasonably convinced."

The old woman frowned. "Circumstances were against me, put me in a suspicious light."

"That seems only too true."

Melissa was slipping into a mood of reverie now. "My husband had always been jealous of Richard Brown. And so he was easily convinced that I was infatuated with the man."

"Weren't you?"

"I liked him. I saw him alone a few times. But I was never unfaithful to my husband."

"Yet you put yourself under suspicion," Polly accused her.

The matriarch's lips twisted nervously. "I was never a discreet person. I have lived my life as I wanted to. I have never hidden my feelings. I tried to be a friend to Richard Brown. And he abused my friendship."

"Oh?" This was something new, and Polly was all attention.

Melissa's eyes were scornful. "I thought he had been coming to Shadow Lake only to see me. And that turned out not to be true."

Polly said, "What do you mean?"

The old woman's expression was bleak. "A few days ago you questioned me as to whether I had a quarrel the night of the murder of Richard Brown. The answer is yes."

"I think I asked you what you quarreled about."

"And I refused to tell you," Melissa said in a bitter tone. "Well, I'll tell you now. Perhaps it will help you to understand that things have not been easy for me."

The two women sat there facing each other in the grim silence of the study. Finally Melissa said, "I learned that Richard was having a love affair with someone else in the house. I heard it from one of the maids. She refused to divulge the name of the person, but assured me solemnly it was so; that nights, after all the household were in bed, Richard would come here to keep trysts with this hussy. His horse and carriage had been seen."

"And you believed this to be true?"

"There was a ring of truth in what the girl said," Melissa went on, lost in the past. "And so on that unhappy night fifty years ago, I told Richard what I had learned. And I berated him for being so crass in his behavior. I asked him never to return to the house again, to stop using me as a cover for his backstairs romance. So we did quarrel. That part is true!"

"Did he admit his guilt?"

The old woman's lip curled. "Richard Brown was not one ever to admit a wrong. But I knew that I had caught him. He said nothing when I called him down. A few minutes later he left without an explanation or excuse. I never saw him alive after that."

"That was the night he was shot?"

"Only minutes afterward," Melissa said. "I had gone to Amelia's room to relieve Pinney. She had a headache."

Polly frowned. "Who was with your sister?"

"Josephine," the old woman explained. "When she first came here as a nurse to Amelia, she was just a girl. And following Amelia's example, we called her Pinney. She went to her own room, and I stayed with Amelia until she slept."

"I see," Polly said. "What about the silver shawl?"

Melissa looked troubled. "I had been wearing it that night. I remember having it on, and then it vanished. I looked for it after I left Amelia's room, thinking I might have left it there. But Josephine told me she'd seen no sign of it." There was a dramatic pause in the old woman's account as she gave Polly a significant look. "And I never saw it over the years until the other night when the phantom tried to strangle you with it."

"You can't expect me to believe that," Polly said. "It seems a lot more likely that you kept the shawl hidden and brought it out to take your vengeance on me."

The matriarch looked utterly astonished. "You are accusing me of attacking you?"

"It seems likely. You'd probably guessed I'd found Connie's notes, and that, instead of turning them over to you, I was going to use them against you."

Melissa shook her head mournfully. "I wouldn't be capable of such evil. You're all wrong. The murders were the work of the phantom Caroline! It was Caroline, wearing my shawl, who shot Richard Brown, and Caroline

who made Connie take her own life! Her ghost has been the evil influence here at Shadow Lake. So it was she again who attacked you. And the fact the shawl vanished proves it was the work of a ghost!"

Polly was on her feet. "I last saw the shawl in your possession."

"No!" the old woman protested. "No, you are wrong!" And she lifted herself from the chair, bearing heavily on the cane. "You are caught in the spell of Caroline! Her phantom has befogged your mind! That is why you have made such wild accusations against me! I am innocent!"

There was a look of mixed hatred and despair on the old woman's face as she ended her tirade. Then she made her way to the door with head and shoulders high, still her old arrogant self. Polly watched her vanish with a feeling of dismay. She had gambled by being truthful with the matriarch, hoping to obtain something in return. But Melissa had given her no satisfaction at all.

There could be no doubt that Jim's grandmother was dangerously insane. She had offered no alibis of any kind to dispute the evidence against her. And when pinned down, she had wildly tried to shift the blame for the various crimes on a legendary ghost. It wouldn't do! Melissa had been a murderess for a half-century. And some of her children knew her guilty secret. They had joined to make sure the truth about their mother was never known.

That was why Connie had had to die. But Percy's wife had been too clever for them. She had hidden the evidence well, knowing she was in danger. And while she had not saved her life, at least she had preserved those important documents attesting to Melissa's guilt.

Polly knew it was only through a quirk that she had come upon the material. Melissa, in her insane need to find the documents, had urged her to screen the family records, thinking she might locate the missing material

and innocently turn it over to the matriarch. It hadn't worked out that way!

If she could only manage until tomorrow evening, she would have Jim at her side. Jim would give her the support she needed in this crisis. The question that now troubled her most was how many of the others in the grim old mansion knew Melissa's guilty secret? How many of them were in on the conspiracy of silence?

With a sigh she left the study and went up the stairway to the Rose Room. She took her time changing for dinner that evening. Before she left the room, Patrick Anderson came to see her again. The eldest son of Melissa looked worn and troubled as he entered the room.

He said, "I'm glad to see you've made the move."

"Yes," Polly said. "I appreciate that you arranged it."

The bald man said, "My mother tells me Jim is arriving home tomorrow evening."

"He called this afternoon and told me."

Patrick nodded. "That will be good. I'm sure you'll feel much more comfortable here."

"I doubt that," she said. "I'm going to get Jim to take me to Boston as soon as possible."

The bald man looked surprised. "Do you find us that unpleasant?"

"I'm sure his mother will make things very difficult for us as long as we remain here," she said. "And then there is your mother."

"My mother?" Patrick echoed her.

She looked at him with sad eyes. "I'm no longer able to be sure of anything here, able to count on anyone. But I've found out some very bad things about Melissa. And I believe her to be insane."

"But that's impossible!" Patrick protested. "I can't have you speaking of my mother in that way. She is remarkably alert for her age!"

"I don't question her alertness," Polly said. "But I do think her mind is twisted, has been for years."

The bald man looked stunned. "How can you be so wrong?"

"I also think some of you are aware of this and determined to cover up the truth," she said. "I don't know whether you are in the group or not. And perhaps it's not all that important. Before I leave, I'll give you documents proving that your mother murdered Richard Brown. And I'll let you decide what you wish to do about it."

Patrick studied her with baffled eyes. "I don't believe such documents exist!"

"Connie left them. And you shall have them. At the very least, Melissa should be placed in some institution where she can do no further harm."

"You know how she feels about such places!" Patrick blurted out, and then looked sorry that he had made the slip. Lamely he added, "In any case, that's beside the point. There's nothing wrong with her mind."

She sighed. "I don't want to argue about it. But before I go, I'll give you the envelope and the statements that Connie left."

The bald man made some more feeble protests that his mother was not mentally ill and then left her. For the first time Polly felt she might have made some headway. There was no doubt in her mind that Patrick knew the truth about his mother. And she was placing the problem in his hands. None of them would dare try to harm her with Jim due back tomorrow evening. That would mean having to answer to him. So she was at last in a position of control.

A few minutes later she went down to dinner, and it was a grim affair. Melissa presided at the table, as usual, and was cheery and full of wit to such a point that it was almost abnormal. Polly could see the brightness of insanity glittering in the matriarch's eyes. Both Patrick and Paul

were strangely subdued, while Priscilla was so well insulated with drink that she paid little attention to the others at the table. Percy was the most normal-acting of the group, and he kept gazing at Polly.

Once the stout man addressed her directly, asking, "Are you going to Burlington in the car that will pick up Jim?"

"I want to," she said.

"Would you mind if I came along?" the stout man wondered.

"If you like," she said, though she considered it thoughtless of him to intrude.

From the end of the table Melissa said brightly, "I think that would be very nice if you can spare the time, Percy. The trip would obviously be much too tiring for Priscilla. She can be waiting to welcome Jim here."

The ash-blondé looked up from her plate with glazed eyes. "Jim doesn't need me any more." This brought no comment from the others.

As soon as the meal ended, Polly left the room. She was starting up the stairway when Paul came into the side hall and called to her. She hesitated and gazed down at the concerned face of the artist.

"You're leaving us so soon?" he asked.

"Yes. Priscilla isn't in her best mood. I'd rather make myself scarce."

"Don't let her scare you away," Paul said. "I'd enjoy having a talk with you. I'm sorry about that accident on the boat today."

"It didn't matter," she said. "I'm going to my room to read for a while. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Just as you say," the artist told her.

She went on up the stairs and into the Rose Room. The book she began reading held her interest for a while. But by ten o'clock she was restless and still not sleepy. Occasionally she'd heard voices and footsteps in the corridor

outside her door. But now the old house was mantled in quiet.

And she found herself nagged by a warning voice, an inner voice that told her she'd made a mistake in mentioning the documents concerning Melissa's guilt to the old woman and Patrick. Either of them might have duplicate keys to the vault. And while they probably would not be able to locate the damaging evidence, there would be nothing to stop them from removing all of the family records and destroying them.

If that box with its secret compartment should be placed in the wood-burning furnace, there would be nothing to prove Melissa's guilt. And that proof had suddenly become terribly important to her. In the space of a few minutes she came to a decision. She would go down to the study, get the documents and hide them in her own room. There would be plenty of possible hiding places, and she needn't worry any more about them.

With this in mind, she left the room and made her way along the dark corridor and down the shadowy stairway. There was a dim light in the lower hallway.

As she started down to the study, she was relieved to meet the spare Josephine in the corridor. She stopped and told the elderly housekeeper, "I'm going to be working in the study for a short time."

The gaunt-faced housekeeper said, "Let me bring you some hot coffee or perhaps a cup of cocoa?"

Polly smiled her thanks. "There's no need."

"I'd be glad to," the thin woman in black said.

It struck her that it might be smart to have Josephine around. It would frighten off any of the Andersons. So Polly said, "Very well. Bring me some cocoa."

"I'll not be long," Josephine promised.

And she wasn't. Polly had no more than opened the vault and removed the box from it when the housekeeper

returned with a cup of hot cocoa. The elderly woman placed it on the desk by her.

"Better drink it right away," Josephine urged. "Cocoa cools off so quickly."

Polly nodded. "I will." And she began to sip the pleasant drink.

Josephine hesitated. "Will there be anything else?"

"No. And thank you."

"Then good night, ma'am," the thin woman said.

"Good night, Josephine," Polly said, continuing to drink the cocoa. It was warm and sweet. She finished it before she set about opening the secret compartment of the wooden box. In a moment she had Connie's notes and the two incriminating statements in her hand.

She placed them on the table and was closing the box when the first wave of dizziness struck her. The room swirled around, and she nearly passed out. Touching a hand to her temple, she felt the perspiration there and was stunned.

The shadowy study became normal again. The blur lifted from her eyes, and she felt better. She blamed the spell on the strain she'd been under. Quickly closing the box, she started to get out of the swivel chair. And weakness engulfed her once more!

This time it was worse than before. She couldn't get out of the chair. Falling back, she let the box drop and stared at the swirling room with dazed eyes. And then a fearful suspicion swept through her. The drink! The cocoa Josephine had been so anxious to get her must have had something in it!

She'd barely reached this terrifying conclusion when she saw the door of the study slowly opening. She clasped the arms of the swivel chair with perspiring hands and tried to keep her mind clear. As she stared at the door, she saw a ghostly figure enter the study.

A female figure was wearing a shroud-like gray cloak. The face of the creature was lost in the shadows of a hood, and in her hands was the missing silver shawl. Polly tried to scream out but couldn't.

She watched in frozen horror as the wraith closed the door after her and then slowly advanced over to the chair where she sat drugged and helpless. Only then did the apparition fling back the hood to reveal the triumphant, smiling face of Josephine!

Polly managed a hoarse whisper. "You!"

"Yes, me!" the veteran housekeeper said, with mad glee in her eyes and a twisted smile on her lined face.

In Polly's fogged mind came a confused remembrance of the scrawl on the envelope left by Connie, something warning of P. And this afternoon Melissa had said that when Josephine was young they had all called her Pinney!

Josephine's thin, time-ravaged hands lifted up the silver shawl and deftly slipped it around Polly's neck. "I was the one Richard Brown was courting," the mad old crone exulted. "And it was I stole this shawl from Melissa to wear when I shot him. Bond saw me and thought it was Melissa. And I let them go on thinking that all these years. Then Connie found the statements and began to suspect me. She questioned me, and I knew I had to kill her!"

"Drugged like me," Polly whispered from nearly paralyzed lips.

"She got a deadly dose," Josephine told her as she tightened the pressure of the silver shawl around her neck. "I just gave you enough to make you weak for a little. And I'm finishing you with the shawl. When they find you here with it around your neck, they'll blame it on Melissa. You've already helped me in that by spreading the rumor she's mad."

The shawl was now cutting off Polly's breath. She made

a feeble attempt to reach up and claw it away. But she couldn't raise her hands more than a few inches.

Josephine was whispering in her ear, "Richard Brown was ready to throw me over and go back to her. He didn't tell her my name, but he promised he wouldn't see me again. And she was ready to take him back, so I had to kill him. I couldn't let him humiliate me like that!"

Polly was choking and barely conscious. But it seemed to her the study door had been thrown open, and she saw a blurred figure that might be the bald Patrick Anderson. A hoarse male voice cried out, and then something came crashing down on her head. . . .

Polly opened her eyes. The room was strange to her. It was much smaller than the Rose Room, and its walls were an antiseptic pale green. Wonder of wonders, a nurse in a white cap and gown was standing beside her bed. And next to the nurse was a grave-looking man in a white smock with a stethoscope around his neck; a man whom she'd never seen before.

The man came close to her and said. "Now you're behaving better."

"Where am I?" Her voice sounded like a far-away echo.

"In the Burlington Memorial Hospital," he said. "I'm Dr. Benson, and you're a patient I was worried I might be going to lose."

"Why?" She was still too weak to think clearly.

"You were drugged, throttled and at the last minute hit on the head with a heavy silver candlestick by a crazy old woman," Dr. Benson said. "I call that more than enough to put any healthy young woman in the hospital."

She suddenly remembered, and terror flared up in her eyes. "Josephine!"

The doctor nodded. "I believe that was her name. She's being looked after. Utterly mad, from what I hear. It was

lucky Patrick Anderson arrived in time to rescue you."

"So it was Patrick," she said weakly.

"Yes. Then you were rushed here."

"How long ago?"

"Last night. Very late. You ruined my beauty sleep."

She frowned. "My husband! Jim! He's due here tonight!"

The doctor and nurse exchanged smiles. "Your husband is already here. He's been in to see you several times. He's in the waiting room now with his grandmother. A remarkable old woman, if I may say so! She practically turned the hospital upside down to make sure you had the best room, the most competent nurses and my own medical care."

Polly managed a weak smile. "I can well imagine." And then she added, "I'd like to see Jim."

The doctor said, "You can, but for just a few minutes. Then we're going to give you something to make you sleep again. What you need most now is rest."

The doctor left her in charge of the nurse. She closed her eyes.

When she opened them again, the nurse was gone and Jim was standing smiling down at Polly. It was a thin, haggard Jim, in a military uniform that sagged slightly on his emaciated frame; but a Jim alive and by her side.

She reached up her hands to him. "Jim, you look so ill!" Her eyes filled with tears.

He bent down to her with a wry smile. "You're not exactly at your best yourself."

"You'll get well soon, won't you?" she asked him anxiously.

"We'll both be well soon," he told her in a gentle voice, and touched his lips to hers. The bad dream of waiting had come to an end, and now the future would be theirs together.

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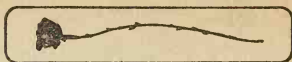
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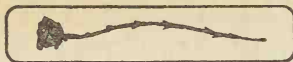
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