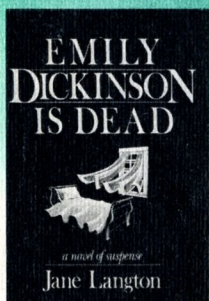
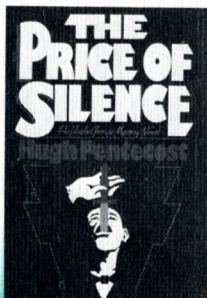


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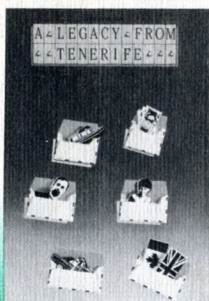
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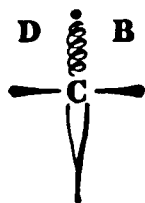
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**THE PRICE OF SILENCE**

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*HUGH PENTECOST*

**EMILY DICKINSON IS DEAD**

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*JANE LANGTON*

**A LEGACY FROM TENERIFE**

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*Published for the*  
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*by Walter J. Black, Inc.*

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*Part* \_\_\_\_\_

***ONE***

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**I** Timmy, George Crowder's setter dog, announced the approach of a visitor. Timmy had two distinct signals for his master. If a stranger was coming up the logging road to the cabin in the woods from the main highway, Timmy's bark was hostile, even threatening. If it was a friend, the bark was a joyful greeting. Uncle George didn't have to be told that whoever was coming was being welcomed by Timmy.

George Crowder was known as Uncle George to most of the people in the small New England village of Lakeview due to the hero-worshiping of his twelve-year-old nephew, Joey Trimble. "My Uncle George is the best man with a shot gun or a rifle anywhere . . . . My Uncle George is the best fly fisherman you ever saw . . . . My Uncle George is the best man at training a hunting dog in the whole country . . . . My Uncle George was once the best lawyer, maybe in the whole world!"

George Crowder had once been the prosecuting attorney for the county, headed, people thought, for the governor's mansion, possibly the United States Senate. Fifteen years or more ago he had prosecuted a man for murder and gotten a conviction that led to the man's execution. Later evidence was unearthed that proved the dead man had been completely innocent of the crime for which he had paid. George Crowder resigned from his post as prosecutor and disappeared from the town of Lakeview. For ten years no one knew where he had gone, not even his sister, Esther, married to Hector Trimble, the local druggist. It was

suggested that Crowder was drinking himself to death somewhere. But one day he reappeared, older, grayer, but very much alive and in one piece. He built himself a cabin in the woods and lived there alone with his dog, Timmy, and was the constant companion of his nephew, Joey, who had found himself a real, live hero. He became very quickly what most small towns call "a character." Most of the claims Joey made for his beloved Uncle George were only slight exaggerations. The tall, gray man was expert at almost anything he chose to turn his hand to. "He can read the woods better than most kids can handle the first-grade reader," Red Egan, the local sheriff said of him. Red Egan and Uncle George had grown up together and their mutual respect for each other had been solidified by years of testing.

Uncle George expected to see his young nephew appear at the door that early summer morning. Timmy's barking was for a cherished friend. But it was Red Egan who knocked on the door and let himself in when Uncle George called out "Come in!"

"Hey, Red!" Uncle George said. "Pretty early in the day for you, isn't it?" The sun was only just beginning to shine brightly in the east. "Coffee? I just made a fresh pot."

"There's hell to pay in town, George," Red Egan said.

Uncle George tried an old joke on his friend. "Who put the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder?" he asked.

Red didn't smile. "Lions Club had a picnic at the Grove last night," he said. The Grove was a wooded area at the edge of the lake after which the town was named. Only property owners and their guests were allowed to enjoy the lake, the boats, the recreation pavilion, the bathhouses, and the decks and floats. It was, in effect, a community club. You elected yourself to membership by paying taxes in the town.



"Who got drunk and did what to whom?" Uncle George asked.

"Boy Scouts are hired to clean up after a party like the Lions'," Red said. "Kids went out there before sunup this morning to get things neat before folks started to use the Grove today. One of the kids went into the equipment shed for something and found this guy."

"What guy?"

"Don't know," Red said. "That's part of the problem. Shot right in the middle of his face. His own mother wouldn't know him. No identification on him. That's only the beginning."

"Sounds more like the end," Uncle George said.

"There are some big iron hooks screwed into the ceiling beams for hanging things," Red said. "Tools, boating equipment, stuff like that. Somebody unscrewed one of those hooks and used it to rip this character open down the front—from his throat to his crotch. His intestines, stomach, his insides ripped out of him and scattered around. Bloody, butchering mess!"

"Gun?" Uncle George asked, his face suddenly looking carved out of rock.

"No gun, no nothing," Red said.

"I won't offer you breakfast if that's what you've been looking at," Uncle George said.

"State Police there, of course," Red said. "Captain Purdy asked me to come and get you."

"To do what?"

"You might be able to read something in the Grove that the rest of us wouldn't see."

"You're as good as I am at that sort of thing," Uncle George said.

"I tell myself that until I don't see anything," Red said. "You're needed, George."

"I've told myself I'd never get involved in a murder again," Uncle George said.

"But you have, once or twice," Red said.

"Hell! I suppose I can't say no."

The Grove is a beautiful spot at the south end of Lakeview Lake. Property on either shore of the two-mile-long lake sells for a king's ransom, but the Grove, one of the most perfect acreages, belongs to the people of the town. Over the years it has been improved and equipped by the wealthy people who have settled in Lakeview. In the beginning there were just a few stone fireplaces for outdoor picnic cooking, then came bathhouses where people could change into their swimming togs, then the pavilion, roofed over, with a hardwood dance floor for night parties, then an open air fast-food kitchen and counter. The property owners had eventually brought in power boats and sailboats, and constructed a sandy beach at the water's edge. Just a few yards in from the beach was a parking lot surrounded by a thick woods, dotted with ancient maples and oaks and pines.

When Uncle George, driving his Jeep, followed Red Egan's car into the parking lot, he saw how unusual the moment was. There were four or five State Police cars. He recognized the old Cadillac owned by Dr. Bill Walters, longtime family physician and also the town's coroner. Outside the equipment shed was a group of anxious-looking young boys, one of whom had discovered the brutal murder and butchering of a stranger. Captain Jim Purdy emerged from the equipment shed as Uncle George approached it from his parked Jeep.

"Thanks for coming, George," Purdy said. He was a big, square man with the deadpan look of a police officer on duty. He glanced down at a sturdy little red-and-white

springer spaniel, which had suddenly appeared on the doorstep. "Okay, scram, buster—for the last time!"

"Friend of yours?" Uncle George asked.

"After a picnic there's always a small army of dogs looking for food scraps. That one seems determined on getting into the shed. I guess he smells raw meat."

"Red told me," Uncle George said.

"Damnedest thing you ever saw," Purdy said. "Gutted the way you'd clean out a deer after you shot it in the woods. Organs shoveled out of him by someone in a hurry."

"Still no identification?"

"Nothing. We've taken fingerprints—checking them out. But you better start at the beginning, George."

Purdy turned back toward the door and the spaniel darted after him. Purdy kicked at it. "How many times do I have to tell you—" The dog scurried off, snarling.

"Not characteristic of the breed," Uncle George said. "Maybe you've just got a big foot, Purdy."

"Damned mutt's been trying to get in there ever since we arrived."

"Know who he belongs to?"

"I have trouble enough keeping track of people without keeping a file on dogs," Purdy said.

Early morning sunlight was streaming through the windows of the equipment shed, paradoxically cheerful in the grim scene it lighted. The body was still there, but covered by a canvas tarpaulin. Dr. Bill Walters, an old friend of Uncle George's, was standing to one side talking with a State Trooper with sergeant's stripes who was a stranger.

"Sergeant Conroy, George Crowder," Purdy said, making the introduction. "Sergeant Conroy is from the state headquarters, George. Homicide expert."

Conroy gave Uncle George a "let me see your license"

look. "Thanks for offering to help, Mr. Crowder, but I'm not sure—"

"That you want help?" Uncle George smiled at him. "I'd be happy to back off."

"I want help," Captain Purdy said. He gestured toward the tarpaulin. "Take a look at him, George, just in case—"

"You got a weak stomach, you better brace yourself, Mr. Crowder," Conroy said. He bent down and pulled away the canvas cover.

Uncle George, who had seen considerable violence during his days as county prosecutor, found himself gagging on a quick intake of breath. He had never seen anything to match the horror that was revealed. His first impression was that what he saw was a mass of butchered meat, all that was left of what, a few hours ago, had been a living, breathing human being. He swore softly under his breath. Then, as the instant shock came under control, he saw that this had once been a tall man with a well-barbered head of dark hair. There was no face; it had been blown away. What Uncle George guessed had been expensive clothes had been ripped off, left torn and blood-soaked, by the brutal act of disemboweling the dead man. Lying on the floor just beside the body was a large, sharp-pointed iron hook, bloodstained, with strands of human flesh sticking to it. There were expensive, highly polished cowboy boots on the man's feet.

"Not pretty," Conroy said, and started to cover the body.

"Hold it!" Uncle George said. He bent down closer, his blue eyes cold as two newly minted dimes. "Which killed him, Doc? The gunshot or—or the other?"

"We're waiting for the ambulance to take him to the hospital where I'll do a formal autopsy," Dr. Walters said.

"What's keeping the ambulance?"

"A multiple-car accident out near the fairgrounds," Captain Purdy said.

"You want an educated guess, George?" Dr. Walters asked. "I think the gunshot killed him, the butchering took place after he was dead. Why in heaven's name anyone would do a thing like that I can't guess. I suppose there's no way you can account for a maniac's behavior."

Uncle George straightened up. "Where did that hook come from?"

Conroy pointed to a beam in the ceiling. There were three hooks like the one on the floor screwed into the beam. From one of them hung fishing nets, from another some sail cloth, and from the third fishing rods. "We think those tielines on the floor there were hanging from the hook the killer unscrewed from the beam," Conroy said.

"He had to stand on something to unscrew the hook," Uncle George said.

"That crate in the corner was standing under the beam when we first got here," Captain Purdy said. "We moved it after we'd taken a picture of it where we found it."

"Interesting," Uncle George said in a flat voice. "He shoots the guy and then looks around for something he can use to carve him up. Looks like an afterthought, doesn't it? He didn't come prepared to carve up his victim."

"Could be that way," Conroy said.

"Why? He wasn't hurting the man. He was dead. Message to someone else? He didn't really disfigure him. The gunshot had already done that."

"Like the doc said, you can't read a maniac's mind."

The door to the shed opened and two ambulance attendants carrying a stretcher came in. Directly behind them was the red-and-white springer spaniel. The hairs along the dog's russet saddle were standing on end. The animal moved quickly toward the mess on the floor.

"Hold it, you mutt," Sergeant Conroy said. "You're not entitled." He bent down and grabbed the dog by the brown leather collar around its neck. The dog bared its teeth and

snarled at the trooper, who drew back quickly. His hand went automatically for the holstered gun at his hip.

"Easy does it," Uncle George said. He went down on his knees and put a gentling hand on the dog's back. "You're what I'd call a Huckleberry." His voice was gentle, his hand seemed to quiet the animal, which stared at the body on the floor with shocked brown eyes. "This man belong to you, Huckleberry?"

The dog stood rigid but made no effort to get away from Uncle George's touch. Uncle George looked up at Conroy. "He could tell you who this guy is if he could talk," he said.

"Get him out of here," Conroy said.

"No license on his collar but he's been inoculated for rabies," Uncle George said. "Vet's tag on the collar."

"Little bastard was going to bite me!" Conroy said.

"Little bastard was trying to protect his master," Uncle George said. He stroked the dog, which suddenly lay down, freckled nose on its front paws, and began to whimper miserably.

"Someone has to know who owns a springer spaniel around here," Conroy said. "You could be right, Mr. Crowder; maybe he belongs to the dead man."

"I never saw him before," Uncle George said. "I would have noticed, I think, if he belonged to somebody in town. He's a well-bred animal. He's noticeable, if you're a dog fancier as I am."

"Lot of strangers coming and going just now," Captain Purdy said. "The County Fair. People coming from all over the state for the trotting races, the competitions."

"Those cowboy boots may tell us something," Conroy said.

"All kinds of people besides cowboys wear that kind of boot these days," Uncle George said. "They're in style." He still knelt by the trembling dog, stroking him. "I've got friends out at the fairgrounds. Want me to take the dog out

there and see if anyone can connect him up with someone?"

"Long shot, but if you'd like to try, George—? Hundreds of people from all over the state that the regulars wouldn't know from Adam," Purdy said.

"Worth a try," Conroy said.

"Get me out of your hair, too, wouldn't it, Sergeant?" Uncle George asked. "If Huckleberry belongs to one of the regular fair people, it'll be easy. If he doesn't—well, we'll have given it a try, anyway."

"Look, Mr. Crowder, I appreciate your help," Conroy said. "Sorry if I acted snotty. I don't happen to like dogs." He glared down at the spaniel. The dog growled.

Uncle George grinned and stood up. "Looks like the feeling is mutual," he said. The dog also stood up, a questioning look in its brown eyes. It was as if, having found a friend, the dog's self-confidence had been restored.

"I didn't ask you one thing, Sergeant," Uncle George said. "Purdy told me there was no ID on this character. But money, car keys, anything?"

"Picked clean," Conroy said.

"All this violence for a man's pocket cash and maybe his credit cards?"

Conroy shrugged. "They're gone, anyway. No way to tell if he came in a car. Parking lot had dozens of cars in it last night, but none left over. No way to single out any one set of tire treads."

"Well, let's hope the pooch here can be of some help to us." Uncle George snapped his fingers. "Come on, Huckleberry," he said.

The springer trotted off at Uncle George's heels as though he'd always belonged to the tall, gray man.

"He's got a way with animals," Conroy said.

Captain Purdy chuckled. "Speaks their language, I guess," he said.

\* \* \*

The annual County Fair, held in some open fields about a mile and a half out of Lakeview, came each year as a mixed blessing to the local residents. The two local restaurants and five or six bars along the thruway did a land-office business for a week. Impromptu food stands and parking areas near the grounds provided pocket money for young and old for the next year. But there was always some vandalism and some petty break-ins and robberies.

There had not, as far as Uncle George knew, in the seventy years the Fair had been held in Lakeview, ever been a murder connected with it. There has to be a first time for everything, he thought.

The ten young Boy Scouts who had made the gruesome discovery were still huddled together a few yards away when Uncle George came out of the shed, the springer spaniel at his heels. The boys all knew who the tall man was, and he recognized several of the kids as sons of old friends.

"Rough morning for you guys," Uncle George said.

There was a chorus of "Oh, wows."

"Which one of you found him?"

"It was me, Mr. Crowder," Howard Brinker, son of a local contractor, said.

"This dog around when you all came in to clean up?"

"Sitting right outside the door of the shed there," Howie Brinker said. "Didn't want to let me in."

"You don't know who owns him?"

Again a chorus of answers. None of the boys recognized the springer.

"Why were you going into the shed, Howie?"

"Part of the cleanup routine," Howie said. "Nothing locked up except in the food concessions. People might have gone into the shed during the Lions' party—to use the plumbing, or—," the boy giggled, "—or do a little necking. I went in to check the wastebaskets and look for any litter."



"And you found—him?"

"I took off out of there in high gear, Mr. Crowder."

"And called the State Police?"

"From the public phone booth over there," Howie said. "Lucky I had a dime on me."

"I think the dog belongs to that guy in there," Uncle George said. "I'm going to see if I can find out who owns him."

Uncle George walked over to his Jeep in the parking lot, the springer close behind him. He got in the Jeep and patted the passenger seat beside him. "Want to go for a ride, Huck?"

The spaniel bounded into the seat beside the man. He looked at his new friend and gave his hand a tentative lick.

"Good boy. Now, if you could just give me a name . . ."

On Lakeview's main street, about a mile from the Grove, was the veterinary hospital operated by young Dr. Tom Andrews. Andrews and Uncle George were good friends, and the doctor was bubbling with questions about the horror in the Grove. The news had spread like a forest fire.

"Got something I want you to look at out in my Jeep," Uncle George said, after he'd sketched a few of the gory details for Andrews. The springer, sitting up straight on the seat in the Jeep, watched them approach.

"Think he may have belonged to the dead man," Uncle George said. "No license, but he's got a rabies-shot tag on his collar. Thought you might know him."

"Nice-looking animal," Andrews said. He reached out for the dog who instantly bared his teeth and growled.

"It's okay, Huck," Uncle George said, resting his hand on the dog's back.

"I could use you around this place, George," Andrews said. He examined the dog's collar. "Not my tag. It's gold-colored. I had some special ones made for me; they're blue."

"So you'd say he came from out of town?"

"Look, this is a good dog, George; probably has papers. The owner couldn't have bought him for peanuts. What would you guess, a year or a year and a half old? His coat's been well brushed—maybe even yesterday. Well fed, flesh where it ought to be. Nice bright eyes. He's scared right now, but you seem to have calmed him down."

"He was waiting for his owner to come out of that shed," Uncle George said. "There must have been some frightening sounds: a gunshot, maybe some shouting and arguing before the shot was fired."

"Must have been some screaming while the guy was being cut open," Andrews said.

"Doc Walters thinks the man was dead before that happened."

"The whole thing sounds crazy," Andrews said.

"Out of horror fiction," Uncle George said. "I'm taking the dog out to the fairgrounds: Sam Spencer may be able to name the dog's owner for us."

"Say hello to Sam for me," Andrews said. He smiled. "Sam's been running the Fair since long before I was born. Bought me my first hot dog when I was about six years old."

For fifty-one weeks of the year the Lakeview Fair Ground was relatively deserted. The only activity except for Fair week was in the stables and on the half-mile race track, built years ago by some rich patron. In the off weeks a few local residents were permitted to use the stables and the track as an exercise area for privately owned horses. With the recent craze for jogging, a number of exercise freaks could be seen running around the track in the early hours of the morning.

This week the fairgrounds were alive with activity, decorated with flags and banners. The fields surrounding the

main area were dotted with campers, trucks from food suppliers were servicing the refreshment booths, and a work crew was manicuring the half-mile track for the afternoon races.

Along the highway approaching the fairgrounds, residents stood outside their houses holding up parking signs. By late morning the parking lots would be jammed by cars from all over the county. It was a familiar sight to Uncle George. He had grown up looking forward to this one week in the year. He had played the games in the midway as a kid, enjoyed the side shows—the “freak shows” they were called. His first job, as a ten-year-old, was selling programs to the racing fans in the grandstand. In all those years, there had always been the towering figure of Sam Spencer. Sam had made a business of managing fairs all across the country. When Uncle George first came to know him, Sam wore his dark hair long, down to his shoulders. It was the stereotypical Buffalo Bill image. Later, when George Crowder was an adult, a lawyer, and a county official, Sam Spencer still came every year and George Crowder never missed the chance to say hello to Sam and tour the grounds with him to see what the latest innovations were. Sam must be in his late seventies now, Uncle George thought, but except that his long hair was now snow-white, he was the same smiling, bright-eyed man who loved his work and enjoyed encountering old friends in the towns he visited and revisited, year after year.

Sam Spencer was standing by the rail at the trotting track, watching some of the horses take their early-morning workouts, when Uncle George found him. Twenty-five years separated the two men in age, but old Sam greeted his friend as a contemporary crony.

“How the hell do you do it, George? You don’t change!”

“You look great, Sam,” Uncle George said.

The old man smiled and then spat out a stream of tobacco

juice onto the grass. "You know what George Burns says about the three ages of man? Youth—Middle Age—and You Look Great!"

"Well, you do look great."

"Had my seventy-eighth birthday a few weeks ago," Sam said. "Someone I now think of as an ex-friend told me I don't look a day over seventy-seven."

"I hope I look as good when I get there—if I get there," Uncle George said.

Sam Spencer pointed out to the track. "See that black gelding coming down the home stretch? Black Michael, he's called. You got a few bucks to risk on him this afternoon, you should go home a richer man. He's been cleaning up around the circuit."

"I didn't come out here for a tip, Sam," Uncle George said, "but I might take your advice." He looked down and saw that the red-and-white springer was sitting not a foot away, waiting expectantly. "Ever see that dog before, Sam?"

"Springer. Nice-looking animal," Sam said. His lined forehead was creased by a frown. "I didn't expect to see you today. I thought the cops would have called you in for that thing at the Grove."

"You know about it?"

Sam nodded. "We had a three-car accident out here, several people pretty badly hurt. Your town ambulance was out here carting off the injured. Cops trying to reach them and we heard the story. Ambulance people were told to finish their job here. What they had for them was a dead one. Murder?"

Uncle George nodded.

"Holy Christopher!" Sam said. He looked down at the waiting dog. "Looks like a dog I saw in Stan Chard's car when he turned up here yesterday."

"Who is Stan Chard?"

"Hanging around fairs and circuses all his life. Used to sort of follow me around the country. Worked the side shows."

"Doing what?"

Sam chuckled. "The Great Stanley," he said. "A sword swallower."

"A *what*?"

"Secret I was never able to solve," Sam said. "Fancy costume, a brass umbrella stand full of swords. He would take one out, dip it in what I suppose was kerosene, and set it afire. Then, believe it or not, he'd swallow the damn thing, lighted. It was like three feet long and would have come out his behind if it wasn't a trick. Then he'd bring it out, still lighted—and bring down the house."

"You say it was a trick."

"Had to be. The Great Stanley never let anyone near his swords. I always thought the one he used collapsed up into the handle when he appeared to put it down his throat. Somehow managed to relight it when he pulled it out. Magic act."

"Still doing it?" Uncle George asked.

"No, not for some years. He struck it rich somehow, somewhere." Sam pointed over toward the parking lot. "See that white Mercedes over there? That's Chard's. You don't buy one of those with wooden nickels. But he still follows the fairs, betting pretty heavy on the trotters. When he showed up yesterday he had a dog like that in his car with him and Stormy."

"Who is Stormy?"

"Stormy Knight, a girl who's been traveling around with Chard for a couple of years. Used to be a striptease artist, lot of laughs."

"She'd know if this is his dog then, wouldn't she?"

"Sure, I suppose she would."

"If this is his dog, Sam, the Great Stanley is a very dead

piece of meat at the moment. Where would I find the girl?"

"We could circulate," Sam said. "Has to be a coincidence, George. Chard is too smart to get himself killed."

"I have the uncomfortable feeling he outsmarted himself," Uncle George said.

**2** The fairgrounds were busy, preparing for opening for the general public in a couple of hours.

"Things don't change much, do they, George?" Sam Spencer said as the two men, followed by the springer spaniel, walked down the midway. "Still selling the same junk gifts, still playing the same old fixed games, still preparing the same lousy food."

"Forty years ago I used to think it was the best food I ever tasted," Uncle George said. "Where would Stan Chard and his woman stay in this town, Sam?"

"Half the homes in this town turn into boarding houses for a week," Sam said. "I been staying at Mrs. Remsen's just down the street there ever since I started coming here. Molly Remsen was just a kid, married too young, when I first started bunking there. See her now and you realize what time does to people. She needed the money back in the beginning. Now she just likes to see old friends. Widowed for quite a number of years." Sam smiled. "I started thinking a few years back that some day I just wouldn't move on. Molly makes a man feel real at home."

"Chard?" Uncle George said.

"I don't know where he stays, but my guess is a man with a twenty-five-thousand-dollar car and a fancy woman

wouldn't stay in one of these overnight places. Probably in one of the expensive inns up or down the thruway."

"So why are we looking here?"

"I have a strange feeling I saw her around not too long ago," Sam said. "Didn't have any reason to pay any attention to her then, but—hey! There she is!"

Stormy Knight was sitting at one of the food counters, sipping a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette. She was tapping a foot restlessly on the foot rail along the counter. Mid or late thirties, Uncle George thought. She had henna-red hair, a color never imagined by the Creator when he invented men and women, he told himself. But it was expensively cared for. The blue-and-white striped dress she was wearing hadn't come off a department store rack. When she saw Sam Spencer approaching, her narrowed violet eyes seemed to relax and she smiled a bright, welcoming smile.

"Hi there, Stormy," Sam said. "Want you to meet my friend George Crowder. He's been looking for you."

"I'm glad somebody is," the woman said. "You got a message for me from Stan, Mr. Crowder?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Uncle George said.

"Keep that little beast away from me," Stormy said.

She was looking down at the spaniel, which was pressed hard against Uncle George's leg, growling. Uncle George bent down and stroked the dog's head.

"This Stanley Chard's dog?" he asked.

The woman laughed. "The little jerk is jealous of me," she said. "Stan insists on keeping us both."

"You know where Stan is?" Sam asked her, his face clouded.

"No, I don't. But when he shows up, a lot of stuff is going to hit the fan. He took off after the show closed last night, said he had some business to transact in town. He dropped me off at the Stone Masters' Lodge, where we're staying,

and hasn't showed up since. His car's there in the parking lot so he's somewhere around. When I get my hands on him—" She made a choking gesture.

"The lodge is five miles away," Sam said. "How did you get here this morning?"

Her smile was easy. "I've still got what it takes to thumb a ride, Sam."

Sam looked at Uncle George and drew a deep breath. "Look, Stormy, there may be some big trouble."

Stormy dropped her cigarette in the grass and stepped on it. "What do you mean, trouble?"

Sam looked at Uncle George and shrugged.

"You know what the business was he had to transact?" Uncle George asked.

"Stan doesn't talk business with me," the woman said. "Monkey business, maybe, but not business. What's the trouble you two are talking about?"

"You better hold onto your hat, lady," Sam said, and turned away.

"There's been a murder in town, Miss Knight," Uncle George said. "We think the victim may have been Stanley Chard."

She raised her hand to her mouth to stifle a little cry.

"There was no identification on the man, no wallet, no money, no nothing. But this dog was hanging around the building where it happened. Sam told me who owned the dog and that started me looking for you."

"Dozens of people here at the Fair would know him by sight," the woman said.

"Not this morning. He was shot in the face. No face."

"Oh, my God!"

Uncle George didn't tell her the rest of the horror. "I'd like to ask you to come with me to see if you can tell us whether it is or isn't Chard."

Stormy Knight straightened her broad Joan Crawford



shoulders. "Of course," she said. "I've got a set of keys to Stan's car."

"I think we'll leave that here for the police to look at—if it turns out to be Chard," Uncle George said.

They walked across the lot to Uncle George's Jeep, leaving Sam Spencer behind. The dog trotted at Uncle George's heels. At the Jeep it hopped up onto the seat.

"We have to take that creature with us?" Stormy Knight asked.

"He's a witness, and I'm stuck with him," Uncle George said. "Over the back, Huckleberry!"

The dog obeyed and the woman got in the front with Uncle George. She had to be told before she was confronted with what lay ahead. She had to be prepared. Looking straight ahead as he drove, Uncle George told her the rest of it. He could hear a soft sobbing start up but he didn't turn to look.

"It can't be Stan," she said, as the Jeep approached the hospital where the body had to be by now. "He had people who didn't like him, but something like this . . . just not possible."

As they stopped in the hospital parking lot, Uncle George turned back to the dog, "Stay!" he said. The dog lowered itself onto the back seat, freckled nose on its front paws. Stormy got out of the Jeep and suddenly she was gripping Uncle George's wrist.

"Let me hang onto you, Mr. Crowder."

"Of course."

They walked into the hospital and were directed to the room that was serving as a morgue. Captain Purdy was there along with Dr. Walters and a hospital orderly. Uncle George explained that he had identified the owner of the dog, which had led him to Miss Knight, which had brought them here.

Dr. Walters spoke gently to the frightened woman. He

pointed to a medical table on which was what was obviously a body covered by a sheet. "It's a pretty ugly sight, Miss Knight," he said. "Is there something that would help you identify your Mr. Chard without looking at what's happened to this man?"

The grip on Uncle George's wrist tightened painfully. "Let me see his left hand," the woman said, in a flat, dead voice.

"What will that tell you, Miss Knight?" the doctor asked.

"The little finger on Stan's left hand was cut off at the middle joint in some accident when he was a kid."

The doctor nodded. "You don't need to look, Miss Knight. The little finger on this man's left hand is gone at the middle joint."

"I want to look," Stormy Knight said. "I have to see him sooner or later. I have to make arrangements for what's to be done with him."

"Family?" Captain Purdy asked.

"No family. I guess you could say I'm his heir."

"It isn't necessary for you to look, Stormy," Uncle George said, "unless you're after kicks!"

She turned to look at him, as if she didn't believe what she'd heard.

"Captain Purdy needs to talk to you. You'll be in better shape if you haven't put yourself through the business of looking at some mangled remains."

"I'm not talking to any cops without a lawyer."

"You got one nearby, Miss Knight?" Captain Purdy asked.

"You know I haven't!"

"Mr. Crowder's a lawyer," Dr. Walters said.

The woman turned, her eyes fixed on Uncle George. "Would you be willing to represent me, George?"

"I don't know that you need to be represented," Uncle George said. "There are no charges against you. Captain Purdy needs all the information he can get about Chard."

"But if you were my lawyer, you could be there while he asks me what he wants to know?" She was still holding, almost desperately, to Uncle George's wrist.

Uncle George glanced at Purdy and then nodded. "Yes, I could be there."

"Then you're my lawyer, if you will be. What about a fee?" She glanced at the sheet-covered body. "I have a feeling I'm suddenly a rich chick!"

"There's no fee for helping someone in trouble."

Stormy laughed. It was a bitter sound. "Seems to be your day for helping the helpless, George. First that creepy dog and now me."

Dr. Walters' house and office were just across the street from the hospital. He offered his living room as a place for Purdy to talk with Stormy Knight, away from the busy comings and goings at the hospital.

Uncle George found himself alone with Stormy for a moment or two while Captain Purdy tried to round up other people who should be present, Red Egan and Sergeant Conroy, the State Police detective. The doctor's wife had offered to make some coffee for them and left to prepare it.

"I'm not a morning drinker," Stormy said, "but I sure as hell could use a good slug of booze right now."

"After you've talked to Purdy, the drink is on me," Uncle George said. "Sam Spencer told me you've been traveling around with Chard for the last couple of years."

"Sometimes it seems a lot longer than that," Stormy said. She had finally let go her hold on Uncle George and was moving restlessly around the room. "The first time I ever laid eyes on Stan I knew he was trouble. And yet—and yet—and yet—"

"He had something for you?"

She stopped her pacing and faced Uncle George. "Look at that dog," she said.

"What about him? By the way, does he have a name?"

"Dog."

"His name is Dog?"

Stormy nodded. "Scared, frightened, lost—and then he found you. Like you owned him all your life. That's the way Stan was for me. Anchor in a storm."

"Tell me if you want to."

She didn't speak.

"Stormy—Stormy? What's your real name, Stormy?"

She made a sour face. "If you promise not to tell anyone—Gladys. My last name really is Knight, so you can see why the kids on the block called me Stormy. Just a gag."

"'Kids on the block' suggests a city beginning."

"*The city*," Stormy said. "New York."

"Where did you meet Chard?" Uncle George asked, trying to bring the conversation back on course.

Stormy gave Uncle George a faintly bitter smile. "You don't look like a man who can be easily shocked, George. What the hell, it will come out anyway. I was a hooker when I met Stan." Her look turned defiant.

Uncle George shrugged. "I think I have more respect for women who make it a business than those who use sex as a weapon or a bribe or a way to steal."

"Good for you, George. You married?"

"No."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"You must have lost your wife."

"I've never been married," Uncle George said.

"How come? You must have been a pretty eligible bachelor over the years in this town."

"Can we get back to Chard?" Uncle George said, his voice gone hard.

Stormy stood with her back to Uncle George, looking down at the dead ashes in the fieldstone fireplace. "I was sixteen when my mother and father died in a tenement

fire. I was lucky. I'd gone to a movie, some kind of romantic slop with Paul Newman. I sat through it three times, would you believe! When I got home there was no house—no family left alive.”

“Other children?”

“Just me—and no aunts or uncles I ever knew of, no family anywhere. They tried to put me in some kind of juvenile home, but I got myself out of there in a hurry. Shanks' mare. I just walked away. No qualifications for a skilled job of any sort. Waiting on table, and I wasn't very good at that. It wasn't very long before I found I had something to sell—myself. I didn't like it, but I had to eat.”

“Sam Spencer said something about burlesque.”

“Yeah, but I was a little late for that. Burlesque was dying on the vine when I got into it. Stripping in public seemed a little better to me than stripping in private, but it was on the way out as a way of making a legitimate living. A woman I met in my last theater job had something going and invited me in on it. Conventions, traveling salesmen; men away from home are hungry for girls. This woman, Abigail Faber she called herself, arranged parties for groups of men from out of town. Liquor, drugs—though I never got hooked on that—and sex. It started out each night as a big party and wound up in some cheap hotel room with some creep who was really too bombed to enjoy himself. But it was a living and a fairly good one.”

“And one night you wound up in a cheap hotel room with Stanley Chard?”

“You didn't know Stanley. If it had been Stan it would have been the Ritz, or the Pierre, or the Beaumont. Stan was a kind of partner of Abigail's. He got the out-of-town men, Abigail provided the girls. Stan provided the liquor, the drugs, the place to hold the party. He was making himself a small fortune out of his racket.”

“A lot of people are making fortunes from dealing in drugs,” Captain Purdy said from the living room doorway.

Behind the captain were Red Egan and Sergeant Conroy. He introduced the two men to Stormy Knight. With them was another State Trooper carrying a stenotype machine.

"We need information from you, Miss Knight. Trooper Evans will take down what you tell us so we'll all have it straight."

"Can they do that to me?" Stormy asked, turning to Uncle George.

"We're not asking you to make a statement, Miss Knight. It's not anything that will be used against you in any way," Captain Purdy said. "We're just trying to put together what information we can about Chard. Somebody killed him, you know."

"I think it's all right for you to tell them what you can—Gladys," Uncle George said.

Stormy laughed. "If you ever call me that again, George, you're fired," she said.

"The captain is an old friend. You can trust him—Stormy."

"You and Chard have been traveling together for some time?" Purdy asked. Trooper Evans had set his machine up at the center table in the room and his fingers moved over its keyboard.

"Stan and I have been living together for just over two years," Stormy said.

"Where? Where is your legal residence, Miss Knight?"

"In a white Mercedes," Stormy said.

"But where do you get your mail? Where do you keep your clothes?"

"We don't get mail. We keep our clothes in the car. Stan transacted his business by telephone, wherever we happened to be. We covered fairs and circuses—in New England in the summertime, the South and Southwest in the winters. One town after another."

"What kind of business would he have to transact here in Lakeview?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, come on, Miss Knight! Two and a half years and you don't know what his business is?"

"I only know a part of what he did for a living," Stormy said. "You were listening at the door, Captain. You heard about his supplying liquor and drugs and places for Abigail Faber's parties."

"But there were no parties being held here in Lakeview," Red Egan said.

"You know what goes on in all those estates around your town, Sheriff?" Stormy asked.

"It could be that people from here and other towns around had contact with this Faber woman's enterprise in the city," Uncle George said. "We have no way of knowing what people do when they go into the city on business."

"True," Red Egan said. "But—"

"Not the people you know, Sheriff? Is that the way you see it?" Stormy asked. "You might be in for a big surprise."

"If Chard was a source of drugs for people in the city, he might follow them up in the towns where they live to keep 'em supplied," Sergeant Conroy said. "Is that the way it was, Miss Knight?"

"I already told you, Sergeant, I don't know," Stormy said. "'What you don't know can never hurt you,' Stan would say when I asked him."

"You weren't curious?" Conroy asked.

"'An anchor in a storm' you called him," Uncle George said.

The woman turned away, her face clouded over. "I met him through Abigail Faber. I was one of her girls."

"One of the ones who wound up in the hay with one of her customers?" Conroy asked.

"Say a prayer for me, Sergeant, if it matters to you,"

Stormy said. "Yes, I was. It was better than working a street corner! One night when I got home from whatever I was doing I found a message from Abigail. There was a party on and I was needed. It was late, I remember—after midnight. I thought it was too late to go, but a call from Abigail wasn't to be ignored. So I went to the place she'd left the address of for me to report to. The party was over when I got there—a hotel on the East Side. Abigail was still there with Stan Chard. I'd never met him, but I knew who he was. Dark, good-looking, tough kind of guy. I thought, at first, she'd planned me for him."

"Not so?" Uncle George asked, quietly.

"No. I explained I'd gotten her message too late to arrive any earlier. She understood. Stan suggested we go down to the nightclub in the hotel and get something to eat. We went—the three of us. We had some drinks. I remember I had some Chinese food—shrimps in lobster sauce."

"What else do you remember?" Captain Purdy asked.

"I missed it at the time, but I think Stan must have passed some kind of signal to Abigail, because she suddenly recalled she had something she had to do, and she left me alone with Stan. I guessed I was in business after all." She sounded resigned. "But he didn't make a pass at me. After a while he just said to me, 'You're too nice a girl to be in this business.'"

"Aren't we wasting time with a play-by-play on the lady's first night in bed with Chard?" Sergeant Conroy asked. "You say you are his heir, Miss Knight. Is there a will? Did he have a lawyer who handled things for him? Is there a family that could contest a will?"

"No family. Everything Stan has is in joint accounts—his name and mine," Stormy said. "The same for his safe deposit boxes. Although the names weren't always our own."

"You mean you could have walked out with everything he had any time you chose?" Conroy asked.



The woman gave the sergeant a sort of pitying look. "Not and lived," she said. "The reason he arranged it that way was in case he got into some kind of trouble I could always get cash for him."

"How large are these bank accounts?" Purdy asked.

"Scattered all around," Stormy said. "Would a million bucks surprise you, Captain?"

From Purdy's face, it was obvious that it did.

"Why would a man with that much bread salted away run risks?" Red Egan asked.

"What risks?" Conroy asked.

"The man is dead, Sergeant—carved open," Red said.

"If he was peddling drugs and wouldn't supply someone without the money up front?" Conroy suggested. "A hooked junkie could blow his stack. The body was stripped of everything: wallet, cash, keys. If he was carrying drugs, they were taken, too."

"Would it be okay if I tried a little different line, Jim?" Uncle George asked the captain.

"Go ahead," Purdy said.

Uncle George turned to the woman. "You say that after the Fair closed up shop last night, Stormy, Chard told you he had business to take care of, drove you to the Stone Masters' Lodge and left you there. In the Mercedes?"

"Yes."

"The dog with you—the springer?"

"Yes."

"And Chard took the dog with him when he left you?"

"Yes. Hell, I didn't want that mutt left with me, George."

"So we know Chard went out to the Grove to meet someone. He was shot, butchered, robbed, and left there. But take notice, Jim, the Mercedes is back in the parking lot at the fairgrounds. Someone drove it back there, leaving the body and the dog behind."

"Why would someone risk that? They've got night watchmen at the fairgrounds."

"Dark," Uncle George said. "Everyone would recognize that gaudy white car, but in the dark, without any reason to be suspicious, they'd just assume Chard or Stormy was driving it."

"Why bother to take the car there?" Conroy asked.

"The body couldn't be easily identified," Uncle George said. "Without the car at the Grove it might have been days before you discovered who the dead man was. Killer made one mistake."

"Oh?"

"He left the dog alive," Uncle George said. "Maybe he didn't know it was Chard's dog; thought it was just a stray, sniffing around for scraps from the Lions' picnic. The dog took me to the fairgrounds, Sam Spencer told me who owned him and that took me to Miss Knight. That car may tell you things, Jim. Fingerprints, something dropped in it, even a watchman who could give you a description of the person who brought it there. The watchman would assume Chard had loaned his car to someone."

"I'll have it impounded, check it out," Purdy said, and left the room.

"Long shot," Conroy said.

"You got a shorter one, Sergeant?" Red Egan asked.

"I have a feeling Miss Knight could name us some names, people Chard came here to do business with."

"He never mentioned any names to me," Stormy said.

"He ever talk to you about his old days in the circus, Stormy?" Uncle George asked.

"He grew up in the circus," Stormy said. "His mother was a trapeze artist—died in a fall. His father was a midway barker, selling games and junk to the suckers. Father drank himself to death after his mother missed a somersault grab."

"But Stan Chard was already working the midways him-

self, Sam Spencer told me,” Uncle George said. “Had a sword-swallowing act?”

“A *what?*” Sergeant Conroy asked. Uncle George remembered having the same reaction when Sam Spencer had told him.

Stormy Knight smiled. In the face of the grimmest sort of tragedy, that smile seemed to light her up, like the sudden throwing of a switch in the dark. “Stan loved that old stuff he used to do,” she said. “He would still do some of it for kids. If Stan has—had—a soft spot, it’s kids. Maybe that’s the circus background. After all, that’s what circuses are for, kids and grown-up kids.”

“You ever see him do his act?” Uncle George asked.

“Well, not from start to finish—like a performance. But he was always doing bits and pieces of it. You see, none of it was really so.”

“Come again, please,” Sergeant Conroy said.

“Magic, illusion, fake,” Stormy Knight said. “From what he’s told me, he would come out before his audience dressed in a fancy Chinese Mandarin coat—big sleeves. He didn’t talk. I guess today they call it mime. Face with a heavy clown makeup. He’d take a large piece of candy, hold it up, and swallow it whole. Then he’d take an egg and swallow it whole, shell and all. Then maybe a lemon or an apple.”

“That’s crazy!” Red Egan said. “Nobody could swallow an apple!”

“And nobody did. Am I right, Stormy?” Uncle George asked.

“You’re right, George. Don’t ask me how he did it. The hand is quicker than the eye. The mandarin coat with the big sleeves, I don’t know. Like most professional magicians, Stan wouldn’t tell even me how he did his tricks, but he was marvelous with his hands. Card tricks—he could do amazing things with cards.”

“And, of course, swallowing a burning sword and bring-

ing it out, still lighted, was another magic trick," Uncle George said.

"I can only guess," Stormy said. "Trick sword, blade folded up in the handle, putting out the fire. Then, when he 'pulled it up and out,' it would relight the fire at the last moment, principle of a cigarette lighter. I saw him do it once or twice, but he'd never let me or anyone else near that trick sword. I can only tell you that when you saw him do it you had to believe it. He was something when he was doing his tricks."

"That sort of explains things for us, doesn't it, Sergeant?" Uncle George said.

"Explains what?" Conroy asked.

"Why the killer ripped open Chard with that iron hook. He was gullible but not a crazy sadist. He thought Chard had swallowed something he had to have—shot him, and then ripped him open looking for whatever it was he thought Chard had swallowed."

"Only Chard didn't swallow it?" Red Egan asked.

"That's the way I see it," Uncle George said. "I think it would make sense to go back to that equipment shed in the Grove and look for what Chard didn't swallow. If we find it, it could name a killer for us."

"I don't buy it," Conroy said.

"Thing that interested me from the start, Sergeant," Uncle George said, "is why, if the killer was a psycho planning to butcher a man, he didn't go to his meeting with Chard prepared, carrying a knife or a scalpel. Something happened after he met Chard that he hadn't anticipated. Chard apparently swallowed something the killer wanted. He was prepared to kill if he had to, so he shot Chard. Now he had to get back what he assumed was somewhere inside the dead man—in his throat, his stomach, his intestines—and he had to find something to use to cut him open. He saw the hooks in the ceiling beam and unscrewed one of them, used it."

"Found what he wanted and took off with it," Conroy said.

"That's not the way my script reads," Uncle George said. "Chard didn't swallow things, he faked swallowing. He pulled his magic act, his sleight-of-hand trick. The killer was taken in, cut Chard open to find it."

"Like what?" Conroy asked.

Uncle George shrugged. "A jewel, a calling card—"

"Calling card?"

"Something that, if we find it, will tell us who it belongs to."

"Let's get moving," Red Egan said.

Mrs. Walters brought coffee and some doughnuts. Uncle George thanked her and she left him alone with Stormy.

"I could still stand that drink," Stormy said.

"After Purdy gets back and asks you what he needs to know I'll provide you with a double whatever," Uncle George said.

"You really believe what you suggested to the sheriff and that trooper?" the woman asked.

"It sounds wild, doesn't it? But it's possible."

Stormy took a sip of coffee and put her mug down on the table. Refreshment wasn't what she needed. "Captain Purdy thinks Stan was peddling drugs," she said. "I don't think so."

"But you told us Chard provided drugs for Abigail Faber's parties.

"Oh, I don't say he didn't have connections where he could get supplies for parties. But I just don't believe he was traveling from town to town making sales on his own. He couldn't have done that without my knowing. Our clothes, everything we owned, were packed together in a couple of chests in the back of the car. I was in and out of those chests all the time. He couldn't have had a supply of drugs without my stumbling on it."

“You liked him.”

“I lived with him for more than two years.”

“But he was some kind of a con man, wasn’t he, to accumulate all that money?”

Stormy gave Uncle George a tight smile. “We live in a world of con men, George, from Congress on down, don’t we?”

“It was worth the money to stay with him?”

“Look, George, we didn’t live in a palace! We lived in an automobile, town after town after town.”

“The Stone Masters’ Lodge isn’t a dump,” Uncle George said.

“But it wasn’t ours, or the other fancy inns we stayed at. No, damn it, George, I loved the man. A tough stinker to other people, but with me he was kind, gentle, loving. I’d have stayed with him in a slum if that was how it’d turned out.”

“You must be hurting,” Uncle George said.

“Oh, brother!” She turned away, her shoulders shaking. She spun around. “When you find out who did this, you better keep me away from him, George!”

The living room door opened and Captain Purdy reappeared.

“I ran into Red and Conroy outside,” he said. “They told me your theory. It’s kind of wild, George.”

“But worth a look back at the Grove, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. And I’m headed for the fairgrounds to go over that Mercedes. Maybe George will bring you over to the barracks in an hour or so, Miss Knight.”

“If that’s the way you want it,” Uncle George said.

They all went out of the doctor’s house. Purdy took off in a police car. Uncle George’s Jeep was where he’d left it, with the springer sitting up in the back seat.

“He didn’t take off,” Stormy said.

“I don’t think he will. He needs a friend,” Uncle George

said. He reached in and patted the dog, whose lips wrinkled back in a kind of grin. "I'll take you to my place, Stormy, and pour you that drink. If we stop at a bar, everyone in the place will want to ask you questions. The news has spread, of course."

They got into the Jeep and started off down the main street of Lakeview.

"I want to make a stop on the way at the shopping center," Uncle George said. "While I'm there I'll pick up whatever it is you like to drink."

"Some vodka and tonic would be just great." Stormy said.

"But I'll tend bar," Uncle George said. "Got to keep you in shape for Purdy." As he turned into the area of stores and shops, he told the woman what he really had in mind. "Red said there weren't any parties in this town. He doesn't know, of course. But Earl Slocum, the market manager, can tell me if anyone has been buying for something special. You mind waiting in the Jeep with Huckleberry? Maybe save you some awkward questions."

"I don't mind. It's a beautiful day." Her lips twisted. "A beautiful day to die!"

Uncle George left her in the Jeep. He was gone for perhaps half an hour. Earl Slocum went over some recent shopping orders and came up empty. People had house guests at Fair time, bought a little more than usual, but nothing that suggested anything super fancy. Uncle George had to answer a hundred questions about the violence in the Grove, of course.

When he walked out of the market Uncle George saw at once that Stormy and the springer spaniel were no longer in the Jeep. He stood, looking around, when a familiar voice greeted him from behind.

"Uncle George! I was just coming to look for you."

It was Joey Trimble, his twelve-year-old nephew, blond

hair bleached by the summer sun, skin mahogany tanned.

"Hi, boy," Uncle George said.

"The lady that was in the Jeep asked me to find you and tell you," Joey said.

"Tell me what, boy?"

"I just happened by. Mom wanted some eggs and coffee in the market. Then I saw this lady sitting in your Jeep with a dog. Springer spaniel, isn't he?"

"Yep. I call him Huckleberry."

"I figured right away she must have something to do with what happened at the Grove. I told her who I was and she invited me to sit in the Jeep with her and wait for you. She told me a little bit about what had happened, and I had a thousand questions for her, naturally."

"Naturally," Uncle George said.

"She told me the dog had belonged to the dead man, and that you'd saved him, picked him up. Just then a man came out of the market carrying a brown paper shopping bag. He suddenly was standing right by the Jeep, looking at us. He looked like he knew the lady, but didn't speak, he just hurried off. The lady called after him. 'Hey, you! Wait!' He just kept moving, almost running. 'You know who he is?' the lady asked me. I didn't. I never saw him before. 'Find your uncle and tell him I'm on to something,' she said. She jumped down out of the Jeep and hurried in the direction the man had gone."

"The dog?"

"He went after her. Funny thing about the dog, Uncle George. When the man came out of the market and stopped right there by the Jeep, the dog started to growl and snarl something fierce. Then he took off after the lady."

"Can you describe the man, Joey—quick?"

"Middle-aged, dark hair. No hat, but city dressed."

"Let's see if we can find them," Uncle George said.  
"Which way did they go?"



Joey led the way along the line of shops—the supermarket, the radio store, the optical center, the record shop, the liquor store. Stormy’s extraordinary red hair should be easily spotted, even in a busy shopping crowd, but he didn’t see any sign of her. Nor did the red-and-white spaniel come running to greet him. At the end of the row of shops the boy stopped.

“They could be inside one of the stores,” Joey suggested.

“You take a look, boy. I’ll keep patrolling out here.”

“You think something’s wrong, Uncle George?”

“I don’t know what I think, boy. She didn’t know the man—asked you if you knew him—and yet she recognized him from somewhere.” Uncle George felt a faint tightening of his stomach muscles. He hadn’t expected Stormy to take off and leave him flat, nor the dog either. Joey started running in and out of shops, obviously with no luck. Was it just the climate of that particular day that stirred feelings of anxiety? A girl who had been in her kind of business, later traveling from town to town all over the country, could easily see a familiar face, someone she’d seen somewhere else, and still not know who he was. But why take off after him?

Joey finally rejoined his uncle. “I don’t see her anyplace, Uncle George.”

“You say you’d know the man if you saw him again? He could have ducked away from her.”

“I think I’d recognize him, Uncle George, but I’d certainly know the lady. She’s beautiful—and nice.”

“And you’d know the dog.”

“Yeah. Handsome little guy,” Joey said.

“So, we go back to the Jeep and maybe they’ll find us,” Uncle George said.

They walked back along the strip, greeting people here and there who knew them both.

“Hey, the dog’s back anyway!” Joey called out.

Huckleberry was lying on the front seat of the Jeep, his nose between his paws. Joey went around to the far side of the Jeep to speak to the dog.

"Uncle George! He's hurt!"

Uncle George joined the boy. Blood was trickling down out of one side of the dog's mouth. The man spoke softly to the dog and reached out to him. Huckleberry lay perfectly still, but whimpering.

"Looks like someone kicked him in the mouth," Uncle George said. "Tooth broken off, lip cut all along one side."

"Who would do such a thing?" Joey wondered.

"Someone he made a grab at," Uncle George said. "Maybe he recognized the man with the shopping bag, too." He took a red bandanna handkerchief out of the hip pocket of his blue jeans. "Moisten this over at the fountain, Joey. I'll see if I can clean him up a bit."

He sat down in the seat beside the spaniel, and a bloody tongue licked his hand. "I sure wish you could talk, Huck."

Joey came back with the wet bandanna and Uncle George worked gently to clean the dog's wound. The dog held perfectly still, no flinching.

"He trusts you, Uncle George," Joey said.

"So did Stormy when I left her alone and now she has disappeared," Uncle George said, his voice harsh.

"You couldn't know that man was going to turn up," Joey said. Uncle George could do no wrong.

"I should have known better than to leave her alone, Joey." He turned the key in the ignition and started the Jeep's motor. "You stay here, boy, and if Miss Knight shows up just tell her to wait till I get back. And don't let her out of your sight."

"You can count on me, Uncle George."

"I know I can, boy."

Uncle George drove out along the main street and out of town to the fairgrounds. The day's crowd was beginning to

gather there. People with parking signs waved at him to choose their place. At the main entrance to the grounds he was stopped by a local man he knew.

"No parking space left inside, George," the man said.

"I'm not looking to park. I'm looking for Captain Purdy."

"Oh, he's in there, checking out some car."

Uncle George was allowed to go through, and in the parking lot near the race track he saw Purdy and a couple of other troopers standing around the white Mercedes.

"Somebody really did a job on this buggy," Captain Purdy told Uncle George. "Clothes tossed all around, every inch of it searched. Chard must have been some kind of camera nut. Two expensive Japanese cameras smashed to pieces, rolls of film exposed, some of them torn to shreds, glove compartment ransacked. Whoever did it had to have had keys."

"Chard's keys, taken from him at the Grove," Uncle George said. "I have another reason for being here, Jim." He told the trooper captain about the disappearance of Stormy Knight.

"Damn!" Purdy said. "I should have arrested her. I knew it."

"I don't think so," Uncle George said. "I don't think she took off voluntarily. My fault for leaving her alone."

"But Joey was with her, you say, when this stranger she appeared to know came out of the market?"

"With her, and she asked him if he knew the man."

"And he didn't?"

"No. Probably not a local person in town Joey doesn't know by sight. People in the market—at the checkout counter—won't be any help." Uncle George gestured around him. "One week in the year when a stranger doesn't attract any particular notice."

"So, she's gone before we can really get down to the nitty-gritty with her," Purdy said.

"I was hoping you could set up some roadblocks," Uncle George said. "Somebody trying to take her out of town—troopers couldn't miss that head of hair."

"Little late, don't you think, George?"

"No way to tell how fast he could move—with a prisoner."

Purdy went over to his police car and issued orders over its two-way radio. He came back.

"Let's go back to the shopping center, George. She may have showed up, whole thing a false alarm."

"I'd give an arm to believe that, Jim."

"You can't kidnap a woman in the middle of a crowd," Purdy said.

"I have a gut feeling that tells me something different," Uncle George said.

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By early afternoon the Fair was going full blast, crowds in the grandstand watching the trotting races, crowds at the betting booths between races, crowds along the midway playing games, tossing rings over dumbbells for prizes, shooting at moving targets in the gun booths, crowds around the food stand where local women were competing for awards with homemade baked goods, crowds around the cattle corrals where prize bulls and milk cows were on exhibition. Who would you stop and ask if they'd seen a woman with henna-red hair being abducted by a mysterious stranger?

Back at the shopping center the morning rush had petered out and there was a chance for Uncle George and Captain Purdy to have a relatively uninterrupted conversation with Earl Slocum, the supermarket manager.

"I'm afraid you're asking the impossible, gents," Slocum told them. "The checkout girls wouldn't pay any particular attention to a stranger on a Fair day. More strangers than locals. Unless this stranger made some kind of a fuss, or asked for something we don't have."

None of the checkout girls remembered such an incident.

"Most of the orders that go out are in brown paper shopping bags," Slocum told Captain Purdy. "Wild goose chase, I'm afraid, Captain."

Finally the captain concentrated on Joey Trimble. Joey had waited for them in the Jeep, comforting the wounded springer.

"Try to give me as detailed a description as you can, boy."

Joey wriggled uncomfortably. "You got to understand, Captain," the boy said. "It—it was so quick! I was interested in the lady and what she could tell me about what happened in the Grove—and what Uncle George was doing about it."

"Go on, Joey."

"This dog started to growl and snarl and I turned around to see what was bothering him. That's when I saw this man with the shopping bag. At first, I thought he was surprised by the dog. And then I saw he was staring at Miss Knight. And then he took off. It was just seconds that I really got a look at him. Then Miss Knight asked me if I knew who he was. He was almost running down the row of shops by then. Well, I didn't know him, and Miss Knight jumped out of the Jeep calling back to tell Uncle George she was 'on to something.' The dog here followed her. That's it. That's all there was."

"Tell me everything you remember about the man, Joey."

The boy moved uneasily. "I'm sorry if I let you down, Uncle George," he said.

"You haven't let us down, boy," Uncle George said. "Just tell the captain what you remember."

"He was tall," Joey said. "Not as tall as Uncle George, but tall. Dark hair, cut short. He wasn't wearing a hat. City clothes—business suit, shirt, and tie. Not like someone who was spending a day in the country. The main thing I remember were his eyes looking a little scared."

"Kent Barlow," Uncle George said.

"Kent is short, fat, and fair," Purdy said.

"I didn't mean it was Kent, but that Kent might help," Uncle George said. "He used to be useful to my office in the old days."

Kent Barlow was an artist. In the "old days" he had been helpful to the county prosecutor, George Crowder, trying to draw the likenesses of criminals from descriptions given by witnesses. Those drawings had helped track down more than one wanted man.

Barlow lived across the valley from Uncle George's place, on a hillside with a beautiful view. A phone call from the market indicated that Barlow was at home and willing to receive callers.

Barlow was, as Purdy said, short, fat, and fair, and possessed of a bountiful supply of cheerfulness and good will. He greeted Uncle George and Joey as though seeing them was a real pleasure. He reached out and rumbled Joey's hair.

"Nice to see you, Joey. You know, I once thought I was going to make an artist of this boy, George."

"What happened?"

Barlow laughed. "Growing up takes far too much time to get serious about anything as inconsequential as becoming an artist."

"I was afraid you'd be down at the Fair," Uncle George said. "You always used to be down there, sketching."

"Things never change at the Fair," Barlow said. "By now

I can draw that scene in my sleep. What can I do for you, George?"

Uncle George explained. "I know you worked with witnesses before, Kent. I thought you might be able to dig something out of Joey that Purdy and I couldn't."

"Listening to Joey talk about you, George, I'd have said you couldn't fail. Let's go into my studio."

In the studio the artist picked up a large sketch pad and a sketching crayon. "I always start the same way, Joey," he said. "You go to the movies and watch television?"

"Oh, sure," the boy said.

"I usually start by asking if this man reminded you of any movie actor or TV star."

The boy frowned. "Gee, I don't know. I—wait a minute. There was a show on TV I used to watch when I was a kid. Reruns, I guess they were. It was called 'The Rockford Files.'"

Barlow's crayon began to move on the pad. "The star of that show was an actor named James Garner, right? Made a lot of commercials with an attractive blond actress, right?"

"Yeah! Yeah, that's the one."

Barlow drew and finally showed the result to Joey. "That's James Garner, as nearly as I can remember him."

"Gee, that's great. It's just like him!" Joey said.

"But not the man you saw in the shopping center?"

Joey shook his head, slowly. "The hair—the man in the shopping center had dark hair, but it was slicked down tight to his head, like he used some sort of tonic or grease."

Barlow worked some more. "That him?"

"More like it," Joey said. "But something else . . ."

"Think what it is, boy," Uncle George said.

"The eyes had kind of pouches under them."

"Let's see," Barlow said, and worked some more. "This better?"

"Hey, that's like him!" the boy said. "Something else, I

think. The man's mouth was thinner—sort of tight-lipped. But when I saw him he was surprised, maybe scared.”

Barlow worked and showed the boy again.

“That's him!” Joey said. “That's him!”

“Thanks, Kent,” Uncle George said.

“Duck soup when you've got a model to start with,” Barlow said.

Uncle George hesitated. “You got time to try another one for me, Kent?”

“The lady who disappeared from the shopping center?”

Uncle George nodded.

“For you, George, glad to. You got a model for us to start with?”

“You know a movie actress named Faye Dunaway?”

“Sure. Played Joan Crawford in a movie a while back.”

“Funny you should say that, Kent. It was the broad Joan Crawford shoulders that made me think of Dunaway.”

“Well, let's see where we get.”

Captain Purdy wasn't alone in his office when Uncle George and Joey arrived at the State Police barracks after their visit to the artist. The man with the trooper captain was Judge Thorne Winters, one of Lakeview's top citizens, who had been an acquaintance of George Crowder's for as long as he could remember—not a friend in an intimate sense, but in the past they'd been friendly rivals in the county courts, before Uncle George retired from the practice of law and before Thorne Winters had been elevated to the State's Supreme Court.

“George! Nice to see you,” Judge Winters said. He was a big man, thickset, with thin, closely cropped white hair, and cool gray eyes. “Captain's just been telling me about the mess we've got here in town.”

“This is my nephew, Joey Trimble, Judge.”

“Your father runs the drugstore in town, doesn't he, Joey?” the judge asked.



“Yes, sir.”

The judge chuckled. “Been buying headache medicine from Hector Trimble for longer than I can remember. Need it in my business.”

Uncle George put a manila envelope down on Purdy’s desk. “Kent Barlow’s done a picture of the man Miss Knight went after in the shopping center. Joey gave him the details. He also did one of Stormy, helped by me. I thought you could have copies made here, Jim, and circulate them to your men, people who work in the center and at the fairgrounds.”

Purdy opened the envelope and put the two drawings down on his desk, face up. “It’s good of the woman,” he said. “Doesn’t show the color of her hair, but—”

“I only saw the man for a few seconds,” Joey said, “except his back as he hurried away. But yes, I think it’s pretty much the way he looked.”

“Stranger to me,” Purdy said.

Judge Winters was looking at the drawings, a deep frown creasing his forehead. “I never saw either of them before,” he said.

“The woman has been here before, once or twice,” Uncle George said. “She’s been traveling with Chard for a little more than two years. He’s hit this Fair every year, which means this could have been her second or third visit to Lakeview.”

“You think she saw the man in this other drawing here some other time?” the judge asked.

“Here or somewhere else. She didn’t know who he was. She asked Joey. But she recognized him from somewhere.” Uncle George’s smile was thin. “I think that little dog out in my Jeep knew him from somewhere, too.”

“He acted real fierce when the man stopped by the Jeep,” Joey said.

The judge looked at Uncle George. “How do you figure it, George?” he asked.

"The dog was out at the Grove when the Scouts found Chard's body in the equipment shed," Uncle George said. "He'd obviously gone there with Chard. He was hostile to everyone, trying to get into the shed where his master was."

"George practiced his special brand of animal magic on the pooch," Purdy said.

"He wanted help and I convinced him I was a friend," Uncle George said. "He hadn't moved a yard from me or my Jeep until he saw this guy in the shopping center. Then he took off with Miss Knight, who wasn't his friend."

"Growling like crazy," Joey said.

"When I found him again he was back in the Jeep," Uncle George said. "Mouth cut, tooth broken off. Someone had kicked him."

"The man, you think?" the judge asked.

"I think it's a pretty good guess. He caught up with the man—which probably means Miss Knight also caught up with him. Dog attacked the man, who kicked him in the mouth to get rid of him. It won't stand up in court, Your Honor, but I'd like to bet this man in the picture is the one we want for murdering Stanley Chard and cutting his guts out."

"And drove the Mercedes back to the fairgrounds, stopping somewhere along the way to destroy everything in it," Purdy said. "He was looking for something. Who knows whether he found it or not."

"Purdy was telling me when you came in that you thought this man Chard had swallowed something that was important to the killer," the judge said. "That explains why Chard was gutted."

"That isn't what I think," Uncle George said. "I think that killer *thought* Chard had swallowed something he wanted. Chard was a magician. I don't think he swallowed anything, but he suckered the killer into believing he had. Cost him his life."

"So what did he do with whatever it was?" the judge asked.

"You heard anything from Red Egan and Conroy?" Uncle George asked Purdy.

"First time around, they didn't find anything that seemed to mean anything," Purdy said. "They're going over the equipment shed again."

"So the killer found what he wanted, after he found it wasn't inside Chard," the judge said, "and took off with it."

"It could be," Uncle George said, "but I don't think so. Why would the killer go off with the car and then take everything in it apart? Because he hadn't found what he wanted inside the dead man or inside the equipment shed."

"Interesting theory," the judge said.

"I suggested earlier the kind of thing Chard might swallow, or it could be believed he had swallowed," Uncle George said. "I thought of a jewel, though I had no reason to think that, but let's invent a scene. The killer has come to the Grove to make a deal to get back a jewel. He and Chard argue over the price. The killer threatens Chard with a gun. Chard holds up his clenched fist. 'Here's your diamond,' he said. 'Try and get it.' He goes through the motions of swallowing it, his old trick. The killer shoots him and then carves him open. No diamond."

"Where could it be?" the judge asked.

"Not inside the dead man—not in the equipment shed. The killer had all night to look for it. He didn't find it there, so he took the car apart."

"What could Chard have done with it?" Purdy asked. "There was nothing in his clothes, his boots."

"Chard was a magician," Uncle George said. "He'd spent a good part of his life conning spectators. Whatever it was he had that the killer had to have was small enough for the killer to believe Chard could swallow. Chard holds up his clenched fist and says, 'Here's your diamond. Try to get

it.' He goes through the motions of swallowing it but it was never in his hand at all! The whole thing was a fake. Whatever it is the killer wanted, it's somewhere else. In the car and did the killer get it? Somewhere else we haven't thought of looking?"

"Where?" the judge asked.

"Chard and the Knight girl were staying at the Stone Masters' Lodge. The room there?"

"The killer has had hours to go there and search," the judge said.

"If he knew where Chard was staying," Uncle George said.

"I'll get copies made of these drawings so we can circulate them. Then I think we should make a quick trip out to Stone Masters' Lodge," Purdy said. "Care to join us, Judge?"

"Wouldn't miss it for anything," Judge Winters said. "This whole thing is getting really fascinating."

"I'll skip the Lodge trip," Uncle George said. "I'll wait for some copies of those drawings and start passing them out. I don't want to be where the Knight girl can't find me—just in case."

"Just in case what, George?" Judge Winters asked.

"Just in case she hasn't been kidnapped," Uncle George said. "Just in case she isn't being tortured to get her to tell something she doesn't know anything about. Just in case she turns up unharmed and asks me to buy her a drink I promised her."

Armed with copies of Kent Barlow's two drawings, Uncle George headed back toward town in his Jeep, with Joey beside him and Huckleberry, the springer, on the back seat, licking at his tender mouth. The road into town was jammed with Fair-bound people.

"Looks like a big crowd today," Joey said.

"I'm going to stop there, show the drawing of this man to

Sam Spencer. Give you a chance to fool around a little, boy."

"I'd rather stay with you, Uncle George," Joey said. "That's more exciting than any county fair."

"Your father won't like it."

"Well, I'm a witness, aren't I?" Joey asked. "I got to be where the police can find me if they need me, don't I?"

Hector Trimble, Joey's father, was, to put it mildly, a man of strong opinions. An expert pharmacist and a shrewd business man, Hector attempted to rule his family with an iron fist. One of the things that troubled and angered him most was Joey's idolizing of his Uncle George. Perhaps, deep down, it was jealousy. "Your brother," he would tell his wife, Esther, a strong, totally unflappable woman, "is filling the boy's mind with useless garbage! How to handle animals! Identifying weeds in the woods! Reading him trashy books about the Knights of the Round Table, nonsensical detective stories! Sherlock Holmes, for goodness' sake! Boy doesn't pay attention to his school work, to proper extracurricular activities! We've got to get him turned around, Esther."

But Esther didn't seem to feel that her brother George was doing the boy any harm. He had a better way than Hector had of teaching the boy some of the real values in life, she thought. Hector wouldn't let the family own any pets—dogs or cats. Stray hairs might get into a customer's prescription. Uncle George's dog, Timmy, took care of the boy's natural need for the companionship of a pet. Joey had actually won a couple of prizes handling Timmy for Uncle George in some hunting dog trials. Those were Joey's proudest moments and made him feel grown up.

"Too early to feel grown up!" Hector said. "The boy's just twelve years old!"

Esther smiled at her husband. "I'd rather have him grow up now than wait till he's thirty or forty, Hector."

And so it was that Joey was not grounded, or kept away

from his Uncle George. Promptness at meals, so much time for his studies, special chores, were legitimate. But to be barred from spending time with Uncle George—or King Arthur, or Sherlock Holmes, or Buffalo Bill—was a prohibition Esther wouldn't buy. When Esther wouldn't buy, Hector couldn't sell.

Joey had turned around in the front seat of the Jeep and was gently stroking Huckleberry. "I wish I could take him home with me," he said. "Timmy isn't going to like it if you take him back up to the cabin."

"Timmy and I will work it out," Uncle George said.

"You make it sound as though you and Timmy could really talk to each other," Joey said.

"We can communicate, boy, which is all that two living creatures need. I can let Timmy know that he is, and always will be, Number One."

"This little guy wants to be someone's Number One," Joey said.

"He was," Uncle George said. "He was Stanley Chard's Number One. What's bothering him now is he feels he failed him—last night, today in the shopping center."

"I suppose, in a way, he did," Joey said.

"Let that guy you saw, the one in the drawing, show up again and Huckleberry may make up for it," Uncle George said. "In a strange way, Joey, I'm counting on him."

"My dad would say, 'Keep your nose clean, leave it to the cops.'"

"He'd be right in a way, Joey. Too many cooks, or cops, spoil the broth. But Stormy Knight counted on me for help and protection and I let her down. I'm hooked."

He turned the Jeep into the crowded fairgrounds, where he was stopped by a cop. Uncle George explained he was delivering something to Sam Spencer from Captain Purdy. That opened the gate to them.

The afternoon trotting races had started. The grandstand

was crowded with happy, excited people. Sam Spencer was where Uncle George thought he would find him, near the betting booths at the north end of the grandstand.

"Your black miracle gone yet, Sam?" he asked.

"Last race of the day," Sam said. "You still got time to make yourself rich, George."

"Something I want you to look at, Sam," Uncle George said, and handed the old man a copy of the drawing Kent Barlow had made of the stranger in the shopping center. "Ever see this guy around?"

While Sam frowned down at the drawing, Uncle George told him what had happened in the shopping center earlier.

"I've seen him," Sam said finally.

"Where? When?"

"I don't know if you can know how it is, George," Sam Spencer said. "Almost every day of my life I see thousands of people come and go at fairs and circuses. I've seen this one, but not recently. Maybe last year here in Lakeview, maybe the year before."

"Or maybe somewhere else?"

"No, here," Sam said. He turned the drawing to look at it from different angles. "Two things about him. Look around you. You see anyone in a city suit with a white shirt and tie? People come to fairs in sports clothes, jeans and sports shirts. Man in a city suit looks out of place."

"That's all that makes you remember him, the city suit?"

"Nope. Around a couple of days, last year or the year before, I remember him because he spent time talking to Stan Chard. Stan Chard got rich so quick, you're interested when you see him talking to a stranger."

"You ever ask Stan who he was?"

"Nope. Because I knew he wouldn't tell me. But now I remember another place I saw him. Funny I should think of it just now."

"So where, Sam?"

"In your brother-in-law's drugstore in town."

"Hector Trimble's store?"

"Yep. It was last year, now that I fit that piece into the puzzle. I stopped in Trimble's Drugstore to buy some chewin' tobacco. This fellow, here in the drawing, was having some kind of an argument. He had a prescription he wanted refilled. Your brother-in-law wouldn't fill it. Said he couldn't refill it without a new prescription. This guy said his name and the doctor's name was right on the bottle. Trimble said that didn't cut any ice. It wasn't refillable without a new prescription. He suggested he go down to Doc Walters' and get him to make him out a new one. The guy was sore, but Trimble wouldn't budge, and this guy just stormed out of the store. Trimble said something to me about he couldn't break the law. I bought my tobacco, and that was that."

"Man's name and the doctor's name on the bottle! That may do the trick," Uncle George said.

But it didn't.

Hector Trimble, a thin, intense little man wearing wire-rimmed glasses, received Uncle George without enthusiasm. From the window of his store he could see his son, sitting in the Jeep with Huckleberry.

"I suppose I should thank you for having the decency to bring Joey home," he said.

"Decency?" Uncle George asked.

"Having mixed him up in a bloody murder, I hope your conscience told you it was time to get him away from it."

"His getting involved was not my doing, Hector," Uncle George said. He explained how Joey had seen Stormy Knight sitting in the Jeep in the shopping center and what had happened. He handed a copy of the drawing of the mystery man to Hector. "You recognize this man?"



Hector glanced at it. "I don't think so," he said.

"A year ago," Uncle George said. "Sam Spencer was in here to buy some tobacco and you were having an argument with that man about a prescription."

"An argument a year ago? This man in the picture is a stranger to me."

From the door that opened in the house attached to the store Esther appeared. "Thanks for bringing Joey back, George," she said.

"I'm afraid I may have to take him back with me to the barracks," Uncle George said.

"Absolutely not!" Hector exploded.

"May I see the picture, George?" Esther asked.

Uncle George handed her the drawing, explaining that Kent Barlow had done it from a description supplied by Joey. "This man is desperately wanted, Es. We think he killed and carved up a man named Stanley Chard at the Grove. You've heard about it?"

"Nobody in town is talking about anything else," Esther said, staring at the drawing. "I've never seen this man. But I remember about the argument, Hector."

"What argument?"

"It was a year ago at Fair time," Esther said. "A stranger came in the shop to get you to fill a prescription. It wasn't possible for you to refill it without a new prescription. You had a shouting match with him, and you came into the house all steamed up about it. I remember that Sam Spencer was here in the store. I'd seen him come in and hoped he'd stop by to say hello. I enjoy talking to him. He's been a friend of George's and mine since we were kids."

"I don't remember," Hector said. "Strangers at Fair time! They expect you to do all kinds of things you can't legally do. An argument with one of them isn't anything special."

“According to Sam the man had a bottle with his name on it and the name of the doctor who provided the original prescription,” Uncle George said.

“And I’m expected to remember those names a year later?” Hector asked.

“You might, and it could save a life,” Uncle George said.

“I don’t spend my life remembering things that aren’t important,” Hector said. “If I tried to remember the name of every stranger who comes in here, or every out-of-town doctor who made out a prescription, my head would really be cluttered up.”

“But now that the situation has been recalled, does this picture ring any kind of a bell?” Uncle George asked.

Hector studied the picture once more. “Clean-shaven man in a business suit. It’s a drawing, not a photograph. He’s like a lot of people I’ve seen coming and going.”

“There’s nothing in your records?”

“Why should there be if I didn’t fill his prescription?”

“Sam recognized the drawing?” Esther asked.

“Yes. Saw him around a year ago talking to Stanley Chard, and also here in the store.”

“Sam doesn’t make mistakes,” Esther said.

“Being right about this guy doesn’t help us catch him,” Uncle George said. “I hoped Hector might remember something that would be useful.”

“I don’t want Joey involved any further,” Hector said.

“If they catch the man, Joey will be needed to identify him,” Uncle George said.

“Joey will be available, George,” Esther said.

Copies of Kent Barlow’s drawings of the man and Stormy Knight were circulated everywhere: the stores in the shopping center, the fairgrounds, the local bars and restaurants. Within a short time a dozen people “thought” they had

seen the man, many more had seen Stormy Knight, but not at the critical time. She'd been in town twice before and was not easily forgotten by anyone with an eye for an attractive woman.

There was just one report that sounded useful. A man who drove a rubbish disposal truck had been outside the hardware store at the end of the shopping row in the center, and had seen something that was undoubtedly real.

"I was dumping garbage cans into the back of my truck," he told Captain Purdy. "I heard this dog making some angry sounds. I turned to look and saw this guy in a business suit haul off and kick the dog in the mouth. Could have been this guy in the drawing. Then this red-haired chick was all over him, pounding at him. She was certainly this woman in the other drawing."

"And then?"

"Guy took her by the arm and dragged her out into the parking lot. I saw them drive off."

"You didn't do anything to help the woman?" Purdy asked.

"Hell, Captain, they were strangers to me. I took 'em to be a married couple, she pounding on him because he'd kicked the dog. I don't ever let myself get mixed up in a husband and wife brawl. I just laughed, seeing the way he dragged her out to that car. A man's vanity won't let him be clobbered in public by his wife, I thought."

Purdy had to concede the man's logic. "You notice the kind of car they drove off in?" he asked.

The man shook his head. "I wasn't that interested, Captain. Dark-colored sedan, nothing flashy."

"License plate from this state?"

"No way. Lot of cars out there, plates way down below my line of sight. I hadn't any reason to be checking out, anyway."

"Thanks for coming in," Purdy said, leaning back in his desk chair. "If we catch up with this character you may be needed to take a look at him."

"You know where to find me, Captain—somewhere around town, shuffling garbage cans."

Judge Winters, who had been listening without interruption along with Uncle George to the man's story, spoke. "You could set up roadblocks, Captain," he suggested.

"We did, but I was too late."

"It's hours since the man was seen taking Miss Knight away," Purdy said. "They could be in New York by now."

"Or on the way to Canada," the judge said.

Uncle George brought his hand down hard on the arm of his chair. "Or just around the corner somewhere," he said.

"What's your theory, George?" the judge asked.

"You say you found Chard's quarters at the Stone Masters' Lodge had been searched?"

Purdy nodded. "Taken apart just as thoroughly as the Mercedes was."

"Had to have happened after Stormy Knight left there and thumbed a ride to the fairgrounds," Uncle George said. "Means our man didn't find what he wanted badly enough to kill for—not in the Grove, not in the car. Went to the last place he knew where to look, hours after he'd killed Chard."

"Nobody at the Lodge saw him?" Judge Winters asked.

"No. No reason anyone should have been paying attention. The Lodge is a motel, rows of individual quarters with a parking place in front of each unit. Someone staying there only has to park in front of his own unit and go in. Doesn't have to go through a lobby, like a hotel or inn."

"Door to Chard's unit wasn't forced," the judge said.

"Why should it be?" Uncle George asked. "The killer cleaned Chard's body of everything: money, wallet, all ID, car keys, and the key to his unit at the Lodge. That's how

the killer knew where to make his final search. Room key probably has a tag on it that says where it belongs.”

“So maybe he finally found what he wanted,” the judge said. “Long gone, now.”

“So why did he hang around, go shopping in the center?” Uncle George asked. “No, I don’t think he found what he wanted. But when he saw Stormy sitting in my Jeep, he must have had two thoughts. One, she might remember where she’d seen him before and be able to tell us. Two, she might know where Chard had hidden what he wanted.”

“Would she tell him?” the judge asked.

“I don’t think she would,” Uncle George said. “From what she told me, she really loved Stanley Chard. She’d know this man must have been his killer. She wouldn’t help him, whatever he threatened.”

“Why did she go with him?” Purdy asked.

“Gun in her ribs,” Uncle George said. “I’m not going to be looking for her in New York or Canada. I’m very much afraid we’re going to find her body in a roadside ditch or the lake.”

“You think he’ll have killed her?” the judge asked.

“You can only hang once for murder, whether you’ve killed one person or a dozen,” Uncle George said.

The town of Lakeview was abuzz with the story of the horror that had taken place in the Grove that morning, but it wasn’t as though Stanley Chard, the victim, had been one of them. Had one of their neighbors been shot and carved up, everyone in town would have been charged up, hot to find the killer. As it stood, it was just an exciting story with everyone eagerly waiting to hear the next installment.

George Crowder didn’t fit into that category. In the brief time he had known her, he had come to like Stormy Knight. He could still feel the tight grip of her fingers

around his wrist when she'd stood in the hospital morgue, the dead body of her lover under the sheet on the hospital table. She had trusted him and he'd been careless with that trust. She had asked him to represent her.

"No reason you shouldn't have left her alone in your Jeep out there in the shopping center," Red Egan said. "You had no way of knowing that she was in any danger."

The two old friends were sitting in the back room of Red Egan's sporting goods store in town, a room that served as the sheriff's office. In the next room they could hear the click of pool balls as some of Red's customers enjoyed a game of eight ball.

"I told myself I have an instinct for trouble," Uncle George said. "It failed me this time." He grimaced. "It failed me once before, which is why I'm not practicing law any more."

"You want to blame yourself for sending an innocent man to his death more than ten years ago, it's your privilege," Red Egan said. "But you weren't responsible. You prosecuted a man on the evidence supplied to you by the State Police. If anyone should be crying over what happened, it should be the cops who fouled it up."

"I should have sensed the truth," Uncle George said. "I should have known this morning that Stormy Knight was in a risky situation."

"It may not be too late, George."

"I wish I thought so. It's pretty obvious, isn't it, that she could tell us who the man was who took her away? He can't risk giving her a second chance, can he?"

Red Egan tamped down the tobacco in his corn cob pipe and flicked a kitchen match into flame with his thumbnail. He had to admit George was probably right. No second chance for the woman.

"So, we have to start at square one," Red said.

"We?"

"You know I'll go along with you, George, any way you want me to. Right now I should be over at the fairgrounds. Late afternoon and going into the evening is the time when things can get a little hairy over there. Lot of beer drinking, boozing."

"I'll go with you," Uncle George said. "The fairgrounds may be square one. Someone over there, the people who travel from fair to fair like Chard, may be able to tell us how he got so rich, what his real operation was. He was obviously putting the heat on someone right here in Lakeview."

"Blackmail, you think?" Red asked, as he got up from his desk chair. "The killer wasn't someone who lives here in Lakeview, George. Too many people have looked at that sketch and come up drawing a blank. Between us, you and I know every living soul in this town. Has to be someone who came from somewhere else to find Chard."

Red bent down to knock out his pipe in the metal ashtray on his desk. At that precise moment there was a massive explosion at the rear of the building that shook the place right down to its foundation and almost knocked the sheriff off his feet.

"Sounds like a gas station blew up!" Uncle George said.

Red went to the rear door of his office. Voices, shouting and screaming, drifted in.

"Holy Judas, George!" Red said. "It's your Jeep. Blown to pieces, burning."





*Part* \_\_\_\_\_

***TWO***

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**L** At the back of Red Egan's little store was a loading platform where trucks bringing supplies could deliver their orders. There was a good-sized turnaround space for large vehicles. Uncle George had chosen to park his Jeep there and go in the back way, partly because it was nobody's business where he was and half the town knew his Jeep by sight, and partly because the springer spaniel was lying on the back seat. With his hurt mouth the dog could have been snappish if someone stopped to speak to him or tried to pet him.

Parked just behind the burning remains of the Jeep was a truck. A man was standing by the front fender, close to the flames from the burning Jeep, pounding on the engine hood of the truck and screaming at people who seemed to be appearing from everywhere.

"He's in there! Help him! For the love of God, help him!"

For a few minutes there was no way to get a sensible story from anyone. Red had bounded back into his office to call the fire department. Uncle George, standing just outside the back door, seemed to be frozen where he stood. The feisty little dog was gone. He couldn't have survived this unbelievable disaster. For just a moment Uncle George thought the man pounding on the hood of the truck and screaming "He's in there!" was referring to Huckleberry. Then he realized it was something much worse than that. He went over to the man, the flames hot against his face.

"Who's in there?" Uncle George asked.

The man turned. Tears were streaming down his face. Uncle George saw that the man's hands looked like broiled meat. He'd evidently been trying to get at something in the fire.

"We came in here to deliver some cartons of goods to Egan's store," the man said in a choking, broken voice. "Jeep parked so we couldn't get to the loading platform. We thought we could push it out of the way. My boy—my boy—" He couldn't go on.

"Your boy?"

"My boy! My son! Oh please God, help me!" The man leaned back against the truck, apparently oblivious to the pain his burned hands must be feeling. "Jack thought he could loosen the brake and we could push the Jeep out of the way. He got in the Jeep and then called out to me, 'No sweat. The keys are in the ignition.' He bent forward and the whole damn world blew up!"

Sirens sounded from out on the main street and a fire truck came down the alley between buildings. Uncle George knew that neither boy nor dog could have survived this holocaust. He felt a hand rest on his arm and turned. Red Egan, his face white and set in rock-hard lines, looked at him.

"That was meant for you, George," he said.

It seemed as if the whole town was trying to crowd into the small area behind Red's store: volunteer firemen, State Troopers, the ambulance from the hospital, neighbors, casual passersby. Hysteria and confusion made it impossible even to think of starting some kind of investigation. Who had seen what before the explosion? A bomb had been planted in the Jeep, set to go off when the motor was started. Somebody had to have gone into the area back of Red's store, opened the hood of the Jeep, and installed the bomb.

Uncle George, a comforting hand on the burned man's shoulder as the fireman pumped water and foam and chemicals onto the destroyed Jeep, kept asking himself "Why?" He had no personal enemies that he knew of who would go to such lengths to kill him. It had taken technical skill to plant the bomb. He refused to believe, in these first moments, that it could have been the work of some kick-hungry kids who didn't even know who the Jeep belonged to. "That was meant for you, George," Red had said. Could it have some connection with the murder of Stanley Chard and the abduction of Stormy Knight? He didn't know anything yet that made him dangerous. Did someone think he had stumbled onto something that would lead him to an answer, that Stormy had told him something that would trap a killer?

The man with burned hands moved away toward the Jeep which was now just giving off a cloud of dark smoke.

"My son is in there!"

A fireman gave him a pitying look. "Too late, I'm afraid. No one could have survived that."

The man let out a sound like a howling animal and turned away, wracked by sobs.

Captain Purdy worked his way through the noisy crowd to Uncle George. "Close call for you, George," he said.

"That man's son was in the Jeep, trying to move it," Uncle George said. "Also that stray dog I picked up."

"Blown to pieces before they ever felt any fire," Purdy said. "Something more than vandalism, you think?"

"The bomb didn't go off until that boy turned the key in the ignition switch and started the motor. It was meant to kill whoever did that, Jim. I was meant to do it."

"Somebody had to come back here, lift the hood on the Jeep, attach the bomb. Several minutes, at the least. Could have been seen."

"No one come forward?"

"Not yet."

"If someone saw a man working on the Jeep, they wouldn't wait to tell you."

"Who knows? Scared they might be next?"

A hospital attendant was trying to do something for the man with the burned hands. He wanted to have his grief in private, but Purdy couldn't let him have that moment to himself. His statement came out of him, bit by bit. His name was Stewart Caldwell. He drove a truck for a sporting goods firm in the state capital. He'd come to Lakeview with an order for Red Egan, a trip he'd made many times before. His son Jack had made the trip with him—just for company.

"We drove in the alley like always," Caldwell said. "No one around, but that parked Jeep was in the way of our getting to the loading platform. We decided to try to move it ourselves."

"You didn't think of looking for the owner?"

"We'd been listening to the radio on the way into town," Caldwell said. "Heard about the murder at the Grove. I figured Red Egan wouldn't be in his office. We thought Jack could get in the Jeep, loosen the brake, and I could push it away with my truck. Only had to move it a few feet. Jack got in, saw the key in the ignition, and called back to me that he could move it without help. And then—oh, God!"

"There was a dog in the Jeep," Uncle George said. "He didn't try to stop your boy?"

"I—I didn't see any dog," Caldwell said. "Anyway, Jack was good with animals. Your Jeep, Mister—?"

"Crowder."

"You're well known around here," Caldwell said. "Used to be a lawman, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Someone out to get you, got my Jack instead." Cald-

well's body seemed to writhe in pain. "You find him, you better lock me up, because I'll kill the bastard if I ever get my hands on him!"

Troopers were asking people to leave the area unless they knew something that would be helpful. People leaving expressed outrage or sympathy to Uncle George, to Caldwell. The instant hysteria seemed to have turned into a kind of subdued shock.

Suddenly Hector Trimble was there, gripping Uncle George's arms with fingers that felt like steel. "Joey?" he asked, his voice harsh.

"What about him, Hector?"

"Was he in that Jeep, waiting for you?"

"I left him with you and Esther," Uncle George said, a sense of chill creeping along his spine.

"Oh, he took off as always. Probably playing detective in your murder case."

Uncle George turned to Caldwell, who was still being questioned by Purdy. "It's important for you to try to remember, Mr. Caldwell. You told me you didn't see a dog in the Jeep. Was there by any chance a twelve-year-old boy standing around by it?"

"I didn't see anyone," Caldwell said. "If we had we might have asked him to find the owner of the Jeep."

"My son could have been in that Jeep," Hector said.

"My son *was* in it!" Caldwell almost shouted. He made an effort to control himself. "If there'd been a boy around, we'd have asked him to find the owner. You're home free, mister."

In almost all criminal cases, Uncle George told himself, you begin with the end result and have to try to find your way back to the starting point. Their best chance here was an eyewitness who didn't realize what he'd been seeing. A standing car with the hood up and someone apparently trying to repair something you wouldn't pay too much at-

tention to unless you were a mechanic and thought you might be helpful. Perhaps now, with the explosion a fact, someone, maybe miles away by this time, might remember something. But the Jeep hadn't been out on the street where people would have seen it as they went to work, or to the post office across the way, or to visit a neighbor. The place back of Red's store wasn't a public parking place. You got to it through an alley between the store and a neighboring house if you were driving a car. You could get to it through the fields at the back if you hoped to get there unnoticed.

The house on the other side of the alley from the store was occupied by Miss Maude Robinson, a spinster in her eighties, whom everyone now alive in town had known most of their lives. She had spent her early years caring for an invalid father, and when he died and left her comfortably fixed for money, she had just lived quietly where she always had, known to be nice to kids—there was always candy in her kitchen pantry or a popsicle in her refrigerator—helpful to neighbors who had troubles, involved in church work and local charities. She was the one person who, working in her kitchen, might have seen someone in the area back of Red's store.

But she hadn't.

The old lady answered Uncle George's knock on the front door herself. She looked flustered but delighted.

"George Crowder! They say it was your car! How awful!"

"A little more awful than just my Jeep, Miss Maude," Uncle George said. "There was a young man in it when it blew up."

"Oh my goodness! But come in George, come in." She gave him a kind of coy smile. "I'm not alone. But you surely know Atwood Cline."

It was, Uncle George thought, not only his day for murder and violence, but his day for hobnobbing with the rich



and socially prominent. Atwood Cline, known as Woody to his friends, owned one of the fancy lakefront properties in town. He had started out, Uncle George remembered, at a rather less flamboyant level. Cline had been a teacher in the high school when Uncle George had first encountered him. He had, the story went, been taken under the wing of Willis Winters, long dead father of Judge Thorne Winters, along with another friend of young Thorne's. There had been three boys: Thorne Winters, Woody Cline, and Alex Clement. Some local wag had called them "the Three Must-Get-Theres." Thorne Winters had risen to the bench of the State Supreme Court, Woody Cline was president of the State University, and Alex Clement was president of the Lakeview Bank & Trust Company. Mission accomplished. The judge had been born rich, but old Willis Winters' genius for finance had been passed on to the other two.

Woody Cline, as far as Uncle George knew, had never married. He was a genial man with a loud, booming laugh. Young people who had passed through his hands, first as a teacher and later as an administrator, liked and respected him.

"George! Nice to see you," Woody Cline said from behind Miss Robinson. The familiar loud laugh followed. "Perhaps I should say 'nice to see you alive!'"

"It's really not a laughing matter, Woody," Uncle George said. "There was a young man in my Jeep, blown to pieces."

"Oh my goodness!" Miss Robinson repeated. "Do come in, George. I've just made some coffee." She moved away, brisk in spite of her years.

"Didn't mean to be flip, George," Cline said. "I was in the post office across the street when the explosion seemed to shake the whole damn town. Ran out into the street. People seemed to think it was a gas tank at the back of Red

Egan's store. Then I saw Miss Maude, out on her front porch, clinging to one of the uprights. Old friend—I thought she'd been hurt."

"It must have really shaken this house," Uncle George said.

Cline nodded. He took off his horn-rimmed glasses and wiped them with a white linen handkerchief. "Knocked some china off the cabinet in the dining room, broke a window pane in the kitchen. Scared the hell out of Miss Maude." He laughed again. "She was grateful to me for coming. Offered me a candy bar, which I don't mind telling you took me back a few years."

"Almost everyone in this town grew up with her as a kind of Auntie Maude," Uncle George said. "I came in, first to be sure she was all right, and second on the chance that she might have seen someone tinkering with that Jeep of mine from her kitchen window."

"I haven't been in the kitchen since lunch time," Miss Robinson said, returning from the kitchen. "That is, not till after Woody stopped in to help and I went out there to make this coffee." She handed Uncle George a china mug. "As I remember, no sugar or cream."

"You remember right." The coffee was delicious. "This death of a young man is a serious business, Miss Maude."

"Oh my! It's murder, isn't it, George? First in the Grove and now this!"

"I knew that your kitchen windows overlook that place back of Red's store, Miss Maude. I hoped it was possible you might have seen someone fooling around the car. You wouldn't have had any reason to think it was important, but you might have seen."

The old lady shook her head. "I hate to tell you, George, that I'm about as ghoulish as anyone else. I've been in my front room most of the day, listening to my radio about

what happened in the Grove. Would you believe I knew the man?"

"Stanley Chard?"

She nodded. "I used to go the Fair, always. Years ago I saw him do his act, swallowing a flaming sword. It was amazing. Of course I knew it was a trick and I was dying of curiosity to know how he managed it."

"Did you find out how, Miss Maude?" Woody Cline asked.

"No! He was very pleasant. Said it was a secret of his trade. Would I tell anyone how I made my mince pie filling?" She laughed. "Showed me how to do some card tricks, so I could befuddle my friends and amuse the kids. But not a hint of how he swallowed that fiery sword blade and brought it out still burning."

"I understand there was a woman traveling with him," Woody Cline said. "Isn't she able to explain the trick to you, George?"

"Says Chard kept it a secret," Uncle George said. "And right now the lady isn't available." He told them about Stormy's disappearance in the shopping center.

"Your Joey didn't recognize the man?" Woody Cline asked.

"No." Uncle George took a folded copy of Kent Barlow's drawing from his inside pocket and showed it to them.

"Never saw him before," Woody Cline said.

Miss Robinson hesitated. "You live as long as I have—eighty-eight years—you don't like to say a flat yes or no. Something about him . . ."

"Think, Miss Maude!"

She shook her head. "Could be like some actor I've seen on television or in the movies."

Uncle George didn't tell her that the drawing had begun with a likeness of the actor James Garner, suggested to

Barlow by Joey. "We know he was in town at least once before—a year ago," he said. "He knew Chard, was seen talking with him. Did some business in Hector Trimble's drugstore."

"Hector would know him, then," Miss Robinson said.

"A strange customer, for just a few minutes. Had no reason to know his name or anything about him. He'd probably know him if he saw him again, but we have to find him first." Uncle George's mouth tightened. "There is someone else who could identify him but he isn't available either."

"Who?" Woody Cline asked.

"A dog, a springer spaniel." Uncle George told them about Huckleberry. "I'm afraid he was in the Jeep, probably lying down on the floor out of sight, when the explosion blew him—and the Caldwell boy—to pieces."

"I wish I could help, George," Miss Robinson said. "We just can't allow this kind of thing to go on in our world."

Woody Cline gave Uncle George a troubled look. "You'd better watch your step, George. When he finds out he didn't get you . . ."

Woody Cline's warning was not a new notion to Uncle George. It had crept into his consciousness after the first stunning reaction following the bombing of the Jeep. It had been meant for him, not as a warning but as the end of his life. It had to be because he was dangerous to someone, yet he hadn't the faintest idea what made him a special threat to the killer. It had to be the man who'd killed Stanley Chard and silenced Stormy Knight. The man must believe that Stormy had told Uncle George something that would lead to identifying him. Just being one of the people who was working on the case wasn't enough. Captain Purdy and his men, Red Egan, Sergeant Conroy, the homicide detective, all were equally dangerous to the killer except for one

thing. None of them had spent any time alone with Stormy Knight.

People were clustered along the main street of the town, all talking about the bombing and the murder. Crossing the street on foot to his sister's house and Hector's drugstore turned out to be an obstacle race. People crowded after him asking who, why, what. He hadn't any more answers for them than he had for himself. But he had to get to Hector and Esther and Joey.

The boy came running out of the family house as his uncle approached. He ran to Uncle George and clung to him.

"They tried to kill you!" he said in a frightened voice.

The man held his nephew close. "I'm all in one piece, boy, not hurt a bit. But we've got to talk."

In the house Esther Trimble embraced her brother. They didn't need words. Hector joined them through the connecting door from his store.

"Any leads?" Hector asked.

"Nothing. So far no one's come forward who saw anyone tinkering with the Jeep. Miss Robinson, whose kitchen windows overlook the area back of Red's store, wasn't looking out at the right time."

"If the truck driver's son hadn't tried to move the Jeep, it would have been you, George," Esther said, still standing close to her brother, touching him as though she needed reassurance.

"That's why I'm here," Uncle George said. "Unless we come up with some answers, whoever it is may try again."

"Why, George? Why on earth—?" Esther asked.

"He thinks I know something that I don't know," Uncle George said. He looked down at Joey. "Until we catch up with him, boy, you've got to stay away from me."

"Uncle George!"

"I don't want you to come up to my cabin. I don't want

you to hang around me here in town. This man may try to take a potshot at me from somewhere. Anyone with me could be hurt."

"I'm glad you see it that way, George," Hector said. "I've just finished telling Joey that he had to stay away from you."

"Your father's right, boy," Uncle George said. "Until we catch this killer, you might say I'm a kind of contagious disease."

"I could be watching you," Joey protested. "From a distance. I might see someone who could be threatening you. I'd know the man if I saw him again."

"No," Uncle George said. He put his arm around the boy. "I won't be caught off guard again, I promise you."

Esther had crossed to the sideboard and came back with a set of keys. "You're going to need wheels until you can get yourself a new Jeep," she said. "Take my car. It's in the garage."

"Thanks, Es. That will be a tremendous help."

"And George, please, please take care."

Uncle George gave her a tight little smile. "I've got to catch up with him before he catches up with me," he said. He reached down and ruffled Joey's hair. "Stay out of trouble, boy."

"I'll see to that," Hector said.

A man comes to a dangerous crisis in his life and he turns to his friends for help. Uncle George, as he walked out to the garage for his sister's car, felt that he was short on friends. There was really only Red Egan, deeply involved now with his official business. He didn't stop to think that most of the people in the town of Lakeview were his friends, admired him, cared for him, and would have offered any kind of help he chose to ask for. He felt suddenly alone, shut away from Esther and Joey who were his fam-

ily, because to be with them could place them in danger.

It was his intention to go back out to the fairgrounds. There must be someone out there besides Sam Spencer who had known Stanley Chard, who could have seen the man who had abducted Stormy Knight from the shopping center, seen him yesterday, or today, or last year. But then, as he backed Esther's little blue Chevette out of the garage, he remembered a friend he had neglected since the first light of this violent day. His setter, Timmy, had been waiting for him all this time back at the cabin on the mountain.

He headed for home. The Chevette wasn't quite as adept on the logging road up to the cabin as his destroyed Jeep had been. As he approached the cabin, driving in low gear, he saw Timmy sitting just outside the front door of the cabin, barking cheerfully. Timmy knew the car, had often greeted Esther with that cheerful bark when she'd come up the hill to see her brother. But when Uncle George opened the door and stepped out of the car Timmy came bounding toward him, hysterical with delight.

Uncle George knelt down and Timmy was all over him, licking him, whimpering with pleasure.

"Thought I walked out on you, kid?" Uncle George asked, ruffling the hair on the dog's neck and behind his ears. "Hungry, I bet."

They walked to the door of the cabin, Timmy bounding back and forth, talking his very special kind of dog talk. Uncle George opened the cabin door and stood frozen where he was.

The cabin was a shambles. It looked as if a hurricane had struck it. Clothes were scattered around. Bureau drawers had been pulled out and left open, their contents on the floor. In the kitchen area, the jars that had held sugar and flour and spices had been opened and emptied. The doors to the cabinet where he kept his hunting rifles, shotguns,

and fishing equipment stood open, the guns, rods, fisherman's baskets spread around outside it. Books had been taken out of the cases on the wall and strewn around. The desk had been ransacked and the typewriter tossed on the floor, lying there upside down.

Timmy stood by his master, wagging his tale in a slow, tentative way.

"What the hell happened here, kid?" Uncle George asked.

He knew the dog so well. No stranger could have broken into the cabin without Timmy objecting strongly, physically. If the dog had been shut outside while the search took place, the intruder would have had to leave. Timmy would have been waiting, ready to protest unless the searcher was someone he had reason to think was a friend.

The first quick check didn't reveal that anything had been stolen. Only the typewriter and the emptied food cans had been damaged. Uncle George kept some spare spending money in his top desk drawer, fifty dollars in bills in case he needed it for an emergency. It was still there. The searcher had been looking for something specific. It was not just a break-in and a robbery. Expensive guns had been left behind, a radio and a TV set, items an ordinary thief could have cashed in on.

His years as county prosecutor made it more automatic for Uncle George to think in terms of police procedure than an average man might have. It would have been almost impossible for anyone to go so thoroughly over a place without leaving some trace of himself in the way of fingerprints or other clues to his identity. Before he messed things up by handling everything, putting things back in place, Uncle George knew he needed expert help from Captain Purdy, a fingerprint man, a photographer, the special police vacuum cleaner that could pick up particles of dirt and dust for analysis in the police lab.



The nearest phone was in a neighboring farmhouse down on the main highway. He was about to take off when he heard a little murmur of protest from Timmy. The dog was hungry, of course. As he turned toward the floor-level cabinet in the corner where he stored the dog food, he saw that the bag of meal had been taken out, emptied and pawed over. The cans of dog meat were untouched. The searcher hadn't bothered with sealed cans of any kind. He scooped up a couple of handfuls of the meal, opened a can of dog meat and mixed them in Timmy's plastic dish, reached for the kettle on the back of the wood stove to moisten the food with hot water and discovered that the kettle had been emptied. A damp place on the floor showed where the water had been poured. Uncle George bent down and touched a little puddle with his finger. The water was still warm. He hadn't missed the bastard by much!

He wet the food with water from the sink tap and took it out on the porch, where Timmy wolfed it down. The dog looked up, a question in his brown eyes: what next?

"Stay and guard, Timmy. Guard!"

The dog sat down on the porch, disappointed but not questioning the command.

"No one, Timmy! Not anyone!"

As he drove the Chevette down the hill toward the farm owned by Josh and Doris Henry where there was a phone, Uncle George told himself it was time he became a realist. In the quiet, undisturbed village of Lakeview there had never been any feeling of insecurity. As a boy he could never remember his family locking the doors of their house. "Anyone wants to get in bad enough, they'll get in," his father used to say. George had grown up, become a public figure of sorts, and had never made a routine of locking up. He had never locked the cabin in the ten years he had lived there. He wasn't even sure he still had a key

for the front-door lock. Leave his Jeep in a private place, like the area behind Red Egan's store and office, he more often than not left the key in the ignition. "In case someone wants to move it." Well, just that had happened and a young man had died, along with that sad little springer spaniel. Old assumptions had died a sudden death in just one day.

Doris Henry came out of the back door of her house to greet Uncle George as he came up the path.

"Mercy, George!" she said. "What's happening in our town? I been listening to the radio; a murder in the Grove, and I just heard someone bombed your Jeep."

"That's just part of it, Doris," Uncle George said. "Someone has broken into my cabin, torn it apart."

"Oh, mercy! Steal things?"

"Looking for something that wasn't there, I think," Uncle George said. "May I use your phone?"

"Of course. Come in."

Captain Purdy wasn't at the barracks. Uncle George hadn't really expected he would be. He explained to the trooper on the desk what had happened and said that he'd be waiting at the cabin for Purdy and his experts to get there.

"You didn't happen to notice anyone going up the logging road, did you, Doris?" he asked when he'd hung up the phone.

"No. I was beginning to get ready to make supper. People come and go up and down your road, George—kids and men going fishing in summer, hunting in the fall. It's not anything I take special notice of. Today—well, I've been staying pretty close to my radio."

"Not to be wondered at."

"Timmy was with you?" Doris asked. She was an ample-bosomed country woman, tired-looking yet very much alive.

"No, fortunately, or he'd have been blown up in the Jeep. I have a feeling whoever broke in was someone Timmy knew."

"He isn't an attack dog, George. He'd give you a warning if you were around, but he wouldn't attack anyone, would he? Not the nature of that kind of dog."

"True, but he'd have let me know if he thought something was wrong when I got home. Acted as though everything was perfectly normal—except that I'd been away too long."

"People know him and he knows people," Doris said. "Hunters and fishermen encounter him all the time when they go up beyond your cabin into the woods. They make friends with him. He never goes off your property, but I've often seen him come right down to the highway with kids and men who've been up in the woods. Whoever broke in must have known you could turn up any time."

"I don't think he expected me to turn up, now or ever," Uncle George said, a cold glint in his blue eyes. "He expected me to be dead in that Jeep any time I started for home."

"Oh, mercy, George!"

"Thanks for the phone."

"Josh is down in the lower field with the hired man, baling hay," Doris Henry said. "It's possible they saw someone go up or come down your road."

"I'll try them on the way out," George said.

Neither Josh Henry nor the farmhand working with him on the baling machine had seen anyone.

"Doesn't mean there wasn't anyone," Josh Henry said. "We been working our behinds off trying to get this hay baled and loaded before the showers we're going to get tonight. No reason to pay any attention to anyone coming or going on your road." He grinned. "If it was a beautiful woman, she might have caught our eye."

For the first time since he was a very small boy, George Crowder felt an anxiety for his own personal safety. As a kid, the goblins, the ghosts, the shadows in the dark, had been unreal. There was nothing unreal about the bomb that killed the Caldwell boy and the springer. It had been meant for him, and by now the bomber knew that he'd failed to demolish his target. George Crowder had always been a fatalist. When it was his time it would come, but he told himself, with something like anger, that he didn't want to learn in the next world who had murdered Stanley Chard, probably Stormy Knight, the Caldwell boy, and the dog. The girl and the dog had counted on him for protection and he'd let them both down through carelessness and an insensitive unawareness of danger. He meant to square those accounts before anyone began singing hymns for him.

If the killer was determined, he could be waiting somewhere in the bush on either side of the logging road to the cabin, or somewhere in the woods surrounding the cabin, waiting to get a clear shot at him.

Beyond all this was the one big question—*why?* He had no evidence against the killer. Kent Barlow's drawing of the man Joey had seen in the shopping center wasn't evidence. A lead, but not evidence; it had already been circulated around town before the bomb had been set in the Jeep. Killing Uncle George wouldn't remove the drawing, take it out of the hands of the police and other concerned citizens of the town. Searching the cabin made even less sense. The searcher hadn't wanted to steal something that could be converted into cash. He'd left too many things of value that could easily have been carried away. Uncle George had nothing of any danger to anyone. Why would the killer think he had?

He pulled the Chevette up in front of the cabin in the

woods. Timmy was sitting on the front porch, exactly where he'd been left, ears pricked forward, waiting to be told he was freed from the commands to stay and guard. Uncle George switched off the Chevette's engine and pocketed the keys, but he didn't move from behind the wheel. So much had happened, so quickly and so violently in the last few hours, that he hadn't had the time to put it all together, coolly and without emotion.

It looked like this, he told himself. Stanley Chard had arranged to meet the killer in the Grove after the Lions' picnic was over—after midnight, early hours of the morning. Chard had something the killer wanted, something Chard wanted to sell, like drugs, or something he was using as a tool for blackmail. They hadn't been able to make a deal. The killer had threatened Chard with a gun, and Chard had gone through his pretense of swallowing what the killer wanted. The killer had shot to kill, unscrewed the iron hook from the ceiling beam, and carved Chard open to find what he'd "swallowed." Chard hadn't swallowed anything, just gone through his magic routine to make the killer believe he had. What had he done with whatever it was?

The killer, having spent time searching Chard's body, his clothes, and probably the equipment shed for what he wanted, must have guessed that he'd been flimflammed by a magician's trick. He had searched Chard's car and its contents, eventually driving it to the fairgrounds. Finding the car there would delay the identification of the body in the equipment shed. Where does he look next for what he so desperately wants?

Does he go out to the fairgrounds again to try to find out where Chard is staying? Or does he already know that and have to wait for Stormy Knight to leave the Stone Masters' Lodge so he can search the room? No luck there, and he

comes back into town, goes to buy something in the market and, as he emerges, finds himself face to face with Stormy, sitting in Uncle George's Jeep.

Here, Uncle George told himself, it gets sticky. The man hurries away. He realizes that Stormy has recognized him, but we know that she doesn't know who he is. She's asked Joey if he knows. Stormy knows the man, and yet she doesn't know him. Had she seen him last year when we know the man was in town, doing business with Chard, trying to get Hector to fill a prescription for him? Does she guess that he is the person with whom Chard had business when he left her at the Stone Masters' Lodge the night before? She chases him, catches up with him, is seen pounding at him after he has kicked the springer spaniel in the mouth. She's not pounding at him because he's kicked the dog, but because she thinks he may have killed the man she loved. She was probably accusing him in that pounding and shouting session. The man drags her to his car and takes off with her.

Now it gets even stickier, Uncle George thought. A couple of hours after Stormy's abduction, a bomb is planted in his Jeep. Why? The endlessly recurring "*why?*" The killer has taken Stormy somewhere that they won't be seen—the woods, somewhere the killer himself has a room? This may be the killer's last chance to find what he must have. Chard's woman would surely know, wouldn't she? What kind of threats, what kind of physical violence does he employ to get Stormy to tell him what he has to know? It was, Uncle George thought, an ugly blank. Why not tell him and save herself? But if she doesn't know? Maybe she threatens back; George Crowder is on the track and he isn't a loser. By now she knows what the man is after because he's asked her for it. He can't let her go, can he? She has probably always known, in spite of her denials. If she has even so much as hinted at it to her friend, Crowder, he has

to be silenced, too. The bomb is planted, the killer waits for the sound of the explosion, and then, assuming that Uncle George is dead, has time to go to the cabin to search, just in case.

The sound of a car engine broke Uncle George's concentration, and glancing up into the rearview mirror, he saw a trooper car coming up the logging road, a red light blinking on the top. The arrivals were Sergeant Conroy, the homicide man, and a uniformed trooper. Uncle George knew his name was Bell.

Conroy got out of the car and came around to the driver's side of the Chevette.

"Purdy is up to his neck, as you can imagine," Conroy said. "He passed your message on to me. You taking a nap out here?"

Uncle George gave him a sour smile. "I thought I'd wait for you, in case somebody has prepared an ambush for me out there."

Conroy took a quick look at the woods, darkening in the twilight. "Captain Purdy had something like that in mind," he said. "That's why he sent me. I'm supposed to take you back to the barracks. If you won't come voluntarily, I'm to place you in protective custody and take you there. Trooper Bell will do the fingerprint work in your shack. Photographer is on the way."

There wasn't much choice. "I'd like to take my dog with me," Uncle George said. He opened the car door and called to Timmy who came racing down off the porch to him.

"I'll drive. You stay down low in the seat," Conroy said. "If there is someone, this'll be his last chance at you."

It would be best, Uncle George thought, to get to Purdy and Red Egan, who spoke his language.

## 2

If there was a sniper anywhere in the woods, he made no move against the blue Chevette as Conroy drove it down to the main highway. Uncle George and the trooper sergeant didn't have anything to talk about. For no good reason there was an instinctive hostility between the two men. Probably, Uncle George thought, Conroy thought of him as some sort of eccentric local character, while he thought of Conroy as a smart aleck young squirt who needed considerable seasoning to become bearable.

As they approached the red-brick barracks building, it was clear that the parking area was jammed to overflowing, and that cars were parked along the shoulder of the highway in both directions. Conroy drove the Chevette around to the back of the building, reserved for trooper cars.

"Hundreds of kooks," Conroy said. "All of them think they know something or saw something; all got to talk to Purdy in person. When they've all dished up what they know or saw, it will add up to one big zero!"

Captain Purdy, looking harassed, was in his office, along with Red Egan and Judge Winters, who seemed to have taken the day off to observe the excitement.

"I don't appreciate being threatened with arrest, Jim," Uncle George said to the captain.

Purdy gave Sergeant Conroy a quick look. "You weren't meant to take that seriously, George. I just wanted to impress on you that you were needed here."

"For what?"

"To stop you from making a target of yourself. I need you alive, friend."



"So I'm to be put in mothballs?"

"Come on, George," Purdy said. "We need to work together. It doesn't make sense for me to head off in one direction, Red in another, you in a third. I'm going to deputize you so you have some authority."

"And have to take orders, right?"

"You object to that?"

"You're looking for a murderer, a bomber, a ransacker," Uncle George said. "I'm looking for a woman, or what's left of her. I've been thinking, Jim. She, or her remains, can't be too far away. Look how it is. Chard was murdered in the early hours of the morning—one, two o'clock, after the Lions' picnic was over. The killer takes time to cut him open, looking for something he *didn't* swallow. That took some time. He didn't leave town then. He searched the equipment shed, and then took Chard's car somewhere and tore it apart. More time, and he's still in Lakeview. Morning, and he's waiting for Stormy Knight to show up at the fairgrounds. When she does, he takes off for the Stone Masters' Lodge and searches the Chard-Knight room there. Still in Lakeview. Around noon he is at the market in the shopping center and is spotted by Stormy. When he can't escape her, he abducts her, drives her off in a car. Out of town? I don't think so. We don't hear from him again for a couple of hours. Presumably he is trying to get some information out of Stormy—and probably disposing of her. He's still not out of town, though, because he then sets a bomb in my Jeep. Would he leave town after that? Not when he learns that it wasn't me who triggered the bomb. It's not illogical to assume that he's still here in Lakeview, waiting for another chance at me. So, dead or alive, Stormy isn't far away. You want to order me to find her, fine. You want to order me to do something else, drop dead!"

"Where do you propose to look?" Purdy asked.

"This character has a hideout somewhere," Uncle

George said. "In a relatively short time he touches down at the Grove, the fairgrounds, the Stone Masters' Lodge, the shopping center, the area back of Red's store, my cabin. He can't be traveling miles away between each step. He's probably somewhere within a stone's throw of this office right now."

"With that drawing circulating all over town—all over the county—he's going to have to stay pretty much out of sight," Judge Winters said.

"If he looks like that drawing," Uncle George said. "Remember, that's an artist's mock-up from a boy's description. Joey saw him head on for only a few seconds. The artist asks him if the man he saw looked like someone else, maybe an actor on TV or in films. Joey comes up with James Garner, the TV star. So the artist fools around—'Were the eyebrows thicker? The hair shorter? The lines in the face deeper?' Finally Joey says, 'Yeah, yeah, he looked like that!' Could be, but the man we're after may already have seen the drawing and be laughing himself sick. He doesn't really look like that at all. Two or three seconds wasn't enough time for Joey to be reliable."

"But probably if the boy saw him again he'd know him," Judge Winters said.

Uncle George gave the judge a thin smile. "The boy isn't going to see anyone but his mother and father until we catch this creep. Joey is a lot more dangerous to him than I am. I think you should have a trooper guarding the Trimble house, Jim."

"I'm already too damn short-handed," Purdy said. "But yes."

A trooper came in from the front desk, and through the open door they could hear a clamor of voices.

"Woman out here, Captain, who says she was in business with Stanley Chard."

"Oh, brother!" Purdy said.

"Came in on the last bus from New York," the trooper said. "She sounds on the level, Captain."

"Does she have a name?"

"Abigail Faber," the trooper said.

"See her, Jim," Uncle George said, his voice harsh. "Stormy met Chard through this Faber woman."

Purdy waved his order to the trooper. The woman who was brought back into the office was probably in her fifties, Uncle George guessed. A nice figure, smart summer dress, expensive handbag, makeup a little too theatrical for a woman her age.

"I'm Captain Purdy," the officer told her. "This is Red Egan, the local sheriff and George Crowder, a deputy. The gentleman over there is Judge Winters, State Supreme Court. I'd like them to hear what you have to tell me."

"I want you to tell me something before I tell you anything," the woman said. "Have you found Stormy Knight?"

"No, I'm sorry to say. You know she's missing?" Purdy asked.

"Radio, television," Abigail Faber said. "That's why I'm here. I understand you have a picture of the man who abducted her."

"We have a police artist's drawing, based on a description given by a witness," Purdy said. He reached across his desk and handed the woman a copy of Barlow's drawing.

Abigail Faber frowned at it. "Familiar; and yet I don't remember just at the moment where I've seen him." She looked up. "But that's not the most important thing to me. Are you sure, Captain, that the man who was shot and cut up in your town this morning is Stan Chard?"

Purdy showed his surprise. "Of course we're sure."

"I understood his face was shot away," the woman said.

"Little finger missing at the middle joint," Red Egan said. "Miss Knight identified him from that."

"Look, Captain," Abigail Faber said, "if there's any

doubt that Stan Chard is dead, I don't have anything to say to you. He would kill me if he is still alive."

"He's dead!" Purdy said, impatiently.

"Stan Chard is—or was—a magician, big-time skills," Abigail Faber said. "If he wanted to fake being dead he could manage it. The body has no face, you say. Anybody about his size would do. A missing finger? One clip with a sharp knife."

"Why would he want to fake dying?" Purdy asked.

"Because somebody was after him and he needed time to play the game his way," Abigail Faber said.

"The finger injury was a very old one, according to the coroner," Uncle George said. "I spent some time with Stormy Knight, while she was identifying the body, and after that until a minute or two before she was abducted by the man in that drawing. She told me about you, Miss Faber; that she worked for you, met Chard through you, what the nature of your partnership with Chard was. You could save us all valuable time if you'd get to what it is you came to tell us."

Perhaps his quiet voice, his steady gray eyes helped to convince her. "Maybe I should have a lawyer before I do any talking," she said.

Uncle George smiled at her. "I'm a lawyer. The judge is a lawyer. We can certainly advise you of your rights."

"I don't want to be charged with a crime that has nothing to do with what's happened here."

"We need help, if you've got it to give," Uncle George said. "It's a dream, but Stormy Knight may still be alive. If we could find her before it's too late . . ."

"Stormy is a good friend, which is why I'm here," Abigail Faber said.

"I'm interested in catching the bastard in that drawing, lady," Purdy said. "I'm not concerned with some other crime in some other place."

The woman drew a deep breath. "I guess I'll take a chance," she said. "You highly moral gents probably don't understand how a woman can make her flesh a commodity that she sells for profit. I was sixteen when it started with me; no family, no education, no money, no food. I had something men were willing to buy, and I sold it."

"Go on, Miss Faber," Uncle George said.

"You're not shocked? You're not going to tell me how unthinkable I am?"

"You were a prostitute," Uncle George said. "Oldest profession in the world, I'm told."

She nodded. "A lot of guys, married, with families, pillars of society, maybe churchgoers, still have the stud instinct," Abigail said. "They fight it off, stay faithful, wouldn't dream of going out looking for a whore on a street corner. But men grow up in our society playing team sports."

"I don't think I follow, Miss Faber," the judge said.

"You take the executives of a big company out West somewhere: automobiles, steel, computers, what-have-you. They come to New York for some kind of convention. There'll be someone in their group who has to plan entertainment for them. They'll be away from home for several days. Ever since I can remember, what they arrange for is some kind of party, with women, of course, and booze, and nowadays drugs, maybe some good professional entertainers. A man might feel guilty going after a strange woman when he's away from his family, but when it's a team sport—well, it's just good, clean fun. When a man is unfaithful by himself it's a sin. When it's done in a group, it's just a sport."

"Chard!" Purdy almost shouted.

"I don't know where it began," Abigail said. "I suppose in some small town like this where they were holding a fair or a circus. Stan was around, swallowing his swords and doing

his magic tricks. I suppose he'd hit the local bars, do tricks with coins—part of a promotion for what was going on. Some local yokel probably approached him, wondered what he could set up for some friends of his who were going to the city on business. I suppose Stan told him he could find a place to hold a party, turn up some women for him, buy liquor at a price that was attractive. Maybe drugs, even in the beginning. First time I was aware of it, it was a group from Boston. I knew Stan from my past. Could I round up some gals for these proper Bostonians, gals who wouldn't insist on their being proper? No problem. Stan provided a suite in a hotel and the liquor. I provided the girls. Nice piece of change for everyone. It started a sort of working arrangement. Parties from Detroit, from Toledo, from Lexington, Kentucky—all over the East and South."

"You attended these parties?" the judge asked.

"No," Abigail said. "I—I was an old lady when this started, maybe thirty-one or -two. I rounded up the girls, they went to the parties." Her smile was wry. "They didn't need a chaperone, you understand."

"Go on about Chard," Uncle George prompted.

"Stan suddenly seemed to be getting very rich. He stopped doing his act at fairs and circuses, but he was always around them. He drove fancy cars, wore expensive clothes. I started thinking I wasn't getting my fair share of the cut, because I couldn't afford that kind of thing. He just laughed at me when I complained. Said I wouldn't want to risk making money the way he was."

"Meaning what?" Purdy asked.

"You remember a story in the papers a year or more ago?" Abigail asked. "Lawyer out on the West Coast said he had a videotape on some people, 'high up in government,' involved in some kind of sex orgy? The court demanded that he turn over the tape and he announced it had been stolen out of a briefcase in his office? I was with Stan one

day just about the time that that story broke. He laughed himself sick. 'Stolen my foot!' he told me. 'Those guys in high places in government must have paid a pretty penny to get that videotape from the lawyer.' I had to agree, and then Stan let his own foot slip for once. 'That's how you get to be able to afford a Mercedes,' he said. I was shocked. 'You mean you take pictures of these parties you stage and then blackmail people with them?' He was suddenly dangerous. 'Forget that you ever thought that,' he said, 'or you'll wind up playing a harp somewhere.'" Abigail drew a deep breath. "And so I've forgotten it until now," she said. "But if it will help to get Stormy back before it's too late . . ."

"A film, a videotape of some kind of sex orgy," Purdy said. "Could that be what the killer thought Chard had swallowed out there in the equipment shed at the Grove? What he was looking for in Chard's car, at the Stone Masters' Lodge, in your cabin, George?"

"What he thought Miss Knight had told you, George, and why your Jeep was bombed?" Red Egan asked. "Miss Knight knows where the tape is, the killer supposed she told you, and now you and she have someone over a barrel."

"Except she didn't tell me, if she knows," Uncle George said, "and we don't have anything on anybody—except one thing."

"And that is?" Purdy asked.

"This has all happened here in Lakeview," Uncle George said. "Chard picked up his business in the towns where the fairs and circuses stopped. He had something on someone, or some people here in town. It was time for a regular payoff. This time the blackmail victim—or victims—had had enough. They meet in the Grove and Chard is told to turn over his tape—or else. Maybe a last payment for the tape—or else."

"And?" Red asked.

"Chard refuses and finds himself looking down the barrel of a .45 automatic. He laughs at the man with the gun, and now we have the picture I painted for you earlier."

"What picture?" Purdy asked.

Uncle George went through the motions. "He holds up his closed fist, says something like 'Here's your tape! Try and get it!'—and goes through the motions of swallowing it. Bang! End of Mr. Chard's ball game."

"And so where is the tape?" Judge Winters asked.

"It wasn't inside Chard, or the killer or killers wouldn't have taken the car apart. It wasn't inside the car or he—or they—wouldn't have searched the Stone Masters' Lodge. It wasn't there or they wouldn't have searched my place. It wasn't there because it wasn't there."

"But why would he think it was?" the judge asked.

"He—or they—think Stormy knows where it is. She may have told me, and I—what Miss Faber calls a country yokel—thought I had a way to get rich."

"But you don't?" Abigail Faber asked.

Uncle George grinned at her. "Would I tell you if I did, Miss Faber?"

"I didn't come all the way up here from New York, risk my neck to save a friend, to listen to jokes, Mr. Crowder," Abigail said.

"I apologize," Uncle George said. "I was simply trying to illustrate—in my country yokel way—that a man who's discovered a gold mine isn't likely to let the general public in on it until he's staked his claim."

"Meaning exactly what?" the woman asked.

"If I had that tape, or knew where it was, and I intended to use it to extract money from the people who have killed to get it, I wouldn't be telling the world about it. As it happens, I don't have it, Miss Faber, and Stormy didn't tell me that she had it. She made it quite clear to me that Chard didn't share his business secrets with her."



"But she knew the man in the shopping center," Judge Winters said.

"Knew him and didn't know him," Uncle George said. "Recognized him from somewhere but didn't know who he was. She asked Joey if he knew."

The judge glanced at his wristwatch. "I hadn't planned to take the day off," he said, "but this has been fascinating, Captain. Miss Faber may have given us a clue as to what the killer wanted from Chard, why he searched the places he did, why he went after George. Unfortunately we're not any closer to him, are we?"

"Oh, I think we are," Uncle George said. "By accident—but closer."

"Accident?" the judge asked.

"The accident that we live here in Lakeview. Almost certainly the person or people Chard was blackmailing live here. Chard collected from them, at least once a year at Fair time. This time around his well ran dry."

"The drawing of the man who abducted Miss Knight has been circulating most of the day," the judge said. "No one has come forward to say they know him. He can't live here."

"He can work for someone who does," Uncle George said.

The judge smiled. "You really can dream them up, can't you, George?"

"Let me ask you, Thorne," Uncle George said, "if you were being blackmailed by a criminal, would you be likely to deal with him openly on your home grounds?"

"No," the judge said. "I'd arrange to meet him somewhere else."

"Chard wants it here, because if you won't pay he'll arrange a public showing of his film for all your friends to see. So you hire someone to deal with him: a private detective, some strong-arm boy from out of town."

"Wouldn't that be placing myself in double jeopardy?"

the judge asked. "I give someone else a stranglehold on me. Maybe someone else would, I wouldn't. Well, gentlemen, I've got to be going. My wife probably has a search party out for me. But I'd like to come back tomorrow, if you're still cooking. I'd love to be in at the kill, if it comes to that."

"You're welcome, of course, Your Honor," Purdy said.

The judge gestured a goodbye to the others in the office and left. Abigail Faber broke a momentary silence.

"What are you doing to find Stormy?" she asked.

"Trying to get a clue as to where to look," Purdy said.

"From what Mr. Crowder has said, the man who took Stormy hasn't left town," Abigail said.

"Or hadn't, for some hours after he took her," Red Egan said. "He had to set the bomb in George's Jeep and then, after it exploded, search George's cabin."

"So he had to have Stormy locked away somewhere."

"If he didn't just kill her and dump her somewhere in the woods or the lake," Uncle George said.

"No!" Abigail cried out.

Uncle George stood up. "In Chard's car or the room at the Stone Masters' there must be personal belongings of Stormy's—clothes she wore. My dog Timmy—and there are other dogs in town trained to follow a scent—might help us find her if we can give them a good whiff of what we're looking for. You and I, Red, might just get lucky."

"Stormy's the one who needs to get lucky," Abigail said.

"If you believe in prayer, Abigail," Uncle George said, "I suggest you devote some time to it."

Trying to make an educated guess at how a man would dispose of a body in a strange town was not easy. Red Egan kept insisting on the lake—body weighted down, gone. Uncle George wasn't inclined to agree. Stormy had been abducted in broad daylight. On a beautiful summer day the

lake would have been busy with swimmers, boaters, houses surrounding its shores with regular residents and visitors taking advantage of the balmy weather. At night, the lake would have been a perfect place to dump a body, but the risks were too great to run in daylight, Uncle George felt. A side road into the woods, the culvert under a bridge on a back road, were more likely spots.

"There's still a chance, George, that we can hope," Red Egan said, as the two men drove into town in Esther's blue Chevette, Timmy riding in the back seat. "It's not pleasant to think what this jerk could be doing to Stormy, but if he thinks she knows where the videotape is hidden he could be trying to get her to talk. From what you've said about her, I get the notion she wouldn't talk from just a twist of an arm."

"I don't think she can talk, Red. I don't think, from what she told me, that she knows what this character wants to pry out of her."

"Won't stop him from trying if he doesn't believe her. There are two or three shacks up in the woods that hunters use in the fall. He could take her to one of them, hide her from sight, beat on her."

"If he is a stranger in town—and nobody's identified Barlow's drawing—how would he know about the shacks?"

Red shrugged. "He's been around here, George—a year ago, this time. A professional hit man could have scouted out the territory in advance last year when he was here. He'd prepare himself for any kind of emergency, wouldn't he?"

Uncle George nodded. "We're not looking for a nice guy, Red. You don't want to make a target of yourself."

"Stop kidding, George. I thought we'd see if we can borrow Frank Browder's hound dog. He and Timmy have hunted together. Then we find something of Stormy's to tease them with and we're in business."

"After we've stopped at your office and my cabin for something to shoot with," Uncle George said. "I don't propose to spend my last moments with my mouth hanging open."

They stopped outside Red's store and office. "Got one or two things I have to do before we take off," the sheriff said. "You want to come in, George? The coffee machine is usually operating. Take me ten minutes or so."

"I think I'll hop across the street and check in with my sister and Joey," Uncle George said.

He hadn't opened the car door when Joey came running out of the Trimble house to greet him. They walked back into the house together, the man's arm around the boy's shoulder. Esther was waiting for them, her anxiety for her brother clear on her strong, lined face. Uncle George told her and the eager boy what he'd found at his cabin: the evidence of a search, the warm water on the floor that indicated he'd only missed his man by minutes.

"We spent most of the afternoon on the phone," Esther reported. "Half of the town is eager to know if you're all right. A couple of messages that may be important for you."

"Everyone was worried about you, Uncle George," Joey said.

"The important messages, Es? Not that the inquiries aren't nice to know about."

"People care for you, George. But—first there was Mr. Clement at the bank."

"Alex Clement?"

"Yes. He had heard about the bombing of your Jeep and was concerned. He said he heard from Woody Cline about it."

"Woody was at Miss Robinson's, just after the bombing. I saw him there."

"Mr. Clement said he didn't know anything about your insurance, but he and Woody had called the dealer and

found that he has a new Jeep like yours in stock. He's holding it for you. Whatever the financing involved, Mr. Clement said the bank will stand back of you."

"That's pretty far out!"

"He said a dozen people had asked him if you needed help in getting yourself a new Jeep. But the new one's waiting for you at the dealer's if you want to pick it up."

"Mom's right, people care for you, Uncle George," Joey said.

"The other call was from Dr. Walters, not too long ago. He's at the hospital. He said he had some information that might be helpful to you."

"He didn't say what?"

"He just asked if you could stop by there—if I saw you to tell you," Esther said.

"Use your phone?"

Dr. Walters was at the hospital, but not available. "In surgery," the hospital switchboard operator reported.

Uncle George turned back to his family. "You stay put, Joey," he said.

"If I have to," the boy said.

"The man who's responsible for all this violence could know how important you are to me, boy. I don't want him trying to get at me through you."

"Mom's got a loaded rifle right there on the living room table," Joey said.

"And I'll use it if I have to," Esther said. "What's next for you, George?"

"A stop at the hospital, and then Red and I are going to scour the countryside for Stormy Knight."

Red Egan came out of his store, cradling two rifles in his arms. "In case you want to use one of mine," he said, as he got into the Chevette with Uncle George and Timmy. "Stone Masters' is our first stop, I think. Find something there the Knight girl has worn recently without its being

washed—nightgown, dressing gown.” He glanced back at Timmy. “Want to give him something he can really identify.”

“There was a message for me at the Trimbles from Doc Walters,” Uncle George said. “Wants me to stop by the hospital.”

Red Egan showed surprise. “My message service had a call from the hospital. Someone at the hospital saying the Doc wanted to talk to me, too. I thought it could wait. We’ve got a girl to find.”

“I wonder what it could be?” Uncle George said. “We can stop on the way to the lodge.”

It wasn’t unusual to see a couple of State Police cars outside the hospital. Car accidents, other kinds of injuries and emergencies made the troopers regular callers. But it was more of a surprise to find Sergeant Conroy, the homicide man, waiting near the reception desk.

“I see you got the message,” Conroy said.

“What’s up?” Red Egan asked.

Conroy’s face was a dark cloud. “It looks like we may have found your Miss Knight,” he said. “Kids had some fish traps out in a place called Mullins Creek, went to see if they’d caught anything. Found this woman, body in the water, clinging to the bank as though she’d been trying to get out. You can tell us for sure whether she’s your Miss Knight or not, Crowder.”

A nurse took Uncle George, who had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, down a corridor to the door of an operating room. She opened an adjoining closet door and brought out some materials.

“The doctor will want you wearing a surgical cap and mask when you go in there,” she said. “He’s working on the patient. And this gown over your clothes, Mr. Crowder.”

Uncle George walked into a room populated by masked

figures. He recognized Doc Walters's burly figure bent over the patient on the operating table. Another man, not instantly recognized, was assisting. A nurse stood by a tray of instruments, another seemed to be controlling the flow of some liquid from a hanging bottle into the patient's arm. For a moment Uncle George felt relief. He could see the patient's head, a cap of dull-looking blond hair, not Stormy's henna-red. Above that blond head was a machine registering the patient's heartbeat; irregular, Uncle George thought. The nurse at the medical bottle saw him and spoke to Walters. The doctor gave some instructions to his assistant and turned toward Uncle George.

"Esther got you?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm not sure it's our woman, Doc. Wrong color hair."

"Maybe not. Dye washed out of it. She'd been in the water a long time when the kids found her. The creek's pretty active on that hillside. She was unconscious, but hanging on, water pouring over her head. Must have swallowed gallons of it, but she made it somehow. Come in close, George, and take a look, please. I should warn you, it's not pretty."

Uncle George moved in and looked at the woman's face. It wasn't a pleasant sight. Both eyes were swollen shut; there were scratches and bruises; the jaw looked lopsided, as though it was broken. There were four or five little circular sores that Uncle George couldn't identify for the moment.

"Looks like she'd been burned with the hot end of a cigarette," Dr. Walters said, reading his friend's mind.

Uncle George turned away. There was no doubt about it. Despite the disfigurement, it was Stormy Knight.

"How bad is it, Doc?" he heard himself ask.

"About as bad as it can be," Walters said. "Broken ribs,

separation of the left shoulder, who knows what internally. We can't risk going in yet. She's just hanging on by her eyelashes."

"She talk?"

"You have to be kidding, George. Is it the Knight woman?"

"Yes."

"A terrible going over by someone," Walters said. "Eyes blackened, jaw broken, those burns—not just on her face, but also on her breasts, her stomach. The rest I've told you—ribs, shoulder."

"Chances?" Uncle George asked.

"One in a hundred, or a thousand. The longest odds you care to name."

"But a chance?"

The doctor glanced up at the wall. "As long as that machine keeps clicking, there's a chance," he said.

"You got clothes she was wearing?"

"Somewhere—"

"I want them, Doc. We've got dogs, and a starting point."

"I wish you luck," Walters said. "I'd like to be with you when you catch the bastard who did this to her. He doesn't deserve human handling!"

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**3**=====  
As the last sunlight of a long day faded beyond the hills to the west, it appeared that most of the able-bodied manpower in the town of Lakeview had mobilized itself in a somewhat disorganized search for a man who had brought terror into the area for



the last eighteen hours. Men armed with rifles and shot-guns were everywhere.

"If these crazy kooks start shooting at something they hear moving in the woods, we may have to open up a special wing in the hospital for the casualties," Red Egan said. "And by the time it's dark all the man we're after has to do is walk away, leaving the rest of us to shoot at each other."

"If he's found what he's looking for," Uncle George said. "He's not likely to leave if he hasn't. A man who has gone as far as he has with Chard, with the attempt on me, with what he's done to that poor woman in there, isn't going to take off empty-handed."

Red and Uncle George were driving the blue Chevette out along the main highway toward the Stone Masters' Lodge. The clothes Dr. Walters had produced didn't satisfy Uncle George. They had obviously been soaked for a long time in the waters of Mullins Creek. They wanted something with a fresher scent than that to interest the dogs.

"I can't figure why he left the Knight woman alive," Red said. "When she comes around she'll be able to name him."

"If she comes around," Uncle George said. A cold anger made his voice sound unnatural. "He may have thought she was dead when he dumped her in the creek. She was unconscious anyway and she would drown."

"But she didn't."

"The instinct for survival is an extraordinary thing," Uncle George said. "Beaten and tortured unconscious, Stormy was thrown in the creek. I don't know the medical answer, Red, but maybe the sudden contact with cold water stirred some reflexes—enough for her to grab for something. She catches onto some vines or something growing along the creek bank. She clings to them, maybe not even knowing what she's doing. Water keeps pouring over her, but she's

locked onto those vines. Nature, instinct, whatever. I want to tell you, Red, if I'd taken the kind of beating she took, burns with hot cigarette ends, I'd have just let myself sink."

"That bad?"

"Worse than I've got words to describe to you."

"Took some time to do that to her."

"Hell, he's had since this morning when he grabbed her in the shopping center."

"And you beat up on a woman, burn her with butts, kick her around for hours, and she doesn't make a sound?"

"That anyone heard. Had to be a lonely place. He couldn't keep her soundless, Red. He had to get her to tell him something."

"So he finally gave up, hit her what he thought was a final lick, and dumped her in the creek."

"Could be. We're not going to have much luck trying to track him from where Stormy was found until daylight tomorrow. Meanwhile the whole damn woods will have been tramped over by a herd of elephants, armed with guns, who won't leave any trail but their own."

"Why carry an unconscious woman through the woods and dump her in the creek?" Red asked. "Why not just leave her where she was?"

"We've been living on guesses all day," Uncle George said. "No harm in trying one more. My guess is that if he left her wherever it was he'd worked her over it would tell us something."

"Like what?"

"Your backyard or house, my backyard or house. That would implicate you or me, wouldn't it?"

"There are half a dozen shacks and camps in the woods," Red said. "Hunters, fishermen, local kids own 'em, use 'em."

"He may just have picked one out of the blue," Uncle

George said. "Spent the day trying to twist something out of Stormy which she didn't have to give."

"Taking time out to bomb your Jeep, search your place," Red said. "Those things happened after he'd snatched her. Means she was left alone. Tied up, do you think?"

"Or we're dealing with more than one man," Uncle George said. "A film of a party, a sex orgy, according to Abigail Faber. More than one man's reputation was on the line. There could be a dozen of them."

"All out in the woods with guns pretending to be a posse," Red said.

"And certainly prepared to steer us away from what we want to find," Uncle George said.

"Oh, brother!"

The Stone Masters' Lodge produced what the two men wanted, a dressing gown of Stormy Knight's, fragrant with the scent of a perfume Uncle George remembered her wearing. The robe was put in the back of the Chevette for Timmy to sniff and they headed in the direction of town again to pick up Frank Browder's hound, which had been promised to Red over the phone.

On the way to town Uncle George remembered that the powerful flashlight he was going to need in the woods had been in his Jeep, blown to pieces along with the Caldwell boy and the spaniel. They stopped in the shopping center and bought two flashlights at the hardware store.

"You're lucky," the proprietor told them. "These are the last two. Half the town's been buying them."

Frank Browder's hound dog was an old friend. Sniffer had hunted with his owner, Red Egan, Uncle George, and Timmy. He hopped into the back seat of the car where he and Timmy greeted each other.

"Good luck," Frank Browder said as Uncle George started the car engine.

"You're not going out there?" Red asked him.

Browder laughed. "Thought I'd kind of like to stay in one piece," he said. "Too many crazies out there with guns. Maybe in the morning, if they don't find him by then. I like to see what I'm doing, and what some other guy with a gun is doing."

"Not so dumb," Red said. "I could deputize you, you know."

Browder laughed again. "I'd plead ill health," he said.

It was dark when they reached a place in the woods near Mullins Creek. There was no need to search for the spot where Stormy Knight had been found. There were lights everywhere, like giant fireflies. A State Trooper they both knew was trying to keep them away from a restricted area. His name was Morgan, and he sounded harassed.

"It's nice to see a couple of people who know which end is up," he said. "They sent me to keep people from walking over the area—possible footprints. One man to stop an army that got here before him."

Men, armed with torches and guns, crowded around them. Red Egan and Uncle George were "their people" and men with know-how.

"Give George some elbow room," one man shouted. "He can read the woods better than anyone!"

"All he can read now is that you've all tramped the place flat," Trooper Morgan said.

"Where was she found?" Uncle George asked. He couldn't shake the vision of that battered and burned face on Dr. Walters' operating table.

"Right over here," Morgan said. Torches focused on the bank of the stream. "No way of telling now if she was thrown in the creek here or farther up and washed downstream by the current. Kids who found her said she was clinging to that clump of weeds. She could have been

washed up on the bank and just hung on. Lucky there was something to hang on to.”

“Kids pulled her out?” Red Egan asked.

“Yeah. Pulled her out and one of them ran down to a telephone to call for help,” Morgan said. “She was unconscious then, but holding onto those weeds like death! Kids couldn’t loosen her grip, or were afraid to try. Ambulance got as nearby as they could. Men with a stretcher came, freed her hands from the weeds. There was some blood where she’d been gripping them. Ambulance attendant had the brains to cut the bloodied weeds and take them to the lab for testing. Not much doubt that it was her blood, though.”

Uncle George flashed his torch around on the creek bank. It looked like a hundred footprints, one on top of the other.

“You’d think people would have had more sense,” Morgan said.

“The kids and the ambulance people were trying to save a life,” Uncle George said. He flashed his light over the stream. The creek waters tumbled strongly down the mountainside. That flow of water could have carried an unconscious body quite a distance. “One thing’s for sure,” he said. “That current couldn’t carry the body upstream. Bring the dogs here, Red, and that robe of Stormy’s.”

Red headed back for where they’d left the car. Uncle George turned to the crowd of men.

“We need to find, if we can, where she was thrown into the stream,” he said. “We’ve got a couple of dogs here with a piece of the woman’s clothing to clue them. I’d like to ask you to stay away from the creek bank while we turn them loose. The man who did this isn’t staying around, waiting to see what we do. Search the woods, but stay away from the creek banks above this spot.”

"Is it the man in the drawing the cops were circulating?" one of the men asked.

"Probably. Could be someone else. Red and I think he may have others working with him. Give us a chance with the dogs, okay?"

There was a chorus of agreement. The self-appointed army began to drift away into the woods.

"Search any hunters' shacks you come across," Uncle George called after them. "You see anything that makes you think the girl was held in one of them don't mess around. Let the fingerprint people have a chance."

Morgan and Uncle George waited for Red to come back with the two dogs.

"You been to the hospital?" Morgan asked. "How bad is she?"

"Bad," Uncle George said. "Doc Walters doesn't give her much chance."

"She hasn't been able to name a name?"

"Not even her own. I don't happen to think she can put a name to the man, even if she makes it. But she could tell us where she saw him before."

Morgan's shoulders gave a little shuddering movement, and Uncle George saw that the trooper's right hand was closed on the butt of his holstered gun. "I have the feeling the bastard is looking at us from behind a bush, laughing," Morgan said.

"Out of the other side of his face when I catch him," Uncle George said.

"When? Or if?" Morgan asked.

"I'll catch him," Uncle George said. "Maybe not tonight or tomorrow, but I'll catch him." He drew a deep breath, trying again to shake the vision of Stormy's ruined face.

Red came up from the car, the two dogs walking at heel beside him. He was carrying Stormy's robe.

"Tear that robe in half, Red," Uncle George said. "You

take one half and work up this side of the creek with Sniffer. Timmy and I will cross over and work the other side.”

Crossing the creek was not child's play. The water was no more than waist-deep, but the current was almost strong enough to take Uncle George off his feet. It was an impossibility for the setter, who tried to follow his master and let out a little yelp of despair. He couldn't touch bottom and he couldn't swim it. Uncle George reached out and caught him by the collar just in time. They reached the opposite bank and Uncle George knelt down beside the dog, stroking him, consoling him. Then he held his half of Stormy's robe under the dog's nose.

“Find!” he commanded the dog. “Find!”

Timmy bounded away, nose to the ground, making a wide half circle from the creek bank out into the brush and woods, and then back to the creek bank a hundred yards farther upstream. Uncle George moved slowly up the edge of the creek, his torch focused on the bank. Across the creek he could see Red Egan's torch moving at about the same pace. These two men had worked dogs together for a long time, learned together as kids, developed the techniques to something like a fine art as grown men. The dog, trying to pick up a trail, fans out and works around you. If you move too fast, the dog may hurry and miss part of the territory he's supposed to cover. In this first darkness of night the dogs knew without being told that the creek was a boundary they couldn't cross. The scent of a trail ends with water. Uncle George knew his dog so well that he could have guessed within seconds just how fast he should move to arrive simultaneously with Timmy at their next meeting point. In daylight he would have caught glimpses of the dog, moving swiftly, searching for the scent he'd been ordered to find.

Uncle George could spot nothing on his bank of the creek. Stormy hadn't been carried or dragged to the stream

along the ground he covered. Across the creek Red Egan waved his torch back and forth in a negative signal. Nothing on that side either.

Uncle George and Timmy met a few hundred yards up the creek. The dog whimpered unhappily. He'd found nothing. Uncle George held his half of Stormy's robe down to the dog again.

"Good dog! Find!"

Timmy moved away again, tireless, eager. Uncle George continued his climb along the bank of the rushing waters of the creek. Suddenly, off to the left, came sharp, excited barking. If the dog could have spoken he couldn't have said more clearly that he'd found what he was looking for. Uncle George turned and waved his torch at Red Egan on the other side of the creek. A few moments later Red came wading across the stream, carrying Sniffer, the hound, under his arm. Put down on the ground, the dog rushed off in the direction of Timmy's sharp barking.

"Timmy's got something," Uncle George said.

The two men headed toward the barking, their torches sweeping the brush ahead of them. When they reached them, the two excited dogs danced away toward the creek.

Uncle George stopped, torch aimed at the ground. "He must have come this way. Look there, freshly broken weeds and grass."

"Girl must have been walking, or he carried her so that her feet dragged," Red said. "Dogs wouldn't have picked her up from his footprints, would they?"

The dogs stopped at the bank of the creek, barking excitedly. The trail ended there for them. There were footprints on the muddy bank, deep prints.

"A, B, C," Red said. "Man carrying something heavy. This is where he dumped her. Next thing is where did he come from?"

"Body carried almost four hundred yards downstream



where she was washed up and grabbed onto the weeds there," Uncle George said. He bent down to the dog again, showed him the deep footprints. "Smell, Timmy! Sniffer, you too. Smell!" The dogs, panting, happy, smelled at the deep footprints. Uncle George stood up and gestured off into the woods. "Find!"

The two dogs headed back along the way Uncle George and Timmy had come, the hound barking, the setter quietly intent on his job. The dogs led the way into a clearing where there was a neat little log cabin, clearly visible in a patch of moonlight that sifted through an opening in the trees. They stopped outside the door of the cabin, barking happily.

Uncle George was frowning. "That's Judge Winters' cabin, isn't it?"

Red Egan focused his torch on the front door and on a sign painted on it: THE THREE MUST-GET-THERES. "Judge and his pals use it in the hunting season," Red said.

"Fellow could have just stumbled on it, used it as a place to work over Stormy," Uncle George said.

Red was fishing in his pocket. "You won't believe it, George, but I have a key to this place. One of my regular routines is to check on the fire tower up the mountain. Judge gave me a key and asked me to check on the place when I was passing this way."

Timmy was barking, scratching at the door.

"Dog seems convinced," Uncle George said. "Let's have a look inside."

Red produced his key, went to the front door, and unlocked it. The two men and the excited dogs went into the cabin. A quick sweep around with the torches showed no signs of any disorder.

"Kerosene lamp there on the center table," Uncle George said.

Red Egan produced one of his kitchen matches, flicked it

into flame with his thumbnail and lit the lamp. It was an attractive room, furnished for comfort—overstuffed armchairs and a couch, a wall of bookshelves, a stuffed, antlered deer head over the stone fireplace. Ashtrays on a couple of tables had been neatly cleaned. An unlit fire was laid on the hearth.

“Looks like it was cleaned up after their last visit and been untouched since then,” Red said.

“It’s hard to believe you could hold a woman here for several hours, torture her, burn her with lighted cigarettes, and not leave a trace of it.”

Red nodded. “Dogs say she was here,” he said.

“Just hold still where you are, gentlemen, and turn around very slowly,” a voice said from behind them.

Timmy, his tail wagging, seemed undisturbed. Red and Uncle George turned and found themselves facing Alex Clement, the local bank president, aiming a rifle straight at them.

“George! Red!” Clement said, and lowered his rifle. “Saw the light. Everyone’s gone crazy in this town. I thought someone was making off with what we have here.”

The Three Must-Get-Theres—Judge Winters, Woody Cline, and Alex Clement. They had been grown men when Red and Uncle George were in their teens. Alex Clement, Uncle George remembered, had been an Olympic skier, very much the eligible young bachelor back in those days. He had married Beth Montgomery, daughter of Lucius Montgomery, one of the very rich men who had built a summer home on the lake that later became his retirement home. Alex, you had to say, had “gotten there” in his own way. Personal charm had won him a rich wife and eventually the presidency of the bank. It hadn’t hurt that Lucius Montgomery had been one of the top stockholders in the bank and left all that to his daughter when he died. A success story of sorts, Uncle George thought.

"You know the judge gave me a key to this cabin so I could check on it for you," Red Egan said.

"I'd forgotten. Everybody running around with guns—when I saw the lights, I thought someone had broken in."

"Gun yourself," Uncle George said.

"With a mad dog loose on the town," Clement said, "murder this morning, your Jeep blown up, George, an abducted woman, I thought I'd join everyone else who was looking for him, but I didn't think a penknife was the proper weapon to carry."

"Dogs brought us here," Uncle George said. "They found where Stormy Knight was dumped in the creek, backtracked us to here."

"That's your Timmy, isn't it?" Clement asked. The setter was smelling at the couch, whimpering, suddenly barking. In dog language he was telling his master that the girl's trail led to that couch. Alex Clement was an old friend, which explained why Timmy hadn't warned them when the banker had walked in. Clement had hunted with Uncle George and Red Egan and his two great friends on many fall afternoons. The dog knew him well.

"We haven't been up here for weeks," Clement said.

"I've got to say you're mighty good housekeepers," Red said. "Place looks as though it had just been cleaned."

Clement smiled. "Women don't trust us," he said. "Beth and Gail Winters drop in now and then to make sure the place isn't a mess the next time we want to use it."

Gail Winters was the judge's wife—his second wife, a much younger and very attractive woman. Timmy could be mistaken, Uncle George thought. The dog wasn't a connoisseur of perfumes. He could have been fooled by the smell of "woman."

Uncle George walked over to the couch and patted the eager dog. The couch was in perfect order, cushions neatly fluffed out.

"The dogs were so sure," he said, turning back to Clement. "We thought this maniac we're all looking for had broken in, held Miss Knight here, tortured her, carried her down to the creek and thrown her in."

Age had been kind to Alex Clement. In his sixties he still had an athletic looking body. His once-golden hair had faded, but was still blond, without a trace of gray. He looked angry now.

"I hear they took her to the hospital. Dead?"

"Next thing to it," Uncle George said.

"She talk? Name the man?"

"No, and may never," Uncle George said.

"Well, one thing's for sure," Red Egan said. "Whatever the dogs are telling us, there's no sign she was worked over here. The woman was beaten up: broken jaw, blackened eyes, broken ribs and shoulder, burned with cigarettes. You couldn't stage that kind of act and not leave a sign of it."

"Unless he came back after he'd dumped her in the creek and cleaned up," Uncle George said. "When were you and your friends last here, Alex?"

"Picnic, a couple of weeks ago," Clement said. "Beth and Gail and Lois Wilson, who's Woody's latest flame. Teacher at the college. Women cleaned up before we left. It was just the way it is now when we went home that night. We don't use it much any more, except in the fall when the hunting season's on, winter when there's cross-country skiing."

"So much for that," Red Egan said.

Timmy was still smelling at the couch, panting with excitement. Uncle George reached down and patted him. "Good dog," he said. "Good boy."

"So there's a killer, just out there somewhere," Clement said. "Shouldn't we be moving?"

"I guess," Red said. He turned off the kerosene lamp on the table. Once more there were only the torches and the moonlight to see by.

While Red Egan locked the cabin up again, Alex Clement asked Uncle George if he'd had a chance to see his sister. "I left a message for you with her."

"Oh, Alex, the Jeep! I don't know, till I look at my policy, how well I'm covered for this kind of thing, but—I'm much obliged to you for thinking about me."

"Bomb a man's automobile and he's likely to come to mind," Clement said. "Seriously, that Jeep has been like an extension of you for a long time. People wouldn't know you in any other kind of car. You were doing something for the town, and a lot of people don't think it ought to cost you. Speaking for the bank—and I do—you need any special financing, just let me know."

"Thanks, but I hope it won't be necessary."

Red Egan came down the path from the cabin. "Dogs don't want to leave," he said. "Probably feel they haven't been praised enough."

Uncle George looked back at the moonlit cabin. "Maybe I confused Timmy," he said. "First I had him following the scent of Stormy's robe, then the man's footprints we found at the edge of the creek."

"One of them was here," Red said. "Never knew him to foul up before."

Uncle George turned to Clement. "Would you and the judge and Woody mind if Purdy's fingerprint man went over the cabin, Alex?"

"I suppose not," Clement said. "The fingerprints he'll find will be ours and our ladies'. Your man couldn't have put it back in the kind of shape it's in, could he? Nothing out of place, nothing where it doesn't belong. He'd have to know the place well to leave it that way, wouldn't he?"

“You’d think so,” Uncle George said. He made an impatient gesture. “There’s no way to search around out here till we have some daylight.”

“If you don’t trust your dog, George,” Red Egan said.

Uncle George glanced up the path to the cabin. Timmy and the hound were still sitting outside the door as if to say, “Don’t go away. This is it.” Uncle George called out to the dog. “Heel, Timmy.”

The dog came down the path reluctantly and sat at his master’s side. The man reached down and scratched the dog’s head. “We’ll come back in the morning and try to read what’s outside here,” he said to the others. But he didn’t move. “What do you clean up with in there, Alex?” he asked. “You don’t have electricity for a vacuum.”

“Old fashioned carpet sweeper—and elbow grease,” Clement said.

“Mind if I look at that carpet sweeper?” Uncle George asked. “We know there were cigarette butts. If the man swept up when he got through with Stormy, we might find those butts in the sweeper.”

“No harm in looking,” Clement said. “I can tell you that when the girls get through cleaning up the place they dump whatever’s in the sweeper in a garbage bag and take it, with other trash, down to one of our houses, where it’s picked up by the regular rubbish removal people.”

The three men went back to the cabin, followed by two happy-again dogs. The game wasn’t over. The old-fashioned carpet sweeper was in a closet just inside the front door. While Red and Clement focused their torches, Uncle George took the sweeper apart. The dirt-collecting compartment was clean as a whistle: no cigarette butts, no dirt of any sort. Uncle George knelt, staring at the sweeper as though he could make something be there that wasn’t there.

“Just the way our gals always leave it,” Clement said.

Uncle George snapped the sweeper shut and stood up to put it back in the closet. "Well, it was worth a try," he said.

The three men walked out into the night once more. Uncle George announced that he'd like to go back to the hospital to get the latest report on Stormy Knight, and then put the dogs back where they belonged. Alex Clement chose to stay with the local army that was searching the woods for a killer.

In the blue Chevette, Red drove while Uncle George sat beside him, caressing Timmy's red ears. "I should have trusted you, old boy," he said to the dog.

"Meaning?"

"You think I got away with it?" Uncle George asked.

"With what?" Red asked.

"My own sleight-of-hand," Uncle George said. He patted the pocket of his jacket. "Stuck to the roller brush inside that cleaner, friend, were two hairs."

"Hairs?"

"Two henna-red hairs," Uncle George said. "Timmy was right. Stormy was in that cabin!"

"Judas, George, you didn't mention that in front of Alex!"

Uncle George was staring straight ahead at the cone of light thrown ahead of them by the car. "Red, I'm beginning to ask myself some questions about The Three Must-Get-Theres," he said.





*Part* \_\_\_\_\_

***THREE***

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**I** \_\_\_\_\_ The blue Chevette swerved slightly and then came back on course.

"You must be off your rocker, George!" Red Egan said.

"Those three guys, the judge, Alex, Woody Cline, have done everything together all their lives. They socialize together, hunt together, golf together. They might, don't you think, Red, if they were interested in a sex orgy, be involved in it together?"

"Those three gents? Oh, wow, George!"

"Not necessarily just those three. Others included, from here or other places. One thing's for sure. The roof would blow off this state if a Supreme Court judge, a college president, and a bank president appeared in your morning paper involved in sexual acrobatics with some glamorous whores."

"Well, sure it would. But those three guys? Never!"

"More than a year ago, how much more, who knows," Uncle George said. "They produce someone to deal with Chard for them—the man Joey saw and who took Stormy. He was here a year ago at Fair time; Sam Spencer saw him in Hector's store. He was, of course, here yesterday. I suspect he's still here, somewhere."

"But—"

"Judge Winters has spent the whole day with Captain Purdy. That's his alibi. Woody Cline was at the post office and later with Miss Robinson when my Jeep was bombed. He couldn't have searched my cabin. That's his alibi. Alex Clement, we'll find, was at the bank all day. His alibi."

"So, that just leaves Joey's man."

"Who is a paid assassin," Uncle George said.

Red Egan jammed on the brakes and pulled the car over to the side of the road. "I can understand how you could go off the rails after what's gone on all day," he said. "'Specially after someone tried to kill you. But, damn it, George, we've known these men most of our lives. Can you really think of Thorne, or Woody, or Alex shooting a man, carving him up, bombing your Jeep and killing a boy in it, torturing a woman? They're good old Thorne, and good old Woody, and good old Alex—a judge, a college president, a banker. They're the backbone of the community."

"And they want to stay that way, no matter what it costs or what they have to do," Uncle George said.

"Oh, no, George. I just don't buy it."

"You want to really name the villain of the piece, it's Stanley Chard," Uncle George said. "Three aging gents decide to have a fling for themselves. Who knows how they got onto Chard, maybe through someone else he'd staged a party for. Find us some chicks, get us a place where we can have a romp. So Chard agrees and a good time is had by all. There's probably a little guilt for the two of them that are married, but it's nothing serious. Just a fling, which isn't unnatural for all good healthy guys, is it?"

"You ever try it, George?"

"No."

"Me neither."

"But you never suggested it to me or I to you. What did Abigail Faber say? Team sports. When a lot of guys do something together it's something they can share and laugh about and remember as a fun time. You're only half as guilty if there are two of you, and one-tenth as guilty if there are ten of you. Let's get moving, Red. We can talk as you drive. I want to find out how that woman is."

Red didn't move to start the car. "So Chard was the villain, you say. He set up the party for them, supplied

them with girls and booze and what-have-you, and then took a film of them in action without them knowing it?"

"Right. And the next time around, say at last year's Fair, he shows them the film. What did he tell Abigail? 'That's how you get to drive a Mercedes.' Right then our friends—and their friends—are stuck: They have to pay, because they aren't prepared. No way to guess how much. A hundred thousand among them? Maybe more, because Chard would have found out what the freight would stand."

"Judas!"

"Next time around, which would be at last year's Fair, our friends, our backbone of the community friends, are prepared with a little muscle. The man Joey thought looks a little like James Garner is on the scene—a hit man, some kind of a strong-arm artist. The Three Must-Get-Theres aren't going to let themselves be hooked forever. The hit man deals with Chard this time. We know they were seen together at the fairgrounds last year. Our pillars of the community have to get that film. Chard laughs at the hit man. He doesn't suppose Chard would be carrying that gold mine around in his vest pocket, does he? They have to pay, and if they try any rough stuff Chard has someone who will show that film to the public. A good guess would be Stormy, wouldn't it? The hit man makes a deal. The next time around, Chard will deliver the film—for a price. Would you like to guess at, say, a million bucks, Red?"

"Telephone numbers!"

"It's to be the last payoff," Uncle George said. "So Chard comes to the Fair this time and gets in touch. They arrange a meeting at the Grove, where our friends will buy the film and the ball game will be over. Right now we don't know whether they all went to the Grove or just the hit man. They have no intention of paying the price. Chard will have the film with him, and they'll just take it, and be damned to him. Maybe they couldn't raise a million bucks."

"So they meet in the equipment shed at the Grove?"

“One or two o’clock in the morning. Our friends tell Chard it’s no dice. Turn over the film, or else. My guess is Chard didn’t have the film, never meant to turn it over. But he knew big trouble when he saw it. The hit man was the kind of tough guy he understood. He’s holding a gun on Chard, ordering him to turn over the film. Chard realizes he’s in for it and goes through the motions of an old magic trick for which he’s famous. He pretends to swallow the film. Somebody shoots him, probably the hit man. The film is in his gut so they cut him open.”

“Only it isn’t there.”

Uncle George nodded. “They try the car, only they don’t find it there. Chard had said there was someone who would make the film public if they tried any rough stuff on him. Who else but the woman who lived with him? The hit man waits for her to show at the fairgrounds and then goes out to the Stone Masters’ Lodge to search their rooms. No luck.”

“They must be in a panic now,” Red said. He was beginning to believe.

“Stormy winds up with me,” Uncle George said. “That’s dangerous. I have a reputation for tracking down crime. They must have had a council of war about it. Would Stormy tell me about the film? Would she turn it over to me?”

“But the judge was with Purdy, and he must have known you weren’t on to anything,” Red said.

“He couldn’t let the hit man know that until later, and later never came. By accident the hit man came face to face with Stormy in my Jeep outside the shopping center. It ends up with him abducting her.”

“That springer spaniel knew him, attacked him,” Red said.

“The dog was with Chard at the Grove when they killed him,” Uncle George said. “He knew the hit man had been there when it happened.”

"So then?" Red said.

"He knocks Stormy out, goes to a phone. It had to be Woody or Alex he called. He couldn't call the judge because he was at the barracks. He's got to get the girl to talk, but he can't just drive her around the countryside in his car. The hit man meets Woody or Alex somewhere, they give him a key to the cabin in the woods, and he can take all day to get her to talk. But what about me, George Crowder? If the girl has told me what she knows I'm poison. I have to be put out of business, just in case."

"But the hit man had Stormy to handle!"

Uncle George's smile was grim. "I got an A in chemistry when I was in high school," he said.

"So you were a smart kid."

"My teacher was Woody Cline," Uncle George said. "He would know how to make a bomb, how to set it in a car. He was there, in the post office just before, at Miss Robinson's just after."

"What are we doing sitting here?" Red asked, and started the car.

"Keep one thing in mind, Red," Uncle George said. "We don't have one shred of evidence to prove any of this yet."

"Two hairs from the girl's head," Red said. "And the dog kept telling you."

"Unfortunately Timmy can't testify in court, but it's enough to head me in one direction."

"Toward a man or men who have already tried to kill you."

Uncle George smiled a tight, thin smile. "But now I have eyes in the back of my head," he said.

The touchiest thing about Uncle George's theory was the question of who could be let in on it. With only a series of far-out guesses to support it, how safe was it to take it where it should be taken? Captain Purdy was the man who

should be told, and yet the captain had Judge Winters as an invited observer. One whisper that three of the town's leading citizens were involved in murder, kidnapping, and torture would be received as the joke of the year, comic relief in a grim situation. George Crowder had blown his stack! Five minutes after the joke was told, Judge Winters, Woody Cline, and Alex Clement would hear it. They would know just how much of a joke it was. They would laugh in public, and if there was truth in the theory, they'd make certain that no one could find proof of it. If they thought George Crowder could persuade the police to go after them, then George Crowder must be stopped. He must be stopped before his gifts of persuasion had a chance to take hold.

"So it's you and me, Red, until we can come up with something solid," Uncle George said, as they approached the hospital.

"Two red hairs," the sheriff said.

"I may have gotten an A in chemistry under Woody Cline," Uncle George said, "but I don't know if the lab can match these two red hairs in my pocket with the washed-out blond hair on Stormy Knight's head. If they can, it will be evidence of a sort—evidence, at least, that Stormy was in the Three Must-Get-Theres' cabin. If they can't, we're still working on a fairy story."

"If she was there, George, who cleaned up the cabin? Because, boy, it was clean."

"Alex could have done it. He was out there, pretending to look for the hit man. Woody Cline could have done it. We don't know yet where he was. Not the judge; he was with Purdy until too late in the day to have had the chance. And I still say, Red, there can be other people here in town involved. I don't think Stanley Chard and Abigail Faber set up orgies for just three men."

"It's hard to think of other people here in Lakeview who would get involved in that kind of thing."



"It's hard to think of the judge, and Woody, and Alex getting involved—but I think they did. The others could be from out of town: associates of the judge's in the state capital, friends of Woody's at the college, business connections of Alex's, old college friends with whom they've stayed in touch. 'We'll all meet in New York and have a ball!'"

"Where do we start?" Red asked.

"With Doc Walters here in the lab. If they can match hairs we know we're on the right track."

The first person they saw in the hospital waiting room was Abigail Faber. She came quickly across the room to greet them.

"You know about Stormy?" she asked.

"We were here earlier," Uncle George said. "Any news of her?"

"The doctor hasn't come out here since I first came," Abigail said. "I'm afraid to see him come. It could mean—"

"Stormy's a fighter, I think," Uncle George said. "Can I ask you a couple of questions, Abigail? The sheriff and I may have gotten a whiff of something."

"Of course, if it will help catch the monster who worked Stormy over."

Uncle George turned to Red. "See if you can get the doctor to talk to us for a minute, Red. Let's sit down over there on that bench, Abigail."

The woman reached out for Uncle George's arm, as though she needed help to get her across the room.

"You ever hear of the town of Lakeview before today, Abigail?" Uncle George asked her.

"Only on the radio this morning."

"You don't remember supplying girls for a group of men from here, maybe as long as a couple of years ago?"

"No."

"You keep records of the parties your girls go to?"

"Of a sort, but not what I think you're driving at."

"What am I driving at?"

"Do I have the names of anyone who arranged parties over the year? The answer is no. They're all John Smiths to me. I have records of the girls I've hired because I get a commission from them. I think I told you that this party thing began some years ago with Stan Chard. He had a group coming from Boston. Could I supply girls for a bash? I could. A girl doesn't ask for a customer's birth certificate, and the Johns don't run around with a name tag on their jackets. They may in a business meeting, but not at our kind of party." She smiled cynically. "Stan obviously knew names or was able to find out who the customers were. He was taking pictures of them so he could blackmail them! But I don't ask, the girls don't ask. We provide what we get paid for. That's all."

"Chard would have those names somewhere?"

"He might have, he might have just kept them in his head. He was a first-class operator, Mr. Crowder."

"But you would know if you sent girls into this area."

"I can tell you that I never did. My business is in New York. Stan's people came there for their parties."

"But your records would show you what girls worked for you, say a couple of years back?"

"Yes."

"Do you think we could get some of them to come up here, wander around, see if they recognize familiar faces?"

"After what's happened to Stormy, do you think I'd ask any of my girls to walk into this meat grinder? Anyway, they start pointing the finger at anyone and we'd all be out of business."

Red Egan came over from the reception desk. "Doc Walters can give us a couple of minutes in the corridor outside the operating room, George."

"Wait here, Abigail," Uncle George said. "I'll let you know what the report is on Stormy."

Dr. Walters was still wearing his surgical gown and cap. His mask was hanging down around his neck. He looked, Uncle George thought, near exhaustion.

"Your patient, Doctor?"

Dr. Walters drew a deep breath. "That heart monitor is still clicking along—erratically, but ticking. She's on a respirator. She could be gone in two minutes, or two hours, or two days—or she might make it."

"You're more optimistic than you were?"

The doctor shrugged. "She's still alive."

From his pocket Uncle George produced a white linen handkerchief. He unfolded it carefully and showed it to the doctor. "A couple of bright red hairs, Doc," he said. "Could the lab tell us whether they are Miss Knight's, before the dye was washed out of her hair by the creek water?"

"Oh boy, maybe, I don't know," the doctor said. "That's Dr. Lawton's department."

"Ask him to try, would you? If they match—stand up as evidence in court—we may be on our way."

"Don't stake your life on it," Dr. Walters said, taking the handkerchief.

"One more thing, Doc. Will she talk?"

"Who knows?"

"Delirium?"

"Not so far. That lady is so close to death, George . . . but nothing that happens could be a surprise."

"Anything she might say could be vital, maybe just a name. Is there some way it can be audited, a tape machine, something like that?"

"I'll try to set something up," the doctor said. "Right now there's someone right by her side every second."

"Impress on them that anything she might say could be critical, Doc. When can I expect a report from Dr. Lawton?"

"I'll try to light a fire under him, George."

Uncle George walked out into the reception room. The minute he appeared Abigail Faber came running toward him. She seemed to be wildly excited.

"Mr. Crowder! Five minutes ago I saw a girl here who used to work for me! She saw me and took off on the double. She—she was dressed in one of those nurse's aides outfits. People at the desk say they weren't noticing."

"Take it easy," Uncle George said. "These volunteers work on a regular schedule. Easy enough to check out who's on duty. What's your girl's name?"

"Joanne Smythe—a fancied-up Smith! Half of those girls don't give you a real name! Joanne Smythe!"

Uncle George knew the receptionist at the desk, a local girl he'd seen grow up since her pigtail days. "Hi, Laura," he said. "My friend here thinks she saw someone she knows, a volunteer aide. Do we have anyone named Joanne Smythe?"

"No, Mr. Crowder."

"But you do have a list of the women who are supposed to be on duty tonight, don't you?"

"Aides don't work at night unless there's some kind of emergency," Laura said. "Fire, big car wreck, something like that."

"You didn't see an aide walking through here?"

"No, I didn't. But I've been checking a lot of reports and stuff." She glanced at Abigail. "Your friend asked me a few minutes ago and I told her I hadn't noticed anyone. There's been a meeting of the administrative staff going on. Someone representing the aides could have been here for that, but I didn't notice."

"In uniform?"

"Only if she stayed over from the regular afternoon session," Laura said.

"Who would know?"

"Mr. Andrews, the hospital administrator. I think he's still in his office down the hall."

Uncle George knew Warren Andrews from the days when he'd been the County Attorney. Their relationship had been friendly and involved cooperation. He and Abigail walked down the hall toward the administration office.

"Why are you so concerned about this girl you know, Abigail?" he asked.

"For goodness' sake, Mr. Crowder! Joanne Smythe almost certainly knows Stormy Knight. That means she could know the man who abducted Stormy. If she could be shown that artist's drawing—"

"Good enough," Uncle George said.

Andrews was putting his desk in order for the night when he saw he had visitors.

"George! Pleasure to see you," he said, and held out a welcoming hand.

"This is Miss Faber, Warren."

"How do you do, Miss Faber."

"She's a friend of the woman who's in emergency with Dr. Walters right now."

"Nasty business," Andrews said. "What can I do for you, Miss Faber?"

"Abigail saw a nurse's aide in the reception room a little while back in uniform. Someone named Joanne Smythe."

Andrews frowned. "I don't know of any aide by that name," he said.

"She could be using another name," Abigail said. "Smythe may not be her real name at all."

"The hospital's volunteers are all local women, Miss Faber," Andrews said. "I don't know anyone in Lakeview named Smythe, do you, George?"

Uncle George shook his head. "I understand you just had a regular weekly meeting of the staff. Was there anyone here representing the volunteer aides?"

"Gail Winters," Andrews said. "She's just been made the new head of the group, you know."

Uncle George felt his hands tighten on the back of the chair behind which he was standing. "The judge's wife?"

Andrews smiled. "The judge still calls her his 'bride'—after two years."

"Was she wearing a volunteer's uniform?"

"No, not at a meeting like this was."

"Would she have reason to change into one after she left you?"

"I don't know of one. The day's work for the volunteers is done around five o'clock. I'm afraid I don't know how to help you, Miss Faber." Andrews closed the briefcase on his desk. "No Joanne Smythe in these parts. You must have been mistaken."

"No!" Abigail said.

"Well, thanks anyway, Warren," Uncle George said. His fingers closed tightly on Abigail's arm. "Let's just wander around and see if we can find someone who saw your friend."

He led Abigail out into the hall again.

"I couldn't be wrong, George! I saw her!" Abigail said.

"Just hold your horses, Abigail," Uncle George said, in a strangely tight voice. He led the woman out into the reception room again. People watched them, idly curious. Anyone involved with George Crowder was a matter of interest. He walked straight to the far wall where there were some framed photographs. "Take a look at the picture in the center there, Abigail. It was at last year's hospital ball, function to raise money. They crown a queen. That's a picture of last year's queen and her court."

"Why should I bother?"

"Just take a look," Uncle George said.

Abigail went to the picture, took a quick look and turned back to Uncle George, her eyes wide. "It's Joanne! It's Joanne Smythe!"

"Which one, Abigail?"

“The one in the center, the one you called the queen.”

Uncle George felt every muscle in his body grow tense. The queen of last year’s hospital ball had been Gail Winters, the judge’s “bride.”

“Let’s get out of here, Abigail—some place we can talk.”

Uncle George and Abigail sat together in the blue Chevette in the hospital parking lot. Timmy had greeted them and settled back in the rear seat, his head resting on the half of Stormy’s robe he’d been given earlier.

“It could be a double,” Uncle George said.

“No! Just the picture, maybe. That could be some kind of crazy miracle. But I saw her, George! I saw her there in the reception room. That was no double. That was Joanne Smythe.”

“Why would she duck when she saw you?” Uncle George asked. “Does she have some reason not to want to see you? She owe you money or something?”

“Nothing that simple,” Abigail said. Her mouth drew down at the corners in a sardonic little smile. “A woman, for whatever reason or reasons, is usually driven to prostitution to survive. Damn few of us go into it because it’s an adventure or because it’s fun, George. Then there comes a time when you want out! You move to another town, get an off-the-street job, become a part of this new community. You don’t want anyone knowing about your past.”

“Marriage?” Uncle George asked.

“Sure, it happens. And we make damn good wives, George. We understand men.”

“So why would your Joanne Smythe run out on you? Did she think you’d blow her cover?”

“Maybe I couldn’t help it—if I just talked to her in public. If the people of this town don’t know now why I’m here, they will know. I came here because I was concerned with what had happened to Stormy Knight. I was the

madam; Stormy was one of the girls in my stable. Be seen hobnobbing with me, and it could raise some eyebrows if you're trying to hide a past. I would never open my mouth to anyone about her, but I wouldn't have to, once the connection with me was made."

Uncle George was silent for a moment. "How long is it since Joanne Smythe worked for you, Abigail?" he asked.

"Two, maybe three years," Abigail said. "She just dropped out of sight. Most all of them do, eventually."

"I'm going to try to find her for you," Uncle George said. "But I'm going to ask you a favor in return. Drop out of it. Don't ask about her. Leave it to me."

"If she's the woman in that picture, you shouldn't have any trouble," Abigail said.

"If she knows you spotted her, it's just possible she won't be anywhere around," Uncle George said. "I want her for the same reasons you do. She could help us trap a murderer, a kidnapper, the brutal torturer of Stormy Knight. I'd like you to trust me."

Abigail hesitated for a moment. "I'll play it your way on one condition, George. Tell me who the queen of that ball is."

"She is the wife of one of the most important citizens in this town," Uncle George said, after a pause. "They were married about two years ago, his second marriage. She is twenty-five or thirty years younger than her husband. Her first name is not Joanne, and she didn't come from anywhere around here. She was instantly very popular in the community: charities, social life, sportswoman. You heard Andrews say she'd recently become head of the hospital volunteers."

"Gail Someone, he said."

"Give me a little time without starting a brushfire, Abigail. I promise you that if you take aim at her before we have something more than a clouded past to throw at her,



her husband and his friends will build a wall around her we'll never get through."

"Keep in touch and I'll play along for a while," Abigail said. "I don't know why I should trust you, but somehow I do."

Uncle George went looking for Red Egan, the one person who knew the direction his thinking was taking him. Abigail Faber went back into the hospital reception room to wait for some news of Stormy Knight.

Red wasn't in his office, and the troopers at the barracks didn't know where he was at the moment. Uncle George thought of driving out to Judge Winters' lakefront estate and confronting Gail Winters. "And blow it," he told himself.

He sat in his car, across the street from Red's deserted office, trying to put together what he knew and remembered. He was fifty-two years old, the judge about ten years older. Thorne Winters had married when George Crowder was about twelve years old. He had married the Summers girl, daughter of one of the rich families in the area. The Three Must-Get-Theres had started feathering their nests early on. Joan Winters was referred to by George Crowder's elders as a "nice lady," a shy partner in her husband's somewhat flamboyant climb up the ladder of success. Many years later, during George Crowder's absence from Lakeview, Winters' wife had been stricken by cancer. A long and painful illness had terminated in death about four years ago. Thorne Winters was a richer man after that and free for whatever might suit his tastes. A little more than two years ago he had come back to Lakeview from a business trip out of town with a bride, a handsome young woman many years his junior. Her name was Gail, which is all Uncle George knew about her. Where the judge had met her, or where they'd been married, or what

her maiden name was, all unknown quantities. None of those matters had concerned George Crowder at the time. He supposed the ladies of the local Women's Club had a pedigree on Gail as long as his arm. Now he wondered if they did, and how much of it was accurate. There'd been some back-room jokes about the judge's young wife when she first appeared on the scene. Thorne Winters was old enough to be her father, but he was a vigorous man for his age. An attractive, sexy young woman like Gail could easily restore a man's youth, the boys in the back rooms guessed. Gail made it very quickly in the town—outgoing, active, charmingly flirtatious without being suggestive. The judge was a damn lucky man, the boys in the back rooms decided.

Abigail Faber's certainty that Gail Winters was a girl she'd known as Joanne Smythe simply wasn't possible to ignore. If Abigail was right, it suggested almost unthinkable possibilities. Had the judge met his bride on one of Stan Chard's orgy parties with girls supplied by Abigail? If Chard had been blackmailing the judge and his friends, wasn't it likely that Gail knew about it and was in league with her husband and the others in trying to do away with the threat Chard was holding over them? That would mean that she knew who the man was who had abducted Stormy, beaten her, and left her for dead in Mullins Creek. The cabin where Uncle George was now certain Stormy had been held and tortured had been cleaned so neatly afterwards—"just like the girls always clean it," Alex Clement had said. Could Gail have been responsible for that? It had looked like woman's thorough cleaning and not a man's tidying up.

Another warning bell rang in Uncle George's head. Abigail and Gail; was that a coincidence? The girls who worked for Miss Faber rarely gave their right names. Had Joanne Smythe picked "Gail" out of the blue when she met

Judge Winters, the last part of Abigail's name? Was she really the judge's loving young wife, or was she a part of Chard's blackmail scheme, a party to bleeding her husband and his friends? If that was so, then she too could be on the hit man's list for future action.

There was an entirely different possibility, Uncle George told himself. Joanne Smythe or Gail Whatever had met Judge Winters at one of Chard's arranged parties. They had hit it off more seriously than just a one-night stand. The judge had offered her a life, a position, that was all she'd ever dreamed of. She was out of an ugly world she'd fallen into for reasons that didn't matter. The judge accepted her past and they were happy in their present. Into the picture comes Chard with his film and his blackmailing demands. Does the judge tell his wife? Maybe, because she was one of the people who could be threatened by the film; maybe not, because he trusted her and chose to handle things himself.

Either way, onto the scene comes Stormy Knight. Joanne, or Gail, who knows her, is terrified by what might happen if she came face to face with Stormy, cat out of the bag, her past a public joke. Attending a meeting at the hospital, a meeting she had to attend, Gail tries to find out how serious Stormy's condition is, mainly has she been able to talk, and does she know that Gail is now part of this community? Wearing her hospital volunteer's uniform, Gail can move around the hospital without being questioned. Passing through the reception room she gets a second blow, right between the eyes. Abigail Faber, the woman for whom she once worked as a prostitute, is there and sees her. She has to take flight. She has to pray that Abigail is not certain after that brief look at her. She has to leave town, probably, until Abigail is no longer on stage. The judge knows the truth about his "bride," but nobody else does. They both have to be saved from that revelation.

George Crowder, sitting in his sister's car, churning these ideas round and round, told himself that he hadn't one shred of evidence that would stand up with the police or the courts against Judge Winters and his friends. Suppose the whole thing was an elaborate fantasy he'd invented for himself? Without evidence he could do irretrievable damage to innocent lives. Shouldn't he give Gail Winters a chance to justify herself before he branded her publicly as a one-time prostitute? He had once before harmed an innocent man beyond repair. . . .

He started his car and drove back to the hospital. Abigail Faber was still in the reception area. There was no fresh news of Stormy. She was still hanging on, but the prognosis wasn't favorable.

"And you? You located Joanne?" the woman asked.

"Not yet. But I needed to ask you a question, Abigail."

"So ask."

"Did the girls who worked for you, who went to these parties Chard arranged, necessarily know Chard? I know Stormy did. She told me how she met him. But would Joanne Smythe automatically have known him?"

Abigail hesitated. "I don't know if I can answer that the way you want me to, George. The mechanics worked something like this. Chard met someone in a town or city he visited. He probably let it be known that he could arrange some kind of orgy party for groups. He'd get himself a buyer, arrange a time and place. Then he'd call me for girls. But outsiders didn't attend the parties. Those on-the-town-for-fun boys didn't want to be identified. Chard had a staff of waiters, and that was it. He never went, I never went. Just the girls and the party guys and the waiters."

"So Joanne wouldn't have known Chard?"

"Probably not by sight, but his name was tossed around freely."

"Thanks," Uncle George said. "I'll get back to you later in the evening."

He glanced at his wristwatch as he went back out to his car. It was going on ten o'clock. He was familiar with all the village roads, and he drove out along the north shore of the lake to Judge Winters' estate, a Colonial mansion set on a rise of ground above the lake's shore. He was aware, as he drove up the bluestone driveway to the house, that there were no cars around, and only a few lights burning at the windows. The Winters' were either out or had retired for the night after what must have been a hectic day.

He went to the front door and rang the bell. There was no answer after several rings and he was about to turn away when the door opened. A local woman whom he knew acted as a sort of maid-housekeeper for the Winters had turned on a light over the front door and was peering out at him.

"Mr. Crowder!"

"Hello, Sarah. Nobody home, or have they all gone to bed?"

"The judge isn't here," the woman said. "He went out after dinner."

"He tell you where he was going?"

"He doesn't have to tell me where he's going, Mr. Crowder. I suppose Mrs. Winters would know, but she's turned in."

"It's really Mrs. Winters I wanted to talk to," Uncle George said.

"I couldn't call her, unless it's terribly important," the woman said.

"I think it is, Sarah. Tell Mrs. Winters I have a message for her from Abigail Faber. I think she'll see me."

The housekeeper went up the gracefully winding stairway to the second floor. Uncle George waited in the front hall, wondering. How would Gail Winters react to his message? Would she try to brazen it out, or would she play it straight?

Sarah, the housekeeper, reappeared and came back

down the staircase. "Mrs. Winters asks if you will give her a few minutes, Mr. Crowder. She had turned in and she needs a little time to make herself presentable."

Or send out an SOS to her absent husband? The message Uncle George had sent her must have been a blockbuster.

"Mrs. Winters asked me to ask you if I could get you a drink of some kind, or perhaps some coffee, Mr. Crowder," Sarah said.

"No thanks, Sarah," he said, and suddenly remembered he hadn't had anything to eat since Mrs. Walters' doughnuts and coffee hours ago.

He waited, watching the almost hypnotic motion of the pendulum of a beautiful antique grandfather's clock standing against the far wall. Then he heard her coming and raised his eyes to the top of the stairway. Slim, dark hair worn shoulder-length, full-bosomed, her smile of greeting a little forced. The boys in the back rooms would probably have called her "a pretty special hunk of woman."

"Shall we go into the library, Mr. Crowder?" she said, and led the way across the hall.

In an attractive book-lined room she turned and faced him, all her defenses showing. "Abigail recognized me?"

"Yes."

"I was afraid so. Now it's all over town?"

"Not yet. I think I'm the only person Abigail has spoken to about you, and I haven't told anyone."

"You don't look shocked, Mr. Crowder."

"There have been a good many more shocking things than the story of your past taking place in Lakeview today," he said.

"I don't have to tell you that I was nearly floored when I saw Abigail sitting there in the hospital reception room. But she knows me as Joanne Smythe; how did that lead to me, here?"

"Piece of bad luck for you, Mrs. Winters. A picture in

the reception room, last year's queen of the hospital ball."

"Oh, brother!" she said. She had put on a wine-red housecoat for this meeting. From a pocket she produced a silver cigarette case and a lighter. Her hands weren't too steady as she got a cigarette going. She inhaled deeply and then let the smoke out in a long sigh. "So you said there was a message?"

"I didn't want you to turn me away, Mrs. Winters. Abigail Faber and I are both interested in the same thing: finding the man who kidnapped Stormy Knight, beat up on her, and left her for dead. I know, for example, that you were in a regular staff meeting in Warren Andrews' office. Later on you changed into a volunteer's uniform, though there were no duties for you to perform. That suggested to both of us that you were trying to find out what Stormy Knight's condition was. Had Stormy already, or was she about to, reveal the truth about you? Had she talked, or was she ever going to talk?"

"You're working with the State Police, aren't you, Mr. Crowder? My husband told me when I got home for dinner."

"Yes, but my interest in this is rather personal. I blame myself in part for what happened to Stormy. I didn't have the sense to realize she was in danger, and I left her unguarded. Abigail Faber heard about it on the radio and came to Lakeview to try to help an old friend. She told us what her connection with Stormy had been. Later, when she saw you in the hospital, she told me about you—the same kind of connection. Since Stormy can't talk, I thought perhaps you could and would."

"My life and Thorne's life to go down the drain to help Stormy?"

"To help catch a murderer who killed Stanley Chard, abducted and tortured Stormy, and tried to kill me and got an innocent bystander instead."

"I—I don't think I should talk without Thorne being here, but some of it you've guessed and I might as well let you have it straight. Sit down, Mr. Crowder, please. It—it's not going to be easy."

He sat. She did not, moving restlessly around the room as she talked, taking a quick look at him as she made particular points.

"I—I was born Josephine Anna Tucci," she said. "My mother and father were uneducated Italian immigrants to this country after the Second World War. I grew up in the city slums, a dumb kid without any real opportunities. Talk about free education, and all the help for the needy, the unemployed, the underprivileged! Talk about it, but don't try to get help in all those areas!

"When I was eight or nine years old, my father was killed in a construction job accident. I had an older brother and two older sisters. We were high and dry, Mr. Crowder. One day my mother ran off with some creep who sweet-talked her into sharing his bed and leaving four kids to handle our own problems. My brother joined the Navy, my two sisters took to the streets, and when I was about sixteen, I—I went the same way. It brought money, which bought food, and clothes, and shoes, and cheap perfume, and cheap jewelry. And books! Reading was about the only thing I really enjoyed. I cut my teeth on Hemingway and Faulkner, and later Fitzgerald and Willa Cather, and on and on. I got to be an educated tramp, Mr. Crowder. I could handle the high-class trade and not have them think they were in bed with a cow!"

She lit a fresh cigarette after tossing the one she'd finished into the open fireplace. "When I was in my mid-twenties, beginning to think I was getting a little long in the tooth, I ran into Abigail Faber." Her short laugh had a bitter edge to it. "It was like a struggling actor getting an agent! I didn't have to go out scouring the bars and the



streets for customers. Abigail provided them, at parties—perhaps I should call them brawls. The money was good, there was a kind of protection that went with it. If some John got too obstreperous there were other people around. The help worked for a man named Stanley Chard who set up the parties. There was always good food, good wines, good music. There was a lot of laughter, which there isn't when you're working solo. Shocked, Mr. Crowder?"

"If you mean are you telling me something I never heard of, no."

She moved away. "That brings me down, I guess, to what counts."

"Before you get there," Uncle George said, "your name?"

She laughed. "Josephine Anna Tucci had become Joanne Smythe. In our business everybody was a Smith—in the hotel business they call the people who register under false names 'John Smiths.' I thought I'd fancy it up and make it Smythe."

"Gail is the name we know you by here in Lakeview, Mrs. Winters."

She turned away again and stood with her back to him, ramrod-straight. "Between Abigail Faber and Stormy Knight you're going to be able to strip me naked, Mr. Crowder. There are personal things that have no bearing on anything that's been happening here. What will come out, if Abigail wants to make a fast buck by selling her memoirs to the national press, is that I worked for her, that I was part of an 'orgy package' she sold to groups of men supplied by Stanley Chard. It will come out that my husband, a respected jurist and an honorable man, met me at one of those orgies. Will you be getting a cut from Abigail if I tell you the juicy details, Mr. Crowder?"

"I'll pretend you didn't ask me that," Uncle George said.

She turned to look at him again. "I don't have any choice

but to throw myself—and Thorne—on your mercy. Yes, I met Thorne at one of Chard's brawls. What was a nice, decent man doing there? A long and happy marriage had been ended by his wife's death."

"Cancer is the story in town."

She nodded. "Thorne was lost without her, turning this way and that to take his mind off it. Some friends persuaded him to go to one of Chard's brawls."

"Woody Cline and Alex Clement?"

"I'm willing to talk about Thorne and me, but nobody else, Mr. Crowder."

"Fair enough," Uncle George said.

"Thorne came to that party like a man in a strange town might drop in to a burlesque house or an after-hours club where the girls do a strip. Curiosity, because he was lonely and couldn't get his mind off his personal hurt, and because friends were going. I was one of the girls Abigail had produced for that night. It was noisy and loud—a jazz piano played by a black man who was really great, a lot of men getting drunk very fast, girls being mauled and handled. My—my particular assignment that night was to look out for the shy ones. There are always shy ones, who can't get into the swing of things. My job was to joke with them, make sure they got to drinking, and eventually shack up with one of them. That night—that night I spotted this handsome older man, standing on the fringes of things, not joining in. He was Thorne Winters. I offered to get him a drink. 'Maybe later,' he said. 'I guess I'm not in the mood for much, except watching and maybe laughing a little,' he said. I got him a drink anyway, and sat down beside him. He asked me my name, and I told him—Joanne Smythe. I remember he frowned. 'Do you have a nickname?' he asked me. 'Joanne is a name that produces rather painful memories for me.'"

"His wife's name was Joan," Uncle George said.

“Yes. I found that out later. You please the customer. I didn’t have a nickname, but I pulled one out of the hat—the last part of Abigail’s name. ‘Some people call me Gail,’ I told him. ‘I like that,’ he said. ‘It suits you.’ And so I became Gail to him. We talked and talked—politics, books, theater. I kept waiting for the usual to happen, but it didn’t. ‘If I don’t choose to get involved with you, will it cost you?’ Thorne asked me. ‘Only if you report me for not being cooperative,’ I told him. That was it, till the small hours of the morning—talk, and more talk, and laughing at the antics taking place in the rest of the party. Finally he announced that he was throwing in the towel—and asked if he could see me again—‘in a more private setting.’ Well, there it was. I liked him and I said yes.”

“Not against the rules to set up business deals of your own?” Uncle George asked.

“Not as long as I was always available when Abigail needed me. Anyway, the next evening, just before dinner time, Thorne called me at my apartment. I’d given him the number. ‘Must be just about time for a fancy breakfast,’ he suggested. It had been daylight when we’d parted after the brawl. I agreed to go out with him. He’d reacted sooner than I’d expected, but so much the better. He picked me up at my apartment and took me to a fancy East Side restaurant. We, quite literally, did have a breakfast-type meal. Afterwards we went back to my place. He seemed surprised by it. I suppose he’d expected some sort of bedroom décor. What he saw was a pleasant living room, lined with books, one good painting I’d acquired in an extravagant moment. I made a pot of coffee and we sat and talked, mostly politics that night—how I stood on women’s rights. Eventually he said he had to go—early business appointment the next day. No pass, no nothing. Would you believe I was pleased? It was the first evening I’d spent with a man since I could remember which hadn’t finally involved

my profession. It was pleasant. It was, believe it or not, fun! I thought I wouldn't see him again, I must not be his type, physically. But the next day he called. Would I have dinner with him? He was leaving town the following morning." She was silent for a moment as she lit a fresh cigarette. "It was dinner, and a Broadway show, and a fancy night spot afterwards for a drink. He took me home, eventually, but he didn't suggest coming in with me or going up to my apartment with me. Instead, he seemed embarrassed by something. 'I've taken up a lot of your time when you could have been—working,' he said. 'If—if you'd like me to pay for your time—?' I told him of course not; I'd had fun, enjoyed myself. That was that, I thought. About a week later he called me again. He was here, in Lakeview. He'd been thinking about me, wanted to see me again. If he came to town, would I—?" Gail laughed. "The first honest-to-goodness date I'd almost ever had with a man. He came to town, dinner at "21," jazz club afterwards where the music was super. This time, when he took me home, he asked if he could come up. Here it was, I thought. He was a slow make. But that wasn't it. Oh my, was it not!"

"I think I can see what's coming," Uncle George said.

"After the fact! Not me at the time," Gail said. "I—I made us coffee. He sat at the far end of the couch from me. He had never touched me, never tried any kind of caress, never even held my hand in a taxi. He said he had something to ask me. Would I consider giving up what I was doing for a living? I thought I knew, then, that I'd missed the boat. He was some kind of a do-gooder, trying to reform me. That didn't please me. I made some kind of flip answer. 'If you can think of some other way I can get by,' I said. He said he could. I asked him, what? 'Marry me,' he said. I have to tell you, Mr. Crowder, I didn't believe my ears.

"'You're kidding,' I said.

“‘I’m very serious,’ he said. ‘I like you. You’re good company, great fun. I’m lonely. I need someone with whom I can share all the good things I’ve got to share.’

“I saw he was really serious. No one had ever—” She gave a brief, humorless laugh. “‘You know what I’ve been most of my life,’ I said.

“‘I know,’ he said.

“‘And you still want to—?’

“‘Very much,’ he said. ‘I have a house in the country, cars, people to run the place and care for it. I have friends who will accept you with pleasure because you will have ended my loneliness.’

“‘I’m much, much younger than you are,’ I said.

“‘That’s a risk you’ll have to run,’ he said. ‘Maybe I can’t satisfy all your needs, maybe I can.’

“‘And you want to marry a prostitute?’

“‘I want to marry you, the real you,’ he said.

“I want to tell you, Mr. Crowder, it didn’t seem possible. And yet, and yet—” She gave that bitter little laugh again. “I told him I’d like a chance to think about it. He said he wouldn’t expect any other answer from me just then. I waited for the touch, the kiss. It didn’t come.

“‘I’m a judge in the State Supreme Court,’ he told me. ‘Court’s in session for the next five days. I’ll come back on Saturday and you can say yes or no. if it’s yes, we’ll get a license, get married, and that will be that.’

“I asked him if he didn’t want to ‘test out the territory’ before he made a commitment. ‘After we’re married,’ he said. ‘If it doesn’t work I’ll see to it that you never have any financial worries.’ He drank his coffee and took off!

“I needed someone to talk to, Mr. Crowder, but I knew what all the people I knew would say. ‘Take the money and run.’ I—I didn’t feel that way about it. I wanted to try on the level or not try at all.”

“That was ‘the real you’ Thorne had been talking about,” Uncle George said.

"I suppose. I—I didn't really think I'd hear from him that next Saturday. He'd have a week in which to think about the insanity he proposed for himself. Marriage to a prostitute!"

"But he called?"

She nodded. "He called. If the answer was yes, we would drive up to Greenwich, Connecticut, get married, take a brief honeymoon at any place I chose, and then go 'home.'"

"And you said yes?"

"Did you ever buy a ticket on a lottery, Mr. Crowder? Your chances of winning may be a million to one, but why not risk a couple of bucks to make half a million? He was a terribly nice man. He was offering me something I'd never have a chance at again. What could I lose?"

"So?"

"We went up to Greenwich, arranged for a license, were married by a justice of the peace."

"Your name on the marriage license was Gail Smythe?"

"Yes. I'd had no idea of where to go on a honeymoon, but Thorne had already arranged for a place, in case I hadn't made a choice. It was a lovely little inn a little farther up in Connecticut, overlooking Long Island Sound. Finally—finally the time came; the time when the skilled prostitute would make love with an inexperienced older man. It was a miracle, Mr. Crowder. Thorne was a marvelous lover, and for me—for me it was the first time, in like forever, that someone had made love to me and not just used me. I fell in love with Thorne during those few days in Connecticut, and I'm still in love with him, always will be in love with him."

"You came back here to Lakeview to live?"

"Of course, and it was everything Thorne had promised it would be: this house, Sarah and the outside people to care for it and me, his friends, who welcomed me with all the pleasure he'd promised."

“Woody Cline and Alex Clement?”

“They are Thorne’s oldest and best friends, and they were wonderful to me. That I suppose I could have expected. But the people—they’ve been unbelievable. No questions. I suppose there’s been gossip. You would know that, Mr. Crowder.”

“No gossip that I’ve ever heard,” Uncle George said. “The kind of slightly off-color speculations about a young woman and an older man. I think people knew how lonely the judge had been after the death of his first wife. I think they were pleased for him that he’d found someone attractive to fill the vacancy that Joan’s death created for him.”

“I’ve been accepted everywhere, actually elected head of the hospital volunteers. Now Abigail comes up, ready to wreck it all.”

“That isn’t why she’s here. She was concerned for Stormy Knight, thought she might be able to help catch the man who’d harmed her. Seeing you wasn’t anything she’d expected or imagined could happen. She had been a sort of partner of Stanley Chard’s, you know. You knew Chard, too, didn’t you?”

“I knew who he was,” Gail said. “I knew he was the man who set up the parties for which Abigail supplied the girls, but I never saw him.”

“And when he was killed in the Grove this morning you must have told Thorne that you knew who he was.”

“Yes, I did.”

“It’s interesting that Thorne never mentioned that to Captain Purdy.”

“Surely you can understand that, Mr. Crowder. People knew who he was, what he did; people at the Fair, Stormy Knight. For Thorne to tell the police that *I* knew who he was would open up the whole can of worms! It wouldn’t help solve the crime or identify the man who later abducted Stormy Knight.”

“Or tried to kill me by bombing my Jeep.”

“Well, would it have helped? Why should we reveal our secret if it wouldn’t do any good?”

Uncle George gave her a level look. “I’d like to ask you a rather personal question, Gail. Do you and the judge sleep in a double bed, or in separate beds in the same room?”

“Really, Mr. Crowder!”

“Chard was killed sometime after midnight in the equipment shed in the Grove. If the judge was in your bed, or in his own bed in your room, that would mean he wasn’t at the Grove.”

“Why on earth would he be at the Grove?”

“Because Chard was blackmailing him, and Woody Cline, and Alex Clement—and, incidentally, you. He had a film of what went on at one of Abigail’s orgies, which involved them and probably you.”

“That’s crazy, Mr. Crowder!”

“I’ll take it from there, Gail!” a harsh voice said from behind Uncle George.

Uncle George turned and found himself facing a stone-faced Judge Winters.

“I kept him talking as long as I could, Thorne!” Gail cried out. “I thought you’d never get here!”

“Well, I’m here now, love,” the judge said. “You couldn’t keep your nose out of other people’s business, could you, George?”

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Showdown time, Uncle George told himself.

Judge Winters walked over to a sideboard, opened it, and took out a bottle of bourbon. He poured himself a stiff



drink in a shot glass, made a gesture of invitation to Uncle George, and then drank it down.

"I told him the whole truth, Thorne, about us," Gail said. "Nothing else. It was the only way I could see to keep his attention."

The judge put his empty shot glass down on the center table. "Gail called me when Sarah told her that you were here to see her with a message from Abigail Faber," he said. "What was the message, George?"

"I'm afraid that was a way to get Gail's attention," Uncle George said. "In a way, though, there was a message. Abigail had recognized her as Joanne Smythe, one of her party girls."

"Bitch!" the judge said.

"Accident," Uncle George said. "Gail walked into the reception room and there was Abigail. Abigail wasn't here to do Gail any harm. She wanted to help identify the man who had worked over Stormy Knight."

"The Knight girl still alive?" the judge asked.

"Just barely hanging on, the last I knew."

The judge took a thin brown cigar from a humidor on the table and lit it. Then he bit down hard on it. "You were flirting with the truth when I came in, George."

"One man is dead, butchered; an attempt was made on my life and an innocent boy was killed in my place; Stormy Knight's life is dangling by a thread. You think it's odd that I've been trying to come up with answers?"

"Who have you shared your guesses with?" the judge asked.

"Who are your partners in crime, Thorne, in addition to Woody Cline and Alex Clement?"

The judge shifted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "So we have two unanswered questions," he said. "You'll protect your friends and I'll protect mine. That doesn't get us very far, does it?"

Uncle George gave him a faint smile. "Your move, Your Honor."

Winters was silent for a long moment. "I only have two moves I can make, George," he said. "I can tell you the truth and hope that you can show me a way out of the corner I'm in. If that doesn't work, then I'll have to make certain that you don't tell anyone else what I've told you."

"Another bomb?" Uncle George said.

"Nothing as chancy as that," Winters said.

"Perhaps I'd just better go about my business," Uncle George said. "You know I'm not going to help you escape a murder charge if you're as guilty as I think you are."

"I wouldn't try to go anywhere, George. There's a man outside who will stop you unless I give him the word that you're free to go."

"Your hit man?"

"Let's just say it's someone who won't hesitate to stop you. I'm not going to let anything happen to Gail or me—or to any friends of mine. I can tell you how it is, and you can decide whether you'll play ball with me or not. After you've heard, if you won't play ball, well then—I'm sorry."

"You can snowball yourself right into a guilty verdict, Thorne."

The judge's smile was humorless. "You're the man I've heard say that you can only be executed once, whether you've committed one murder or twelve. You know, George, you disappeared from this town once for ten years. If you disappear again, nobody's going to think it's out of character."

"That first time, Thorne, nobody had tried to bomb me into the next world. This time nobody's likely to think that I've just taken a walk. Somebody may come off my bench and throw you for a big loss. You're too old, Your Honor, to be indulging in adolescent threats."

"Maybe if you tell him, Thorne," Gail broke in. "He must have some kindness, some compassion."

The judge took a few steps across the room to his wife, took her two hands in his, and bent down in a courtly old-world gesture of kissing her fingers. Then he straightened up, turned, squared his shoulders like a man about to hear the jury's verdict.

"You were asking a question, George, when I first got back here. You were asking Gail if she and I sleep together. I'm happy to tell you that we do! If we are questioned on that score by the police, we would both testify that we were together in the early hours of this morning when Stanley Chard was killed in the Grove. But you are a good enough lawyer, George, and a good enough guesser, to know that we weren't in bed. We were waiting for very important news to come from the Grove."

"To hear that your agent had made the last, painful blackmail payment to Chard and acquired the film which he was holding over your heads?"

"I'm curious to know how you knew about the film, George," the judge said.

"Abigail Faber. Chard let it slip to her one day. Not the specific film that interests you, but films like it that he was using to make himself rich."

"A miserable jerk!" Winters said, biting down hard on his cigar. "A man who didn't deserve to live."

"But you didn't set out to kill him, did you, Your Honor?"

"He'd been bleeding us for two years. We had let him know that the next payment, half a million dollars in cash, would be the last. He would turn over his film to us, or he could do his damndest. We couldn't go on living that way, George. Better to let him reveal what he had and take the rap than to live in anxiety and fear. I—I had the least to

lose. I would still have Gail, one way or the other. I might not have my career, but I didn't have to have it to survive. The film showed that Gail and I were both present at a sex orgy, but no more than observers, because that's all we were. But the others—well, they were involved in a pretty far-out fashion.”

“Good-bye college presidency, good-bye bank presidency,” Uncle George suggested.

“Good-bye whatever mattered to them,” the judge said. “Good-bye marriages, good-bye the respect of the community where they'd grown up and lived their whole lives. One absurd piece of unacceptable playboyism and you must pay forever or have your world smashed to pieces. It was like a kid taking his first drinks and killing someone when he tried to drive home drunk. Too big a price for too small a misstep. A piece of improper fun. It wouldn't have become a habit, a way of life. You try something once, and that's that—unless you get caught.”

“Like smoking pot once, or snorting cocaine once—just to see what it's like,” Uncle George said.

“In my case, George, I was just plain dumb,” the judge said. “While my first wife was still alive, I wouldn't have considered for a moment going to such a party. But when it was suggested to me, I was alone, and lonely, and bored out of my mind. I wasn't interested in fooling around with paid women, but a party? It could be fun, bizarre, amusing just to watch. My friends had organized it. I wouldn't have gone with strangers.”

“So you went—and you met Gail. She's told me.”

The judge turned to look at his wife. “Luckiest thing that ever happened to me,” he said. “And why I let myself be put over a barrel by Chard. Gail—my darling Gail—had made my life over. She had become a happy part of my world, my friends loved her, the community respected and liked her. Let Chard spread his filth around and it would

have destroyed Gail. I would do anything on earth to prevent that. I would do what has been done all over again if I had to. I will do whatever has to be done up the road to keep Gail untouched."

"The man—your agent?" Uncle George asked. "Doesn't he have you over a barrel, too?"

"Not any more," the judge said, his smile grim.

"Having murdered, kidnapped, and tortured, he will go down with the ship, too," Uncle George said.

"That's about the size of it," the judge said.

"How did you happen to hire an outsider?"

The judge drew a deep breath and tossed away his cigar. "We went to that party, my friends and I, two and a half years ago. They had the kind of fun they were after, I was an observer and I found Gail. That was that. My friends enjoyed their sexual acrobatics and I found a way to remake my life—Gail. Gail and I were married, began to rebuild our lives. The party was forgotten, until Fair time that summer, when Stanley Chard came to town. He got in touch with us, had something important to show us. Hinted that it was about the almost-forgotten party. A few of us went to his motel room—Stone Masters' Lodge—to meet him. He had a projector set up, he ran his film through it for us, and our worlds began to topple. Bastard!"

"There was a price?"

"A price, a stiff price that would obviously go on and on forever. Every year at Fair time we were to have a substantial payment ready for him."

"You didn't try to overpower him, take his film from him then and there?"

"Because he made it clear that someone else had a copy of the film. We were flabbergasted. We got up that first payment. We had a year to figure out what to do. We were safe as long as we paid."

"And so a year went around?"

"Yes. We held more councils of war than you can imagine. One thing we all agreed on: we wouldn't, couldn't, be seen in Lakeview dealing with Stanley Chard. Just to be seen with him would make us suspect to the people who knew him. There was a man I knew at the state capitol, a private detective, not too scrupulous. He agreed to act for us with Chard. A good price to him, too, but he was to make a deal for a final payment and the return of the film."

"Or films," Uncle George said.

"Yes—or films," the judge said. "This man, our agent as you call him, met with Chard that next Fair time. Our man said this was it; we'd make that payment if Chard turned over the films to us. No more after that. Chard laughed at him and I guess they got into some kind of shouting match—enough to attract attention. Chard's woman, this Stormy Knight, came into the room where they were to find out what was wrong. Chard told her everything was all right, but she got a good look at our man. How much Chard told, I don't know. Do you, George? You were her protector."

"She told me Chard never discussed his business affairs with her."

"You believed her?"

"Yes, I think I did. But after Chard was murdered she saw your man in the shopping center. She knew there'd been trouble a year ago between that man and Chard. Your man knew she could connect him with Chard and he tried to take off. Stormy went after him. He had to keep her silent. So far so good?"

"Something like that is the way it was, George. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. In that first meeting, a year ago, when it was over, Chard had agreed that he would turn over the films to us with a final payoff at this year's Fair. My man contacted him and it was arranged for them to meet at the Grove after the Lions' picnic. They met there, shortly

after midnight." The judge hesitated for so long Uncle George wondered if he would go on. "Our man had the money for the final payment," he said, at last. "Chard laughed at him. Did our man really think he would give up on a gold mine when there was still ore in it? Our man blew his stack, threatened Chard, and Chard pulled a gun on him. Our man is a pretty tough cookie."

"I know how tough he can be with a helpless woman," Uncle George said.

The judge made an impatient gesture, as if to brush aside the comment. "Our man made a lunge at Chard, knocked the gun out of his hand. They scrambled for it and our man came up with it and covered Chard. He ordered him to turn over the films. Chard laughed at him, reached in his pocket and came out with something in his hand. 'Here's your film!' he said—and swallowed it. I guess our man was in shock when he saw that. He knew Chard's history and he thought it was for real. In his instant reaction his finger tightened on the trigger and he shot Chard right in the face, killed him."

"And then carved him open to find the film?"

"Yes. That was his job, to get the film. He—he acted on his own. You do what comes to mind in a moment of crisis."

"But Chard had bamboozled him."

"Yes." The judge's mouth twitched at one corner. "He came back and reported to us. At first we thought it must be some version of the old magic trick. He concealed the film in his clothing, tossed it away in the semidarkness of the equipment shed. We went over there and searched—his clothing, every corner and crevice in the room."

"What you saw must have been a little stomach-turning," Uncle George suggested.

The judge's mouth twitched again. "What was done was done. The important thing was to find the film. It might be in his car. We took it apart without any success. Since no

one was going to recognize the body easily, we drove the car back to the parking lot at the fairgrounds. Where else could he keep the film? Of course, in the Stone Masters' Lodge where he and his woman were staying. Our man waited at the fairgrounds in the morning for the Knight woman to appear, and when she did he went to the lodge to search. Nothing there. But we had to come to the conclusion that the Knight woman was his partner in crime. If the body was identified as Chard, the woman would turn over the film or films to the cops and that would be it; not only a scandal about a sex orgy but a murder charge against all of us."

"You could turn over your man to the police," Uncle George said. "You couldn't avoid the scandal, but a high-powered lawyer could probably get you out of a murder charge."

"I don't turn over people who try to do a job for me," the judge said.

"Chard threatened your man, and he acted in self-defense," Uncle George said. "You might even get him off."

"There is one thing we overlooked," the judge said, as if he hadn't heard. "That damn dog, Chard's dog. He was in Chard's car when Chard went out to the Grove to meet our man. He knew our man was the one who had polished off his master. We saw him hanging around outside the equipment shed, but we thought he was just some local mutt searching for picnic scraps. Then you found him, George, took him to the fairgrounds, found out he was Chard's dog, which identified the body for the police. That brought the Knight woman into the picture and she sewed it up for you. We kept waiting for the woman to produce the films and do us all in."

"She didn't because she hasn't got them," Uncle George said.



"We hoped that was so, but the more we thought about it, the less likely it seemed. She had them, she would use them against us, and it was twice the problem now, because if she produced them we would also be had for Chard's murder."

"And then your man encountered her in the shopping center, dragged her away to your cabin on the mountain, tortured her, and left her for dead in Mullins Creek."

The judge turned away, a man very close to coming apart at the seams. "I grew up believing that life was a kind of team sport," he said. "You faced it with friends who had common goals, common ambitions, common pleasures, the same rules for living. Then you find yourself faced with a common crisis, and all the disciplines you've lived by collapse. We—we stopped operating as a team and everyone made his own independent moves."

"The party where you met Gail, that was the last team sport you engaged in?" Uncle George asked.

The judge nodded, still turned away. "Then Stanley Chard. For two years we played it together, jointly raising the money for a payoff. Then we just couldn't go on living that way, prisoners to this monster's whims and demands. I hired my man, my agent as you call him, to handle things for us. That's when it all came apart. He killed Chard. I don't blame him, you understand. He was threatened, he reacted to the threat. But if we had had the guts to go with him, to face Chard ourselves—"

"It might have been different?"

"We might have been able to strike a bargain with Chard. So we were involved with a murder we'd never dreamed of, and Chard still had us where he wanted us. Someone, almost certainly the Knight girl, had the film and would use it against us. On and on."

"So you planned to work on her?"

"No! It was an independent action again. Bad luck. My

man ran into her in the shopping center, acted on his own.”

“But you told him where he could take her to work her over,” Uncle George said.

“The deed was done. He’d attacked her and now we had to get the truth from her. We didn’t anticipate that he would kill her. We thought she’d surely give us what we had to have.”

“Another independent action?”

“Yes, God help us.”

“Like bombing my Jeep?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s stop playing games, Your Honor,” Uncle George said, his voice cold. “When my Jeep was bombed, your man was up in the mountain cabin, slamming Stormy Knight around, burning her with hot cigarettes. Whose independent action was the bombing?”

“George, George, George, you were a danger to us!”

“Was it my good friend, the ex-chemistry teacher? Did he act independently?”

“Woody? You know Woody, George. He wouldn’t do any such thing!”

“I think we’ve gone on with this charade long enough,” Uncle George said. “It’s curious, but what you’ve been telling me is extraordinarily close to a theory I’d figured out for myself. But now that I hear it from you, it rings as sour as a cracked bell. You’ve told me all this because you want me to believe it, and because you want me to believe it, it must not be the truth. What did really happen, Judge? Who did kill Chard? Was it you, or Woody, or Alex? You’ve set up your hit man, but we’re not going to find him, are we? He’s gone, has had hours to get to where we’ll never find him.”

“I guess we’ve let this go as far as we can, don’t you think, Thorne?” The voice came from behind Uncle George in the doorway to the library.

Uncle George turned and found himself facing Alex Clement. The president of Lakeview's bank was dressed just as Uncle George had last seen him at the mountain cabin. He carried the same rifle, but this time it was aimed at Uncle George's chest. He was not the friendly, jovial man George Crowder had known most of his life. This man was cool, deadly, determined. Just behind him in the doorway was Woody Cline, also armed with a rifle.

"The Three Must-Get-Theres!" Uncle George said.

"And plan to stay there, George," Alex Clement said.

They talked about Uncle George as though he wasn't there.

"We've moved his car," Woody Cline said, his voice unfamiliar.

"My dog was in that car," Uncle George said.

"Then I suppose he still is," Cline said. "The boathouse? Nobody will be coming there this time of night."

"Give us until morning," the judge said. "What about Sarah?"

"The last cup of coffee did her in," Woody said. "She'll be out like a light for hours."

"So make sure the coast is clear and we'll take him to the boathouse," the judge said. He had suddenly produced a handgun from the pocket of his jacket and was fondling it.

Uncle George glanced at Gail Winters. She was rigid, frozen, but apparently not to be counted on as an ally.

"You can just take me to the shore of the lake, shoot me, and push me in," Uncle George said.

"It's not going to be as simple as that, George," the judge said. "You're going to talk before you die. How painful it is will depend on how stubborn you are."

"If you can't win anyway, it doesn't really matter how painful it is to lose, does it?" Uncle George said.

"That is something we will find out," the judge said.

"Keep him covered, Alex. If he lifts a finger, let him have it where it will hurt him the most."

The judge crossed to the desk and opened the top drawer. He produced a pair of steel handcuffs. He walked around behind Uncle George, grabbed one arm, snapped a cuff over that wrist, and then the other. He patted his prisoner over for a hidden weapon. There was none.

Woody Cline reappeared in the doorway. "Nothing stirring," he said.

"All right, George, march!" the judge ordered, and Uncle George could feel the barrel of the handgun pressed into the small of his back.

You don't do something impulsive and crazy when you're in a trap. You wait until there is some small but realistic chance of escape. Not here, not with two guns leveled at him and his hands locked behind his back.

Gail Winters made a quick move toward the door, went out into the entrance hall, and was gone. Whatever Judge Winters decided to do, she was with him all the way. That was apparent.

"March!" the judge said again, and jammed the gun harder into Uncle George's back.

And so you obey, and wait for your moment to come. How much chance was there that a moment would come when you were in the hands of three normally civilized men who'd been driven over the brink of sanity by a snowballing series of horrors not entirely of their making? Less than twenty-four hours ago they'd thought they had a deal with Stanley Chard: a final bribery payment, the damaging films turned over to them, and home free, noose removed from around their necks, back to a normal existence. Then Chard's double-cross, the dam breaks, and a torrent of violence sweeps over them, uncontrollable, perhaps even a relief after more than two years of perpetual anxiety

brought about by one night's indiscretions. These men were not thinking as they had thought all their lives.

Time was his one chance, Uncle George thought as he moved slowly out of the library into the entrance hall, Judge Winters' gun jammed hard in his back. Sooner or later, these men were going to have to slow down after a round-the-clock period of horror. If he could stall them past that point, Uncle George thought, they might come around to some kind of sane evaluation of the situation they were in. Adding to their list of crimes was not going to make their chances any better.

The little parade moved through the entrance hall and out of the front door into a silvery moonlit night. Looking around, Uncle George saw that his car, with Timmy in it, was indeed gone. Nor did he see any other cars parked around the house. The men's cars were probably garaged at their adjoining estates.

"What happens if Captain Purdy comes looking for you, Thorne?" Alex Clement asked.

"Gail will handle him, but why should he come? He's probably delighted not to have me peering over his shoulder. Follow Woody, George," the judge said.

There was no need for flashlights or torches here in this open space along the shore of the lake. The moon was a bright, round globe in the sky, with no trees to shut out its light. Far away across the water, Uncle George could see lights in the windows of houses there. No way to signal them or attract attention.

They had talked of "the boathouse." There were half a dozen of them within a mile. The judge had one, Alex Clement had one, Woody Cline had one. Woody walked past all three of those to the next one in line. It belonged, Uncle George knew, to people named Macklin. He looked up at their house. It was dark, no lights anywhere.

"Don't get your hopes up, George," the judge said. "Bob Macklin isn't going to mind our using his place. He'll never know. They're in Europe."

Woody went into the Macklins' boathouse, the others behind him. A big picture window overlooking the lake provided enough moonlight to make any other lights unnecessary. No chance that anyone would see an unexpected light and get curious. The judge gave Uncle George a violent shove, and he found himself toppling into a wicker armchair. His arms, locked behind him, were cruelly hurt by the handcuffs. Against his will he heard himself make a little cry of pain.

"Don't smoke, Alex!" the judge said, sharply. "Someone might see your lighter, or the glow of a cigarette."

"Sorry, Thorne. I wasn't thinking," the banker said.

The three men faced the wicker armchair, guns held rather carelessly. A handcuffed man wasn't going to be very hard to control.

"Let's make it clear, George, exactly where we're at," the judge said.

"Let *me* make it clear where we're at," Uncle George said, his face twisted by pain in spite of himself. "That will save you all from making gory threats that aren't natural to any of you. You think I know where Chard's film, or films, are hidden. You think Stormy Knight confided that information to me. She didn't. I don't think she knows where they are. Your man, who worked her over, must be pretty certain she didn't. No woman could stand up under that kind of brutal treatment."

"Women can stand pain better than men, George," Woody Cline said.

"But you've set up a no-win situation, woman or man," Uncle George said. "If Stormy does know where the film is, she couldn't have saved herself by telling your man. He couldn't let her go. She could identify him, which would

lead to a murder charge against him—even if he didn't commit a murder."

"If you mean Chard, our man did kill him—in self-defense," the judge said.

"A technicality which might or might not stand up," Uncle George said. "Stormy didn't know that. If she knows where the films are, the one thing she had left in a short life was not to let you win. I don't happen to think she knows. But if she does, and if she comes around, she will tell us. The only way you can stop that is to storm the hospital, shoot your way past the guards who have been set up around her, and reveal yourselves to the world."

"We don't have to do that, George," the judge said. "We get you to tell us where the film is. Because, almost certainly, the Knight woman told you."

"She didn't, as a matter of fact. But I can make you two good guesses as to where the film is."

"I'm listening," the judge said.

"If Chard never meant to make a deal with you, he surely didn't have the film with him. It's probably locked away in a safe-deposit box somewhere. It was his security for the future. You would have to go on paying and paying forever."

"So he got himself killed by making a wrong move. Who gets the film now? The Knight woman probably inherits whatever he had to leave."

"If she does, she'll see you characters hanged—if she pulls through," Uncle George said.

"And if she doesn't pull through?"

"Alex can tell you how many banks there are in this country, and you can be certain the safe-deposit box isn't in Chard's name. Needle-in-a-haystack department."

"You said you had a second guess," Woody Cline said.

"You won't like it."

"Try us," Cline said.

"The judge told me how it happened—the struggle between your agent and Chard, the shot that killed him after he went through the motions of swallowing the film, the eventual carving Chard up to find the film. I'm not sure I believe any of that, because it's what the judge wanted me to believe. But let's say for the moment that's the way it was—or that's the way your hit man says it was."

"Says it was?"

"Let's say Chard did have the film. Let's say he did swallow it. Then the man who carved him up found it!"

The Three Must-Get-Theres exchanged glances.

"He cooperated in all the other searches to make it look good," Uncle George said. "He beat up on the Knight girl so you'd know he was with you all the way. Then you arranged to spirit him away, and he's gone, with your film, and he's got you forever!"

"No way!" the judge said.

"And 'no way' the way you've told it, either, Judge. Who really did kill Chard? You, Judge? Alex? Woody? Or someone else whose name hasn't surfaced yet?"

There was a moment of dead silence in the moonlit room. Uncle George moved in his chair, trying to relieve the painful pressure on his wrists. Then the judge stepped forward, drew back his arm, and used the butt of his handgun to strike a savage blow to the side of Uncle George's face.

"Game time is over," he said. "Where is the film, George?"

Uncle George could taste blood in his mouth. Little stars danced for a moment in front of his eyes.

"Harder than that and I won't be able to talk if I could talk," he said.

The three men moved away into a huddled conference that Uncle George couldn't hear. He guessed what was



coming. The vision of a battered Stormy Knight came back to him. She had held out to the bitter end, because she had the guts to hold out or because she simply didn't have the information the man wanted. That was the boat he was in. He had nothing to give them except guesses, and if they chose to torture him for something he didn't have, there was nothing he could do except prepare for whatever was in store for him.

Woody Cline broke away from his friends and came over to the wicker armchair where Uncle George sat, twisted to one side to keep from bringing extra pressure on his arms. Woody looked almost benign, mild brown eyes behind his horn-rimmed glasses showing a genuine sympathy. He had taken a clean, neatly folded handkerchief from his breast pocket and reached out with it toward Uncle George's face.

"Little trickle of blood at the corner of your mouth, George," he said. "Mind if I wipe it away?"

"Be my guest," Uncle George said. A sudden, fierce anger almost shook him. He was about to get the "bad-cop-good-cop" treatment. First a gun butt to the jaw and now good old kindly Woody.

"This is the kind of situation you never dream of happening in your whole life," Woody said. "We've been casual friends for—what? Thirty-five, forty years?"

"First year of high school, Chemistry One," Uncle George said.

"Ah, yes. My first year as a qualified teacher," Woody said.

"That may explain why you left me slightly insufficient."

"How was that, George?"

"You neglected to show me how to build a bomb and plant it in a man's car so it would go off when he started his motor."

Cline actually looked hurt. "You're a lawyer, George.

You've dealt with people in crisis most of your life. You know that acute pressures can drive a man to actions he wouldn't have thought possible."

"Stewart Caldwell, the father of the boy who was killed in my Jeep, may not find that too easy to understand. What are you trying to sell me, Woody?"

Cline took off his glasses and began to clean them with his bloodied handkerchief, blowing on the lenses, rubbing, blowing again. "The purpose behind the criminal justice system," he said, like a college professor starting a lecture, "is to keep dangerous criminals off the street, to protect society from them. I have spent my whole life trying to help people, not hurt them. Thorne was a defense attorney before he was elevated to the bench, and has spent most of his life trying to make certain that people on both sides, the criminal and the victim, get justice. Alex has spent his years trying to help people with their financial problems, to dig themselves out of holes, to finance their dreams. I can't think of any three men who are less dangerous to the general public."

"And yet in the space of less than twenty-four hours you are responsible for the murder of two men, Chard and the Caldwell boy; Stormy Knight's life is hanging by a thread; she may be your third victim; and you're certainly not going to be able to let me live after this. Not dangerous, you say, Woody?"

Cline's eyes, behind his cleaned lenses, had turned cold in the moonlight. "Chard deserved to die," he said. "He was a monster, involved with crime every day of his life. He threatened our man who was trying to complete an agreed-upon deal and he got what was coming to him. The Knight woman was obviously his partner, and you, George, appeared to be in with her. If we had had time to think it out rationally—"

"The Caldwell boy might still be alive?"

"An unfortunate tragedy, not planned, not meant to happen," Cline said.

"But a murder *was* meant to happen. Mine!"

"It was a little like a hurricane striking a place unexpectedly," Cline said. "The storm has struck, and passed by. There need be no more damage, no more violence."

"Then take these cuffs off my wrists and let me go," Uncle George said.

"If there was some way to be sure that you'd let Thorne and Gail and the rest of us go free and safe."

"So I could leave town and let Captain Purdy and Red Egan handle the case? They won't quit, you know. If I'm not here, the Knight woman and Abigail Faber will tell the police what they know, unless you can find a way to buy them off or silence them. I've been suckered once, Woody. Not again, I think."

"Suckered once?"

"I came out here because some soft spot in my heart told me Gail Winters deserved some kind of help. It turns out she didn't need help from me. She talked me into a trap, instead."

"Let's put it right on the line, George. Tell us where the film is and we'll pay you a handsome price for it."

"For it, and for my silence. Right?"

"Right."

"My silence after you've finished off Stormy Knight, if she pulls through, and after you've put Abigail Faber into Mullins Creek, or someplace else?"

"You're not an easy man to deal with, George," Woody Cline said.

"And that's enough sweetness and light," the judge said, stepping forward, swinging his gun, held by the barrel, back and forth.

Uncle George braced himself for another blow, but it came in another and even deadlier form.

"Nerves of steel, but let's see how steely they are— Uncle George!" The word "Uncle" was spoken with contempt. "What a lovely relationship you and your young nephew, Joey Trimble, have. It would be a pity, wouldn't it, to bring it to an abrupt end?"

Uncle George could still taste the blood in his mouth. "Meaning what?" he asked.

"Meaning that we've decided beating you up isn't the best way to get what we want from you. You have a kind of stupid heroism that might hold up under a physical attack. Alex and I have decided that there is a way to get you to tell us where the film is."

"I don't know where it is," Uncle George said.

"I don't believe that for a minute, George. So we've decided to make you a promise. If you haven't told us within an hour where the film is and gotten it into our hands, we will bring you Joey Trimble's body so you can have a look at it before we dispose of it."

"You wouldn't! You couldn't!"

"Would and can," the judge said. "Our lives are at stake, so there's no reason why some lives that matter to you shouldn't be at stake."

"Lives?"

"If you force us to bring you a dead boy, George, we'll make you another promise. If the boy hasn't convinced you, we'll bring you your sister, Esther Trimble. So, take a minute or two to think, George, because we're not kidding."

The simple fact of the matter was George Crowder had nothing to think about. He had no idea where Chard's film was or who might control its future use. It could be Stormy

Knight, but it was a long-shot gamble whether she'd ever be able to tell anyone what she might know. If there was no way to convince these three madmen that he didn't have the information they wanted, what next? Would they really carry out their threat to harm Joey and Esther? Men who have gone this far, Uncle George told himself, won't stake out any limits to what they'll do to get what they want. He could picture the judge or Woody Cline or Alex Clement going to the Trimble house. One of the three most respected men in town visiting the Trimbles. Hector would be flattered, Esther would have no reason to suspect danger, Joey would be all ears. It would turn out, perhaps, that Joey was needed to look at someone who might match Barlow's drawing. The police were shorthanded and had asked for help. The Trimbles would surely trust Joey to Judge Winters, or the college president, or the banker. And later, when Joey was found dead, the boy had "slipped away" to play detective on his own. A tragic but unforeseeable incident, and the Three Must-Get-Theres would head the posse to search for the boy's killer.

Uncle George twisted painfully in his wicker chair. There was no possible way to warn his sister or Joey. Left alone, he might, through some kind of contortion, get his hands in front of him, get to one of the lakefront houses and a telephone. But he wasn't going to be left alone. He would live only just as long as his captors continued to think he might be able to tell them what they so desperately wanted to know.

But how to save Joey and Esther? How to persuade the judge that more killings were not going to get him what he wanted?

"Tossed it around a little, George?" the judge asked, coming back to the wicker chair, still holding his gun by the barrel and swinging it gently back and forth.

"I've been trying to think how to convince you that I don't know what you want me to tell you," Uncle George said.

"Waste of time, I'm afraid, George."

"You were a defense lawyer once in your career," Uncle George said. "You must have had many techniques for getting a judge and a jury to believe the truth."

"It's always harder to get someone to tell it than it is to get them to believe it when it is the truth. We've been discussing our options, George. A dead boy might just not be the way to persuade you to talk. But bring him here alive and let you watch him die by inches? Would that loosen you up a little, do you think?"

A cold chill ran along Uncle George's spine, but what he was feeling didn't show on his face. "You can never let the boy go; you can never let me go. It becomes just a matter of how painful you choose to make it."

"You'll choose pain for the boy as well as yourself?"

"There might be a way to find the film for you," Uncle George said.

"How?"

"You can turn me loose. I'll go back to the hospital and wait for Stormy Knight to be able to talk. If that happens, and she knows where the film is, she might tell me. She trusts me."

"And while you're waiting, you send an army of state cops down here to take us. Of course, if we had the boy here as a hostage—"

"You take the boy hostage and harm him," Uncle George said, "and I promise you I'll come back here and personally kill all three of you."

"I believe you would," the judge said. "No, I don't think we can let you go, George. We really can't, can we—not now, not ever?"

“So get on with it, then.”

“No. I think we’ll try the boy first,” the judge said.

Afterwards, Esther Trimble told how it happened.

She remembered that the clock in the church tower had chimed the hour of eleven. Hector had gone to bed. Tomorrow was another work day. He wasn’t going to sit up, glued to the radio, listening to the same story being told over and over at fifteen-minute intervals. There had been two murders committed in the town of Lakeview, and another victim’s life was hanging in the balance. Nothing new had happened, so why sit up and listen to it repeated endlessly?

It was well past Joey’s bedtime but Esther knew there was no way Joey was going to sleep. The radio in his room would be going all night, hidden under the bedclothes so Hector couldn’t hear it, so he might as well be up and they could share each other’s company. Joey sipped hot chocolate and nibbled at a jar of peanuts. Esther stayed by the coffee machine. Both of them had expected that sooner or later Uncle George would check back with them. He must be staying by that poor woman in the hospital, they told themselves.

“I should have followed her when she went after that man,” Joey kept telling his mother. “I’d have gotten a better look at him, maybe helped the lady when he grabbed her. But I was waiting for Uncle George to tell him. She asked me to.”

“You did just what you should have done,” his mother told him.

Under any other circumstances a caller after eleven in the evening would have been a cause for anxiety. Some kind of emergency would have been the first thought—Hector needed to fill a much-needed prescription. But to-

night, with the whole town apparently searching for the man in Kent Barlow's drawing, a crazy killer running loose somewhere, lights on in their windows, a caller didn't seem scary.

Joey went to answer the doorbell and Esther heard his surprised voice. "Gee, hello, Mr. Cline."

"Joey! I'm glad to see you're still up."

Woody Cline had been a familiar personality almost all of Esther's life in Lakeview. She went out into the front hall to greet him. He was his usual gently smiling self.

"I saw by your lights that you were still up, Esther," he said. "I don't feel as guilty as I would otherwise."

"Come in, Woody."

"This isn't a social call, Esther," Woody said as he came into the living room. "I actually came to find Joey."

"Oh?"

"Some of the men who've been out searching for the man they suspect of murder have come up with a stranger. They want Joey to have a look at him. He might be able to tell them for sure if they have the right man."

"Hector won't like it," Esther said.

"I've got to go, Mom," Joey said. "I'd know him if I saw him again. Uncle George would want me to do it."

"The police?" Esther asked.

"They've got to find Captain Purdy and tell him that they may have the man he wants," Cline said. "I thought you and Hector would trust Joey with me."

"I should wake Hector and tell him," Esther said.

"Oh, Mom, he'll only argue, and I've got to go," Joey said.

"Is George out there where the man is?" Esther asked.

"I haven't seen him," Cline said. "He's been out there in the woods with the others. But as soon as the word spreads he'll undoubtedly show up. George, or one of us, will bring Joey back, Esther."



"Where have they got this man?"

"One of the shacks out in the woods," Cline said. "We should get Joey back here in an hour or so."

Esther Trimble made one of the few wrong decisions in her life. "All right, off you go, Joey," she said.

Joey went out to Cline's car with him. Houses were lighted up all along the main street of the town. People everywhere were waiting for news.

"How did they catch the man?" Joey asked Cline when they were underway.

"He was hiding in this place," Cline said. "They were checking all the shacks, the boathouses."

"Out by the lake?" Joey asked, recognizing the direction they were taking.

"Yes. Actually, it's the Macklins' boathouse. They're in Europe, you know."

"Does he look anything like the drawing I helped Mr. Barlow do?"

"Enough for us to want to be sure," Cline said.

They drove to the garage on the Macklins' property.

"We'll leave the car here," Cline said, "and walk down to the boathouse."

There were no lights in the surrounding houses, only the moon as the man and the boy walked along the lake shore.

"No cars," Joey said.

"People hunting on foot, cars scattered all over the place," Cline said.

They reached the boathouse and Cline gave a loud, triple rap on the door. The door was opened from the inside and Cline gave the boy a sharp shove into the moonlit interior. Joey could only see three people inside the boathouse. Judge Winters had opened the door. Across the way was Mr. Clement, the bank president. And sitting in a wicker armchair, peculiarly twisted around, was Uncle George.

The boy shouted his pleasure. "Oh my, Uncle George, am I glad to see you!" He looked around. "Where is the man?"

"Joey, we have been tricked and trapped," Uncle George said, in a flat, dead-sounding voice.

The boy ran to him. "What's wrong with you? Are you hurt?"

"My hands are tied behind my back, Joey. Handcuffs, as a matter of fact. These men are our enemies, boy."

"I don't understand!" The boy had reached his beloved uncle and looked behind him. He saw the metal cuffs, the bloodied wrists. He turned. "You take those things off him right now!"

The judge and the others ignored him.

"Any problems?" the judge asked Woody Cline.

"No."

"They ask you where you were taking the boy?"

"I told them a shack up in the woods where they'd trapped the killer. Needed Joey's identification."

Joey had crept close to Uncle George's chair. "I don't understand what's cooking, Uncle George," he whispered.

Uncle George gave him a steady look. "It's the end of the world, boy," he said. "Not just one of those games we used to play, trying to figure our way out of an impossible trap. This is an impossible trap; no way out, not now, not ever."

"You're scaring me, Uncle George," the boy said.

"I wish I knew some way not to scare you, and for you not to be afraid," Uncle George said. "These men we've always thought of as friends have been turned into monsters."

"Mr. Cline, too?" Joey asked, his eyes wide as saucers. He and Uncle George *had* played games in which they invented villains and Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson found ways to outwit them. Uncle George didn't sound like that now, though.

“Good old kindly Woody Cline, too,” Uncle George said. “He tricked your mother into letting you go with him, and this is the end of the line. Good old kindly old Woody Cline planted the bomb in my Jeep that killed the Caldwell boy and Huckleberry. And good old kindly old Alex Clement, who offered to buy me a new Jeep, has changed his mind. And good old kindly old Thorne Winters has been transformed into a murderer and a torturer.”

The boy’s cold fingers touched his uncle’s face. “Are you okay, Uncle George? They hit you! There’s a little blood at the corner of your mouth.” He thought, obviously, that Uncle George was raving.

“You want to tell the boy, or shall I?” Judge Winters asked.

“Joey, you want to scream and cry it’s all right. I can’t help you and no one who matters will hear you,” Uncle George said. “The judge wants me to tell you, so here it is. These good old kindly old friends think I know where something is they must have. It’s a film that shows them doing something that would make them objects of contempt in the community and end their careers.”

“Is that what the man in the Grove swallowed?” Joey asked.

“Pretended to swallow, I think, boy. They think Miss Knight knows where it is and told me. She didn’t.”

The boy looked at the Three Must-Get-Theres. “If Uncle George says she didn’t, she didn’t,” he said.

“These three good and kind friends, Joey, have brought you here for a purpose. They plan to hurt you and keep hurting you until I tell them what they want to know. The problem is, I don’t have the answer they want. But that’s not the only problem, boy.”

“I—I don’t think I—”

“Of course you don’t understand, but it could only occur to sick minds,” Uncle George said. “They will hurt you,

and because they know I love you, I will tell them where their film is. I could fake it, Joey; I could invent a place where it is. But they wouldn't find it there and that would bring us right back to where we started. And in the end, boy, they can't let us go because we know too much."

"But Mom knows I went off with Mr. Cline."

"They will find us both, you and me, shot to death somewhere in the woods by the 'murderer,'" Uncle George said. "I was bringing you home and the murderer, who had escaped, shot us both. Our good, kind friends here will weep crocodile tears for the benefit of the town, and that will be that."

Joey shook his head, slowly. "You just have to be making up a story, Uncle George," he said.

"I wish to God I was, Joey."

The judge stepped forward and grabbed Joey by the shoulders, holding him so that he was facing Uncle George. "We've had enough of this," he said. "Last chance before we begin, George. Tell us where the film is."

"It never existed," Uncle George said. "Chard has been fooling you from the very beginning."

"It existed. It exists," the judge said. "I told you, Chard showed it to us the first time around—two years ago." He took Joey's arm and twisted it up behind the boy's back.

Joey cried out and looked ashamed.

"Just a gentle sample, George," the judge said.

"I won't know till I get there," Uncle George said, his voice not quite steady, "whether hate can be projected up from hell or down from heaven. If it can, it's going to be burning a hole in you forever, Winters."

The arm twist was more vicious this time. Joey's face was contorted with pain, but this time not a sound escaped him.

"Well, George?" the judge said.

"Thornel!" It was a shrill voice from the doorway. They all

turned as Gail Winters hurried into the boathouse. She went straight to her husband, at the same time putting a protective arm around Joey's shoulders. "You can't do this to this boy, Thorne," she said.

"Please stay out of this, Gail," the judge said.

"Crowder and the Knight girl may have planned to take over Chard's game and shake us down forever," Gail Winters said. "I could stand what you've done to them, even applaud it! But this boy is innocent of everything!"

"Crowder has to be made to talk," the judge said.

"But hurting this boy who's done you no harm!"

"It's too late to turn back, Gail. He can hurt *us* now."

Gail turned to the other two men. "Can't you reason with him—Woody, Alex?"

Woody Cline was wiping his glasses with the bloodied handkerchief. It seemed to be an automatic reflex against moments of anxiety.

"As Thorne says, Gail, we've gone too far to turn back."

"You can't afford it any more than we can, Gail," Alex Clement said.

Gail faced her husband. "So take me along with them, Thorne. I don't want to go on living with this boy on my conscience."

"That's nonsense, Gail," the judge said. He let go of Joey, put his arm around his wife, and led her over to a far corner of the boathouse.

Joey stared at Uncle George. "Will he?—Can she?"

"I'm afraid I don't think so, Joey?"

They could hear Gail's voice, raised in protest. The judge's voice, reasoning, was inaudible. Eventually he turned and came back to Joey. Gail stayed back in the corner, her hands raised to cover her mouth, as if to protect against screaming out another protest.

"Last chance, George," the judge said. He had produced his handgun again and, holding it by the barrel, was swing-

ing it gently back and forth in front of Joey's face. "The kid stuff is over, George. Talk or I'll show you a sample of what's coming up."

"I can't fake something I don't have." Uncle George turned his face away. "Get it over with, Thorne."

He heard the thud of the gun butt as it struck the boy, probably in the face. He heard a little grunt of pain from Joey and prayed it had been enough to knock the boy out.

Then there was the sound of smashing glass, the sharp crack of a rifle shot, a scream of pain, and a voice from heaven—Red Egan's voice.

"Any of the rest of you move an inch and I'll blow holes in you big enough to drive trucks through!"

Uncle George turned his head. Joey was clutching at his face, blood trickling through his fingers. The judge was flat on the floor, looking very dead. Clement and Cline stood where they'd been, their rifles dropped to the floor. Gail was streaking across the room to where her husband lay.

Red Egan stepped through the lakeside picture window which he'd shattered. His gun was aimed at the two men, his face like white marble.

"You all in one piece, George?" he asked.

"A little handicapped," Uncle George said. He struggled up onto his feet. He turned sideways so Red could see. "The keys to these cuffs are probably in the judge's pocket. What miracle brought you, friend?"

Red moved across the room, kicking aside the rifles Clement and Cline had dropped. Joey, crying openly now, rushed to Uncle George and clung to him.

"Friend of yours guided me here," Red Egan said.

At the door he found a light switch and for the first time the room was bright. He opened the door.

"Your friend wasn't dead after all," Red said.

Through the open door came the bedraggled little figure of a red-and-white springer spaniel. Huckleberry! He

looked around, hackles on end, and then he saw Uncle George and Joey and trotted over to them, whimpering.

"I was just covering the territory when I saw him parked outside this boathouse," Red said. "He has a nose for killers, that one."

The Three Must-Get-Theres were no more. There were only two of them left. Gail Winters, down on the floor holding her husband, kept muttering over and over, "He's dead! He's dead!"

Red Egan's shot, after he'd smashed the window, had gone straight into Judge Winters' head.

"One more crack on that boy's skull and *he* might have been dead," the sheriff said, sounding a little shaken. He touched Gail's shoulder. "I've got to find the keys to these handcuffs, ma'am."

She seemed unable to resist, or to express what she felt. Woody Cline and Alex Clement stood like frozen statues exactly where they had been when the glass shattered and the shot rang out.

Red Egan found the keys he was looking for in the dead man's jacket and Uncle George was free, flexing hands that were bloodless from lack of circulation. The sheriff handed him his rifle.

"I've got to call the barracks and get Purdy," Red said. "Don't let these characters go anywhere, George."

Uncle George took the rifle. "I think they know how glad I'd be if they tried," he said. "You all right, Joey?" He didn't look at the boy.

"I'm fine, Uncle George," the boy said, fighting tears.

"Aren't you going to get a doctor for Thorne, Sheriff?" Woody Cline asked. He sounded like a man speaking from far away.

"He doesn't need a doctor, Woody," Red said. "Can I get into your house and use the phone? It's the closest."

"It's not locked," Cline said. He laughed, a strange hollow sound. "We don't have to lock up around here. There are no criminals in Lakeview."

"You'd better check out the judge's house," Uncle George said. "I'm afraid Sarah Adams may have been hurt."

"She's not hurt," Woody Cline said. "I was trying to keep her occupied while you and the judge and Gail were talking, George. Finally I managed to slip a tasteless sedative into her coffee. We couldn't afford to have her see us take you away, George. She'll sleep until morning, but she's not hurt."

Red took off. There was a dead silence in the room except for the whimpering of the dog who was crouched at Uncle George's feet. Gail began to rock back and forth, holding the dead man in her arms.

"I'm sorry, Gail," Uncle George said, never taking his eyes off the two men. "He would have killed the boy, and me."

"It was like a landslide," Woody Cline said. "It couldn't be stopped after it started." He looked around, like a man addressing a large audience and not just the three other people in the room. "Chard! Damn him, damn him, damn him! You do a fool thing and a man tries to wreck your life over it. I tell you, George, I didn't feel a thing when I saw him shot! He had it coming! We were justified!"

"You were there when it happened?" Uncle George asked.

"We were all there—Thorne and Alex and Gail and Kessler."

"Kessler was the private detective Thorne hired?"

Cline nodded.

"Where is he?"

"Took off," Woody Cline said. "He wouldn't play along with us after the thing in the Grove."



"Not right away," Uncle George said. "He stayed around long enough to help you search, long enough to abduct Stormy Knight and beat her nearly to death."

"Yes and no," Woody Cline said.

"Stop babbling, Woody, until we have legal help," Alex Clement said, his voice harsh.

"Why stop, Alex? If I need a lawyer, he's standing right here. When the girl spotted Kessler at the shopping center he took her away, turned her over to Thorne, and told us he was through."

"Thorne worked over Stormy Knight?"

"She was locked in the cabin. He went there when he left Captain Purdy. I guess he thought he had killed her. He was like a madman, George. It was like something snapped inside him and there was nothing he couldn't do!"

"His whole world had come to an end," Gail said, rocking the dead man back and forth.

"He shot Chard?"

"When Chard appeared to swallow that film, he shot him," Cline said.

"Took the hook out of the ceiling and cut him open?"

"It was like a nightmare," Cline said. "Blood and guts!"

"There was no stopping him," Alex Clement said. "We were all part of it and yet not part of it."

"You searched his car and then drove it back to the fairgrounds?"

"We all searched his car when we couldn't find the film . . . inside Chard. We searched the shed and the car. I drove the car back to the fairgrounds. He told me to; I did it."

"And your man, Kessler, searched the Stone Masters' Lodge the next morning?"

"Yes. And then he grabbed the Knight girl in the shopping center, took her to Thorne and gave up. We should all have given up then and there, but Thorne wouldn't hear of

it. We had to get the film and then sit tight. We'd be out of it, in the clear then."

"After you'd killed me?" Uncle George's voice had no pity or compassion in it.

"He had us hypnotized," Alex Clement said. "He convinced us you were the enemy, George—in partnership with the woman."

"And you set the bomb in my Jeep, Woody?"

Cline nodded, "No trick. I'd handled explosives in the army. And somehow he convinced me. Oh, God, George, I never dreamed we'd kill that innocent Caldwell boy."

"But you wouldn't have minded killing me?"

"You were out to get us. Thorne made us believe that. I don't think you can understand how, once a thing like this has started, you just keep on and on—"

"He did it for me!" Gail said. "He wanted to save our world for me."

The door at the far end of the room opened and Red Egan was back. "Purdy's on his way," he said. He glanced at Uncle George. "I spotted your car in Woody's garage. Another friend of yours there."

Timmy, the setter, gave a little yip of joy as he came in behind the sheriff and spotted Uncle George. Halfway across the room toward his master he stopped dead in his tracks, hackles rising. He was staring at the dead man in Gail Winter's arms. He couldn't have said it clearer in words. That was the man whose trail he had followed from Mullins Creek to the cabin where Stormy Knight had been held.

Huckleberry, the spaniel, growled at the other dog.

Uncle George put his hand down on the springer's head. "You two are going to have to make friends. I owe you both."

"George, where is the film?" Woody Cline cried out.

"That doesn't have to be seen, along with everything else, does it?"

"I think I know how I might find it," Uncle George said. "And if I do, it will be handed over to the police." He turned to Red Egan. "I've got to get this boy home, Red. I'll leave the mop-up to you and Purdy. There's one loose end I'd like to tie up, though, Mrs. Winters."

The woman continued to rock her husband's body.

"You cleaned up the cabin on the mountain after Thorne had worked over Stormy?"

She nodded, but didn't speak.

Uncle George and Joey and the two dogs walked out of the boathouse. In Woody Cline's garage they found the blue Chevette and headed for home, the two dogs quite happy in the back seat.

"Do you really know where the film might be, Uncle George?" Joey asked, as they headed down the road toward town.

"It's a guess, but my guesses have been pretty good so far, Joey," Uncle George said. "I think Stormy Knight knows where it is. In one of Chard's safe-deposit boxes."

"But why didn't she tell the judge when he was beating up on her?"

"Girl with a lot of courage," Uncle George said. "She knew she wasn't going to live, tell him or not. She probably knows where there are other films, not just the one that counts here. If she makes it, I think I can talk her out of using them in any way. If she doesn't make it, we'll never find them."

Lights were still on in windows all over town. Joey looked over at the back seat.

"Do you suppose my dad would break down and let me keep that Huckleberry?" he asked.

"Hope springs eternal," Uncle George said. "But I prom-

ise you, if your dad says no, Huckleberry will have a home. I owe him. Extraordinary little guy. He'd spotted Woody Cline at the Grove, Kessler, and the others. When Woody started tampering with my Jeep he got out to try to get into the act and saved his own life. Then he went out to the Grove, looking for someone to point at—and saved our lives, Joey.”

“I don't think I'll sleep much tonight, Uncle George.”

“Nor I, boy, not tonight,” Uncle George said.

**The End**

**EMILY DICKINSON IS DEAD**

BY

*JANE LANGTON*

Published by special arrangement with St. Martin's Press



The photograph has been taken in the form of a visiting card. It is very small. On the back, someone has scribbled in a careless hand,  
*Emily Dickenson 1860*

WHO IS SHE?

. . . is there more? More than Love and Death?  
Then tell me its name!

—*Emily Dickinson*





# 1



*All but Death, can be Adjusted . . .*

After the death of his wife, Owen Kraznik went on living and teaching in Amherst, but his days had become a bewildering fluster, a tangled wilderness, a formless and perplexing dishevelment. Snatching at the chaos as it hurtled past him, end over end, Owen struggled to arrange it in a rational pattern.

But the Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium refused to be made sense of. It came crashing into Amherst like a loose boulder, ricocheting from College to University, crushing and grinding and destroying. Who was responsible? Owen didn't know. After the fire, after the disappearance of Alison Grove, after the awkwardness about the picture, after the attack in Emily Dickinson's bedchamber—with an axe!—and after all those other bizarre disasters, it was impossible to single out one human being and say, "Look, that person is entirely to blame."

But some of the guilt was his own. Wincing, Owen couldn't help pointing a finger at himself. Of course he wasn't crucially at fault, but there was no denying that it was Owen Kraznik who had given that boulder its first little nudge, way back in October. And then he had thrown up his hands in horror and galloped after it as it gathered speed and plummeted down

into the peaceful valley of the Connecticut River, to bruise and shatter and lay waste, and change lives forever.

It was just an innocent little remark, that was all. If only he had kept his mouth shut!

# 2



*Went home a century ago . . .*

“*E*mily Dickinson has been dead for a hundred years.” That was all he had said. And it had been true—well, almost true. On that October day last fall it had been ninety-nine years and five months since Emily Dickinson perished of Bright’s disease in the big house on Main Street. And Owen had said it on the day the letter came, the letter from Peter Wiggins, the letter about the picture.

Owen had risen early that morning, as he always did, eager to get to his office at the University of Massachusetts before Winifred Gaw showed up. Now, taking the letter out of his mailbox, he held it in his teeth while he fastened the bicycle clips to his pants, and then he sat down on the top of the porch steps and looked at the return address:

*Professor Peter Wiggins  
University of Central Arizona  
Pancake Flat, Arizona*

Pancake Flat, Arizona? Owen smiled. What an improbable-sounding place.

He pulled out a thick wad of paper from the envelope. It

was an article he had seen before, a study of a famous photograph of Emily Dickinson. Well, the photograph might or might not be a picture of Emily Dickinson. There was a controversy about it. This man Wiggins was trying to prove it was genuine. He had bought it from a collector. He owned it now, out there in Pancake Flat. He had examined the whole subject thoroughly. The photograph was authentic, he said. It was a real photographic portrait of Emily Dickinson, the celebrated poet of Amherst, Massachusetts, without a shadow of a doubt.

Well, good for Peter Wiggins, thought Owen, unfolding the xeroxed copy of the photograph. Turning it to the light, he looked at the face of the young woman in the picture.

Gravely the dark eyes looked back at him through the lens of the ancient camera and across the space of a hundred and twenty-five years. The woman was indeed good-looking. Owen wanted to believe it, that this was really the poet whose life and work had meant so much to him. What a fine and sensitive face! But did it match the younger face, the true face of Emily Dickinson as she appeared in the daguerreotype of 1848? Ah, that was the question. Some people thought they were the same, some didn't.

Owen put the picture back in the envelope and took out the letter. Peter Wiggins wanted to come East. He was inquiring eagerly: Would the English department at the University of Massachusetts be interested in a slide lecture on the subject of the photograph? Did Professor Kraznik know of a teaching position in New England? *Résumé* enclosed.

The letter had a panicky ring. The poor fellow seemed frantic to escape from Pancake Flat. Owen pictured him, this unknown Peter Wiggins, standing forlornly in some sunbaked desert landscape, stretching out his hand to the East. It was like Emily Dickinson's own yearning for the impossible—*"Heaven"—is what I cannot reach!* Well, poor Wiggins was out of luck, thought Owen sadly. Nothing could be done for him. All the colleges in the Connecticut River Valley were firing, rather than hiring.

Trundling his bicycle down the steps, Owen mounted and

rolled along the driveway, wobbling a little as he turned onto Spring Street, dodging puddles from yesterday's rain. Wet leaves were plastered to the pavement. Overhead the rising sun struck the lofty crowns of the sugar maples and set fire to them as with a match. Owen glanced up at the treetops and told himself he should take more pleasure in things like that. But it was no use. Since Catherine's death he found no savor in natural wonders. Today it was too painful to remember her delight in the autumn color of the Amherst countryside. Better not to notice anything, better not to be reminded, better not to think about that kind of thing at all.

Damp leaves spun around his wheels as Owen turned left on Dickinson Street, focusing his mind safely once again on the article by Peter Wiggins.

There was something about it that dismayed him. The flaw was a common failing—a note of ownership, of territorial arrogance. *My theory, my picture, my poet.* The inference was always the same, *Emily Dickinson belongs to me.*

On the surface it seemed innocent enough, this habit of grasping at the great and good after they were gone. And yet to Owen there was something violent about it. It was like grave-robbers stealing rings from the fingers of the dead, or groping in the lifeless jaws to extract the gold teeth. It was like an exhumation. *These bones are mine.* In the article by Peter Wiggins you could almost hear the ringing clatter of his wrecking bar against Emily Dickinson's tombstone.

Of course, Wiggins was not alone. In Amherst, Massachusetts, almost everyone laid claim to Emily Dickinson. She was like a colonial plantation, a piece of ephemeral real estate.

At Main Street, Owen swooped left and pumped to the top of the steep little hill. At the crest he stopped beside the Dickinson house and dragged the bike up the granite steps. THE DICKINSON HOMESTEAD, BY APPOINTMENT ONLY, said the sign at the front walk.

Owen didn't want an appointment. Owen knew every square inch of the public rooms. He glanced up now at the windows of the bedroom in which Emily Dickinson had written



nearly two thousand poems, the room that had been a haven from intrusion by fools, a place of retreat from the polite people of the town. She was still retreating, decided Owen. In death she had removed to the family plot under the white ash tree in West Cemetery. She had withdrawn to her narrow white coffin, six feet under the ground. But she could escape no farther. Any bunch of idiots could claw at the grass growing on her grave and hold up chunks of turf and claim them for their own.

Moving down the sidewalk, Owen gazed through the hemlock hedge at the sloping Dickinson garden. The grass was wet. In the oak tree a bird hopped from branch to branch. Owen stared through the hedge, wondering who really owned Emily Dickinson. If anybody in Amherst could be said to possess the woman in this ninety-ninth year after her death, who would it be?

Oh, Lord, there were so many claimants! In all the five

colleges of the Connecticut River Valley there were professors who regarded the poet as property—not to mention the fifty thousand students swarming on the streets of the local towns, Amherst and Northampton and South Hadley. Was there any other place in the world where one literary deity was worshiped so universally? Well, there was Stratford-on-Avon, and Concord, Massachusetts. Did everybody in Stratford own Shakespeare? Did everyone in Concord lay claim to Henry Thoreau? Here in Amherst even a piece of paper whipping down South Pleasant Street was apt to be a title deed, a page from *The Complete Poems*, unstuck from the paperback edition, fluttering out of somebody's motorcycle saddlebag. Impulsively, Owen covered his ears as he thought of the sounds of righteous Dickinson ownership, the rattle of a thousand typewriters, the battering of chalk on a hundred classroom blackboards.

Then he smiled. It wasn't just people, after all. Even that commonplace bird in the oak tree, there in the Dickinson garden, even that sassy robin who was whistling, head up, chirping a succession of phrases, spattering the whole side yard with cheerful melody, even that small bird could make a claim of its own upon Emily Dickinson. Maybe it was descended from the poet's own *Gabriel In humble circumstances* and owned the whole green lawn.

Mounting his bike again, Owen pushed off and sped along Main Street to the Common. The hour was still early. Except for a couple of joggers loping around its circumference, the Common was deserted. The sun was just surfacing over the Town Hall, shining on the snapping flag, casting a rosy glow on the brick cornices of Merchants Block. Leaning to the side, Owen whizzed around the corner onto North Pleasant Street. Later the crossing would be jammed with students and choked with motor traffic, but at this hour Owen had it to himself.

North Pleasant Street, too, was deserted. Racing left at the fork, Owen skimmed along too fast on McClellan Street and almost ran into Tom Perry.

Whoops! Dodging left, Owen shouted "Sorry!" at Tom,

who was standing in the street, opening the door of his car. Tom was one of Owen's superb successes, the youngest full professor at Amherst College, and another deed holder, of course, in the Emily Dickinson real-estate bonanza. Was that the girl he was engaged to, the fabled doctor from Northampton? Speeding away, Owen looked back to nod and smile at the girl, and then he nearly lost his balance in surprise.

It wasn't the doctor from Northampton. It was a sophomore English major from U Mass. Once you had seen Alison Grove, you didn't forget her. This morning Alison was coming out of Tom's front door, clutching a folded umbrella, teetering along in gold sandals, shivering in a skimpy outfit obviously left over from last night.

Owen whirled away, keeping eyes front. It was no business of his if Tom Perry brought a random girl home to share his bed. It was none of Owen's affair at all.

"Shit," said Tom Perry to Alison Grove. "The great Owen Kraznik. He would come along right now. Our iniquity is discovered."

"Well, who cares?" said Alison, getting into the car. "I mean, like you said you were going to tell your old girlfriend about us anyway. You said you'd break it off. You said she'll understand, because she's this really, really good sport."

Tom got in beside Alison. "Oh, sure. Next time I see her we'll have a heart-to-heart talk. But not now. I called her up yesterday and told her how busy I am." Tom grinned at Alison. "You know, all these midterms to correct, all these conferences with students." Bending his head, Tom kissed Alison's bare shoulder. "Like last night. Very important student conference. All kinds of"—Tom kissed Alison's throat and buried his head in her red-gold hair—"really important stuff to discuss. You know like this—and this—and especially this. Oh, Alison."

Alison Grove leaned back and allowed herself to be caressed. It was what she had been born for. She had always known it. But she had taken her time. Like in high school, she had been really just so incredibly fussy. But she had been right to wait for Tom Perry, who was really so incredibly good-



looking and just so fabulously important. Everybody said so. All the girls on Alison's floor at Coolidge Hall were incredibly jealous.

"Well, Owen won't tell on us anyway," sighed Tom, sitting up reluctantly. "The saintly Owen Kraznik, he'll keep it under his hat. Oh, say, that reminds me, didn't you say you were looking for a part-time job?"

"Oh, right. My clothing allowance, it's just so incredibly small."

"Well, listen, I understand they're going to fire Owen's assistant, Winifred Gaw. Dombey Dell told me. The whole department at U Mass voted to throw her out. So why don't you go over there this morning and talk to Owen? Maybe he'll hire you in her place. Tell him I sent you. Owen's a soft touch. You can wind him around your little finger."

"Well, I don't know. I mean, I don't know anything about Emily Dickerson. Isn't he this really big expert on Emily Dickerson?"

"Dickinson." For an instant Tom glanced sideways at Alison, aware of a flicker of doubt. He had felt it before, just once or twice. He banished it now by putting his arm around Alison's creamy shoulders. "An expert? That's putting it mildly. If anybody in this world owns the right to talk about Emily Dickinson, it's Owen Kraznik."

"Honestly?" said Alison, widening her eyes, really, really impressed.

"Oh, he'd probably never admit it, being a saint the way he is, but it's true. Owen Kraznik owns Emily Dickinson, lock, stock, and barrel."

# 3

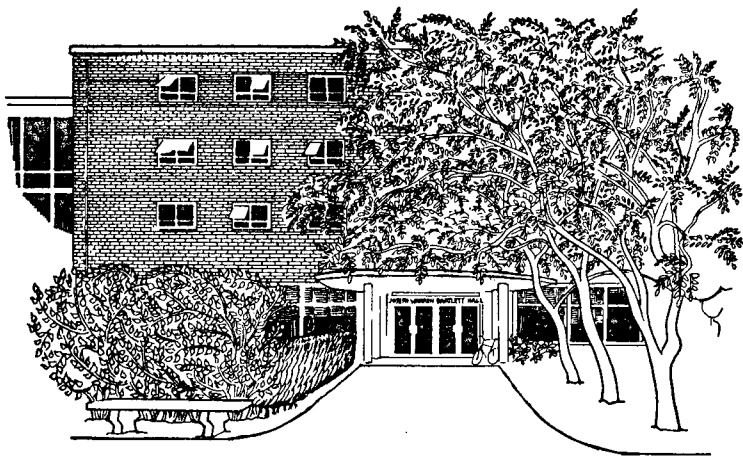


... *Estates of Cloud*

Tom Perry was right. If some supreme judge had pounded his gavel and pronounced a ruling on the insubstantial domain that was Emily Dickinson, the title of ownership would surely have been awarded to Professor Owen Kraznik of the University of Massachusetts.

But Owen would never have accepted it. Fiercely, Owen repudiated all claims of vanity. It wasn't blindness on his part. It wasn't that he had never noticed his own moral and intellectual superiority to other people. He had discovered it in childhood. But at eight years old it had disturbed him as much as it did now, at forty. How sad for the human race if it could do no better than Owen Kraznik! In the simplicity of his nature and the clarity of his vision, Owen rejected self-congratulation. As his eminence grew, his eye grew milder still. The more he surpassed, the more helplessly he shrugged his shoulders, the more he refrained from needless victories.

Now, as Owen's bike plunged along Lincoln Avenue, the University of Massachusetts sprawled in front of him, forty-three acres of trampled grass. Owen swept past the long stretch of concrete sculpture that was the Fine Arts Center, dodged around Memorial Hall and Herter, skidded to a stop in front



## Bartlett Hall

of Bartlett Hall, chained his bike to a column, and opened the door. Running lightly up to the second floor, he felt his insides clench with apprehension. What if Winnie Gaw were there already, lying enormously in wait? Sooner or later Winnie would discover that her boss was coming in early. And then she would insist on getting there before him, to anticipate his every need.

Warily, Owen poked his head into the undergraduate English office, then breathed a sigh of relief. It was empty. Crossing to his own small study on the other side, he sat down at his desk and smiled with satisfaction.

But the telephone had eyes in its head. It began to ring.

Owen stared at it a minute, then picked it up. "Hello?" he said cautiously.

But it was all right. It was only his cousin, Dr. Harvey Kloop.

"Owen? How would you like to come fishing with me at the Quabbin Reservoir? I've got a free day at last. My patients

are all behaving themselves and nobody seems to be calling on my services as medical examiner. I've got my boat all hooked up to the car and I'm ready to go."

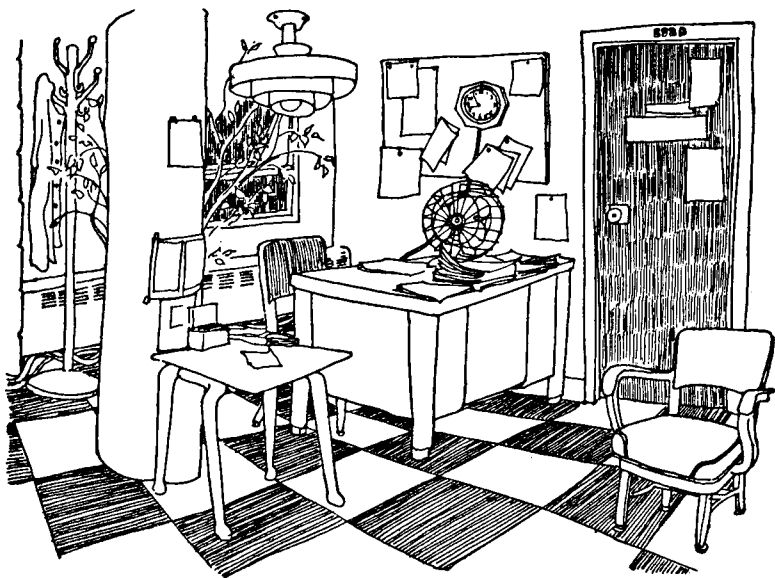
Owen smiled, picturing the melancholy hollow-cheeked face of his old childhood companion. "Oh, Harvey, I'm sorry. I have to teach today."

"Oh, too bad." And then Owen heard a scuffling noise and a protesting shout, "Hey, wait a minute, Eunice Jane."

"Owen?" It was Eunice Jane. "Listen here, Owen, I'm sorry, but Harvey isn't going anywhere today. He's sorting his underwear."

"He's what?"

"And overcoats. He promised me. He said he'd sort his underwear and overcoats right away. Well, the time has come. Now, listen, Owen, while I've got you on the phone, I've got to tell you. You'll be amazed. I've been working on some more of those fascinating lines of Dickinson's, those *deeply obscure*



passages, remember? Like *the sterile perquisite, Reportless Subjects, to the Quick, the peerless puncture?* Well, listen, I know what they mean. Those other fools were wrong. Wait till you hear."

Owen could have wept. The injustice of Providence smote him. How could fate have taken Catherine away from him and left Harvey saddled with Eunice Jane?

At last he made his escape and hung up the phone. Something fell with a crash. A heavy piece of furniture was squealing across the floor, hitting the other side of the wall with a jarring thud.

Leaping to his feet, Owen threw open the door. Two middle-aged men were flailing at each other in the outer office, tripping over the coatrack, plunging heavily this way and that in the small space between the windows and the door to the hall.

One of the combatants was Dombey Dell, chairman of the English department, administrator of one hundred and eighty-six separate sections of literature and composition and a teaching staff of seventy-five, to say nothing of an army of teaching assistants. As Owen watched in astonishment, Dombey landed a punch in the other man's solar plexus, then lost his balance and catapulted into Winifred Gaw's big potted plant.

"Oof," said the other man, swinging wildly at empty air. It was Owen's old friend from Concord, Homer Kelly, distinguished Thoreau scholar and professor of American literature, and ex-lieutenant detective for Middlesex County. Owen was chagrined to observe that Homer didn't seem to have any pugilistic know-how, in spite of his early background as a policeman. Homer was throwing his long arms around Dombey Dell in a bear hug and hanging on with all his strength.

"You lying alphabetarian," gasped Dombey, struggling to get his arms free. "You philological sneak!"

"Good heavens, gentlemen," cried Owen. "What's this all about?" Stepping bravely into the fray, he took Homer by the shoulders and dragged him away from Dombey Dell.

Dombey and Homer glared at each other, breathing hard. Then Homer turned to Owen angrily, and shrugged himself

back into his jacket. "I think Professor Dell is troubled by a letter I wrote in the *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, disagreeing with some of his premises on nineteenth-century American usage. He seems to prefer fisticuffs to scholarly discourse."

Once again Dombey flung himself at Homer. Taken by surprise, Homer stumbled into Owen, who lost his balance and floundered backward through his office door. Together the three of them fell in a jumble against Owen's desk. "Look here," said Owen, his voice muffled under Homer, "why don't you people join me in a cup of coffee?"

Grumpily, Dombey and Homer stood up, and then Owen, struggling to his feet, began bustling around among his cupboards and shelves. "Sorry, but I don't seem to have anything to go with the coffee but these—ah—pretzels? I'm afraid they're two years old."

Dombey and Owen sat down sullenly, but Owen's clumsy hospitality soon broke the ice. Before long, Dombey was chaffing Owen about his terrible coffee and explaining what he had come for.

"We took a vote. The entire English faculty. I warned you, Owen. That girl has got to go. Winifred Gaw is no longer an employee of the English department. She is no longer a candidate for the doctor's degree. She leaves today, you hear that, Owen? You and your lame ducks."

Owen was dismayed. Picturing the scene with Winnie, he passed his hand over his eyes. How was he going to tell her? It would be an ordeal of the most harrowing kind.

But Dombey had no mercy. He turned to Homer. "You should see this Winnie Gaw. What a slob. You know what, Owen? If I looked like Winifred Gaw, I hope I'd have the grace to shoot myself." Then Dombey snickered, and gestured at the picture on the wall, Owen's precious copy of the daguerreotype of the young Emily Dickinson. "I must admit that's what troubles me about our famous local poet. Look at the woman! That's one plain little lady."

Homer Kelly was outraged. "My God, Dombey, that's the stupidest thing I ever heard. Listen, you dumb cluck, what dif-

ference does it make what a great poet looks like?"

Hostility was boiling up again. Swiftly, Owen pulled the envelope from Peter Wiggins out of his bookbag and waved it at Dombey and Homer. "But perhaps she was truly good-looking after all! I have a letter this morning from a man named Peter Wiggins in Arizona. He owns that controversial photograph of Emily Dickinson. He claims he can prove it's authentic. He wants to come and give a speech."

"Well, good for him," said Dombey, settling back in his chair. "Because, listen, Owen, I'm telling you a solemn fact. If Emily Dickinson was as homely as that picture on your wall, I hold it against her. I'm sorry to admit it, but it's something in my glands."

Homer said something rude about Dombey's glands, and Dombey snarled. Owen hastened to intervene. "My dear Dombey, how can it possibly matter? It was all so long ago."

And then Owen made his fatal mistake.

"After all," he said, "Emily Dickinson has been dead for a hundred years. Homer's perfectly correct. It's the poetry that counts. Nothing else."

"That's right," growled Homer self-righteously.

But Dombey was no longer listening. He was calculating under his breath. "It's true. It will be a hundred years next May." His eyes brightened. He grinned. "Say, listen, that gives me a superb idea. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to organize an Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium on the hundredth anniversary of her death, and invite people from all over the country." Dombey threw his arms wide and shouted, "All over the world!" Raising his fist, he brought it down on Owen's desk with a crash. Owen's books bounced. His coffee cup jiggled. "A hundred years dead! By God, I'll drag the woman out of her grave! And afterwards, when anybody thinks of Emily Dickinson, who will they think of first? Dombey Dell, that's who." Dombey smirked. "Me, in short. In person."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Dombey," said Homer, exasperated. "If they think of anybody now and forevermore, it will be Professor Owen Kraznik, you big jerk."

"No, no, please, no." Owen shook his head and closed his eyes in silent suffering. It was the kind of talk that pained him most. He was repelled by Dombey's display of scholarly megalomania. He knew exactly what would happen. Dombey would organize his conference and prance around on the platform and make himself famous, and at the same time he would say condescending things about the poet. Not only would he be important in his own right, he would be more important than Emily Dickinson herself. It was sickening.

But Dombey was throwing back his head in a paroxysm of self-congratulation. "Oh, this is going to be a lovely, lovely symposium. We'll all get a chance to show off. You, too, Owen. You, too, Homer. And we'll get Tom Perry in on it. The University of Massachusetts and Amherst College, we'll run it jointly. And I'll get hold of that guy in Arizona. He can talk about his picture. Oh, wow, isn't this great. I've never had a whole entire conference to call my own. *The Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium, brainchild of Professor Dombey Dudley Dell, founder, guiding star, principal factotum, and distinguished majordomo.*"

"Oh, Dombey, you big ass," said Homer.

But Dombey was jumping out of his chair. "Well, say, I'd better get right to work before somebody else thinks of the same thing. Get out my pick and shovel, start digging the woman up." Dombey jumped over Homer's huge shins, then paused in the doorway. "Metaphorically speaking, of course," he said, simpering. "I mean, just as a figure of speech."

He was gone, slamming the door behind him.

Owen stared at Homer, shaken to the core.

Homer stood up and tore angrily at his hair. "You know, Owen, the man scares me. He's dangerous. A conference like that is unhealthy. I mean it, speaking as an ex-cop. What you'll get is a collection of snarling tigers. Everything at a fever pitch of ambition and jealousy and character assassination. All those professors, they look so mild and easygoing on the surface, but underneath it's the law of the jungle. Violence, that's what you'll get! I mean, look what that fool did, Dombey Dell." Ho-



mer displayed the torn sleeve of his jacket. "He jumped me from the rear. A savage attack."

"Oh, yes, I know," murmured Owen, sinking his head into his hands. "And the man does have such an unfortunate way of expressing himself."

"You mean, all that stuff about digging Emily Dickinson out of her grave? Listen, Owen, I'll tell you what it's like. Remember those people who discovered the tomb of King Tut? You know, they broke the seals and burst in and took away all the mummies and the gold and everything? You know what happened to them? Death and destruction!"

# 4



... love got peevish, watching—

Homer helped himself to another petrified pretzel and told Owen his amazing news. He was living in Amherst now. "Renting a room on Route Nine. You know, Owen, bachelor quarters. It's got a kitchen. I'm cooking my own supper."

"Bachelor quarters?" Owen was dismayed. His fingers trembled with concern. "No trouble between you and your good wife, I hope?" he said anxiously, coming to the point at once.

Homer snorted in horror. "Good God, no. I rush home to Concord every weekend. I'm a guest lecturer at Mount Holyoke for the academic year. They wanted Mary too, but she's committed to that course we taught a couple of years ago in Memorial Hall at Harvard. Remember? All that hoopla with the music, and the explosion, and the poor chap who was buried alive?"

"Oh, yes, of course." Owen smiled. "The papers were full of it, even in this remote corner of the world. You attained a good deal of celebrity, as I recall."

"Notoriety is more like it," grumbled Homer. "Anyway, I'm supposed to tell you Mary sends her love." Homer cocked

his great doggy head and looked wisely at Owen. "Wasn't it this month, two years ago, that Catherine—?"

"Yes, it was. Two years ago tomorrow. Thank you, Homer, for remembering."

Homer rumbled sympathetically, and thought how attractive the man was. There he sat, the great Owen Kraznik, looking like a child behind his big desk, his narrow chest concave beneath his shirt, his shirt cuffs nearly engulfing his small hands, his eyes wet—Owen was famous for bursting into tears at moments of emotion. Taken all in all, decided Homer admiringly, Owen was the very opposite of the popular image of the desirable American male, that cool, expressionless, jut-jawed hero. Jut-jawed! Owen didn't even have a chin. His face sort of disappeared into his collar. Nor did he, thank God, share Dombey Dell's cruel macho sense of humor. In fact, wondered Homer, did Owen have any sense of humor at all? Perhaps not, at least in the ordinary sense of the phrase. But it wasn't because something important was lacking in his makeup. It was simply his sober attention to the true terrors of the world.

"You're still living on Spring Street?" said Homer. "In that same big house?"

"Oh, yes. I know it's ridiculous. I just don't have the heart to leave it." Then Owen brightened, and he looked at Homer eagerly. "Why, Homer, of course, I should have thought of it at once. You must stay with me. There I am, all alone, standing up at the stove for meals, eggs for breakfast, eggs for supper. How about it? We could share the cooking, enjoy each other's company."

"Why, of course, I'd love to." Homer was delighted. "And listen, Owen, I'm developing a flair for gourmet cooking. Wait till you taste my salad dressing—corn oil, mayonnaise, mustard and ketchup." Homer smacked his lips and made a circle with thumb and forefinger. "I accept your offer. That's really great. I'll be on your doorstep Monday morning." Homer stood up to go, then leaned forward and tapped Owen's desk. "Listen, Owen, I should warn you about Dombey Dell. He'll want to

rope you into that symposium of his as the central fixture and ornament. So watch out."

"Well, I won't do it," said Owen firmly. "And, anyway, everybody's sick of listening to me. There are plenty of people Dombey can call on. How about you, Homer?"

"Who, me? Do you think I want to watch Dombey swagger around, saying mean things about Emily Dickinson? Not on your life." Homer took Owen's small hand in his huge paw, shook it warmly, and walked out, shutting the door behind him.

In the outer office a pretty girl was waiting. The furniture was still askew. Homer smiled at the girl and righted the furniture. Then he looked at his watch. Good God, he would be late for his morning class in South Hadley. Charging at the door to the corridor, he collided with someone coming in.

*Thump.* Recoiling, Homer found himself enmeshed in the fringes of a giant shawl and the buckled strap of a mighty pocketbook. "Oh, sorry," he said, trying to disengage himself. He was belly to bosom with an immense woman. "Excuse me. All my fault. Oh, ha ha, whoops, is this your scarf? Just a sec. We seem to be entwined. Our rigging is entangled. I've been dismasted. There, now, are we squared away? Farewell, then. Ships that pass in the night!"

Winifred Gaw stared as Homer Kelly whisked away around the corner. But the man hardly registered on her consciousness. It was the pretty girl who had all of Winnie's attention. Winnie knew the girl's name. She was Alison Grove, a sophomore English major. She lived in Coolidge Hall. She was an enemy.

"What do *you* want?" said Winnie, hanging her coat on the coatrack. (Alison would see that Winnie belonged here.)

Alison Grove looked up at the huge girl in the tentlike jumper. "I'm just applying for a job," she said carefully.

"A job? What job? Have you got an appointment?"

"No, but Dombey said—I mean, Professor Dell—well, I mean, really it was Tom. You know, 'Professor Perry at Amherst College—"

"You can't see Professor Kraznik without an appointment. He's all booked up until January. There aren't any jobs anyway, okay?" Turning away from Alison Grove, Winnie waddled across the floor, slapping down her sponge-soled wedgies, her thighs slubbing against each other under her dress. Opening the door to Professor Kraznik's cramped little office, she went in and shut the door behind her with a slam.

Professor Kraznik jerked and looked up. "Oh, good morning, Winnie. A little early, aren't you?"

"I just thought you might need me," said Winnie sweetly. "I just had this sort of a feeling." Winnie said nothing about Alison Grove, waiting in the outer office. Alison looked like a threat to the longing in Winnie's heart.

For Winifred Gaw knew love. Winnie was one hundred pounds overweight, but her love for Professor Kraznik was as powerful as if she had been slender and lovely, like the girl on the other side of the office door. Deep down inside, as a matter of fact, Winnie felt small and delicate, sort of like Emily Dickinson. The truth was, Winnie felt a special bond of closeness to Emily Dickinson. Actually, Winnie was more interested in Emily as a person than as a poet. Emily Dickinson had loved somebody, just like Winnie, and she had hoped and longed, just like Winnie, and she was homely to look at, sort of, the way Winnie was fat. The two of them had a bond in common, Winnie and Emily. Sometimes Winnie thought she was the only one who understood what Emily Dickinson had really been like, deep down inside.

So of course that gave her a special bond with Professor Kraznik, who was the top Dickinson scholar in the world. And he had seen it, her special closeness to Emily, because he had agreed to let Winnie be his personal assistant. She was one of his inner circle. She was almost in charge!

Now, squeezing past Professor Kraznik's chair, Winnie crouched down, wheezing with effort, and reached past his knees to inspect his wastebasket. It was empty. She bent over his chair, pillowing his shoulders with her huge bosom, and flipped up the back of the book he was reading, to see if it

needed to be renewed. It didn't. Plucking the pencil out of his hand, she took it to the sharpener on the wall, ground it noisily to a point, and gave it back. Then Winnie took a tiny camera out of the pocket of her jumper—photography was Winnie's hobby—and backed up to get a good angle for a candid shot of her beloved professor.

There was a great flash of light. Professor Kraznik yelped. Leaning back in his chair, he put his hands over his eyes. Then he stood up and looked at Winifred Gaw with tortured wrinkles in his forehead. "Winnie," he said, "I'm afraid I have bad news."

Kindly but resolutely, he told her the decision of the faculty. She was no longer to be an employee of the English department. From now on she was not a candidate for the doctor's degree.

Owen had known the interview would be painful, but it was even worse than he had expected. He was astonished by the violence of Winnie's response. Hurling herself at him, she hung upon his neck, sobbing and beseeching. Owen had to stagger backward to keep his balance.

"I'll kill myself," said Winnie.

It was the worst day of Winnie's life. Well, as for worst days, it would have been difficult to discriminate among worst days. Sealed up in a bleeding package in Winnie's memory was the day she had lost the little finger on her left hand. "Paper cutter," she would say shortly, whenever anyone was bold enough to ask. But it had not been a paper cutter. And there had been a thousand other days in Winnie's childhood that could compete with this one for general misery. But Winnie had put them out of her mind. It was the kind of knowledge that tucked itself into hidden crevices in her layers of fat, deep down in the creases of her neck, or in the chubby folds of her knees.

"You're from around here, Winnie?" Professor Kraznik had asked her one day in kind inquiry.

"Oh, sure, I live in Ware. My father works at the Quabbin Reservoir. And we have, like, a farm."

And then Professor Kraznik had smiled at her and admitted her as a candidate for the master's degree—knowing full well he shouldn't do it.

It was out of pity, of course, pity for the immense pudgy body, pity for the doglike appeal in the brown eyes. And of course Owen had regretted it. He was fully aware of the fecklessness of his kindness, which made him do things that wasted his time, obliterated his leisure, and destroyed his peace of mind. Sometimes Owen thought he must emit some kind of odor that attracted pitiful human beings from miles away. Looking over a new class at the beginning of a term, his heart would sink as he recognized yet another sorry case. Their eyes would meet, a flash of terrible understanding would pass between them, and before long the tyrant would have fallen upon its greedy knees at his feet, demanding rescue.

It was his own fault, Owen knew. His kindness was merely laziness. Laziness and timidity. Sometimes it was easier to give in than say no.

But today he stood firm. "Now, Winnie, I know you won't kill yourself. Listen, I've been talking to the people in the Public Affairs Office at the College. One of the guides at the Dickinson house is retiring. They need another one, and I think I've persuaded them you would be perfect for the job. They pay the guides now, you know. It's not just a bunch of volunteers."

"But it's not with you," bawled Winnie. "I wouldn't be working with you." Her hold on his neck tightened. He was nearly strangled. She was rocking his frail body to and fro, so that he had to keep up a shuffling dance to stay on his feet. His ruthless conscience assaulted him. Why didn't he feel more pity for the girl? Her misery lacked dignity because she was fat, that was the reason. It wasn't any the less keen on that account, poor girl. "I'm sorry, Winnie," choked Owen, struggling to breathe, "but there's nothing else I can do. You'll like the new job, I know you will."

Slowly he disentangled himself from the powerful embrace, and at last Winnie turned, gulping, and pulled open the

door. But then, at the sight of Alison Grove waiting outside, *waiting to take over Winnie's job with Professor Kraznik*, Winnie howled with rage and dismay.

Owen stood rigidly at his desk with closed eyes, listening as Winnie pounded down the corridor. Only when her lamentations at last faded into silence, trapped in the descending elevator, did he open his eyes and take a breath.

Then Owen did something he had never done before in all his life. At ten o'clock in the morning, he decided to get smashed.


Picking up his coat, he left his office, marched blindly and unsteadily past Alison Grove, stumbled down the stairs, mounted his bicycle, and rode home to Spring Street. There, without even taking off his coat, he took a bottle of whiskey from the mantelpiece and poured himself a stiff drink.

Therefore when Dombey Dell called to offer him the honorary directorship of the Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium, and the privilege of delivering the keynote address, Owen said yes—partly because Dombey appealed so skillfully to his conscience, which was bleeding, but mostly from intoxicated befuddlement.

"If I didn't know any better," Dombey said happily, reporting to Tom Perry, "I'd say the man was squiffy, absolutely plastered."



# 5



*The fire-bells are oftener now, almost, than the church-bells. Thoreau would wonder which did the most harm.*

The fire in Coolidge Hall was visible all over town from the cupolas of Amherst's nineteenth-century houses. The screaming fire trucks kept coming, roaring through intersections, clanging and clamoring, masters of the night. In the fire house on North Pleasant Street, the dispatcher's voice grew hoarse as he called for engine companies from Northampton and Hadley, Deerfield and Sunderland, ladder trucks from Chicopee and Springfield, rescue equipment from Easthampton, helicopters from the state police and the Coast Guard and Westover Air Force Base.

Owen Kraznik had gone to bed early, in his big dark house on Spring Street, his head awlirl. Besotted with drink, he hadn't even bothered to worry about the bad dream that so often plagued his rest, *that Vast Dark—That swept His Being—back*. His sleep had been dreamless.

But at eleven Owen woke up and lifted his head. A wild cry was trembling the window curtains, a rhythmical wail. It seemed to be coming from the direction of Main Street, but now there was another, whining farther away. While Owen listened, the caterwauling faded, then started up again. It sounded like a county-wide alarm.

He got out of bed, feeling muzzy. Throwing on his bathrobe, he hurried up to the attic and looked out the window. To the northwest there was a red glow above the trees. Good lord, it must be the University. Shivering, Owen hurried back to his bedroom and began flinging himself into his clothes. He got his pants on backward and had to take them off and start over, his fingers shaking.

Winifred Gaw's big van encountered the first engine companies from Belchertown on Route 9 as she drove home to Ware. They whipped past her, pounding down the road, heading for Amherst. Exhilarated, terrified, Winnie felt the blood rush into her face, flushing her big cheeks, pulsing in her forehead. Then she grinned with excitement as another ladder truck thundered past her in the dark, its red lights flashing, its siren howling. For an instant in the flicker of her headlights Winnie caught a glimpse of the polished gold letters on the side as they whizzed past her—WARE. The truck had been summoned all the way from Ware, Winnie's own hometown. Coolidge Hall must be burning down, it must really be burning down, the whole huge high-rise building. For an instant Winnie thought of people trapped in burning rooms, but then she put them out of her mind, and thought instead about what to do now. She was desperate to get home, to creep up to her room and hide herself in bed. But she couldn't go home yet. She had to do something with the extra can of lacquer, the propane torch, the shopping bag. She couldn't just put the stuff back in her father's garage. She had to get rid of it.

Well, there was a place. Winnie had thrown things to hell in that place before. She would have to get the key and go there, and throw the stuff down the hole. And that would take care of it forever. When things were thrown away in that special place, they stayed thrown away. . . .

The rescue at Coolidge Hall was under way, and going well. It looked like chaos, but it wasn't. The chief of the Amherst Fire Department and a quick-thinking major from the air base stood in the middle of the tumult, surrounded by fire-

fighters, police officers, University functionaries, and barking dogs. In short order they had the helicopters taking off from the playing field on the other side of Commonwealth Avenue and landing on the flat roof of Coolidge Hall to pick up batches of frightened students.

Owen Kraznik waited at the edge of the field in a panic of concern, flapping his arms in the cold, watching the helicopters land and take off. He was inarticulate with anxiety. When he saw Tom Perry, he gripped him by the arms, unable to speak.

Tom Perry, too, was frantic. "Listen, Owen, have you seen Alison Grove? She lives in Coolidge Hall, right up there on the fourteenth floor. Look, see there, where all those flames are coming out?" Then Tom's face changed. "Oh, thank God, there she is." Jumping over a rope barrier, he raced across the field and embraced Alison as she descended from the bubble door of one of the Coast Guard helicopters.

Owen broke down and sobbed. But Alison was fine. She was rosy and clean. Her white sweater wasn't even smudged with smoke. She had combed her red-gold hair in the air. Tom took her home, and she called her mother to tell her she was all right, that she wasn't one of the kids who were being rushed to the infirmary or to the Cooley-Dickinson Hospital in Northampton to be treated for smoke-filled lungs or minor burns or simple hysteria.

At the hospital, Dr. Ellen Oak was in charge of the emergency room when the first rush of ambulances pulled up outside. Ellen had been sleepily putting on her coat, thinking about bed. Instead she was up all night. By morning her staff had cared for nearly all of the Coolidge Hall residents who had come pouring in at midnight, carried on stretchers, walking, weeping, coughing. Dozens were put to bed on cots in the cleared-out cafeteria. Scores were calmed down and sent home. But no rescue techniques, no desperate lifesaving efforts, could revive the two sophomore men who had tried to descend the north staircase in Coolidge Hall, hoping to reach the ground in safety. Through one propped-open door the whole stairway had filled with smoke. For them it was a fatal mistake.

Ellen watched the two covered stretchers disappear

around the corner in the direction of Harvey Kloop's pathology lab. Worn out and disappointed, she swore under her breath, then indulged in a quick fit of tears.

The pathologist was not in the lab to receive the bodies. He was home in bed. No one had summoned Dr. Kloop. He slept through the whole thing. Not until five o'clock in the morning did his phone ring.

Harvey was used to calls early in the morning. Automatically he stretched out his arm to answer this one, keeping his eyes tightly closed on his dream, a vision of the shimmering surface of the Quabbin Reservoir. And on the shore—what a miracle!—a mountain lion was peering through the trees, the legendary catamount of old! They were rumored to be still lurking in the woods, but nobody was sure. It was Harvey's lifetime ambition to see one in the flesh. And there it was, with its big body and small catlike head, right there in the—

"Hello," murmured Harvey into the phone, not wanting to wake up.

It was the state police. "Hey, Harvey, big fire at U Mass, you should of seen it. Tower of flame, Coolidge Hall. A hundred students rescued from the roof by helicopter. Come on, you're wanted at the hospital. Couple of kids died of smoke inhalation."

"My God," said Harvey Kloop. For an instant his dream of the blue water of the reservoir remained upon the retina of his mental vision, and then it shriveled and vanished in the withering heat of the conflagration in Coolidge Hall.

# 6



*The Horror not to be surveyed—  
But skirted in the Dark . . .*

Winnie couldn't sleep. All night she floundered in her bedclothes. Not until dawn did she drift off at last. By the time she woke up, her mother and father had left for work and it was too late for the news on TV. Winnie was desperate to know what had happened. She wanted to go to Coolidge Hall and look for herself, but she didn't dare.

Instead she drove her van to the parking lot on the Amherst Common, and walked up to Amherst College to apply for the job at the Dickinson Homestead.

The woman who took her request in Converse Hall was distracted. "Oh, yes, I have a recommendation here somewhere from Professor Kraznik." She looked around vaguely. "Excuse me. This fire, it's got me all flustered."

Winnie's heart began beating furiously. "Fire? What fire?"

"At the University. Didn't you hear the sirens? They were going all night long. It was Coolidge Hall. Two students killed! It was dreadful, just dreadful."

Winnie stared at the woman and licked her lips. "Who were they?"

"Who—? Oh, you mean, who was killed? Oh, I don't know their names. A couple of boys. Sophomores, I think. Their

poor parents! I've got a son at U Mass myself, only, thank heaven, he lives off campus."

"It was boys?" said Winnie, her heart lolloping in her chest. "Only boys?"

"That's right. Two sophomore men."

"But I thought there would be . . ."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," said Winifred Gaw.

The fire in Coolidge Hall was big news. Television teams converged on Amherst. The president of the University was interviewed, and so were the helicopter pilots and the fire chief and the major from the air base and some of the students rescued from the roof and a bunch of miscellaneous people on the street and a handful of outraged parents who were calling for an investigation.

On the day after the fire, Owen Kraznik decided the best thing he could do was stay out of everyone's hair. He pattered around the house, trying to tidy it up for the arrival of Homer Kelly. The guest room was a problem. How could he make it look more comfortable? It smelled musty. It looked bleak. Owen didn't have the faintest idea what to do. There was a badminton net wrapped around a pair of poles in the corner and a dead typewriter on the dresser beside a jug of antifreeze. Opening the closet door, Owen was shocked to find an old gardening shirt of Catherine's hanging inside. It stopped him cold. He was still staring at it, wondering what to do, when the phone rang.

It was Mildred Crape, the provost of the University. Mildred wanted Owen to read a prayer at the memorial service for the two dead students.

"Oh, Mildred, I'm sorry," said Owen. "I can't do it. I'd break down in the middle. And that wouldn't help matters, would it?"

"Oh, honestly, Owen, it's too bad. Who else can I get? You're such an angel of light. That's what I keep telling Dombey Dell. That Owen Kraznik, I tell Dombey, he's an angel

of light. Oh, that reminds me, Owen dear, Dombey and I have decided to enlarge your classes for next semester.”

Owen gasped. “Enlarge my classes? But they’re already too big as it is.”

“I’m sorry, but we’ve got to quadruple the size of your lecture course. I mean, it’s one of those famous courses everybody wants to take sometime in their college career. We’ll get you another dozen teaching assistants and move you into Mahar Auditorium. Now don’t groan, Owen. You’re stuck with it, and that’s a fact. Oh, by the way, I understand you’ve lost your secretary. Would you like a couple of new ones?”

“Oh, no, thank you, Mildred. I think I’ll just carry on without a secretary for a while.”

“Really? You mean it? Well, all right. It’s your funeral.”

“Or salvation,” murmured Owen to himself as he hung up.

Homer Kelly moved in on Monday, with his Velveeta cheese, his tortilla chips, his Pizza Snax, his kosher dill pickles, his SpaghettiOs with Sliced Franks, his frozen fish sticks, his Grandmaw Butterworth’s Homestyle Chicken Pie, his marshmallow cookies, and his instant banana cream pudding. He was full of news about the fire. “I stopped in at the police station to talk to Archie Gripp, an old friend of mine from Middlesex County. They’ve put him in charge of the investigation. Of course the insurance company will be looking into it too, you can bet on that. Hey, Owen, look at this. Mary sent along a pint of chicken livers. Fry them in butter, she said. I forgot to ask her how long. What do you think?”

“Half an hour?” said Owen doubtfully.

“Right-ho. Here they go. I’ll just turn the heat up, and then we can have our drinks in the front room. It was arson, Archie thinks.”

“Arson!”

“Strong smell of something flammable on the fourteenth floor, where the fire started. Couple of charred galvanized buckets.”

“But why would anybody do such a thing?” Owen set a tray of drinks on the bench in front of the fireplace, moving

aside a shoe and a tin of shoe polish. "Do they have any idea who it could have been?"

"Well, they've got a list of people they want to find." Homer consulted his pocket notebook. "The kids in the building saw various strangers in the corridors on the day of the fire—an old guy with a beard, a woman with a cat on a leash, a guy selling a saxophone, a fat girl with a paper bag, and—here's the one I like—a gorilla."

"A gorilla?" Owen gasped. "Surely they must be joking."

"No, it's true. There was a gorilla wandering around on the fourth floor of Coolidge Hall last Friday night. It was just a gag, naturally. There's this guy who lives in the Orchard Hill student housing complex, owns a gorilla suit, his prize possession. He was just lallygagging around. But naturally he was dragged in by Archie Gripp and severely talked to."

"It occurs to me," said Owen thoughtfully, "that Hallowe'en is coming."

"That's right. That's what the gorilla said."

"The parents of those two poor boys are going to sue the University," said Owen gloomily, sipping his drink.

"Yes, I saw that on the news this morning," said Homer. "What's the University going to do about housing all those kids who were burned out?"

"Oh, everybody's doubling up. I offered to take some of them myself, but they said no. They're renting a couple of houses on North Pleasant Street to take the overflow." Owen coughed. "Homer, do I smell smoke? Good heavens, I wonder if the stove—"

"Good God," said Homer, leaping to his feet.

The chicken livers were tough black leathery nuggets. "I'm sure they'll be delicious," said Owen, scooping them onto the plates.

"You just have to—chew quite a lot," said Homer, chomping patiently. "Hmm, not bad—if I do say so—myself."

"Why, Homer, they're—really quite—tasty," said Owen, who had no taste buds at all, none at all.

\* \* \*



And that was just the beginning. Encouraged by this culinary triumph, Homer began experimenting, branching out. By Christmas he had boiled, scorched, charred, and incinerated some fifty-five pounds of beef, lamb, chicken, fish, and pork. After the Christmas holidays he came back to Owen's house bearing a Christmas present, a French cook book, from his wife Mary. "From now on, Owen, it's *cordon bleu*."

Owen was overjoyed to see him. "Oh, Homer, I missed you. Now things will feel normal again. And the University is back to normal too. I must say, it's a relief to see the place looking more like itself. The kids are moving into Coolidge Hall again, did you know that?"

"No kidding? Well, that was fast work."

"There was no structural collapse, as it turned out. Just surface disfigurement. A lot of smoke and water damage. I suppose young Alison Grove will be back there on the fourteenth floor where the fire started."

"Alison Grove?"

"One of the students in our department." Owen's forehead wrinkled in guilty recollection. "She wanted to work for me last fall. I had to say no. I hope she found another job."

But Alison Grove had not found another job. She hadn't needed one. Her wardrobe had been completely replenished free of charge. A special University fund had been set up to supply all the burned-out students in Coolidge Hall with cash for new clothing and new books.

And there was a new ring on Alison's finger. Tom and Alison were engaged now, officially engaged.

There was no engagement ring on the left hand of Dr. Ellen Oak, resident in charge of the emergency room at the Cooley-Dickinson Hospital. But that was only because Ellen had refused to wear a ring in the first place. It was true that she was seeing less and less of Tom Perry. Tom was always calling up to apologize. "I'm sorry I'm still so damned busy," he told her in February. "It's this symposium of Dombey Dell's. Dombey's asked me to help him out with this Emily Dickinson

centennial conference. It's going to be a rat race, getting the thing organized in time."

Ellen was delighted. "An Emily Dickinson conference? Oh, say, that's just great. When is it? I'll come."

"Oh, no, you won't want to come. Boring speakers, a lot of claptrap. And I'll be so busy keeping the thing going, I won't have time to be with you."

*Well, I'll come anyway,* thought Ellen stubbornly, *I'll keep out of his way. I won't be a pest.*

Ellen wasn't the only one to be delighted at the news about the Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium. Two thousand miles west of Amherst, in Pancake Flat, Arizona, Peter Wiggins was thrilled to find Dombey's invitation in his mailbox. Joyfully, he kicked a tricycle off the doorstep and brought the letter indoors to show Angie.

Angie was not impressed. Angie didn't want to be left alone with the children for days on end. "You're going to give another talk about that old photograph again? God! Who cares about a picture of somebody dead as a doornail?"

"You're jealous," said Peter angrily. "Just because she's so beautiful. You're jealous of my photograph."

"Jealous? Me? Jealous of an old photograph? Honestly, Peter, sometimes I think you've gone bananas. You've got this obsession. I mean, face it, that's what it is, an obsession with a dried-up old corpse in a cemetery."

"You ignorant little bitch," shouted Peter.

Nicole and Michelle began to shriek.

"Now see what you've done." Weeping, Angie gathered up the two babies and rushed out of the kitchen.

Left to himself, Peter went to the sink and gazed eastward out the window, hardly seeing the raw red hills, imagining instead some college in the East, with mellow brick buildings set tenderly around a tree-shaded lawn, where Peter would have an office to himself, a room like a green bower, engulfed with leafy growth, entwined with ivy, moist with dew.

# 7



*The Sky is low—the Clouds are mean . . .*

Spring was a mixed bag that year. There were balmy days in March, sucking the cold out of the ground, drawing everybody out-of-doors to admire the crocuses and quote Emily Dickinson—*We like March, His Shoes are Purple*—and cold, raw days in April, spitting rain and sleet. *Who knocks? That April. Lock the Door.*

The weather in Bartlett Hall was changeable too. Running into Dombey Dell in the corridor, Owen often found him testy. “Sensitive ladies, so far, that’s all we’ve got. Bushels of responses from sensitive ladies. Marybelle Spikes, Jesus! Eunice Jane Kloop, my God!”

At other times, Dombey was jaunty and self-important. His big-deal arrangements were going well. The National Endowment for the Humanities had contributed ten thousand dollars, the University was going to pay the travel expenses of Peter Wiggins, and Amherst College had agreed to underwrite the cost of food and drink. *The New York Times* was sending a correspondent. There were applicants from all over the country, and from Sweden and Mexico. Far away across the Pacific Ocean, the Japanese Poetry Society, a men’s club, was chartering a plane, an entire plane.

"Thank God, Owen, the Coolidge Hall fire isn't front-page news any more. Now we can get a little attention. We're going to restore the good name of the University in the public eye, right?"

"Well, I fervently hope so," said Owen. "Oh, Dombey, do you have a brochure? I don't think you ever sent me a brochure."

"A brochure?" Dombey shook his head. "Oh, too bad, Owen. As a matter of fact, I'm all out. Got to print up some more."

And therefore it wasn't until Dombey posted the new brochure on the bulletin board at the bus stop in front of Stockbridge Hall that Owen saw the list of symposium speakers. Only then did he discover that there were to be no women on the program. Instantly he called Dombey and complained.

"Oh, but you don't know about Alison Grove," said Dombey. "Alison's going to be on the program. She's going to wear Emily Dickinson's white dress and read a poem."

"She's going to wear the white dress? Listen, Dombey, you know that's a sacrilege. And, anyway, that's not enough. Alison Grove may be a woman, but she's certainly no scholar."

Dombey groaned. What the hell! Owen was so damned unpredictable. Most of the time the man was quiet and unassuming, and then for no reason at all he'd turn intractable and stubborn. "Listen, Owen, it's too late. And, anyway, there's no room in the Dickinson Homestead. That's where all the speakers are going to be staying. You and me, too. Special arrangement with the College. And the brochure has already gone out, all around the world. I can't change it now."

Owen was outraged. Dombey was surely headed for disaster. No women speakers at a conference on the nation's foremost woman poet? The man was asking for trouble.

And Owen was right. Trouble was already brewing in two separate quarters in the town of Amherst. But when Owen stumbled on evidences of it himself, later on, he failed to recognize them for what they were, the first fierce sputterings of two powerful engines of rebellion.

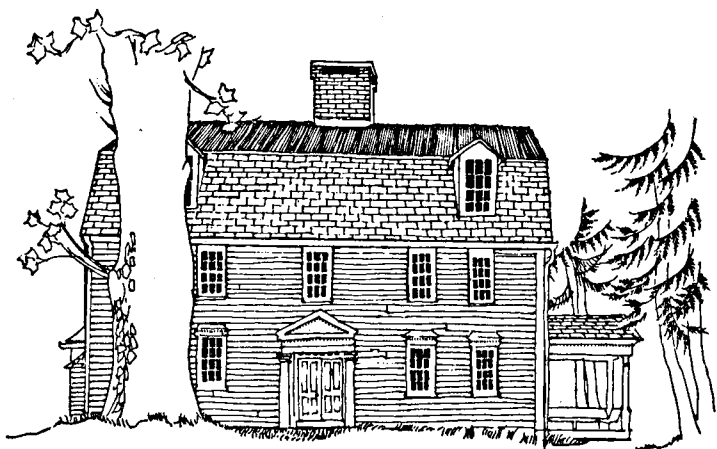
He came upon the first crackle of defiance at a meeting of

the Amherst Historical Society in the old Strong house on Amity Street.

As president of the society, Owen always came early to turn on the electric heater and arrange the chairs in a circle in the downstairs parlor. But now, hearing voices from above, he decided the meeting must already have gathered upstairs.

On the second floor he found another bunch of people entirely. It was the executive committee of the Amherst Women's Emily Dickinson Association. The guiding spirit of A.W.E.D. was his old friend Tilly Porch. There sat Tilly with Dottie Poole and Barbara Teeter and Marilyn Wineman and Carolyn Chin and all the rest, gathered around a big table with their needles poised over a large piece of cloth. It looked to Owen like a gossip session, an old-fashioned sewing circle. "Oh, good afternoon, Tilly, Dottie, everyone. Sorry, wrong meeting. I didn't mean to intrude."

He had taken them by surprise. Tilly took one look at him, then snatched up the piece of cloth and tossed it upside down on the table. Pins and needles flew. Sitting back in their chairs, the women gasped, and then began to laugh.



Strong House

"I'm sorry, Owen," said Tilly. "Big secret. You're not in on it, I'm afraid."

But then Dottie Poole clasped her hands and beseeched, "Oh, Tilly, don't you think we should tell Professor Kraznik? I mean, what if he thinks we shouldn't do it at all?"

The other women were horrified. "Heavens, Dottie, of course not. How can you say such a thing? Never!"

Owen put up his hands as if to say, Far be it from me to inquire. And then, smiling, he ran downstairs to find the other members of the Historical Society collecting in the parlor.

Afterward, when his meeting was over, when all the other members of the Historical Society had dispersed, Owen lingered for a moment and listened to the voices from upstairs.

Once again Dottie Poole was sounding a note of distress. "Oh, Tilly, do you really think we should? Now that we're all done—I mean, now that I really get a look at it, I just feel so uncertain. I mean, I didn't know how really huge and *real* it was going to look. I mean, I just wonder if we should really go through with it?"

"Nonsense, Dottie." Someone else was speaking up firmly. Again Owen recognized the voice of his widowed old friend, Tilly Porch, who had lived all her life in the house of her ancestors on Market Hill Road. "Of course we should go through with it. Shouldn't we, everybody? Are we mad at those men or not?"

There were cheers from the other women, and cries of defiance. Owen stood with his hand on the latch of the front door as Tilly's voice rose above the rest in gallant reassurance. "Courage, Dottie, you have nothing to lose but your good name, your family and friends, and your reputation as a law-abiding citizen. Forward, Dottie, forward!"

The rest of them were shouting it too, in exuberant chorus. "Forward, Dottie, forward!"

And then there was a pause. "Oh, well, then, forward, I guess," came the voice of Dottie Poole, faltering down the stairs.

*How martial is this place!  
Had I a mighty gun  
I think I'd shoot the human race  
And then to glory run!*

Nor did Owen perceive the first signal flare of the second revolution against Dombey Dell's all-male Emily Dickinson symposium. Although it passed right in front of his eyes, he failed to recognize it as a flaming rocket in the sky.

It was merely a rectangular notice at the bottom of one of the soggy pages of *The Hampshire Gazette*, picked up from Owen's rain-soaked front porch and spread out to dry on the kitchen table.

Before supper Homer used the paper to catch the slop as he beat up his *omelette aux fines herbes*, a concoction of eggs, basil, taco seasoning, and hot dog relish. But Homer paid no attention to the little notice, and neither did Owen when he mopped at the front page after supper and looked the paper through. Even the forest of exclamation points didn't catch his eye.

!!! SINGLES FOR EMILY DICKINSON !!!

????????????? Are you a SURVIVOR ??????????????

*Somehow myself survived the Night*

*And entered with the Day . . .*

Poem by E. DICKINSON

!!! WOMEN SURVIVORS!!! Are you SINGLE ??? HURT ???  
EXPLOITED ???  
??????? HAVE YOU *had it* with MEN ????????

!!! JOIN S.I.N.G.E.D.—“SINGLES FOR EMILY DICKINSON” !!!

!!! *Talk sessions every Tuesday night at 8 in the basement  
of the First Congregational Church* !!!

!!!!!!! NOW PLANNING ACTION !!!!! URGENT !!!!!!!!

But the ad was not lost on Winifred Gaw.

Since last fall, Winnie had been struggling to keep going. Her panic over the investigation of the fire in Coolidge Hall had quieted down. No longer did her heart pound when she heard a knock at the front door or a shrill ring from the phone in her mother's kitchen. “Fat girl with a paper bag,” the TV had said. They were looking for a suspicious fat woman. Well, they hadn't come to the right fat woman. And the paper bag with its contents was gone forever. On the night of the fire, the heavy bag had plunged one hundred and twenty-five feet down into the empty blackness of Shaft 12, and then it had been carried away through the tunnel to Boston in the torrent of water from the Quabbin Reservoir.

So the danger was over. And Winnie's van had stopped smelling of flammable chemicals. Her clothes had been washed ten times. The crisis was past. She could breathe more freely.

And Professor Kraznik had been right about the job at the Homestead. The job was okay. Winnie liked going to Emily Dickinson's house every Tuesday and Friday. She liked the nice smell of the house. It reminded her of Professor Kraznik, because it was sacred to the memory of Emily Dickinson. And Winnie was getting her self-confidence back. Standing spread-legged in Emily's bedroom, saying her piece over and over to clusters of visiting tourists, she was beginning once again to feel in charge. The place was hers and hers alone, every Tuesday and Friday. Emily Dickinson's white dress in the closet was Winnie's own personal possession. She could show it or keep it



an arrogant secret. She could let people in the door, or slam it in their faces, if they didn't have an appointment. Serve them right.

It was only at night that Winnie's wretchedness came back. She couldn't sleep. All the things that had been tucked into the folds of her fat during the daytime came creeping out at night, from the rings of flab around her throat, from the deep dimples in her elbows. The two guys whose lives had been snuffed out in Coolidge Hall—they were a knobby bundle that refused to stay hidden away in a fatty cranny. And the thought of Alison Grove, sitting at Winnie's desk, waiting upon Professor Kraznik in Winnie's place, Alison Grove with her torrent of red-gold hair, her bewitching prettiness—that was another terrible thing that kept spilling out of hiding, night after night.

Therefore the ad in *The Hampshire Gazette* was heaven-sent.

*Somehow myself survived the night  
And entered with the Day . . .*

It spoke to Winnie. It was just what she needed.

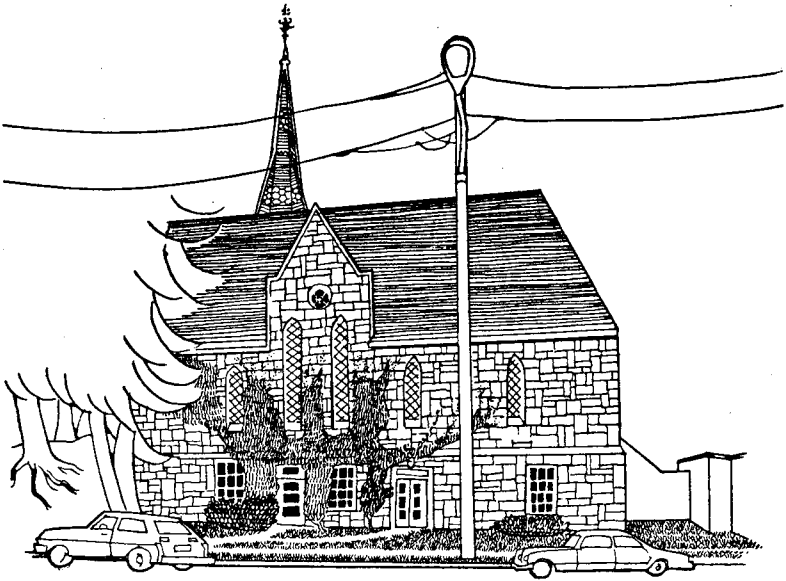
*!!! Talk sessions every Tuesday night at 8 in the basement  
of the First Congregational Church !!!*

**!!!!!!!!! NOW PLANNING ACTION !!!!! URGENT !!!!!!!!**

It was always hard for Winnie to enter a group of strangers. On the next Tuesday evening at quarter past eight, she stood for a moment outside the basement door of the Congregational church, gathering her courage, and stared at the sign that said TAG SALE ON LAWN MAY 15. It had rained all day, but now the clouds were clearing in the west. There was a tremulous glow of sunset in the air.

Winnie opened the door. Immediately she was confronted by a huge banner, declaring the church to be in favor of  
JOY!

There were voices down the hall. They stopped as Winnie paused in the doorway. The women in the folding chairs



looked up. Winnie scowled. She knew what they were thinking: *fat girl*. Maybe in a little while they would notice her eyes. *My eyes are my best feature*, thought Winnie. Instinctively she put her left hand with its stump of a little finger in the pocket of her pants.

A tall, hollow-cheeked woman stood up. She had lank colorless hair and steel-rimmed glasses. "Come on in. Join us. I'm Helen Gaunt. Here, sit down." Then Helen Gaunt explained the business of the evening. "We have this really important item on the agenda. This is sort of an emergency meeting. But first we want to get to know our new members. We were just talking to Debbie Buffington. She's new too. Okay, Debbie, you were saying you decided to keep the baby? What's his name? Elvis?"

Debbie was a pale young woman who looked about twelve years old. There were blue shadows under her eyes. She sucked on her cigarette. "Like I thought it would be just so

great, having this, you know, cute little doll to play with. Like he'd stay in the corner in his crib. Only, like, wow, it isn't like that at all. I mean, I'm the teeny person in the corner, and Elvis is this really gigantic—"Debbie waved her transparent hands. "All he does is bawl." She sank back and took another drag on her cigarette, her face empty of feeling. "Like tonight I couldn't even get a sitter. I had to dump Elvis with the lady across the hall, and she was really pissed."

One of the women was hugely pregnant. She gazed at Debbie with frightened doelike eyes. Next to her a big-boned woman spoke up with bitter emphasis. "Listen, you think you got trouble. I am the mother of *ten*. Wait till Elvis starts running around and getting into everything." The mother of ten shook her head in dire warning.

Helen Gaunt cut the whining short. "You don't need a baby-sitter," she said to Debbie. "Why don't you just bring Elvis along?"

"Oh, Jesus, I couldn't do that," said Debbie. "He bawls all the time."

"So?" said Helen Gaunt. "What's this big guilt trip? We were all babies once. All babies bawl. You can't let your whole life-style be cramped just because your kid acts like a kid. And, hey, listen, that baby will fit right in. Wait till you hear what we're going to do. We're all going to be in it. Elvis, too. I've got this plan. I mean, Emily Dickinson is our role model, right? She was a single woman, right? She thumbed her nose at the world, right? She's one of us, isn't that right? Well, okay, wait till you hear about the latest insult to her memory." Helen Gaunt looked around the circle. "There's this conference. This big Emily Dickinson conference. All these big speakers are going to talk about Emily Dickinson. And get this." Helen's voice sank an octave. "They're all men."

"Men?" whispered the expectant mother.

"Men?" gasped the Mother of Ten.

"Men?" breathed Winifred Gaw.

"Every—single—one." Helen Gaunt sat back grimly.

Winnie Gaw was dumbfounded. Of course Winnie had

heard about the conference, because she had been asked to conduct special tours for visiting scholars. But nobody had said the speakers would exclusively be *men*. Winnie was flabbergasted.

"Wait till you hear my idea," said Helen Gaunt solemnly, leaning forward like a conspirator. Then she looked at Winnie. "Oh, I forgot. It's your turn to introduce yourself. Go ahead. Tell us all about it."

"Well," said Winnie, "like it said in the ad in the paper, people that have been hurt." To Winnie's amazement, her throat filled with sobs. "You know, when somebody—" She paused again, uncertain how to go on. "You know, when a man—I mean it's a lot like what they did to Emily Dickinson."

There were kindly murmurs, clucks of sympathy.

Winnie stopped. She had gone far enough. She let the implication hang in the air that her pain had been inflicted by a perfidious lover.

Helen Gaunt looked at the fat girl, and wondered how Winnie could ever have attracted a man, even for a moment. But she muttered gently, "Join the club."

"God, I don't know what I'm doing here," said Debbie Buffington, dropping her cigarette on the floor and grinding it under her heel. "I mean, like, Jesus! Who's Emily Dickinson anyway, for creep's sake?"

# 9



*God keep me from what they call households . . .*

Homer felt comfortable in Owen's house. For one thing, he didn't have to pick anything up from the floor, the way he did at home. And that was all right with Owen, who had little sense of house pride himself. And both of them enjoyed Homer's gourmet meals, which were new and different every day.

On Monday the twelfth of May, the day before Dombey Dell's symposium was to get under way, dinner was beefsteak. "Why don't we just put it in the oven and let it bake slowly during the happy hour?" said Homer. "And then I'll toss the salad and we'll be all set."

"Perfect," said Owen. "Oh, Homer, I've been meaning to ask you, has there been anything new in the investigation of the Coolidge Hall fire? Or is it hopeless? Have they given up?"

"Given up? Good grief, no. I talked to Archie yesterday. He says all the likely suspects have been cleared, but they're still working on the notion that it was some disgruntled psychotic student. Poor Archie. That means sifting through twenty-five thousand kids, one at a time. And of course they're still trying to track down the source of the kerosene, or gasoline, or whatever it was in those burned buckets. You know,



they're checking garages, hardware stores, talking to kids who pump gas."

Owen looked sadly at the empty hearth of the fireplace, where for some reason a volleyball lay behind the fender. "But, Homer, you can get kerosene in the supermarket. I remember buying it there. Catherine used to light the fire with kerosene."

"Oh, sure." Homer jumped up quickly, snatched the salad bowl, and got to work vigorously with spoon and fork. Soon fragments of cabbage and iceberg lettuce were flying all over the table.

But that night in bed the empty fireplace haunted Owen's dreams. It was a black pit, an endless narrow flue into which he was falling. When something shrilled at him, something insistent, something demanding, he opened his eyes and sat up. The window was gray with the half-light of early morning. The harsh noise was the telephone. Gratefully, Owen reached for it and said hello.

Once again it was his cousin, Dr. Harvey Kloop. Harvey's whisper came hissing out of the phone, inviting Owen to come with him to Quabbin.

Owen whispered too, aware of the sleeping menace of Eunice Jane. "You're going fishing again?"

"Again? This is the first time, and the fishing season started a month ago. I've packed a lot of sandwiches and beer. How about it?"

"Oh, Harvey, I'm sorry. Someday I hope to see that Quabbin of yours. But today I've got to be at the Homestead to greet the people who are coming to the Emily Dickinson symposium. I'm really sorry."

"Emily Dickinson? Not again? The hell with Emily Dickinson! Who cares about Emily Dickinson?" It was a joke between them. Owen didn't blame Harvey for being sick to death of Emily Dickinson, or at least of the tiresome incarnation of Emily Dickinson that loomed over the Kloop household in the dread imagination of Eunice Jane. "Well, too bad, Owen. So long, then. I'll get going right away. I've got to get out of here fast before somebody calls, Mabel Grout or somebody like that, with one of her spells."

"Why don't you just take the phone off the hook?"

"Oh, no. Can't do that. It's against my Hippo-something oath."

"Your what? Listen, Harvey," said Owen wistfully, "have a good time. I wish I could come with you."

At the other end of the line, Harvey Kloop put down the phone and crept back into the bedroom for his heavy sweater. Then he froze in his tracks. Eunice Jane was rearing up in bed. Staring straight ahead, she was croaking another weird passage from the insane poetry of Emily Dickinson: "*Below Division is Adhesion's forfeit.*" But it was all right, decided Harvey. Eunice Jane was sound asleep. She was flopping back on the pillow with a snort.

Grinning, Harvey tiptoed downstairs. Already a picture was glowing in his head, a bright vision of the boat-launching dock at Gate 43. Already he could see the lively scene at the

pier, he could hear the scrape of the aluminum bottoms on the concrete ramp, the jocular greetings of the men in their orange flotation vests and duckbilled caps, and the sputter of the outboards as the boats curved away from the dock and headed for open water, to float for the rest of the day above the drowned cellar holes of the little lost villages at the bottom of the lake.

Picking up his fishing gear and his lunch box, Harvey struggled with the back door, thinking about those old ghost towns under the water and the empty cemeteries down there—even the coffins had been removed! And all those dislocated people whose houses and factories and churches had been destroyed back in the nineteen-thirties. It was terrible, really, what had happened, even though the resulting lake and its surrounding watershed were Harvey's idea of heaven on earth, the heaven that was to be his for the rest of the day, if he could just—get out—the back door. Carefully, Harvey closed the door behind him, tiptoed down the porch steps, climbed into his car, and rolled down the driveway.

But once again he was intercepted. There was a screech from the bedroom window: "Harvey, telephone!"

Wincing, he looked up to see Eunice Jane grinning cruelly down at him.

This time it was Mabel Grout, in person, flat on her back on the floor of her breakfast nook, with the telephone entangled, she said, around her neck.





*. . . all is jostle, here—scramble and confusion . . .*

Owen packed up the notes for his speech, his shaving kit, a clean shirt and his pajama bottoms, and said a regretful good-bye to Homer Kelly. Then he walked around the corner to the Homestead. From now on he would be at the mercy of Dombey Dell.

Walking up the driveway, Owen stood behind the Dickinson house for a moment, looking up at it, reluctant to go inside. It pleased him to think that the light must have fallen on the high bulk of the brick walls a century ago just as it did today. Lofty and solid, the house rose above him on its granite foundations. It was like the poet who had lived in it, decided Owen, in her hard-won sense of self.

*The Props assist the House  
 Until the House is built  
 And then the Props withdraw  
 And adequate, erect,  
 The House support itself  
 And cease to recollect  
 The Augur and the Carpenter—  
 Just such a retrospect  
 Hath the perfected Life—*

*A past of Plank and Nail  
And slowness—then the Scaffolds drop  
Affirming it a Soul.*

For a moment as Owen stood on the back porch, house and poet became one. He put down his bag and rang the bell.

Dombey Dell opened the door. "Oh, there you are, Owen. Good." Behind Dombey a chambermaid from the College was carrying a pile of sheets. "Come on in. Your room's at the front, upstairs, across from the sacred bedchamber. Right this way." Briskly, Dombey ran up the stairs ahead of Owen, and threw open the door of Lavinia Dickinson's bedroom.

Owen wanted to protest, to ask for a different room, but he didn't want to be a nuisance. Here he couldn't forget Catherine, who had shared it with him once, back in the good days before she had become so ill. Painful memories crowded in upon Owen as the chambermaid ballooned a clean sheet over the bed and Dombey rushed away down the hall.

*There is a finished feeling  
Experienced at Graves—  
A leisure of the Future—  
A Wilderness of Size.*



A *Wilderness*—that described it exactly. Since his wife's death, Owen had found himself stumbling through a wilderness, a bleak forest where no light fell.

The doorbell rang. There was an anguished shout from Dombey. "Get that, will you, Owen?"

Owen hurried down the stairs and opened the back door. There on the porch stood a slight young man with fair hair and high tense shoulders. He was carrying a square case and a heavy bag. "How do you do?" he said, speaking with painful care. "My name is Wiggins. I hope I am not—"

It was the professor from Pancake Flat. "Oh, Professor Wiggins," said Owen. "Come right in. We've been expecting you. My name is Kraznik. I'm eager to hear what you have to say about that intriguing photograph."

Peter Wiggins took a deep breath, and stepped inside. His shoulders relaxed. He put down his slide projector and his bag, and followed Professor Kraznik, looking reverently this way and that at the sanctified spaces of the house of his dreams. In the kitchen he sat down timidly, awed by the august presence of the great Owen Kraznik. But soon he was disarmed.

"Tea bag?" said Owen. "Good heavens, I wonder if you can help me figure out how this stove works. Milk? Sugar? Oh, sorry, no sugar, I'm afraid. Now where are the spoons?"

And then Owen expressed a flattering interest in Peter's precious picture. Soon Peter was removing it from his billfold and unfolding it delicately from its tissue paper.

"How fascinating," said Owen, gazing at it eagerly. "What a handsome young woman she is, indeed. Would you like to see your room? We'll have to find Professor Dell."

On the landing they ran into Dombey. Shaking hands with Peter Wiggins, Dombey was lordly and energetic. "Sorry, Wiggins, but we have to stow you on the third floor. We decided you were young enough to make it up two flights of stairs—not like some of us, cough, choke." Playfully, Dombey pounded his own chest. "Oh, say, Owen, did I tell you *The New York Times* is sending somebody?"

"Yes, you did. More than once, as a matter of fact."

"Well, listen. This is brand-new. I just got a phone call.

The Smith Brothers are coming. Do you know them, Wiggins, the two brothers from Harvard?"

"Well, of course, I've heard of them." Greatly daring, Peter ventured a joke. "I've often wondered—ha, ha—if they have short and long beards like the Smith brothers on the cough-drop box."

"Oh, yes, ha, ha," echoed Dombey. "Well, it's true, they do. They're famous for it. It's common knowledge." Then Dombey poked Owen slyly in the ribs. "Rumor has it they're head-hunting. Looking for somebody to replace that poet, Pulsifer Rexpole. Lousy teacher, apparently, Rexpole. So there'll be an opening at that distinguished institution of higher learning on the River Charles. What do you think of that?"

Peter's hand tightened on the strap of his canvas suitcase. *A job opening at Harvard. Perhaps when the Smith brothers hear my significant platform address, they might think—*Peter followed Owen to the third floor, thanked him effusively, closed the door, and turned around, grinning, to gaze at his room.

He was in the attic, Emily Dickinson's own attic. She had come up to the attic to read Shakespeare. The room was filled with cool green light. Hurrying to the narrow arched windows, Peter looked out upon a landscape thick with new spring foliage. Through the branches of the trees he could see the cupola of Emily's brother's house next door.

*She must see everything too.* Swiftly, fumbling at the latch, Peter took his slide projector out of its case and set it up on the top of the dresser. Soon the beautiful face of the woman in his photograph was looking back at him from the blank wall above his bed.

"You're home at last," said Peter softly. Smiling at her in congratulation, he imagined her great eyes staring out of the front page of *The New York Times* the day after tomorrow. And there would be a headline: WIGGINS PROVES VALIDITY OF DICKINSON PHOTOGRAPH.

And then, perhaps, by some crazy stroke of luck, he might win the job at Harvard. Or if not at Harvard, somewhere else, anywhere east of Albany. Anywhere in the green and wooded

East, far from the desert country of Pancake Flat, Arizona. "Dear God," muttered Peter, who didn't believe in God, "get us out of there." He closed his eyes and clenched his fists. "Soon, soon, soon."





*Noon—is the Hinge of Day . . .*

At lunchtime Owen managed to sneak off by himself, grasping at a last cowardly moment of anonymity. He felt a little guilty. He should have asked Peter Wiggins to go with him. But there was something about the naked want in Peter's face that suggested an incipient lame duck, and Owen was wary of encouraging him.

In the Gaslite restaurant he took the next-to-last empty stool, consulted the sticky menu, and ordered a Superburg Deluxe. As he finished it and pushed away his plate, someone sat down beside him, deposited her pocketbook nimbly on the floor, and opened a pamphlet. Recognizing the brochure, Owen spoke up amiably. "Excuse me," he said. "Are you attending the Dickinson conference?"

The woman took off her glasses and smiled at him. She had a thin face and keen eyes. "Yes, I came early to find a place to stay. Actually, my fiancé is helping to run the symposium, but I don't want to be in his way. He doesn't even know I'm coming."

"Dombey Dell?" Owen was astonished. "You're engaged to Dombey Dell?"

"Oh, no." The woman laughed. "Not Professor Dell. Tom Perry. My name is Ellen Oak."

So this was the doctor from Northampton. Owen was stunned. His irrepressible compassion rushed to the surface. Blushing scarlet in anguished sympathy, he mumbled something in congratulation, aware at the same instant of the arrival of Alison Grove. Alison was standing beside the door, looking for an empty stool. Heads turned. The boys behind the counter looked up. For a split second everything in the Gaslite restaurant came to a halt, then went on as before.

"The hamburgers are very good," said Owen courteously, pointing to a grease spot on the menu, "and the French fries are delicious."

"Oh, thank you," said Ellen. Promptly she ordered Lunch #17, Quarter-pounder with French fries and coleslaw.

Then Owen introduced himself. It was Ellen's turn to be surprised. "Oh, Professor Kraznik, I'm looking forward so much to your lecture tomorrow afternoon."

"Oh, no," said Owen. "I'm sure it will be dull. I don't think you should bother to attend."

"Come now," said Ellen. "I'm tired of being told that. Tom said it too. 'Don't bother,' he said. 'It will just be the same old stuff. Stay home.' But I decided to come anyway, on my own hook." Ellen's grin was dazzling, a flash of big white teeth. "After all, I'm the biggest Dickinson freak in Northampton."

Again Owen blushed for the dishonesty of Tom Perry. How could the boy be so two-faced? Getting up from the counter, Owen said a cordial good-bye to Ellen Oak and went to the cash register, nodding politely at Alison Grove as she moved forward to take his place. Paying for his lunch, Owen shook his head, wondering at the difference between Tom's two girlfriends. There was no comparison. One was so ordinary, the other so striking. What a foolish, careless boy!

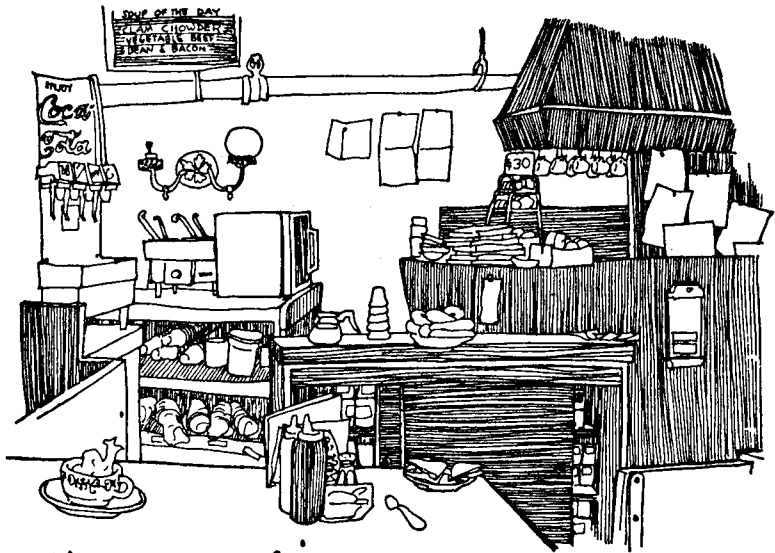
Ellen's hamburger was enormous. Picking it up hungrily, she glanced at the girl who was settling herself on Professor Kraznik's stool, and felt a twinge of envious wonder. How lovely the girl was! A pinnacle of nature, a sort of masterpiece. In her presence everything else fell away—all achievement, all endeavor. Beside this physical perfection nothing else seemed important. And it was the kind of perfection you couldn't de-

serve. You could only be born with it. It was showered upon you from above—or else it wasn't. You couldn't get it by trying, by working, by any kind of strenuous effort.

Ellen chewed her hamburger thoughtfully. It occurred to her that Alison's beauty was like grace, the old-fashioned Calvinist concept of grace. Grace, too, came down from the sky, unearned, a present from God. Right here in Amherst, in the old days, people had prayed for grace, hoped for it, yearned to have it descend upon them. But sometimes in vain. Even Emily Dickinson had never experienced the miracle that was required for conversion. Somehow she could never get the hang of it.

"Anything else?" said the boy behind the counter, snatching away Ellen's plate, staring at the girl beside her.

"Coffee, black," said Ellen. And then she smiled to herself as she thought of conversion as it was practiced today, in all the little college towns of the Connecticut Valley, right here and now. These days it was sexual, not spiritual—a sudden overnight metamorphosis from virginity to rapturous understand-



The gaslite



ing. Every day in the week, women students came to Ellen's office to learn how to win this blessed transfiguration without embarrassing consequences.

The beautiful girl was ordering canned peaches and cottage cheese. Ellen found herself wondering how it would feel to look like that. She couldn't imagine it. But, after all, she told herself, it didn't matter. Even without that kind of birthright, she had been lucky. For one thing, she really liked her job at the hospital. She loved figuring out what was the matter with people. It was something she did well. And then this man had come into the emergency room with his inflamed appendix, last summer, and her life had suddenly changed—

*As if I asked a common Alms,  
And in my wondering hand  
A Stranger pressed a Kingdom . . .*

Alison Grove left half a peach uneaten, remembering what her mother said, always leave a little on your plate. Sipping her coffee, she was hardly aware of the woman sitting next to her except as part of the universe that wheeled around Alison Grove. Without glancing left or right, Alison knew that everyone in the Gaslite was aware of her, the other people at the counter, the girl at the cash register, the guys making sandwiches. In all her life so far, Alison had seldom beheld the profile of another human being, only full round faces staring at her. Even when Alison was a baby, her own mother had fastened her sad eyes upon her, she had dandled Alison in her lap, she had stroked Alison's pretty dresses, she had twined Alison's hair around her finger. Alison had been her mother's only darling. She would have been her father's darling, too, only Alison didn't have a father. Her mother never talked about him. He had vanished long ago.

But she was the world's darling as well. Whenever Alison walked into a room, she gathered all attention to herself and held it, without lifting a finger, without opening her mouth to speak.

It seemed natural to Alison that this should be so. She

hardly bothered to think that she had been especially chosen. But Alison knew one thing, and knew it well. She had not been made so beautiful for nothing. It was like something Emily Dickerson had said—Alison had heard this lecture in Stockbridge Hall—*there is always one thing to be grateful for, that one is one's self and not somebody else.*

Now Alison spared a glance out of the corner of her eye at the woman sitting next to her, grateful once again that she was Alison Grove, that she wasn't really, really ugly, with a long nose and sallow skin and those incredible skinny pigtailed fastened on top of her head. How did the woman stand it when she looked at herself in the mirror?

"Oh, darling, there you are." Suddenly Alison was swept up from the stool, engulfed in a tweed jacket, embraced and kissed, while everyone else in the restaurant looked on, pleased at the sight of two marvelous-looking young people in one another's arms. And then the two of them made their way to the cash register, crushed together, the man's hand in the red-gold hair of the girl.

Tom Perry had not even noticed the drab woman in the brown dress, although he was still engaged to be married to Ellen Oak.

# 12



*Behold! Whose Multitudes are these?*

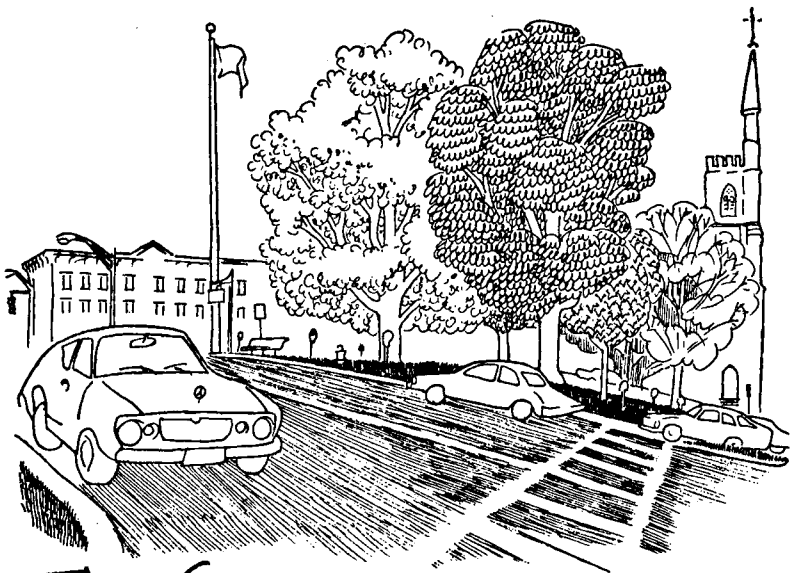
After lunch Owen felt restless. He was reluctant to go back to the Homestead. And he wasn't needed right away. Dombey had promised to play host for the afternoon. Actually, Owen knew, Dombey was lying in wait for the Smith brothers.

"Why not invite them to stay in the Homestead?" Dombey had said to Owen. "They could have my room, and I could move in with you."

"But I thought the house was reserved for the speakers," protested Owen. "The Smith brothers aren't going to speak."

"Well, what the hell," said Dombey Dell. "I just thought, considering their position—and, after all, it's *my* symposium." And then Dombey took Owen by the shoulders and shook him, rattling his teeth together. "Listen, Owen, they're *terribly* interested in Emily Dickinson."

Taking his time, Owen walked around the Common. To his nearsighted vision the sidewalks along South Pleasant Street seemed to be tumbling. Students were milling everywhere. A couple of girls were licking ice cream cones in the vast shade of the ancient katsura tree on Boltwood Avenue. It was almost time for exams, but the day felt festive. A pink balloon wobbled



## The Common

on a parking meter. Owen could detect no tension in the air. Even the boy approaching him with an armload of books lost his look of studious solemnity as his bubble gum swelled and exploded all over his nose.

Duty was calling. Owen walked back to the Homestead. In the driveway he found Dombey abandoning ship. "The Smiths are at the Lord Jeffery Inn," said Dombey importantly. Slicking down his hair, he scuttled away up the street.

But Homer Kelly was shambling up the walk to keep Owen company. "Hi," he said. "Just thought I'd come along and help you hold the fort."

Afterward, remembering Homer's innocent remark, Owen was struck by its prophetic power. Within the hour, the Homestead was a besieged fortress, a stronghold under attack.

At first, settling to their coffee in the kitchen, Owen and Homer paid no attention to the commotion out-of-doors. It wasn't until the noise became insistent, like the rustling of a

great gathering of birds, a shrill chattering like the mutterings of eagles or giant rocs, with a tenor undertone in some foreign tongue, that the two of them suddenly looked at each other and hurried to the parlor to look out the window.

“Dottie Poole, stop falling behind,” cried Tilly Porch, marching backward at the front of the line, her glasses tipped wildly sideways. “Rachel! Carolyn! Hold the banner high!”

Obediently, Rachel Miller and Carolyn Chin lifted the banner of the Amherst Women’s Emily Dickinson Association at arm’s length over their heads. The women of A.W.E.D. were present in strength. Their banner was a freshly ironed sheet with huge letters appliquéd in calico:

### EMILY IS OURS!

At the granite steps in front of the Homestead they suddenly stopped short and stared.

Another straggling line was advancing on the Dickinson house, another banner fluttered in the breeze, another pair of glasses sparkled in the sunlight. At the head of the other procession a tall thin woman marched sturdily forward. Behind her wallowed a vast shape in a denim jumper, then an expectant mother, leaning backward to balance her burden, and then a miscellaneous raggedy crowd. At the end of the line a girl lugged a whining child.

This militia too had a flag, a yellowed curtain crudely lettered with a marking pen. Tilly squinted at it. What did it say? It had folded over on itself again. But now it billowed wide.

### BUILDING TAKEOVER!

“Good God,” gasped Tilly Porch. Through her mind rushed a jumble of images from the late sixties and early seventies, the anti-Vietnam moratorium at Amherst College, the Quaker peace vigils on the Common, the sit-in at Westover Air Force Base. It was all so long ago. What sort of takeover was

this? What building were these women planning to occupy? Not the Homestead? Surely they weren't about to trespass on the ancestral home of Emily Dickinson?

"Who are those people?" whispered Barbara Teeter.

"Isn't this insane?" said Rachel Miller, giggling.

"I want to go home," whimpered Dottie Poole.

"Hold it a sec," shouted a kid in the street. He had a camera. He was backing up to take a wide-angle shot of the two processions staring at each other beside the old wooden sign that said: THE DICKINSON HOMESTEAD, BY APPOINTMENT ONLY.

"Excuse, please," said someone to Tilly. "May I please? Excuse!"

From nowhere a third parade was emerging, a long line of Oriental-looking men in shiny black shoes and dark business jackets and open-collared sports shirts. Smiling, nodding, bowing, they pressed past Tilly Porch and Helen Gaunt, and moved up the walk in a thick flood. "Pardon! Please excuse!" Behind them on the street, a chartered bus released its brakes with a wheezing sigh and pulled away from the curb.

The two lines of women fell back. Tilly Porch gathered her wits. Stepping up to Helen Gaunt, she said crisply, "I think we ought to parley."

Owen couldn't believe his eyes. Leaning out the parlor window, he stared, gasping, at the men moving up the sidewalk, at the women spilling over the front yard. One of the women was Winifred Gaw. They were carrying signs and banners:

EMILY IS OURS!  
BUILDING TAKEOVER!  
EMILY WAS A WOMAN!  
MOTHER OF TEN!

"Mother of ten?" cackled Homer Kelly. "How irrelevant can you get? What does motherhood have to do with Emily Dickinson? My God, Owen, it's Pearl Harbor. It's the Amazon army scaling the walls. Man the battle stations."

The boy with the camera was running up from the street. Winnie Gaw, too, was taking pictures. All the Oriental-looking men had cameras, and there was a continuous soft clicking of shutters as they recorded the front porch, the plaque on the wall, the blossoming dogwood trees.

Owen couldn't figure it out. He put a trembling hand to his forehead. Why were there no women among the invaders from the Far East, no men among the protesting white faces? What mad union of masculine East and feminine West was assaulting the Dickinson Homestead?

"Come on, old man," said Homer staunchly. "I'll stand beside you. Open the front door."

Owen got a grip on himself. Grasping the handle of the door, he swung it wide. Instantly, shining round faces pressed forward.

"Good afternoon, please?" A plump man in trifocals was smiling at him. "The bus, it deposit us at this address. Poetess live here, is it not so?"

"Merciful heavens," said Owen. "Professor Nogobuchi, welcome!"

It was the Japanese Poetry Society, at the end of its journey halfway around the world. From seven thousand miles away it had arrived at its destination, and now it was gazing at the sacred shrine with reverence and joy and humble eagerness to learn.

Owen stared wildly from Professor Nogobuchi to the women in the background. "Oh, sir, are they with you?"

Professor Nogobuchi turned to look at the swarming lawn. He seemed astonished. His companions looked too. All of them shook their heads vigorously. "Oh, no," explained Professor Nogobuchi. "Ladies regrettably not of our party. Unhappy misfortune to be unrelated."

Then Homer saved the day. Stepping in with flowery eloquence, he saluted the gentlemen from Tokyo and explained that there would be an official welcoming tour of the house later on in the afternoon, at which time Professor Kraznik would be overjoyed to welcome them back.

"So happy!" exclaimed Professor Nogobuchi. "This visit in

politeness only. We go now to Lord Jeffery Inn. Four-thirty! Return sharp!"

Hands were shaken and glowing smiles exchanged, while the women dressed their lines, ready for combat. As the Japanese delegation retreated, bowing once again to the standard-bearers at parade-rest in front of the hemlock hedge, Tilly Porch exchanged a glance with Helen Gaunt, and raised her arm. Solemnly the women of S.I.N.G.E.D. and A.W.E.D. advanced upon Owen Kraznik and Homer Kelly at the front door of the Dickinson Homestead.

"It's not fair," said Helen Gaunt, staring angrily at Homer, her angular body pitched forward, her running shoes gripping the porch. "Singles for Emily Dickinson protests. We've got this list of demands." Helen gestured vaguely at the boy with the camera. "Everything you say will be taken down by the press."

"She's right, you know, Owen," said Tilly Porch, standing beside Helen, nodding her head wisely. "We don't like it either. I mean the rest of us here, the Amherst Women's Emily Dickinson Association. No women speakers on your program? It just won't do."

"After all," said Helen Gaunt loudly, half turning to look at the followers massed behind her on the lawn, "what was Emily Dickinson anyway? She was a woman, right?"

It was a signal. A chant struck up: "*Emily Dickinson was a woman! Emily Dickinson was a woman!*" They were all shouting at once, and waving their placards back and forth, and lifting their banners to dip and flap in the warm May wind.

"My God, Owen," murmured Homer Kelly. "What are you going to do now?"

But Owen had made up his mind. Gazing seraphically at the blue sky dotted with puffy clouds, he stretched out a welcoming hand. "Invite them in, of course."



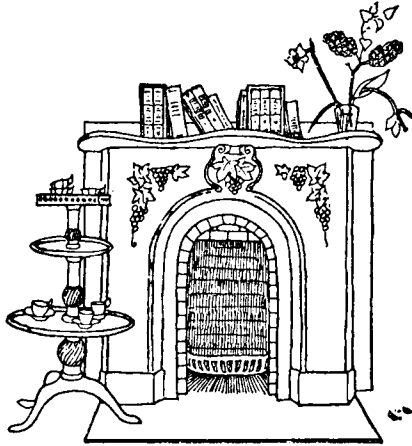
# 13



*Why cant I be a Delegate to the great Whig Convention?*

Leading the way into the parlor, Owen felt wretchedly unequal to confrontation. But to Homer Kelly, Owen's handling of the explosive affair seemed just right. Perhaps *handling* wasn't the right word. Owen was merely listening, sitting patiently in a chair beside the display of Dickinson china, while the sunlight of early afternoon glittered on the gilt edges of the saucers and shone through the translucent porcelain of the teacups, and Helen Gaunt and Tilly Porch took turns bawling him out.

Homer sat back cautiously in his own chair, another fragile antique. (Homer had an unfortunate history of crushing valuable pieces of furniture.) Soon he stopped listening to Helen Gaunt and amused himself by imagining Emily Dickinson's father holding court in the same room, confronting some delegation of town fathers or state politicians or railroad men. What would Squire Dickinson have thought of the present circumstance if he could have foreseen it in a crystal ball? Homer's mind balked. He couldn't imagine Edward Dickinson even beginning to struggle to catch a glimmer of a speck of an idea of what this was all about. In the Amherst of Edward's time there had been no question about the proper behavior of men and



women. Men ran things, women kept the children and the house in order. And that was that.

But Owen Kraznik was not another Edward Dickinson. "You're right," he said softly, "of course."

There was an astonished pause. Tilly Porch smiled and glanced at Helen Gaunt, but Helen had been expecting some masculine trick. Narrowing her eyes in their hollow sockets, she waited for the betrayal.

But it wasn't a trick. With one gallant sweep, Owen overturned Dombey Dell's schedule for the next day. "Professor Dell asked me to be the executive director of this conference, and therefore I will now make an executive decision. Which of you would like to speak tomorrow? I'll guarantee you a place on the agenda. Tilly? Aren't you the local expert on the Dickinson family tree? Won't you give us the benefit of your research?"

"Certainly," said Tilly promptly. "I've got a talk up my sleeve, all ready to go."

And then there was a volunteer. To Owen's dismay, Winifred Gaw raised her hand. Winnie was sitting on the floor

at his feet, her jumper spreading around her like a wigwam. The fat hand she was holding over her head was not the hand with the missing finger. That one was tucked under her knee.

"Oh, Winnie, of course," said Owen, flinching. "Your essay on Emily Dickinson's method of capitalization? Well, why not?" Grimly, Owen reflected that the entire audience would now be punished for Dombey Dell's tiresome display of sexist chauvinism. He ran a finger around his collar. "Now, since the other speakers are staying in the house, I hope the new people on the program will stay here too. Tilly, how about you? The rest of us can double up."

"No, thanks," said Tilly. "Too many things to do at home."  
"Winnie?"

"Yes," said Winnie, grinning, her great face flushed with triumph. Instantly her self-confidence swooped too far up the scale. Her sulky defiance vanished, and she became overbearing. "What about Emily's bedroom?" she said imperiously. "Who's going to sleep in there?"

"Oh, nobody will be using that room," said Owen. Reaching down in a gesture of good will, he took Winnie's hand.

The confrontation was over. Helen Gaunt unfolded her long bones from the floor, the Mother of Ten hurried home to make a vat of spaghetti, the pregnant woman staggered to her feet, feeling ready to give birth, and the members of the Amherst Women's Emily Dickinson Association burst into excited conversation as they drifted to the door. Dottie Poole was beaming with relief, overjoyed to have survived the afternoon without going to jail.

Only the baby seemed distressed. Elvis Buffington, a fat child of thirteen months, had been sleeping in his mother's arms, but now he woke up and howled with hunger. "Oh, Christ," said Debbie. Reaching into her bag, she took out a candy bar.

Tilly was scandalized. The baby was too fat. His mother looked starved. "Why don't you come to my house with the baby?" she said to Debbie. "I've got fresh-picked peas for supper." Picking up Elvis, Tilly held him at arm's length and

tossed him playfully in the air. Elvis hiccuped once, and stopped crying. Tilly's grandmotherly face was the loveliest thing he had ever seen.

Outdoors on the sidewalk there was a flurry of mutual congratulation. Helen Gaunt slapped Winnie on the back and grinned at her. "Good for you, Winnie. You'll really sock it to them tomorrow, right?"

Winnie felt a frightening lurch in the pit of her stomach as she remembered the mishmash of her capitalization paper. But at the same time she was seized by fierce ambition. She would show them, all those stuck-up people who had thrown her out of the department! She'd show them she deserved to study with Owen Kraznik! Winnie hurried off importantly in the direction of her car. She would drive home for her notes and her nightie and something to wear tomorrow, and then she would rush back to conduct the official tour of the Homestead at four-thirty.

Hurrying around the corner of Triangle Street to her beat-up van, Winnie closed her eyes for an ecstatic instant and kissed the hand that had been held in the hand of Professor Owen Kraznik.

Homer Kelly, too, was enchanted with the afternoon. It wasn't the justice of the women's cause that had diverted him, it was the everlasting melodrama of human souls in conflict. It was the handfuls of gritty sand that were forever being sprinkled into the machinery of daily life, grinding the ill-fitting cogs against each other, warping the sprockets, jamming the mismatched teeth. It was always so fascinating, the way people went right on being so outrageously themselves, and therefore so eternally interesting. "Owen, old man, you were magnificent," said Homer.

Owen was deathly pale, his forehead beaded with perspiration. "Well, then, tell me—how am I going to tell Dombey Dell he's got to make room on his schedule tomorrow for a paper by Winifred Gaw?"

"Want me to tell him?" offered Homer amiably. "Look, if

he gives you any trouble, just call on me. I'll knock his block off. I'll wring his neck. Oh, say, Owen, that reminds me. I bought a chicken. How about coming home for supper tonight?"

"Oh, no, thank you, Homer. I've got to be friendly to all those people who are arriving today. I'm sorry."

"Oh, by the way, Owen, Mary's coming for the picnic on Thursday. Is it okay if she shares my room?"

"Why, certainly. I'll be delighted to see her."

"Well, so long then, Owen. Sorry about the chicken. I think I'll boil it in gin. That ought to sozzle its gizzard. Now, remember, Owen, if you have a hard time with Dombey Dell, just call me up. I'll come right over and bust him one."



*Will the frock I wept in  
Answer me to wear?*

“What the hell?” said Dombey Dell. “What the hell? What the hell? What the hell?”

Owen explained it again, from the beginning, and then he stood quietly beside the piano in the Dickinson parlor for fifteen minutes, enduring Dombey’s rage and despair.

“Winifred Gaw? A platform address by Winifred Gaw? I’ll be a laughingstock! How could you do it to me, Owen? How could you?”

But at last Dombey cooled down and accepted the additions with reluctant grace and only a mild sprinkling of extra what-the-hells. When Alison Grove appeared beside the tea-cups, Dombey goggled at her with lecherous enthusiasm and hurried to pick up her bag and guide her upstairs to the sacred bedchamber.

“Are you sure it’s, like, okay for me to sleep here?” Alison put down her coat on the bed and looked around doubtfully.

Dombey’s eyes flickered guiltily over the cradle in which the infant Emily had been rocked, the Franklin stove that had kept the grown woman warm, the bed in which she had died. “Oh, sure, sure,” said Dombey hastily, “of course it’s all right. After all, Owen Kraznik has been pretty high-handed himself.

Well, never mind about that." Dombey opened the closet door and took out Emily Dickinson's white dress. "Don't worry your pretty little head."

"Oh, wow," said Alison. "Is that what I'm going to wear?"

"It is indeed." Dombey held the dress high on its padded hanger. In the slight flow of air from the door the white gown trembled. The long pleats lifted at the hem and fell back. The soft cotton had a glistening surface, a small pattern of woven flowers.

"Was it really hers?" Alison took the dress from Dombey. "I mean, honest to God?" Holding it up against herself, she looked in the spotted mirror over the dresser. Wide-eyed, she turned to Dombey. "Where can I change?"

Dombey went to the door and pointed down the hall. Then he grimaced. Owen Kraznik was coming up the stairs.

Owen looked doubtfully at Alison as she hurried past him with the dress. Gravely he walked into the bedroom, wanting to



interfere, to protest. But then he thought better of it. He had already been at odds with Dombey. Perhaps he had better let this transgression pass. But when Owen saw Alison's overnight bag flung down on the small green sofa, it was too much. He couldn't quell the reproach that rose to his lips. "Now, see here, Dombey—"

Dombey was expecting it. He jumped in with a counter-attack. "Oh, for God's sake, Owen, you've already wrecked my carefully planned schedule for tomorrow. What the hell is it now?"

"This room," said Owen sternly. "Is that girl going to be sleeping here? Don't you think that's a little—?"

"Irreverent?" Dombey looked sour. "Good God, Owen, it's just another bedroom. Alison deserves a room in this house, just like all the other speakers. I see no harm in putting this one to good use."

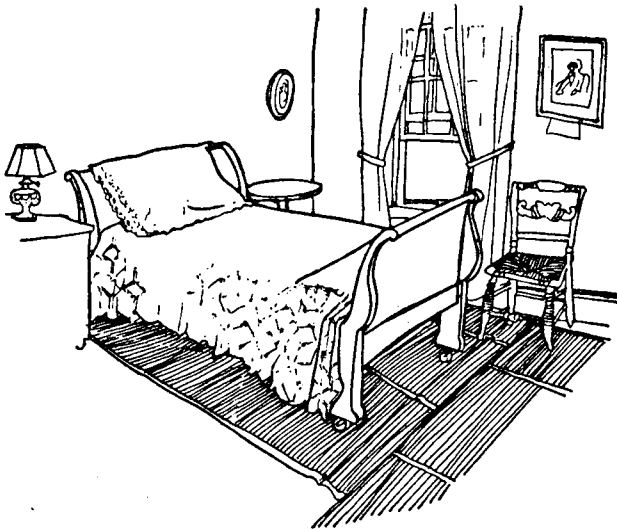
Owen thought of a rejoinder, but he didn't know how to put it into words that would mean anything to Dombey Dell. Owen was remembering the story of a particular day when Emily Dickinson had refused to see a caller, because, she said, *My own Words so chill and burn me*. Those words had been hundreds of poems, written within these four walls. For an instant Owen felt in the gooseflesh on his arms and legs the fever of that unearthly chill. But it was no use. If Dombey felt no such bodily alarms, there was no way to transfer the sense of violation. Owen knew he would merely sound stuffy. He shook his head and kept still. Then Alison entered like a vision, and he caught his breath.

Dombey clapped his hands and crowed with delight. "My dear, you look charming. Your hair, you've done it just right. Emily Dickinson in person. Well, you're a damn sight prettier than she ever was, but, what the hell, who cares?"

Owen spoke up honestly. "Lovely," he said. "I must say, my dear, you look lovely." Then Owen turned in surprise. "Oh, Winifred, there you are. Come in."

But Winnie couldn't budge. She stood massively in the





doorway, staring in horror at Alison Grove. "You're not going to let her," she gasped, glowering at Owen and Dombey Dell. "She's not going to wear that dress? She can't. She just can't."

"Well, she is," said Dombey angrily. "What's all the fuss?"

Winnie tramped into the room, struggling for words. "But I need it. I've got to conduct a tour of this house in half an hour, okay? She's got to take it off right now."

Alison looked archly at Owen, dimpled at Dombey Dell, and swept past the fat woman without a glance.

"Oh, well, in that case," said Dombey, looking at his watch, "we'll all clear out. Come on, Owen, help yourself. Bring on the Japanese Poetry Society. The place is yours. For a while, anyway. Then it goes back to Alison."

Owen nodded graciously at Winnie, and left the room with Dombey. Only then did Winnie see the overnight bag on the sofa, the coat on the bed. The truth dawned on her. She,

Winifred Gaw, was not good enough to sleep in Emily Dickinson's bedroom! Instead, they were giving it to Alison Grove, her mortal enemy.

Rushing out into the hall, Winnie bawled after Dombey and Owen as they started down the stairs, while Alison disappeared in a flutter of white pleats around the corner, "She's not *sleeping* in there? She can't. I thought you said—"

"Oh, dry up, Winnie," said Dombey Dell.



... a Lynx like me ...

By four-thirty Dombey was getting itchy again. "Say, Owen," he said, "would you take over now? I think I'll drop over and have a drink with the Smiths. So if you see the guy from *The New York Times*, just send him up to the Lord Jeff. I mean, he'll want to talk to me. I'll be in the bar."

So it was Owen, single-handed, who acted as welcoming committee for the official symposium tour. In flocks and batches people came to the door and rang the bell. Owen invited them in and shook their hands warmly and urged them to sign the guestbook. And then he handed them over to Winifred Gaw, who dragged them upstairs to Emily Dickinson's bedroom for one lecture, then down to the parlor for another.

Winnie was in her element. Grandly she commanded each squadron of visitors, marching them up to the second floor, growing ever more domineering as the afternoon progressed, giving orders—"Stand here, not there!" For this fleeting moment Winnie was happy. Once again she was working with Professor Kraznik. Once again it was just the two of them, paired

together like a team. Her heart beat with triumph. Her face flushed red. Her voice rose louder and louder.

People kept surging in the front door, college professors from Illinois and California and Arkansas, grammar-school teachers from Stockholm, two middle-aged women from Queens, a salesman for wood-burning stoves from New Hampshire, an endless stream of poetry-lovers from Tokyo, and droves of Dombey's sensitive ladies from everywhere, including Marybelle Spikes from Springfield.

Among the last to arrive at the front door of the Homestead was Dr. Ellen Oak.

Owen was delighted to see her. "Come in," he said, smiling with pity, remembering the shabby behavior of Tom Perry, her two-timing fiancé.

Ellen smiled wanly back at Professor Kraznik, hoping the physical signs of her wretched afternoon didn't show on her face. In the Gaslite restaurant she had discovered why Tom Perry had been so busy lately, so very much too busy to see her. It had not been meetings and student conferences and departmental affairs. It had been a girl with red-gold hair. The revelation had come as a brutal blow. Ellen had locked herself in her rented room and given herself up to misery. If only she had never met Tom Perry at all!

*Had I not seen the Sun  
I could have borne the shade  
But Light a newer Wilderness  
My Wilderness has made—*

A wilderness, that was what her life would be from now on, a landscape of bleak loneliness—not so much a jungle or featureless plain as an enormous cold warehouse filled with meaningless machinery.

Professor Kraznik was looking at her, waving a pen. "Would you like to write your name and address? I'm supposed to ask everyone to sign the guestbook."

Ellen took the pen and stared at the space where she was supposed to write her name, *Ellen Oak*. With a pang she remembered the name that was to have been printed on her office door, *Dr. Ellen Oak Perry*. It wasn't going to happen. She would always be *Ellen Oak* now, never anything different. The split with Tom was final. She had made the break herself. She had written a letter, a dignified letter, and dropped it in Tom Perry's mailbox.

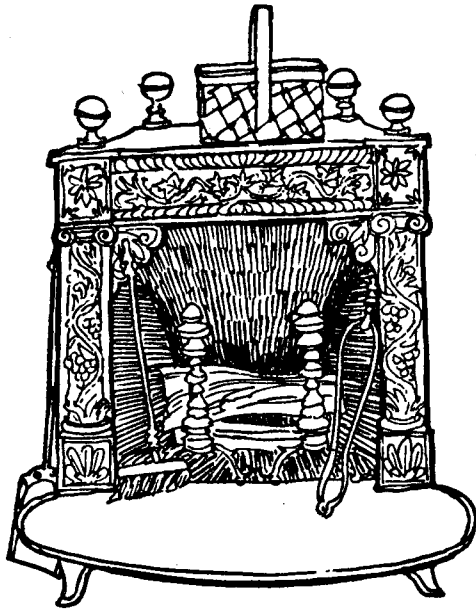
Her hand was still shaking from the feel of the envelope slipping from her fingers into the slot. And now she was exactly the same person she had been before Tom came along, *Ellen Oak*. But that wasn't such a bad thing to be, was it, after all?

*Ellen Oak, Northampton*, she wrote in the guestbook.

"The last tour is just beginning," said Professor Kraznik. His face bobbed in front of her, smiling gaily. "Well," he said, "I think I'll come along myself."

They were late. Winnie had already started her memorized recitation in Emily Dickinson's bedroom. With her feet planted heavily on the floor, wide apart, she was taking command of her miscellaneous captive charges and possessing herself of the writing table, the sleigh bed, the Franklin fireplace, the dresser, the windows, the view of the front walk and the driveway, the light of afternoon and the flowers of spring. In a flat drone she said her piece, hurrying along too fast, glowering at the Seth Thomas clock, the ruby glass decanter, the hat-box, the pictures of George Eliot, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Thomas Carlyle. "Please don't touch that," she said sharply as someone's hand reached out to rock the cradle.

In the faces of her listeners Owen sensed a patient disappointment. Totally absent from Winnie's talk was any sense of the woman who had lived and worked in this room. Closing his eyes for a moment, Owen tried to imagine her for himself, Emily Dickinson, a small woman with dark red hair, moving quickly from door to window, from table to dresser to bed. *I rise because the sun shines and sleep has done with me. I brush my hair and dress and wonder what I am and who made me so.*



One of the women from Queens was asking a question. "Could she see the hat factory from the window?"

The hat factory? Winnie quailed. She didn't know. And at that instant Winnie caught sight of Professor Kraznik standing modestly in the rear. She was flustered. Craftily she decided not to hear the question. It skittered away from her ears and lodged between the folds of fat where she kept secrets from herself. Turning away, she pointed to the other pictures on the wall, the photographs of Samuel Bowles and Charles Wadsworth and Otis Phillips Lord. Scowling, unable to look at Professor Kraznik, Winnie talked of love. Then she pushed her way shakily past three or four members of the Japanese Poetry Society and threw open the door to the closet.

"This was her dress," she said, hauling it out, holding it high.

There were exclamations of pleasure. One of the sensitive ladies reached out her hand impulsively, then snatched it back. The dress hung among them, glistening.

Marybelle Spikes summed it up. "It was her father's fault, right? He wouldn't let her go. So she couldn't get married, so she was unhappy in love, and that's why she retired from the world and wore white dresses and wrote her beautiful poems, right?"

Owen cringed. He wanted to speak up and say, She retired from the world to get away from people like you, because *they talk of Hallowed things, aloud, and embarrass my Dog*. But he kept still and studied Marybelle's neck, a plump expanse of flesh rising from a nest of ruffles. A bizarre vision was appearing in his mind, a dream of Emily Dickinson as a great spotted cat, leaping at Marybelle's throat. Emily, he knew, had often thought of herself as a leopard, or some other kind of catlike beast. It made a pleasant picture, Emily Dickinson tussling with Marybelle Spikes like a lion worrying the carcass of a wart hog. In spite of himself, Owen smiled.

But Marybelle was still alive and well, callow and inquisitive. "Do you think she was pretty?" she asked Winifred Gaw. "I mean, really, really pretty?"

This time Winnie heard the question with painful clarity. She blinked sideways at Owen, then answered loudly, "No, she wasn't. You don't have to be pretty to have beautiful thoughts, okay? Emily Dickinson had a beautiful soul, deep down inside."

Owen closed his eyes again, wishing he could leave the room and go downstairs. But that would hurt Winnie's feelings. He glanced at Dr. Oak, but she seemed distracted. She was gazing at the floor. Then someone spoke up behind Owen. "Ah, but that's where you're wrong."

Owen turned in surprise. It was Peter Wiggins.

"A photograph exists," said Peter boldly, "so we know very well what she looked like." His pale eyes shone. "And Emily Dickinson was very beautiful indeed."

Winnie put the dress back in the closet and turned to him scornfully. "Oh, that. If you're talking about that dumb picture that turned up in New York City, nobody believes in that. That's not a photograph of Emily Dickinson, okay? The whole thing has been disproved."

"On the contrary," said Peter Wiggins, "it's a genuine

photograph of the woman who lived in this house. I'm going to prove it tomorrow."

It was a kind of battle. Owen could feel the tension in the air. The Japanese visitors were looking back and forth between Winifred Gaw and Peter Wiggins, obviously embarrassed. One of the Swedish schoolteachers giggled. The wood-burning-stove man whistled ironically through his teeth.

Owen felt sorry for Winnie. It wasn't Peter's beautiful photograph that was on trial, it was Winifred Gaw herself, in her obesity and ugliness. Somehow she had climbed gigantically into the balance, and her overloaded side of the scale was crashing to the floor. Owen wanted to warn her, to tell her to let it go, to move on to something else. But Winnie wouldn't.

"What does it matter, anyway, okay? What a poet looks like?" Her voice was too high, too sharp. "When you're, you know, a genius, okay? Who cares about looks? Who cares?"

But they all did, that was the trouble. They cared about looks, and they condemned Winnie for hers, for the grossness of her bulk, for her swollen arms, for her slablike hips, for her massive ankles, for her flat feet in their gum-soled shoes. And Winnie cared, too, thought Owen. You could sense the invisible track of her caring in the expressionless mask of her face. For an instant something irrelevant whisked into Owen's mind—"fat girl with a paper bag," the fat girl who had been seen in Coolidge Hall—but then it whisked out again, and he wondered what to do now.

The tour had come to an awkward halt. Peter Wiggins was nodding his head wisely, and leaving the room. The others were shuffling out after him to find their own way downstairs. Two members of the Japanese Poetry Society nodded graciously to Winnie, murmuring their thanks. Dr. Oak turned to go.

But Winnie stood frozen in the middle of the room. She was ponderously stranded. Owen decided it was up to him. He would have to take over for Winnie. Hurrying out into the hall, he ran downstairs to deliver the second lecture in the parlor.

Winnie watched him go. Her breast heaved, her disfigured





left hand opened and shut in her pocket, as Professor Kraznik's light voice began drifting up from below. He was taking her place downstairs. Winnie didn't move until his voice stopped at last, until the noise of departure swelled and faded in the hall. Then she went to the window and watched the visitors saunter to the street in twos and threes.

And then her heart stopped, and began thumping painfully. Professor Kraznik was walking down the porch steps. He was not alone. He was accompanied by Alison Grove. They were wandering to the left, moving out of Winnie's sight beyond the blossoming dogwood tree. Now she could see only their legs. The legs were slowing down, standing still. Winnie craned her neck. To her horror she saw Alison's white sandals turn toward the feet of Professor Kraznik. The toes of their shoes were touching. The heels of the sandals were rising. Alison was standing on tiptoe.

A sob rose in Winnie's throat, and she whimpered out

loud. Alison Grove had stolen Winnie's job, she had stolen Emily's bedroom, she had stolen Emily's white dress, and now she was stealing Professor Kraznik! Hot tears streamed down the pinched passages between Winnie's nose and her fat cheeks, and she lifted her fist to the ceiling.

Alison Grove was not going to get the dress! She was not going to get this room! And she was not going to get Professor Kraznik, not if Winnie could help it!

"It must be some kind of pollen," murmured Owen, "from one of these flowering trees." He stood very still with his eyes closed, while Alison Grove worked on him with his handkerchief, pulling his eyelid down, trying to swab away the obstruction. "There, that's better. Good for you."

"Is it gone?" Alison backed away, looking at him doubtfully. "I'm not much good at first aid, or, you know, anything like that."

"Yes, it's much better, thank you." Owen took back his handkerchief. "Tell me, Alison, are you and Tom planning to get married? Or is that an interfering question?" He smiled at her shyly. "Forgive me."

"Oh, right, we certainly are. Well, okay, there's this little problem. Tom's sort of mixed up with some girl over in Northampton. This woman doctor. But he says it's okay. He says she's a really good kid. You know, just an incredibly good sport. He says she won't mind."

Once again Owen felt intensely sorry for Ellen Oak and disappointed in his friend Tom Perry. "Well, after all," he said politely, "love will have its way."

# 16



*The Soul selects her own Society—  
Then—shuts the Door . . .*

While Owen was changing his shirt before dinner, someone rattled his doorknob and shouted at him. Fumbling with his buttons, Owen opened the door and found Dombey standing outside, a pillar of wrath. Behind Dombey stood Alison Grove. Alison was pouting.

"Now, listen here, Owen," hissed Dombey in a kind of whispering roar, "what are you going to do about this one? I mean, Winifred Gaw is your problem." Dombey jerked his head at the door of Emily Dickinson's bedroom across the hall. "It was your big idea to bring her here. Now she's locked herself in and she won't come out. You and your lame ducks! I told you what would happen. Didn't I? Didn't I?"

Owen closed his eyes. For an instant he was transported to the sky-reflecting surface of the Quabbin Reservoir, drifting with his cousin Harvey over the drowned steeples of lost churches and the smokestacks of abandoned factories while silver fish darted below them in the limpid water. Then Owen opened his eyes and stiffened his shoulders and walked across the hall.

The locked door was blank and featureless. Behind it Owen could sense the morbid presence of Winifred Gaw,

breathing heavily on the other side of the door. Alison's coat and overnight bag lay tumbled on the floor of the hall.

"Winnie?" said Owen.

There was no answer.

Dombey Dell watched with satisfaction as Owen drew his hand over his face. The great man had certainly got himself in a fix this time. "Tell her to get the hell out," said Dombey.

Cautiously, Owen put his ear against the door and listened. Immediately he could sense a slight vibration. Winnie was leaning her full weight on the other side. Shuddering, Owen stepped back.

The whole thing was beginning to strike Dombey funny. He pictured himself making a joke of it at dinner. He could see the Smith brothers throwing back their bearded heads to roar with laughter as he described the grotesque behavior of that fat pig Winifred Gaw. Fat pig? No, he would call her *Brobdingnagian*, and chalk up a few Brownie points as a learned wag. "Have you got another key?" said Dombey.

"No, I haven't," murmured Owen.

"Well, then, we'll have to get in through the window." Dombey grinned at Alison Grove, who was standing limply beside the door, her exquisite lower lip sagging a little.

"No," said Owen sternly. "Why don't we just let her alone?"

"But the dress," whimpered Alison.

"Damn it all, Owen, it's Alison's room now," said Dombey.

Owen shook his head. "Alison can stay in your room, and you can move in with me."

"Oh, well," said Dombey, "what the hell. Come on, Alison." Picking up her overnight bag, Dombey shepherded Alison down the hall. He was furious.

Owen went back to his own room and closed the door. The word *key* had triggered another scholarly memory. Once Emily Dickinson had lifted her hand in the air as if to turn an imaginary key in an imaginary lock, and then she had said, *It's just a turn—and freedom!*

Maybe Winnie, too, was enjoying the exhilaration of that kind of freedom. Owen, at any rate, wasn't about to disturb her.

But it wasn't freedom Winnie wanted. On the other side of the door she listened to the retreating footsteps and the sound of the door closing across the hall.

They were going away. The room was hers. She had won.

She had no feeling of victory. Leaning against the door, Winnie yearned after Professor Kraznik. She had hoped that he would plead with her until she opened the door, and then maybe he would put his arms around her and console her.

But he hadn't. Disappointed, Winnie sank down heavily on the bed. It creaked and groaned.

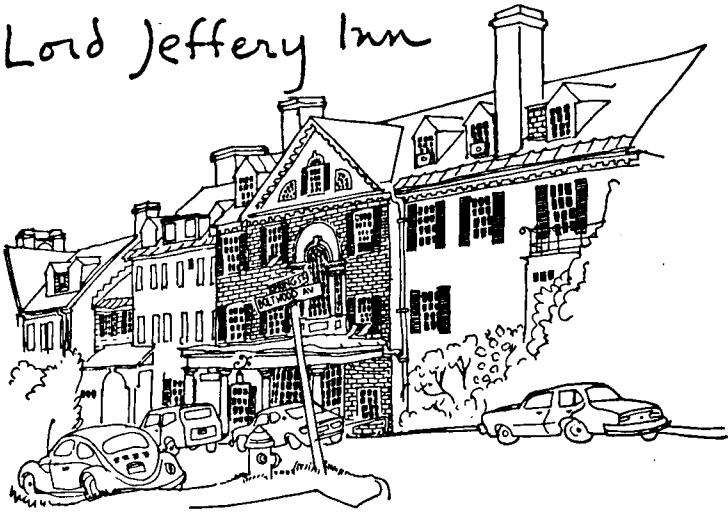
There was one small comfort. At last she had Emily Dickinson's room all to herself. She could commune with the soul of Emily. Emily would understand Winnie's feelings. Surely Emily would sympathize with Winnie's dread of the beautiful Alison Grove.

At suppertime Winnie stayed put. She didn't dare leave, for fear Alison would find a key and move back in. But Winnie had plenty to eat. She had brought a lot of stuff in a paper bag. Munching on taco chips, Winnie sprawled on the green velvet sofa and tried to make sense out of her paper on capitalization in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, that old seminar report with Professor Kraznik's praise at the end, *Good Work, Winnie! C+*.

For Owen Kraznik, the dinner hour was another sociable chore. In the ceremonial comfort of the Lord Jeffery Inn, he sat at a long table with Professor Nogobuchi and the Japanese Poetry Society, playing the gracious host with all his strength.

Across the dining room Owen could see Dombey Dell at a cozy table for three, and he was fascinated to observe that the black whiskers of the Smith brothers did indeed reach to the top and middle of their neckties, respectively. When Peter Wiggins came into the dining room and gazed uncertainly at the crowded tables, Owen wondered if Dombey would get up to

# Lord Jeffery Inn



welcome him. But Dombey was obviously in the middle of some jocular story, and he didn't look up. Owen waved at Peter and pulled up a chair beside his own.

Tom Perry, too, was ignoring his duties as co-chairperson of the symposium. Tom was dining with Alison Grove in Plumbley's Restaurant a block away. Blond head to red-gold, they sipped their drinks and studied the menu.

"Alaskan crab legs?" said Tom, picking the most expensive item on the list.

"Oh, yuck," said Alison. "Have they got, like, a steak?"

Dr. Ellen Oak decided to go back to the Gaslite for supper. Sitting once again on a stool at the counter, she ordered a bowl of New England clam chowder with oyster crackers in a cellophane package on the side. Keeping her eyes firmly fixed on her spoon, she was careful not to look up, for fear of meeting anyone's eye.

And three miles north of the center of town, on Market Hill Road, as the blossoms of Tilly Porch's apple orchard glistened in the twilight and dusk settled in the deep cleft of Cushman Brook, Tilly shared the last of her early peas with Debbie and Elvis Buffington. Elvis loved Tilly's peas. Sitting on two

sofa pillows at the kitchen table, he wolfed them down, shoveling them into his mouth with both hands. Debbie ate them grudgingly, and refused a second helping. Then Tilly drove Debbie and Elvis back to the apartment where they were living on welfare, dropped them off, and raced madly back to her own house.

Tilly still had three things left to do. She had to wash the dishes, she had to go over the notes for her talk tomorrow, and she had to go up-attic to take a look at some of those old boxes. The visit to the Dickinson house this afternoon had whetted Tilly's appetite to look at that old stuff. After all, some of Tilly's ancestors had known the Dickinsons—good heavens, some of them had actually been Dickinsons themselves, members of that enormous Connecticut Valley family. Maybe there would be something really interesting up there in the attic—notes from Emily, or letters from her relatives. Well! Who knew *what* Tilly might find up there? She was eager to get started.

But just as she put her hand on the latch of the attic door, the phone rang.

It was Professor Dombey Dell. "Oh, Mrs. Porch, good evening. Excuse me, I've just got a minute. I'm calling from the Lord Jeff, where I'm entertaining distinguished guests. Oh, Mrs. Porch, I just want to say how fine I think it is that you'll be one of our speakers tomorrow. I just want to welcome you to the platform officially. Oh, and, by the way, Mrs. Porch, speaking of tomorrow's program, I wonder if it might be possible—that is, I was hoping you might just have time to help us with a little problem that has arisen. Do you happen to know where we might find a white dress? Something suitable for a young woman? You know, sort of old-fashioned? A long skirt, that kind of thing? The truth is, Mrs. Porch, we were wondering if you might be able to run up something very quickly on your sewing machine?" Then Dombey explained Alison Grove's predicament, and the importance of her appearance as Emily Dickinson tomorrow morning.

Tilly thought at once of her old lace curtains. "Well, I'll do my best," she said. "What size is the girl?"

Dombey passed along the measurements Alison had given him, then hastened back to the dining room of the Lord Jeff to hustle around and shake hands, and settle down again with the brothers Smith. So far neither of the brothers had said anything about a job opening at Harvard. At last Dombey brought it up himself, making a joke out of it. "Say, tell me, how's good old Rexpole? Still blundering around the department? Writing his so-called masterpiece?" But the two Smiths merely looked at Dombey blankly, and there was an awkward silence.

"Oh, say, that reminds me," said Dombey, changing the subject in a panic, "I forgot to tell you about this girl named Winifred Gaw. I mean, you should really see this woman. She used to be Owen Kraznik's girl Friday. She's huge, I mean really enormous, positively Grobdingdongian. . . ."





*The Show is not the Show  
But they that go—  
Menagerie to me  
My Neighbor be—  
Fair Play—  
Both went to see—*

*I*t was Wednesday morning, Dombey Dell's great day. By the time Owen Kraznik walked into Mahar Auditorium, the place was packed. Owen looked for an empty seat in the rear of the hall, but soon Dombey caught sight of him and motioned him grandly to the front. Obediently, Owen walked down the aisle, inspecting the crowd.

At first glance, the devotees of Emily Dickinson's poetry looked like ordinary people. On the surface they didn't appear to be helpless in the grip of greedy aspiration and territorial ardor. But strong passions were surging just under the skin, Owen knew, even now during the taking off of jackets, the settling of posteriors in the rows of seats, the crossing of knees and the blowing of noses, the courteous introductions, the pleasant chaffing. Listen! In the high pitch of the voices, in the tendency to laughter, you could detect the presence of all those underlying obsessions. You could see them in the sidelong glances left and right, in the craning of necks over shoulders—*Do I see anyone I know? Does anyone else know me?*

Owen sat down and glanced at the newspaper on the seat beside him, where someone was saving a place. There was a

grouchy headline, COOLIDGE HALL FIRE INVESTIGATION ZILCH SO FAR.

Tom Perry picked up the paper and sat down. "They tell me *The New York Times* man is here," he said, leaning over to Owen. "Over there on the aisle in the third row. See that guy in the seersucker suit?" Then Tom moved one seat away. "Save that one for Alison," he said. "Look, here she comes."

The hall was darkening. A spotlight drifted across the curtain. Owen looked up and gasped. Alison Grove was stepping into the ring of light.

The rest of the audience was electrified, too, at the sight of Emily Dickinson in person. They clapped. They made happy chirrupings of appreciation. What a lovely facsimile! On the platform Alison stood quietly in the dazzling glare, waiting for the applause to stop.

But for a moment longer they kept it up. The wood-burning-stove man uttered a shrieking whistle through his teeth. Professor Nogobuchi applauded in a transport of enthusiasm. Tilly Porch, too, was pleased. Alison's dress was a success. Tilly had sat up till four in the morning to finish it. Did the tucks show in the back where she had tightened it this morning to fit Alison's slender waist? Did the hem look bunched where she had turned it up a second time? No, the dress was lovely. Tilly smiled and clapped.

Ellen Oak steeled herself to endure.

At last the room grew still, and Alison read her poem. It was a familiar one:

*"This is my letter to the World  
That never wrote to Me—  
The simple News that Nature told—  
With tender Majesty*

*"Her Message is committed  
To Hands I cannot see—  
For love of Her—Sweet—countrymen—  
Judge tenderly—of Me"*

As Alison glided back through the curtain, there was a general exhalation of suspended breath, then a roar of approval. *Judge tenderly?* They would show her how tender they could be! The clapping went on and on.

Homer Kelly's applause was feeble. He soon gave up and sat on his hands. As for Winnie Gaw, she couldn't bear it. Turning to Dombey, she whispered scornfully, "Emily didn't look like that."

"Well, what the hell," said Dombey Dell, still applauding violently. "Who cares?"

And then someone sitting behind Winnie leaned forward and offered her own opinion. It was the sentimental lady from Springfield, Marybelle Spikes. "I bet her soul sort of shone in her face, you know what I mean? Like some people have these really, really beautiful faces, because their spirit just really shines out of them, you know? You don't even *look* at their features. Well, okay, maybe they're not so great to look at really, but you just say '*Hey, there goes a beautiful woman.*'"

# 18



*His Mansion in the Pool  
The Frog forsakes—  
He rises on a Log  
And statements makes . . .*

Peter's talk was second on the program, right after Dombey Dell's opening speech. Tom Perry introduced him. "Professor Wiggins comes to us from—ah—the University of Central Arizona. He brings us a fascinating investigation of a famous and controversial photograph. Professor Wiggins?"

Peter ran lightly up the stairs to the platform, his heart in his mouth. What if the audience ripped into him as it had just ripped into Dombey Dell? Poor Dombey had entirely misjudged his listeners. He had called Emily Dickinson a typical Victorian female poet of helplessness and fragility. He had been clever and sarcastic at her expense. His pose of *enfant terrible* had enraged them all. There had been boos and catcalls, and during the question period Dombey had been dismembered.

Peter's talk was altogether more successful. As his slides succeeded one another in the darkened auditorium, he could feel the silence of complete attention. Relentlessly he had stricken from his speech all sentiment, all subjective response to the face in his photograph. He spoke only of facts. Shrewdly he allowed the eloquent eyes to speak for themselves. Carefully

he raised the issues that cast doubt on the identification of the woman in the picture with Emily Dickinson, and then he destroyed them, one by one. Why, for example, was she not wearing a white gown? Because in 1860 Emily was still dressing in fawn and blue and brown, in *gay muslins in summer and bright merinos in winter*.

And then Peter launched into a detailed comparison of the photograph with the daguerreotype, displaying his diagrams of facial measurements and angles. Thoughtfully he discussed the ratio of facial length and breadth, the relative heights of forehead, nose, upper lip, and chin, the deceptive difference in the arrangement of the hair. From the massed audience in front of him, Peter was beginning to hear signs of approval, murmurs of pleasure. As he compared his findings with those of a cosmetic surgeon and a forensic dentist, there were outbreaks of spontaneous applause.

It only remained to read the verbal descriptions of Emily Dickinson, written by those who had known her, while the photograph remained on the screen. As Peter quoted from friends and relations, the words seemed to drift over the handsome face and settle there. *A pair of great, dark eyes set in a small, pale, delicately chiseled face; beautiful eyes and an exceedingly pale skin; the wine-brown eyes that could flash with indignation or soften in approval; unlike anyone else—a grace, a charm; a wealth of auburn hair and a very spirituelle face; a beautiful woman dressed in white, with soft, fiery, brown eyes and a mass of auburn hair; to the funeral of that rare and strange creature Emily Dickinson . . . E.D.'s face a wondrous restoration of youth . . . not a gray hair or wrinkle, and perfect peace on the beautiful brow.*

As the lights came on again, there was a standing ovation. Owen stood and clapped with the rest. There were more whistles of approval from the wood-burning-stove man. On the platform Peter's cheeks flushed, and he blinked in the glare, then jerked with surprise as a flashbulb went off in his eyes. Tom Perry shook his hand and laid a fraternal arm around his shoulders, then turned to the audience. "I know you liked it, but does anyone have any questions?"

Hands shot up all over the auditorium. But Peter's listeners wanted to praise rather than interrogate. Only Eunice Jane Kloop and Winifred Gaw had questions.

Eunice Jane stood up in the front row and quoted an obscure line from an obscure poem—*Her countenance it did inflate*—then fixed Peter with her fierce little eye. "Don't you agree, Professor Wiggins, that this is surely a reference to a disease, so far unnoticed by scholarship, which must have afflicted Emily Dickinson? I am referring, of course, to a case of mumps?"

Peter was too startled to reply, but fortunately Eunice Jane seemed to expect no answer. She sank back into her seat, having, she felt, made a contribution to learning.

Winnie Gaw was more pugnacious. She spluttered at Peter Wiggins, "It's wrong. That picture isn't her. She didn't look like that."

"Why not?" said Peter mildly, remembering that this woman had been an easy prey the day before.

"You left out that other thing Higginson said, okay? He said she was plain. I mean, that's what he said."

"Ah, but don't forget," said Peter, pouncing, his pale eyes alight, "he said it in a letter. A letter to his *wife*."

"I don't see what difference—" began Winnie, but the audience was erupting in laughter all around her. *A letter to his wife*.

Winnie couldn't bear it. She shouted above the laughter, "But I can prove it. I can prove that picture isn't Emily Dickinson."

Peter waited for the laughter to die down. "What sort of proof do you have?" he said politely.

Winnie was cornered. "Well, I've got this—you know, documentary evidence, okay? Documentary evidence," she finished stiffly, "will soon be forthcoming."

"Very good," said Peter Wiggins, bowing. "I will be happy to examine it when it—ah—comes forth."

There was more laughter, more spontaneous applause. Angrily, Winnie prodded Dombey Dell and pointed to the

watch embedded in the fat crease of her wrist. "Make him stop. It's my turn now. It's half an hour late."

Dombey was in a sour mood. It occurred to him that the damn fools who had repudiated his brilliant lecture deserved a dose of Winifred Gaw. He stood up and roared at Tom Perry, "Time for the next speaker."

"Right you are," said Tom. From the platform he nodded at Winnie Gaw, and turned to shake Peter's hand. Flushed with success, Peter Wiggins gathered up his papers and went back to his seat.

It was Winnie's turn at last. Breathlessly she heaved herself up the steps. But then as she took her place behind the rostrum, she was horrified to see a mass of retreating backs. Half the audience was surging out of the hall.

Dismayed, Winnie glanced at the front row where Professor Kraznik was smiling up at her encouragingly, nodding as if to say, Carry on, Winnie. For an instant she was comforted, but then she saw the girl sitting next to him. It was Alison Grove. Winnie's heart sank. What was *Alison* doing there? Gulping, almost in tears, Winnie began to read her paper on capitalization in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. "Speak up!" shouted someone in the back. Winnie spoke up, but now her voice was too loud and rasping. The diagrams she displayed were too small to be seen, her subject was tedious, her theory impossible. And it was time for lunch. Below her in the auditorium there was a steady leak from the audience as one person after another gathered up clothing and possessions, fumbled past other people's knees, and dodged up the aisle, head down. A plague of coughing swept the hall. The coughers, too, rose to their feet and hurried away.

The baby was the last straw. It was Debbie Buffington's big baby, Elvis. Debbie and Elvis and the Mother of Ten had come just in time to hear Winnie, their personal representative from S.I.N.G.E.D., and they had made straight for the front row, where Helen Gaunt was saving them a bunch of seats.

But Elvis was soon bored. He began to yell.

Winnie stopped reading, and glared at Debbie.

Debbie was miffed. She shrugged her shoulders. Elvis hollered louder.

"Bounce him up and down," whispered Helen Gaunt.

"Smack him, why don't you?" urged the Mother of Ten.

Debbie bounced Elvis up and down and smacked him, but it didn't help. Soon he was hurling himself backward in her arms, roaring, his face empurpled with rage.

"I will not go on," cried Winnie.

"Then why don't you stop?" shouted a well-wisher in the back.

Tilly Porch saved the day. Jumping out of her seat, she rushed down the aisle and gathered Elvis up in her arms. At once Elvis recognized his fairy godmother and stopped bellowing. Debbie, relieved, went out to the lobby for a smoke. There she fell into conversation with a guy from Shutesbury who was repairing a broken light fixture. It turned out that the guy had seen Debbie at a Flaky Jake concert. He had noticed her particularly when he was having a beer at intermission. "No kidding?" said Debbie.

In the auditorium Winnie carried on. But the worst was yet to come. Glancing up from her eleventh page, she saw something terrible. Professor Kraznik was rising from his seat. With his arm around Alison Grove, he was hurrying up the aisle and leaving the hall. Tom Perry's chair scraped across the floor behind Winnie as he too got up and ducked behind the curtain.

Again Winnie nearly broke down. When she finished her paper at last, there were only a few compassionate listeners left in the auditorium. As she closed her folder with shaking fingers, as the thin applause stopped and the audience began to bolt, Winnie saw Professor Kraznik appear once again at the door and begin to beat his way down the aisle.

But Winnie was too hurt. Turning away, she fumbled blindly through the folds of the curtain and broke down altogether beside a dusty piano and a pair of kettledrums.



# 19

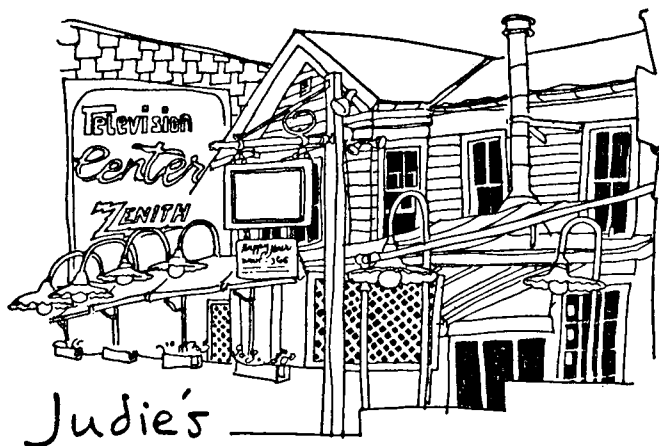


*. . . I cross the river—and climb the fence—now I am at the gate. . . now I am in the hall—now I am looking your heart in the eye!*

*I*t was lunchtime. Owen Kraznik was weak with hunger. Deftly he escaped the clutching fingers of sensitive ladies and fellow scholars and biked home to his own house on Spring Street. There he found Homer Kelly warming up the contents of a can of spaghetti. With a flourish, Homer dumped a jar of bread-and-butter pickles into the pot and stirred them around. Then he unwrapped a pair of Hostess cupcakes and parked one beside Owen's plate, the other beside his own.

"Homer," said Owen admiringly, "this is truly haute cuisine."

Everyone else in Amherst, too, was putting aside the work of the morning to pause for lunch. In the Wildwood Elementary School the children were lining up in the cafeteria, and in the Gaslite restaurant the counterman reached into the fridge for a big bowl of shredded cabbage. Hikers at the top of Mount Holyoke stood on the porch of the Summit House and ate their sandwiches, looking out over the broad landscape of flat green fields and winding Connecticut River. And in the neighboring valley of the Swift River, the chief engineer for the waterworks at the Quabbin Reservoir left the Administration Building and



drove to the Crystal Springs Dairy Bar in Belchertown. There, sitting at the counter, he ordered a tunafish sandwich and wondered when to close off the Ware River intake and open the valve at Shaft 12, to begin the annual surge of water through the tunnel to Boston. Soon now. He would call up Jesse Jack Gaw today or tomorrow.

And in the reservoir itself, eighty feet down, lake trout nosed for smelt around the stone cellar holes of the lost towns of Greenwich and Prescott, Dana and Enfield. Dr. Harvey Kloop thought about the trout and yearned after them as he pushed his tray along the cafeteria line in the hospital in Northampton. Once again he had been delayed. Once again Eunice Jane had thrown a monkey wrench into the works. Before he took off for his little fishing expedition, Harvey was supposed to scrub out the birdhouse and paint the furnace. How long would that take? If he did a really slapdash job on

the furnace, surely he would at last be on his way to Quabbin by late afternoon?

Tom Perry spent the lunch hour with Alison Grove in the cozy intimacy of Judie's Restaurant on North Pleasant Street. "Good God, Alison darling," he said, looking across the tiny table with concern, "are you really all right?"

"Oh, sure. It's just that I had this really incredible headache. I mean I felt really, really dizzy. You know, like I might faint. So Professor Kraznik brought me out to get some air. I'm okay now."

"My poor darling."

But after two glasses of white wine Alison confessed she had merely been pretending. "It was just such a drag. I mean, everybody else was leaving. You know, I mean I thought it over and decided it wouldn't be, like, polite to leave from the front row, not with this white dress on and everything. So I had to pretend to be really, really sick. I mean, wasn't she incredible?" Alison showed her perfect teeth in a rare smile. She had taken down her hair, and it gushed in a red-gold flood over the white sleeves of her long gown.

Tom laughed. "It's so funny, the way you were acting out Dombey Dell's thesis about Emily Dickinson as the pathetic Victorian female. There you were, fainting up the aisle, leaning on Owen. Well, the truth is I was glad to get out of there myself. That Winnie Gaw is certainly impossible."

And then Tom tackled his spinach quiche, while Alison babbled about some of the girls on the fourteenth floor of Coolidge Hall. Tom nodded and smiled, but he was barely listening. He was thinking instead about Ellen Oak. This morning he had spotted Ellen in the audience, and it had been a shock. What the hell was *Ellen* doing at the Emily Dickinson symposium? He had specifically told her not to come. Why hadn't she warned him she would be here? And then Tom remembered the letter from Ellen in his mail. Oh, God, he should have taken the time to read it. He had rushed home in a terrific hurry to change his clothes, and he had snatched his

mail out of the box, glanced at it, and dumped it on the kitchen table. Now it occurred to Tom that Ellen's letter had not been stamped. She must have delivered it in person. He squirmed. He was beginning to get a nasty uncomfortable feeling about his old girlfriend and about what she might have said in the letter that was lying there at home on the kitchen table.

It was a sticky wicket. What was he supposed to do about the woman, now that she was here? The trouble was, he didn't have time to talk to her, not now. By rights he ought to take her aside and tell her about Alison and say how sorry he was, and how grateful, and so on. But he couldn't do a tricky thing like that in a big hurry. Not on a day like this, when the most important speech of his life was coming up this afternoon. After all, the Smith brothers from Harvard would be listening, and everybody said they had this job at their disposal, this big Aldershot Chair of American Studies, or something like that. Tom smiled to himself. Poor Dombey Dell. Dombey thought he had a chance at having the chair bestowed on his own fawn-colored polyester backside. He didn't have a prayer.

In the noisy cheerfulness of Judie's, in the jolly flicker of the lamps on the little tables, with waitresses squeezing past him and a lot of genial uproar in the background, Tom struggled painfully with the problem of his two girlfriends, then hardened his heart. It was just too damn bad about Ellen Oak. Oh, she was a fine woman, of course! No question! And back there in the hospital when she had diagnosed his inflamed appendix, there had been a kind of glamour about her, an air of distinction. But now, compared with Alison Grove—!

Then Tom winced, and put a hand on his abdomen, at the spot where his appendix had once festered. It was as if a thread were attached to the spot, and it was stretching away from him, right through the wall of Judie's and the row of stores next door, then trembling and thrumming along the sidewalk past the bus stop and glistening in the sunlight as it pulled taut across the fork where East Pleasant Street separated from North Pleasant, then poking through the clapboards of his own house on McClellan Street and fastening itself to the

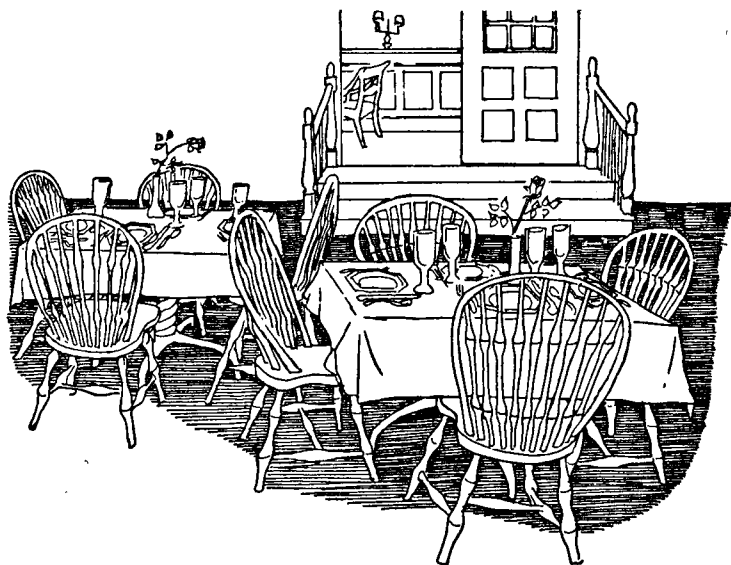
white envelope on the kitchen table. The thread tugged at the clean scar on Tom's belly. Oh, God, he ought to go back there and read the fucking letter.

But not now. There just wasn't time. There was too much to do.

Did Ellen Oak know he had seen her, there in the audience at Mahar Auditorium? Tom had an unhappy suspicion that just for a fraction of a second, just for the merest instant before he flicked his glance away, his eyes had met her steady gaze.

For Peter Wiggins, the lunch hour was the most exciting of his life. Peter had been invited to dine in style at the Lord Jeffery Inn by the correspondent from *The New York Times*. To Peter's surprise, the correspondent turned out to be a rather dowdy woman from the borough of Queens. She was fascinated, she said, by his talk.

Peter was flattered. Nobly he refrained from drinking



more than one vodka and tonic, even though he knew he deserved a whole bottle of champagne. Smiling modestly at his luncheon companion, he was keenly aware that everyone in the dining room was staring at him. People kept coming up to shake his hand. "I'm just so grateful," gushed Marybelle Spikes. "It's like you've given us this really fabulous treasure." And when one of the Smith brothers paused at Peter's table to ask him to join them for a drink after the afternoon session, Peter's cup was filled to overflowing.

But he didn't allow success to go to his head. The moment was too important. The woman from the *Times* was asking him questions, writing down his replies. Peter was careful to mention his various contributions to the *New England Quarterly* and the *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, to make it plain that he wasn't just a one-issue scholar. The *Times* woman wrote it all down, and asked for a copy of the photograph that had been the subject of his talk. Then she hurried upstairs to her room to tap out her article on her portable typewriter.

Left alone, Peter was relieved. The pressure was off. Grinning to himself, he took a long shaky breath and walked out the side door of the Lord Jeff, smiling cordially at a few more admirers who rushed up to shake his hand. There was just time before the next session to go back to the Homestead and call Angie from the phone in the hall outside his room, and tell her the good news.

But Angie didn't seem to be listening. "The kids," she said, "they're driving me bananas."

"But, Angie, listen. Wait till you hear—"

"It's the weather. God! The minute you stick your head out the door, you're fried. I took the kids to the K-Mart, and the blacktop in the parking lot was so hot I nearly fainted. I had to race the car out of there before I lost consciousness. The kids were screaming."

As Angie talked, Peter gazed through the open door of his bedroom and saw the sunlit leafy paradise beyond the windows dissolve and become an image of the blazing sun itself, filling the windows, dazzling out over the walls until they faded away,

until nothing was left but a ruthless blinding light. He hung up the phone a little sadly, remembering how important to Emily Dickinson had been the noonday sun.

*You'll know it—as you know 'tis Noon—  
By Glory—  
As you do the Sun—  
By Glory . . .*

Well, good for Emily Dickinson. But she had not perceived the sun as he did, as a brutal object in the vast metallic sky. She had merely beheld it tremulous among the foliage of her father's trees, its image dappled in little circles on the shady lawn. Or she had watched it drop slowly westward in the small New England heavens, veiled in pretty colored clouds. She had never known it as the fiery withering destroyer that blazed in the white-hot oven over Pancake Flat, Arizona.



*My God—He sees thee—  
Shine thy best—  
Fling up thy Balls of Gold . . .*

The afternoon session of the Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium was called to order by Dombey Dell in Johnson Chapel at Amherst College.

Owen Kraznik sat with Homer Kelly in the front pew and looked out over the audience crowded together in the handsome columned spaces. At this moment it was almost possible to regret his refusal to teach at the College instead of at the University. Tom Perry was always needling him about it. "Owen, I just don't understand it. Why would you want to stick with that ex-cow college when you could be part of the Amherst faculty? You should hear Dombey hint around about transferring over here from U Mass. He'd give his eyeteeth. Why not you?"

Well, why not? wondered Owen. For an instant he imagined himself talking comfortably to a small class of selected students in this sanctified place instead of shouting through a microphone to a faceless mass in Mahar Auditorium. The thought was tempting, but Owen knew he'd never do it.

His address was the last of the afternoon, after Tilly Porch had been informative and brief, Tom Perry witty and sound, and Professor Cobb from Minneapolis boring and repetitious.





Dombey Dell rose to introduce him, but then Dombey had to wait. There was a hushed chaotic pause. A crush of new people was wedging its way into Johnson Chapel and spreading into the side aisles. Owen's speech was what everybody had been waiting for. Homer Kelly straightened his slumped spine and sat up as Owen began to talk.

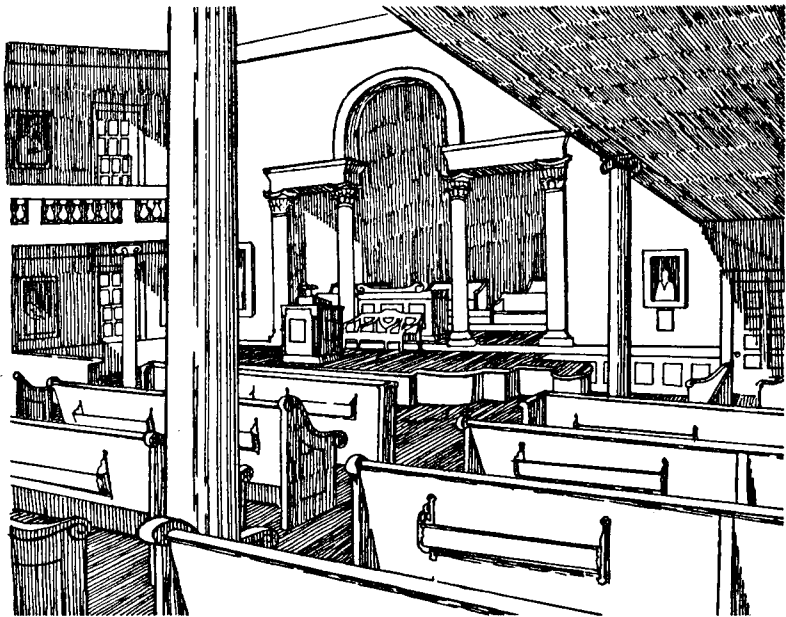
His address was simple and lucid, reverent and sane. The poems he examined were not in the anthologies. They came from his lips majestic, tragic, vast. Veils were withdrawn from central mysteries, trivialities vanished in the breath of the poet's ethereal wind, immensities spread outward from her short quatrains, the sea parted to show a further sea. For a moment Emily Dickinson stood before them in all her amplitude, her grandeur and strength, her melancholy power, her quivering vulnerability. Then, as Owen finished his brief address, she rose in sober stature and withdrew into a sublimity of privacy.

With one motion the audience stood up. There was massive prolonged applause. Owen answered a few questions, then called a halt. The audience began shuffling from their pews into the aisles, satisfied, solemnized, transfixed.

Tom Perry was desperate to get back home and read Ellen's letter. The white envelope on the kitchen table had been pulling at his gut all afternoon. He drew Alison across the hall into an empty classroom. "Say, Alison, listen. I've got a lot of stuff to do right now. And I'm having supper with those guys from Harvard. I'll meet you at that recital this evening, okay? You know, at Merrill Hall."

Alison was peeved. She was not used to being set aside. "So what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" she said angrily.

"Oh, Alison." Tom put his arms around her and kissed her, feeling his body engorge with thick warm blood. Once



again he understood the necessity of breaking off with Ellen Oak.

But Alison jerked out of his embrace. Turning her back, she flounced away down the hall. Alison was really mad.

Our first quarrel, thought Tom sentimentally, letting her go, watching her turn swiftly to descend the stairs. Peering over the iron railing, he caught a last glimpse of her bright hair against the dark stone of the granite steps. Then Tom remembered Ellen's letter. He walked down the stairs slowly, to avoid encountering Alison again, and raced down the hill in the direction of McClellan Street.

There on the kitchen table, waiting for him, was the letter. Tom tore open the envelope, read the letter hastily, and smiled with relief.

Ellen was breaking it off herself. She wasn't accusing him of anything. She didn't seem to have heard any rumors. She was just taking a serene farewell. Somehow she seemed to have grasped the fact that things had changed, and she was bowing out gracefully.

You had to hand it to the girl. She was a damn nice woman. Smart, too. Had Ellen heard his talk? Tom preened himself on the thought, and then his love-fogged mind cleared. For an instant he saw Ellen and Alison side by side, not in their physical embodiments but in their essences and selves, and he was shaken. He remembered something Emily Dickinson had said. *A Letter . . . is the mind alone without corporeal friend.*

But people were not just minds, Tom reminded himself. Ellen had a body as well as a mind. What a shame her ancestors had been so stingy in handing out corporeal goodies! It was really too bad.

As it happened, Tom's vainglory about Ellen was wrong. She had not come to Johnson Chapel to hear his lecture. She had been one of the crowd that pressed into the hall just in time to hear Professor Kraznik.

Now, walking down Boltwood Avenue in the direction of the Gaslite, Ellen's head was reverberating with the poems he

had examined, and with the sound of his voice. For the first time in twenty-seven hours, Ellen was not thinking about Tom Perry and Alison Grove.

*I could not have defined the change—  
Conversion of the Mind  
Like Sanctifying in the Soul—  
Is witnessed—not explained . . .*

At that moment Owen Kraznik himself was opening the front door of the Homestead. He was worn out. Dragging himself upstairs, he was glad to find the bedroom empty. Dombey was elsewhere. But Dombey's clothes were all over the bed—his sharp new blazer, his boots with the cowboy heels, his three-piece suit, his boxer shorts. Owen pushed everything to one side and crawled under the covers. Laying his teeming head on the pillow, he went to sleep.

Instantly he was in one of his spinning nightmares.

*And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down —  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing—then . . .*

# 21



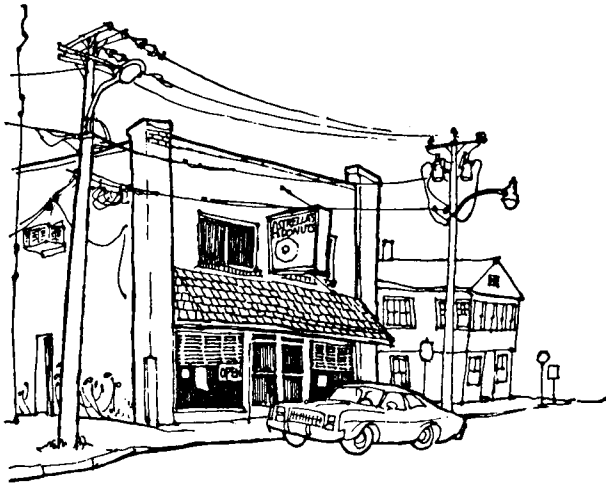
*Success is counted sweetest  
By those who ne'er succeed.  
To comprehend a nectar  
Requires sorest need.*

Winifred Gaw was too miserable to attend the afternoon session of the Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium. She had been planning to sit in the front row and clap loudly for Professor Kraznik. But this morning he had hurt her too deeply by walking out of her lecture in the company of Alison Grove.

With her bosom still heaving in long shuddering sighs, Winnie drove southeast on Route 9. In Ware, she pulled up in front of Astrella's Doughnut Snack Bar on North Street. Winnie needed comfort. More than anything else, she yearned for a certain kind of solace, and this was the place to get it. Good things lay on the paper doilies in the glass case in Astrella's. Winnie poured herself out of the front seat of the big van and crossed the street.

The shop was warm and fragrant. Avoiding the eye of the cute high-school girl behind the counter, Winnie peered hungrily at the piled-up doughnuts in the glass case. "I'd like some doughnuts, please," she said coldly. "A dozen glazed, a dozen chocolate, a dozen cinnamon." And then she saw the éclairs. "Oh, and a dozen of those too, okay?"

The high-school girl was slow. She picked up each dough-



nut daintily in a piece of tissue paper, so that it would be untouched by human hands, and put it carefully into a white box. Winnie balled her disfigured left hand into a fist in her pocket.

At last the girl handed a stack of four white boxes across the glass case. Each box was tied separately with white string. The boxes and the string were the color of Emily Dickinson's white dress, thought Winnie, the dress that still hung in the closet, the dress she had saved from Alison Grove. They were also the color of gluttony—the color of sugar, the color of flour, the color of lard—but Winnie didn't think of that. Quickly she carried them across the street to the van and put them down on the front seat. Then she climbed in, fitted herself under the steering wheel, and tore at the string on the uppermost box.

The doughnuts inside the waxed paper were covered with a brittle sugary glaze. Winnie put one to her lips. The first bite was rapture. Crystalline sugar flaked against her mouth, crumbs fell on the shelf of her bosom, the airy interior dis-

solved upon her tongue. Holding the doughnut delicately between finger and thumb, Winnie started the car again. On the way home she polished off three more of the glazed doughnuts and two of the chocolate éclairs. The éclairs were delicious, eggy and soft in texture, and puddingy with filling.

Driving along Greenwich Road, Winnie forgot the woes of the morning. She chewed and swallowed and chewed, and thought, as she so often did on Greenwich Road, of the lost town of Greenwich to which it had once led. Greenwich was the village in which her parents had lived as children, in houses long since destroyed to allow the water of the Swift River to fill the valley, rising higher than the Town Hall, higher than the textile factory and the Walker sawmill, higher than the Village Hotel and Chamberlain's Store, higher than the steeple of the Congregational church, higher than the little one-room schoolhouse in which Winnie's father and mother had acquired all the education they were ever going to get.

Of course, Winnie herself had never seen any of these places, but she had heard about them all her life, in the angry reminiscences of her father. Her mother always said, "Forget it, let dead dogs lie," but her father couldn't let it alone. Even though he worked at Quabbin for the Metropolitan District Commission, even though his wages from the MDC had been supporting his family for years, Jesse Gaw's anger was alive and festering.

You would think it was yesterday instead of fifty years ago that the bulldozer had knocked down his old schoolhouse and broken the schoolhouse bell and run over his leg and crippled him.

Winnie hated her father. She felt no sympathy for his lame uneven walk, and she was sick to death of his rancid indignation.

Turning into her driveway, she was careful not to look at the house, because the sight of it depressed her. She ignored, too, the wrecked cars all over the front yard. But she couldn't avoid seeing her father working in the garage beside the house. JESSE JACK GAW, COLLISION, FRONT END WORK, said the sign

over the garage. Bending cars back into shape—it was what her father did in his spare time. Sometimes the noise was unbearable, the violent repetitive crash of the sledgehammer against crumpled pieces of sheet metal, the clang of the chain and the frame-puller, the hissing throb of the compressor. Sometimes it drove Winnie right out of the house.

Jesse Gaw glanced up without expression as Winnie's big van pulled up beside him, and then he looked back at the object on his workbench. It's that damn bell, thought Winnie. The broken bell from the old schoolhouse in the valley was red hot under his torch. For years her father had been talking about replacing the broken fitting for the clapper. Now he was working on it at last. Would wonders never cease.

Winnie climbed down out of the van with her white boxes and stood watching him sullenly, but he took no notice of her. After a moment he abandoned the bell, limped to his workbench, and picked up the axe that lay there, gleaming on a heap of rags. Then Jesse Gaw began sharpening the edge of the axe blade on his grindstone. Sparks flew up from the wheel.

Only then did Winnie's father look at her with his small mean eye.

Clumsily, Winnie whirled around and lumbered up the porch stairs, aware of the furious beating of her heart. Carefully she opened the front door, hoping to creep up to her room unheard. But she couldn't prevent the creak of the treads under her weight. Her mother called out sharply from the kitchen, "Is that you, Winifred? I been waiting lunch."

"I don't care for any lunch," said Winnie daintily. Opening her bedroom door, she waited for her mother's reply. Downstairs there was a slam and a crash. Her mother was mad. But Mrs. Gaw said nothing more. Relieved, Winnie went into her room and closed the door, safe at last. Putting down the boxes on the dresser, she sat down beside them on the bed and began working her way through them methodically, alternating cinnamon doughnuts with chocolate, glazed with éclairs, until at last she could eat no more. She wiped her face, which was



sticky with sugar and smeared with chocolate, and put a hand on her swollen midriff. The effort to digest was robbing her of strength. There was a feeling of tightness around her heart. She was suddenly thirsty. All that sweet stuff, it really made you thirsty. Winnie went to the bathroom, filled a cup with water, drank it, filled it again, drank it, and filled it yet again.

It was time to get to work. With an effort, Winnie dragged herself back to her room, took the second volume of Sewall's biography of Emily Dickinson out of her bookcase, and opened it to the controversial frontispiece, the so-called photograph of Emily Dickinson. It was the picture the man from Arizona had been talking about this morning. Carrying the book, Winnie tramped downstairs, all the way to her darkroom in the basement.

She had her work cut out for her, the manufacture of a solid piece of *documentary evidence*. It wouldn't be easy, but Winnie had figured out a way to do it.

And there in her darkroom Winnie forgot about the humiliation of the morning. She forgot about Alison Grove and Professor Kraznik. She forgot about the fire in Coolidge Hall and the two sophomore men who had perished in the choking smoke of the north staircase. For the next two hours, Winifred Gaw forgot about herself and all her troubles.



*. . . death claims a living bride . . .*

Owen Kraznik was still asleep in Lavinia Dickinson's bedroom in the Dickinson Homestead, groaning aloud, plummeting between vertical cliffs of basalt, when Winnie's van whizzed down North Street once again, on its way back to Amherst.

This time Winnie didn't give Astrella's Doughnut Snack Bar a second glance. Erased from Winnie's memory were the three dozen doughnuts and the twelve chocolate éclairs.

But even from herself Winnie couldn't hide the physical results of consuming a dozen custardy confections and thirty-six deep-fat-fried doughy morsels. There was a dull pain in her gut and a heavy pressure around her middle. She was short of breath. In her basement darkroom Winnie had managed to forget the chagrin and sharp dismay of the morning, but now the shame of her failure came back and flooded over her. Her mood collapsed into a poisonous settled depression.

She drove carelessly through Belchertown, her eyes glassy, her foot jolting from accelerator to brake, from brake to accelerator. In Amherst she tried to stop in front of the house where Helen Gaunt had an attic room, but she misjudged the distance to the curb and ran the van up on the sidewalk. Heav-

ing herself out of the front seat, she plodded up the walk, dropped her envelope in the box labeled H. GAUNT, climbed back in the van, jerked it into reverse, careened down onto the pavement, and took off with a jackrabbit start.

There was a traffic light at the next corner. The light turned red. Winnie didn't feel like stopping, but at the last minute she jammed on her brakes. Her body lurched forward. In flatulent impatience she sat staring at the red light. There were no vehicles crossing the intersection the other way. There were no other cars on the street. There were no pedestrians. Then, just as the light turned green, someone appeared from the bushes screening the sidewalk of the cross street, and began to walk in front of Winnie's van.

It was Alison Grove, in her white dress. Alison Grove, the girl whose terrible prettiness had robbed Winnie of everything she held dear.

Winnie's grievances overwhelmed her. With one great sob, with no direction from her conscious brain, she lifted her right foot from the brake and jammed it on the accelerator.

Alison Grove went down, her destiny fulfilled.



*To stir would be to slip—  
To look would be to drop . . .  
It was a Pit—with fathoms under it . . .*

The afternoon was waning as Owen woke up, more fatigued than when he had gone to sleep. In the bathroom mirror his face was haggard. Was there any cure for nightmares? Last year Owen had asked this question of his cousin Harvey Kloop, the medical man. But Harvey had merely looked at him without speaking, his face ashen. And Owen had understood that it was Harvey's problem too. The tendency to nightmare must run in the family. It was therefore hopeless.

Winifred Gaw, too, was having a nightmare, but Winnie's bad dream was real.

Getting out of her van, she stared down at the body of Alison Grove.

Alison's eyes were open. She was looking up at Winnie. She was not breathing. She was dead. She was really dead.

Winnie's heart began tumbling in her chest. She was frightened and exultant at the same time. *She's mine now*, thought Winnie. *She belongs to me*. All that loveliness of face, of red-gold hair, of dainty body, of tiny waist, of small soft breasts the size of peaches—they were Winnie's now. Alison didn't belong to herself anymore. No longer would she take things away

from Winnie. No longer would she even have a will of her own. *From now on, Winifred Gaw was in charge of Alison Grove.*

Two streets away from the crossing where Winifred Gaw stood staring down at the body of Alison Grove, Dr. Harvey Kloop was making a right turn, glancing back at the boat-trailer behind his car. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something queer.

It looked like trouble. Dr. Kloop was in no mood for trouble. At last he was escaping from his tyrannical practice, from telephone calls at two in the morning, from the beeping electronic summons at his belt, from the nagging of his wife and her insane preoccupation with Emily Dickinson. He was going to Quabbin at last, with all his fishing gear and tackle, his pup tent, his sleeping bag, his six-pack of beer. His fishing license was pinned to his hat. Soon he would be alone on the water with silence all around him. The entire creation would not be buzzing and beeping. There would be no Emily Dickinson claptrap ringing in his ears. There would be no sound at all but the plunk of the sinker in the water and the tick of his reel, and maybe the occasional honking of a stray flock of Canada geese or the quack of a pair of ducks in rapid flight, or even—but this was merely fantasy on Harvey's part—the cry of the legendary catamount, howling from the depths of the forest.

But now this queer thing was happening down the street. Resolutely, Dr. Kloop turned his head away and refused to think about it. Shifting into third, he sped away. It was no business of his if some woman was standing in the road, picking up something white from the pavement in front of her car—a big woman, really big, positively huge, like that patient of his, Winifred Gaw.

Staunchly, Harvey Kloop drove straight down Route 9 in the direction of the Quabbin Reservoir, trying not to think about his Hippo-something oath.

Winnie was slow, but she moved with thick persistence, and her mind ran rapidly ahead, making a plan. As her car raced back along Route 9, the plan grew and blossomed until it

included a scheme for Winnie's own future, one she had often dreamed of but had never quite dared to carry out. Swiftly Winnie itemized in her mind the things she would need to gather up at home.

Back in Ware, she was lucky. Her father had gone to work. So had her mother. Winnie was able to help herself freely to the stuff in her father's garage. She knew what she wanted, and snatched it up quickly. Therefore it was only five o'clock when Winnie's van slowed down at Quabbin Gate 43, with a miscellaneous collection of things piled beside her on the front seat.

Turning in at the gate, Winnie drove past the road to the boat-launching dock, with its big sign listing the rates for boat-rental and fishing and parking. Then she stopped her car in front of the long green boards that blocked the way to Shaft 12.

Winnie was familiar with those green boards. Once, a long time ago, when her father's car had been out of commission, its dismembered chassis hoisted over the grease pit, Winnie had driven him to work here, day after day. He had been doing a job at Shaft 12. Now, dragging the boards aside, Winnie felt like part of the administration of the Quabbin waterworks, a ranger or an engineer or something. She really knew her way around.

The paved approach to Shaft 12 was three miles long. Again Winnie's van was alone on the road. There were no walkers in the woods, no bird-watchers with binoculars searching the sky for eagles. There was nothing along the road but birches and pines and oak trees, and hemlocks with new green growth on the tips of their branches, and tall ferns, and maples with fresh green leaves. Here and there in the woods, she passed a stone wall that had once belonged to a house long since torn down because it stood in the Quabbin watershed. Some farmer's whole lifework had been destroyed, Winnie knew that. His white wooden church had been moved away, and the MDC had dug the bones of his ancestors out of the ground and buried them someplace else. Winnie knew the sad stories well. Altogether too well. She was sick and tired of sad

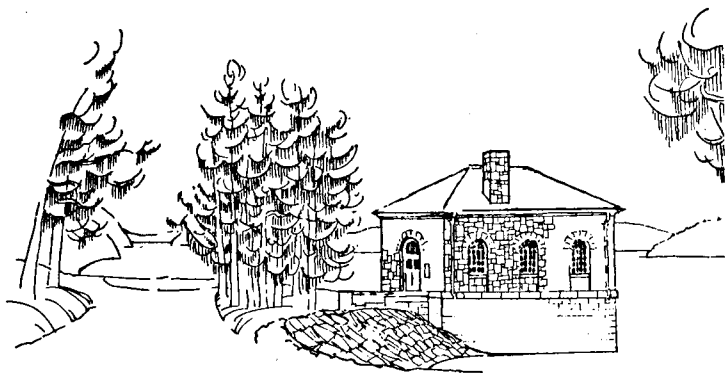
stories about the vanished towns of the Swift River valley.

Shaft 12 was a solid little stone building right on the shore of the reservoir. Winnie pulled up and stopped in the clearing. Beyond lay the water, glittering and blue. Winnie had her father's key. She had taken it from a hook on the wall of the garage. Now she opened the the door and looked around, remembering.

Yes, there was the overhead crane. There was the great bucket, lying on its side. And there above the shaft were the wooden trap doors, flat in the cement floor.

Last fall, it had been dark. Winnie had found her way to one of the trap doors with a flashlight. And then the bucket of paint and the propane torch and the suitcase had plummeted into the bottomless hole. The water had been far down. The splashes had been faint and far away.

Now, seeing the place in the daytime, Winnie was reminded of the past, of that time when she had come here with her father. In those days the empty shaft had echoed with the immense noise of the work going on below, as the crew tore out the old wooden stop-planks that controlled the flow of water into the tunnel. Until then her father had come to Shaft 12 twice a year to throw the switch on the wall, so that the great hooks on the traveling crane would lift the planks or drop them down. But from now on there was to be a huge valve, opened and closed by a control switch far away.



It had been a big job. When the work was done, Winnie had knelt beside one of the openings in the floor and looked into the shaft, expecting to see the new valve far below. But the shaft had been full of water, and she had seen nothing. Would it be full today, or would the water be way, way down in the shaft as it had been last fall? Winnie didn't know what to expect. She was ready for anything.

It was going to be easy. She would pick up one of the trapdoors and drop the body down the shaft into the tunnel, and then the flow of water would carry it far from the town of Amherst, far from the town of Ware, far from a person named Winifred Gaw. And maybe the body of Alison Grove might never turn up at all. Winnie had a vague idea that there was a power station somewhere along the way to Boston, with big spinning turbines, turned by the water from Quabbin. She didn't know what a turbine looked like exactly, but she suspected it would mess up a body pretty bad.

Going back to the van, Winnie opened the back doors, dragged Alison out, and hoisted her with a gasping effort over her shoulder. Then she lugged her up the steps and into the building, and dropped her on the floor next to one of the trapdoors. She was careful not to look at Alison. Winnie was beginning to feel that the dead body of Alison Grove had nothing to do with her. It was just a piece of garbage to be thrown away. Then, puffing to regain her breath, Winnie went back to the van for the bell.

The bell had been an inspiration. There it had lain on her father's greasy workbench, still warm from the torch. It was just what Winnie needed. If there was water in the shaft again, she would use the bell to weigh Alison down, to make her sink all the way to the bottom of the shaft, to be carried away by the rush of water in the tunnel.

The bell was heavy, but not too heavy. Winnie dropped it on the floor next to Alison, and it rolled over with a hollow clatter. Then Winnie bent over the trapdoor and tugged at the rope handles. The trapdoor was stuck. She had to heave and



heave before it suddenly came loose, throwing her off balance so that she staggered backward. At once the rope handles slipped from her fingers and the trapdoor fell, the noise of its impact with the floor making a tremendous hollow reverberation against the hard surfaces of the room. Gasping, Winnie knelt down and looked into the shaft.

It was a good thing she had brought the bell! Once again, the shaft was full of water.

Full of water? For the first time, it occurred to Winnie to wonder why the shaft should ever be full of water. Panting, she sat back on her heels to think. And then she groaned as she understood.

The shaft was full of water because this was the wrong time of year. The water in the tunnel wasn't going anywhere. The tunnel at Shaft 12 was closed off. Instead of flowing from the reservoir to Boston, the water was coming the other way, from the Ware River floodplain to the east. It was flowing all the way from Shaft 8 in the Ware River Valley *toward* Quabbin, entering the reservoir half a mile farther up the shore at Shaft 11-A, beyond the baffle dams. Sooner or later Winnie's father would throw a switch to close off the Ware River intake and open the valve here at Shaft 12. That was part of his job. He bragged about it all the time. And then the water would run through the tunnel the right way, from the reservoir to Boston.

But not now! Right now the water wasn't going anywhere! It was just standing there. It was dead water, dark and dank and still.

Until this moment a kind of desperate glee had kept Winnie going, an urgent obsession to carry out the idea she had worked out in her head. But now she was overwhelmed by a sense of nightmare. Her eyes filled with tears, and a painful lump rose in her throat. Weeping, she struggled to her feet, and then she made two trips back to the van—once with Alison, once with the bell. Slamming the rear doors, she climbed back into the driver's seat, her breast heaving with exhaustion, and headed for Shaft 11-A.

There was only one thing left for her to do. She would dump the body of Alison Grove directly into the reservoir, right there where the Ware River flowed out of the pipe into Quabbin, and trust to the turbulence of the water to carry it far out and away from the shore.

Behind her as she drove away from Shaft 12, the door of the gray stone building hung open, swinging on its hinges. In the empty room within, the long rays of the afternoon sun streaked through the high windows and shone upon the trap-door that lay half over the concrete floor and half over the watery abyss.



*Oozed so in crimson bubbles  
Day's departing tide . . .*

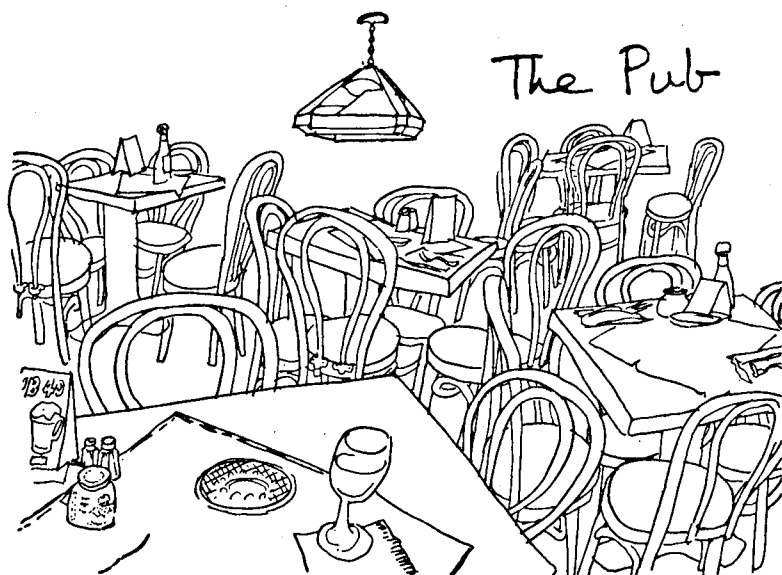
At six o'clock the air of Amherst was still bright with afternoon. The Common lay in shadow, but the whole length of Amity Street was flooded with sunset, and an old woman walking her dog across the intersection mumbled a line or two from Emily Dickinson—

*"Blazing in Gold and quenching in Purple  
Leaping like Leopards to the Sky . . ."*

Once again it was suppertime. Brains were glutted, vascular systems were in need of alcohol, stomachs were hungry for food. In bars and restaurants all over Amherst, the cravings of the body were being satisfied.

In the Lord Jeffery Inn, the Japanese Poetry Society had taken over most of the bar. They were toasting the Swedish schoolteachers, clashing their wineglasses together in small tinkles of international congratulation.

In the Pub, a popular eatery off East Pleasant Street, Tom Perry and Peter Wiggins joined the Smith brothers in a couple of rounds of Scotch, and then the Smiths called for the supper menu and they all switched to Moosehead beer.



*The New York Times* correspondent had already finished her early supper at Plumbley's Restaurant, in the company of her friend, who happened to be a reference librarian, back in Queens. Now the correspondent was back in the Lord Jeff, sitting on the edge of her bed, phoning in her story, passing along a suggestion by the librarian that somebody in Rewrite consult a guy at Columbia about the photograph that had been the subject of the talk by Peter Wiggins.

In South Amherst, in her own kitchen, Eunice Jane Kloop was feeling sulky. Damn Harvey anyway! She had already prepared his supper, a bowl of cold boiled chicken necks, but Harvey had escaped. He had driven away with that damned boat of his to fish at the Quabbin Reservoir. It was too bad. For some reason Eunice Jane enjoyed serving chicken necks to Harvey. There was a peculiar pleasure in watching him spit out the bony bits onto his plate. Now she huddled alone at the table, gnawing at one of the chicken necks, peering at an article

in a learned journal, "The Revitalization of Existential Contiguity in Deconstructive Metonymy," taking a swig every now and then from her bottle of sauerkraut juice.

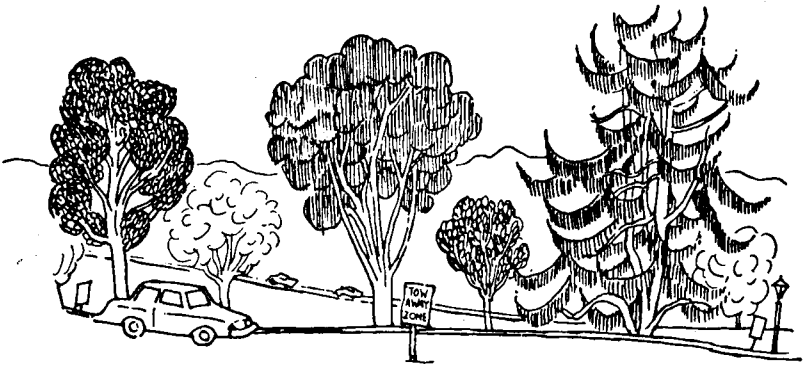
Tilly Porch was used to eating alone. But tonight Tilly was having company. Once again Debbie Buffington was her guest at the kitchen table, while Elvis sat on the sofa pillows gobbling everything in sight. Tilly had been hoping to get up in the attic after supper, but instead she offered to babysit with Elvis, because Debbie had a date with this guy from Shutesbury. "I'm supposed to meet him at this tavern," said Debbie. "There's this group is going to play, The Soft White Underbelly, and they're raffling off this king-size water bed. Okay if I borrow your car?"

Homer Kelly was worried about Owen. The man looked positively ill. "Tell you what, Owen," Homer said. "I'll take you out to dinner in honor of your speech. What a noggin-dazzler that was, wow! How about someplace classy? Say, have you ever had a seafood platter at the Gaslite? Or their homemade chili? Or what they call their Junior Exec? Bulky roll, French fries, lettuce and tomato on the side?"

"Why, Homer, that's very kind of you," said Owen. "It all sounds delicious."

At the Gaslite, Owen was pleased to find Ellen Oak sitting at the counter, and he introduced her to Homer Kelly. After supper the three of them wandered across the Common and climbed a steep path to Johnson Chapel and the Octagon, to admire the view of the Holyoke hills. Then Ellen remembered the evening entertainment, and they ran all the way to Merrill Hall and sat down in the front row with hot faces. Owen hadn't done anything so sporting in years.

Tom Perry was sitting in the back. He looked up as they came in, hoping to see Alison Grove. When he saw Ellen Oak instead, he was jolted, and then a little miffed to see her red-faced and grinning in the company of Owen Kraznik and a tall stranger. Maybe Ellen was getting along without him a little too well. He looked up again as a flock of undergraduates streamed past him. Still no Alison. The program was begin-



ning. The dancers were running out, frisking to the music of harp and flute, while someone read a Dickinson poem, *Beauty—be not caused—It Is*. Triumphant leaps by the dancers, arpeggios from the harp, chirrups from the flute!

Tom couldn't keep his mind on it. He kept glancing over his shoulder. If Alison didn't come soon, he would leave. He didn't want to find himself face to face with Ellen Oak at intermission. *Tweedle-tweedle*, trilled the flutes while the dancers hopped and twirled.

Four blocks north of Merrill Hall, as the harpist plucked a delicate glissando, Winne Gaw's big van pulled up behind the Homestead and stopped with a jerk. Winnie's tank was almost empty, but she didn't care. After tonight nothing would matter for a while. Not until she was out of the hospital. Not until Professor Kraznik told her he was sorry. Not until he gave her back her job.

Winnie was worn out. Her heart was skipping and bobbing in her chest. At Shaft 11-A she had stood for only a moment to watch the body of Alison Grove disappear like a sliver in the boiling tumult and spray of the water in the cove. Then she had closed her eyes and dropped her head and slumped her shoulders, trying to recover her strength, and then she had driven back to the Homestead in the fading light. There was still so much to do. Her day was not yet over, her long day of

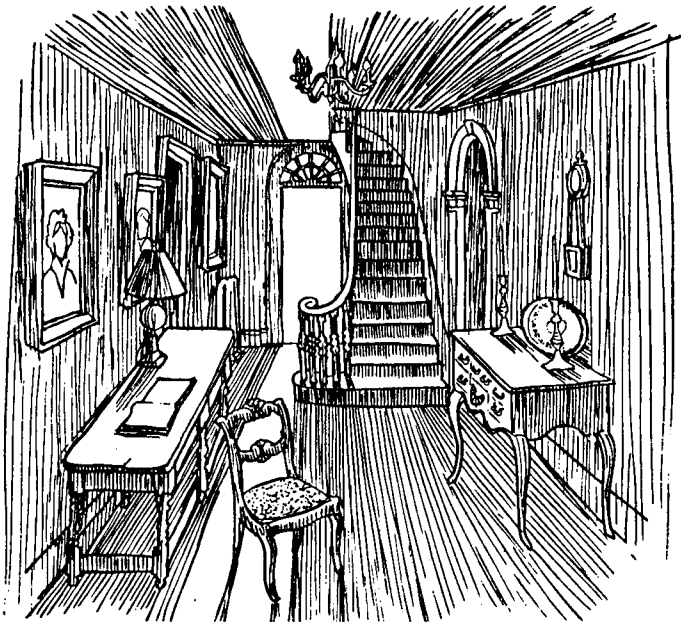
tension and disappointment and greed and hard work and sudden violence and intense physical effort, her tortured day of grinding back and forth along Route 9 in the van, and up to Gate 43 and back along the Greenwich road.

Now Winnie struggled out of the van, slung her purse over her shoulder, picked up her basket, and reached into the back seat for the axe.

Winnie Gaw was not stupid. It was true that her mind had not been encouraged in childhood. It was true that her early education had been feeble. But Winnie had picked up a lot of miscellaneous information in other ways. Escaping from bad times at home, she had often holed up in the library or spent the afternoon at the movies in the Casino Theater in the middle of town. Sometimes Winnie stole dollar bills from her mother's purse and ran away as far as the bus would take her. The result of all this snatched education was not a collection of verbal skills but a kind of shrewdness, a cleverness sharpened by one violent compulsion after another. Chief among Winnie's obsessions were her passion for Professor Kraznik and—until today—her fear of Alison Grove. Now another tremendous urge had seized her, and it was focusing all her faculties on one thing, and on one thing only: her need to sleep—to sleep and sleep, to sleep so deep that she might die, only she wouldn't. She would wake up at last to find Owen Kraznik by her side.

Carrying the basket and the axe, Winnie shuffled across the driveway to the north door of the house. On the porch she put down the basket, leaned the axe against the doorframe, and turned her key in the lock. Cautiously she stepped into the twilight gloom of the central hall.

In Winnie's excited condition, the fragrance of the indoor air affected her strongly. Distilled in the scent given off by the polished furniture, by the paintings on the wall, by the ivory keys of the piano in the parlor, by the books on the shelves, was the ineffable presence of everything Winnie wanted, everything that was the opposite of her own life, everything that was of unutterable worth. Sniffing, she labored up the stairs in the dim light and walked along the hall. For a moment she stopped



to stare at the door of Professor Kraznik's room, where he would soon be lying softly under the bedclothes, only a few feet away. So close, and yet so far, so impossibly far away from Winnie Gaw!

The key to the door of Emily Dickinson's bedroom was different from the house key. Winnie extracted it from her purse, opened the door, and locked it behind her. At once she felt a return of proprietary confidence.

There was still so much to do. First, Winnie took off her clothes and put on her nightie. Then she examined her dress and sweater, her slip, her bra and panties, her shoes and socks. Miraculously there were no bloodstains on any of them, anywhere.

Alison's body had not bled at all, decided Winnie. She must have been, like, squeezed to death by the wheels of the big van. And then Winnie put the thought of Alison Grove



away from her. The memory of what she had done was beginning to fade, to be tucked away in the creases, like all unpleasant things. Winnie turned to her present task. What should she do now?

The book. The book was next. Winnie put the book beside the bed and opened it to the page where she had underlined a passage with a pencil. The book was like a suicide note, a personal message to Professor Kraznik.

The pills. For weeks Winnie had been carrying around Dr. Kloop's new prescription for sleeping pills. This afternoon in the drugstore in Ware she had filled the prescription. And then at home she had flushed most of the tablets down the toilet. Carefully, Winnie dumped out the rest of the tablets and arranged the two empty bottles—the new one and the old one—side by side on the table beside the bed, next to the book. Then she put the bottle caps and the two fluffy pieces of cotton wadding beside the bottles. Now it would look as if she had swallowed two whole entire bottles of pills. Spreading out the remaining tablets on the edge of the little table, Winnie counted them again. There were twenty. That was enough to put her under, way under, but it wasn't enough to finish her off.



Next, the glass of water. A lot of water. Enough water to help her swallow all those pills, and satisfy her burning thirst. Winnie was parched. She took the decanter of rose-colored glass from the dresser and filled it in the bathroom. There was a plastic cup beside the sink. Winnie filled it, too, and drank, again and again. Then she brought the decanter back to the bedside table and tipped it delicately over one of the rose-colored wineglasses. The water poured silently into the glass, filling it nearly to the brim. There was not a drop on the table.

What else? Was she ready? No, of course she wasn't ready. There was still the axe. How could she forget the axe? With trembling fingers Winnie picked up the axe from the floor and put it on the bed. The axe went with the passage in the book. Professor Kraznik would understand, and then he would be sorry.

How did she look? Winnie went to the mirror and took the clips out of her hair, so that it fell loosely beside her face. In the blotched old mirror she looked almost beautiful. Her eyes were her best feature, just like Emily Dickinson's.

She was ready. Winnie turned away from the mirror and lay down on the bed. Arranging her nightie around her ankles, so nestled the axe cozily at her side, and stretched out her hand for the wineglass and the first of the pills.

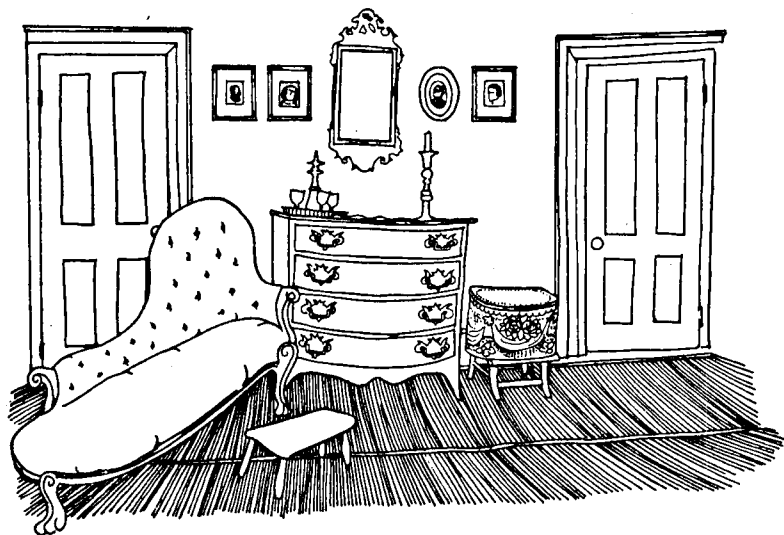
But then something occurred to her. She sat up and stared at the door.

If they saw that the door was closed, they might leave her undisturbed. They might not get to her in time. She might sleep and sleep, and then wake up alone, all by herself. No, no, they must see her sleeping on the bed, and realize something was wrong, and try to wake her and not be able to do it. And then they would know she was trying to kill herself, and they would take her to the hospital and Professor Kraznik would be there to comfort her when she woke up at last.

Therefore the door must be left open. Open wide. Winnie slid off the bed. Moving noiselessly on bare feet, she unlocked the door, pulled it open as far as it would go, and then lay

down carefully again and put out her hand for the first of her Secanol tablets.

Again she stopped with her hand in the air.  
Someone was coming into the room.





*'Tis so much joy! 'Tis so much joy!  
If I should fail, what poverty!*

For Peter Wiggins, the day had been one long triumph. When the Smith brothers said good-night to him at last in a back-slapping mood of tipsy joviality, he walked off into the dusk of evening feeling like a colleague already, a fellow faculty member, an associate professor in the English department at the most famous educational establishment in the East. Peter had visited Harvard once, last year, to look things up in the Houghton Library. It was green there, in the place they called the Yard. There were elm trees in a leafy canopy overhead. This evening, after two Scotches and a couple of beers, Peter had distinctly seen ivy gushing out of the Smith brothers' chins, twining down their shirtfronts, reaching to the top button in one case and the middle button in the other.

Of course, neither of the brothers had actually promised him the job that would soon be opening up, but they had made it clear that he was high on the list of candidates.

The back door of the Homestead was unlocked. That was lucky, because Peter had not been given a key. In the front hall he was shrouded in darkness. None of the lights had been turned on. The house felt empty. Everybody else was probably

at that music and dance thing in a place called Merrill Hall.

Peter smiled as he felt his way along, recognizing the shadowy rectangle of the hall table and the dark squares of the portraits on the wall. He couldn't stop smiling. He smiled halfway up the stairs. But then as he paused at the second floor, something occurred to him with a shock. What about Winifred Gaw? Peter had forgotten all about Winifred Gaw. He had forgotten about her "documentary evidence." Documentary evidence! What kind of documentary evidence was the idiot female talking about? Good God, thought Peter Wiggins, standing in the dark hall with his hand on the banister of the stairway to the third floor, what if by some crazy miracle the woman had actually discovered something real? This morning in the auditorium he had made her look like a fool, but what if she actually possessed some nutty scrap of paper that identified his photograph as somebody else entirely, not Emily Dickinson at all? *Jesus*, it would ruin everything.

Peter took his hand off the banister and walked noiselessly along the hall toward the room Winnie Gaw had stolen from that beautiful girl, Alison Grove.

The door to Emily Dickinson's bedroom was open. The room was dark.

Winnie must have decamped. She must have gone with the others to the evening performance of music and dancing and poetry.

Peter stood in the hall listening. Was he still alone in the house? He heard nothing at all. No one was opening the door downstairs. In all the hollow spaces of the rooms, he was the only living soul. Peter felt a sudden access of freedom, an impulsive sense of adventure. It was like the first time his mother had left him at home by himself, in the family house in Providence, Rhode Island. Peter had opened the forbidden drawers of his father's desk and taken out the drawing instruments and played with the delicate little compasses. He had gone upstairs and fumbled in his mother's bureau drawers, inspecting her brassieres, trying on her gold wristwatch.

Now Peter peered through the open door of Emily Dickin-

son's bedroom. At first he could see only the two west windows, the last of the daylight moving in the leaves outside. But then his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness, and he noticed the basket and the pocketbook on the floor.

That lumpy pocketbook was certainly Winifred Gaw's.

Peter was consumed with curiosity. He had to know. He couldn't allow some half-baked notion on the part of this ignorant woman to jeopardize his year of preparation, his hopeful future, all that had brought him so urgently across the continent to this place, to this moment of fulfillment.

Boldly he walked into the room.

And then he paused, awestruck, remembering that it didn't really belong to Winnie Gaw. It was Emily Dickinson's own bedchamber, sacred as a church. Here within these four walls the woman with the magnificent eyes had written nearly two thousand poems. In his half-drunken condition Peter was so moved, he almost sobbed aloud. Instead, he whispered to himself, "*Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.*"

Therefore, when a massive shape loomed up beside him in the darkness, he gave a grunt of surprise and jumped backward.

"Who's there?" gasped the woman on the bed.

Peter could feel his face flushing with embarrassment and anger. The damned woman was here after all! He pulled himself together. "Oh, sorry. I didn't know you were in here. I mean, the door was wide open."

Winnie stared at Peter Wiggins. Never since she had grown up had she found herself alone in a bedroom with a man. She didn't know what to say. Peter Wiggins was looking at her so oddly. In the thin illumination of the streetlights beyond the hemlock hedge, his fine blond hair was a halo around his head. He was just standing there, staring at Winnie. This morning he had been part of the enemy, part of the world that always treated Winnie like dirt. But now he was a man in her bedroom. And he was looking at her so strangely! It was weird, thought Winnie excitedly, it was really weird.

She misunderstood the cause. To her amazement she, too, began behaving in a new way. Lying back on the pillow, she lifted her arms behind her head and raised one knee. Somehow she knew exactly what to do. "Well, hi, there," cooed Winnie softly.

"Listen here, Winnie," said Peter severely, "what did you mean this morning? You know, when you said you had evidence my picture isn't genuine? You said you had some kind of documentary evidence." Peter could see Winnie dimly now. She was smiling at him and lowering her eyelashes.

"I don't remember," teased Winnie, looking up at him again, remembering that her eyes were her best feature.

Peter was repelled. It dawned on him that the woman thought he had really come into her bedroom to—*God!*—make love to her, or something. Angrily he lashed back at her. "For Christ's sake, what the hell do you think you're doing in Emily Dickinson's bed? A slob like you?"

And then it boiled up in Winnie all over again. Everything that had been hidden in the crevices of her flabby body, everything that had been tucked into the fat creases around her neck, in the deep dimpled folds of her elbows and knees, in the crannies between breast and belly, now came raging forth, exploding like bubbles of gas. Seizing the axe that lay beside her, Winnie launched herself from the bed and lunged at Peter, swinging.

He was totally unprepared. With a yelp he jumped aside, and Winnie's blow smote the floor with a splintering crash. When she came at him again, he flung out his arms and grasped the handle and tried to wrench it away from her. Good God, an axe—the thing in her hands was an axe!

They were face to face, panting. Even as he struggled and jerked with all his strength, Peter thought, *This can't be happening*. The woman was pulling away from him. He couldn't hang on. She was stronger than he was. She had more mass to throw at him. And she wasn't dizzy from swallowing six ounces of Scotch and a couple of pints of beer.

Terrified, Peter stumbled backward, knocking over a small

table. Reaching for it, he snatched it up and threw it at Winnie as she rushed at him again. It hit her in the face and stopped her cold. Winnie groaned, and kicked the table aside. Again she came at him, flourishing the axe. Again he grabbed it by the handle. Again he couldn't hang on. Wrenching it from side to side, Winnie jerked it away from him, then threw him against the dresser. Sacred objects crashed to the floor. Glass tinkled and shattered. Peter's heart jolted in his chest. *This fool was trying to split his skull!*

Desperately he used his wits. When Winnie came at him again, Peter dropped craftily to the floor. She was taken by surprise. Tripping over him heavily, she fell with a sprawling thud that shook the house. Frantically, Peter scrambled up, hoping to make a rush for the door. But, quick as a cat, Winnie was on her feet, blocking his way, and immediately they were locked together. Again Winnie shoved him backward, and this time Peter's head cracked against the wall. Reeling, he braced himself as Winnie swept the axe violently upward.

And then, suddenly, it was over. She let go. The axe slipped from her fingers, fell against her, and clattered to the floor. Her body sagged. Peter saw the dim broad shield of her face tip away from him as she collapsed backward. A dark stain was spreading over her nightgown.

Peter too slumped feebly, and slid down the wall until he was sitting on the floor. In front of him lay the mounded shape of Winifred Gaw, her head bent sideways against one of the fallen chairs.

For a little while Peter merely breathed in and out, hardly able to believe he was still alive. What the hell had happened? The woman had been about to kill him! And then she had dropped the axe and toppled. Was she dead? Or was she only pretending? Was it some kind of trick? Was she about to spring savagely to her feet?

Cautiously, Peter got up on his knees and leaned forward. Winnie's eyes were staring upward. Her huge bosom was not rising and falling. To Peter she looked as dead as any corpse in the movies. Picking up her wrist, he felt for her pulse.



It was fluttering. She was still alive! But then the beat in her wrist hesitated under his fingers and stopped. She was dead now, for sure.

Peter's mind began to race. Even in his panic he thought of Dombey Dell and Tom Perry and all the rest of them coming back to the house very soon, probably any minute now. With prophetic clarity he could imagine how they would view this grotesque event, and instantly he was frantic to separate himself from it. After all, it was no business of his what happened to Winifred Gaw! How would he explain what he had been doing in her bedroom? How would he tell them that he had found himself in a battle to the death with a stupendous woman in a flannel nightgown? And, Christ, how would he make them believe that he, Peter Wiggins, had not slashed at the woman with that lunatic impossible weapon? What would happen to his precious photograph, what would become of his new destiny, if he found himself all mixed up in the public eye in a murderous scramble with a freakish fat lady in Emily Dickinson's bedroom?

Peter stood up shakily and looked at himself. There were a few dark splashes on his shirt. That was no problem. He could wash them out. Stepping carefully around Winnie, he went to the window and looked out. Someone was whistling beyond the hemlock hedge. Was Dombey coming home? The whistling stopped. He could hear laughter farther away. Was that Owen Kraznik coming along the sidewalk? No, the murmur of voices was trailing away toward the center of town. For a moment Peter held his breath and listened, but he could hear nothing else. No car was turning into the driveway, sweeping its headlights across the mirror and the pictures on the wall. There was no sound of an opening door. There were no footsteps in the hall downstairs.

He had time, then, a little time to recover, to retrace his footsteps and obliterate any sign of his presence. What had he touched? The fallen table? The handle of the axe? He could take care of that. He could wipe them clean. He could even take a minute or two to look for the thing he had originally

come to find, Winnie's "documentary evidence." He could look through her pocketbook, her basket, the closet, the drawers of the dresser.

It didn't take long. In a moment Peter was once again standing in the hall, satisfied, pulling the door shut, his shoes under his arm. With his shirttail, he wiped the doorknob clean. Then he made his way back to his room on the third floor.

He was home free. He would examine the soles of his shoes for fragments of glass, he would wash his polyester shirt and hang it up over the tub in the third-floor bathroom, he would pay particular attention to his fingernails. And then he would be through with the matter.

Let them discover the body of Winifred Gaw whenever they got around to it! Let them invent whatever theories they cared to about the cause of her death. It was none of his business. He could go to bed with an easy mind.

Below Peter's attic room, at the end of the second-floor hall, in Emily Dickinson's bedchamber, Winnie lay still, her soft brown eyes fixed on the ceiling in an empty stare. Her long hard day had come to an end.

*The longest day that God appoints  
Will finish with the sun.  
Anguish can travel to its stake,  
And then it must return.*



*I meant to find Her when I came—  
Death—had the same design . . .*

Owen came back to the Homestead from the music and dance performance and went straight to bed, exhausted. But as he lay down he looked at his pillow with suspicion, dreading another nightmare.

As soon as he shut his eyes, there was a knock on his door.

It was Tom Perry, opening it a crack, peering in at Owen. "Oh, sorry, Owen. I just wondered if you know where Alison went. She was supposed to meet me in Merrill Hall, but she never came. The fact is, we had a little tiff."

Owen lifted his head. "Alison Grove? She's not in the back bedroom?"

"No."

Owen was too drowsy to think. "What about her dormitory? Could she have gone back there?"

"Well, maybe. I suppose that's where she is. Wow, I didn't think she was *that* mad at me. Thanks, Owen."

Tom Perry closed Owen's door and ran lightly down the stairs to the telephone in the kitchen. He knew Alison's number by heart. It wasn't really Alison's own number. It was the number of the phone on her corridor on the fourteenth floor of Coolidge Hall in the Southwest Quad. Sometimes it rang for a long time before anybody bothered to answer it. But this time

a breathless voice responded quickly. "Hello?"

"I'd like to speak to Alison Grove."

"Alison Grove? Wait a sec. Let me think. I'm from downstairs, but I know who you mean. She's got this really red hair, right? Sure, I just saw her go into the john. Just a sec, I'll get her."

"No, wait. Don't." Suddenly, Tom was angry with Alison. Now that he knew she was all right, his relief turned to pique. He would let her stew in her own juice till morning. "That's okay. Never mind. I just wanted to be sure she got home all right. Thanks."

"Well, sure, okay."

On the fourteenth floor of Coolidge Hall, Sukey Darrow hung up the phone and went into the john with her bottle of shampoo and her towel and her blow-dryer. The john on her own floor had been out of whack since the fire, so everybody was using the bathroom on the floor above.

Pushing open the door, Sukey saw the girl with red hair. She was brushing her teeth.

"Oh, say, Alison," said Sukey, "some guy just called you up—only he said, never mind, like he didn't have to speak to you, he just wanted to be sure you were okay."

The redheaded girl spat out toothpaste and glanced up at Sukey. "Who, me? My name's not Alison. It's Rachel. Rachel Clapp. Alison Grove has like this really, really curly hair. Well, sure, mine's red too—only, see? It's straight. It's really, really straight."

"Oh, wow, I remember now. Right." Sukey turned on the water in the shower and tested it with her hand.

"Alison's not here anyway," said Rachel, shouting above the noise of Sukey's shower. "Her room's right across the hall from me, and she hasn't been there for a couple of days."

"Oh, no, oh shit," said Sukey, pulling off her bathrobe and jumping under the hot spray. "I just gave this guy a bum steer. I wonder who he was? Hey, Rachel, can you hear me? Aren't you in my chem lab? Hey, listen, do you know anything about all those creepy valences?"



*The Heavens stripped—  
Eternity's vast pocket, picked—*

The last morning of the Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium dawned pearly and warm. Burning through a gold mist, the sun reached over the dark water of the Quabbin Reservoir to light up the Pelham hills and Sugarloaf and Mount Toby and Mount Tom, and skip westward along the ragged peaks of the Holyoke Range. At the University of Massachusetts it picked out the top of the library and the upper floors of the high-rise dormitories in the Southwest Quad. Shining into Alison Grove's empty room on the fourteenth floor of Coolidge Hall, it glistened on the cosmetics lined up on her dresser, the lip moisturizer in cinnabar, the contour blush in burnished copper, the liquid foundation in Portofino Peach. On the top of Alison's bookcase it sparkled on the silver frame of a studio portrait of Alison's mother. Below the window the bed lay in shadow, the bedspread smooth and undisturbed.

On the other side of town, the sunlight filtered through the oak tree in the Dickinson garden and dappled the east window of Lavinia Dickinson's bedroom. Splashes of light wobbled on the sleeping face of Owen Kraznik and woke him up. Lifting his head cautiously, he found himself alone in bed.



Dombey was up and gone. Dombey's clothes lay in a jumble on the floor.

Owen got up too. In the kitchen he was surprised to find Peter Wiggins standing in the middle of the room, looking around vaguely. Peter seemed relieved to see him. "Good morning, Professor Kraznik," he said, his voice high and sharp. "I'm just going out for breakfast. Will you join me?"

Owen looked at Peter curiously. The young man's eyes were glittering, but his face was very white. How did he keep so pale in a sunny state like Arizona? Maybe everybody in Arizona wore a ten-gallon hat, or maybe Peter suffered from a skin disease and had to stay indoors. "Well, of course I will, but you've got to call me Owen."

Together they walked up Main Street. Peter's head was in a whirl. His fingers trembled as he opened the door of the Lord Jeff for Owen, but his spirits were high. The scuffle last night with Winifred Gaw had been crazy, impossible, wild! But he had come through it unscathed. As for the shakiness in his limbs, that would surely disappear with a few bites of breakfast. Peter supposed he should not be spending his money at a fancy

place like this—he should be eating in some greasy spoon instead. But at this point in his life, money was surely no object. He must continue to show himself drinking from fortune's cup.

But this morning, as Peter walked into the lobby of the Lord Jeffery Inn with Owen Kraznik, his brimming success suddenly drained from the bottom of the glass.

They were hailed by Dombey Dell. "What ho, good morning. Hey, looky here. See what I've got."

Dombey had a copy of *The New York Times*. The city edition had been trucked during the night from New York to the Holyoke News Company, and from there to the Hastings Stationery Store on South Pleasant Street, then rushed across the Common to the Lord Jeffery, to greet early-rising guests in this most perfect of rural New England inns.

Dombey tapped the newspaper and shook his head sadly at Peter. "Too bad," he said. "They're trampling all over you. Shame on them."

"They're *what*?" Peter's white face turned whiter still. His shaking fingers rattled the paper as he took it from Dombey.

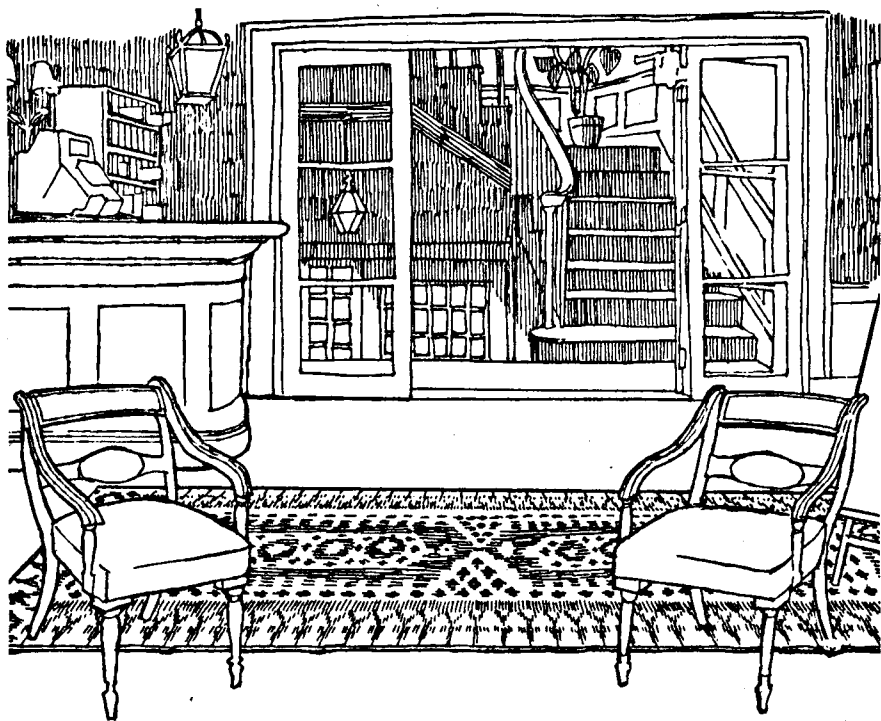
"Good heavens, what do they say?" Owen stood on tiptoe to look over Peter's shoulder.

There at the top of the left-hand column was Peter's photograph of Emily Dickinson, right there on the front page of *The New York Times*. But the headline was a disaster—"EMILY DICKINSON" PHOTOGRAPH DECLARED FRAUDULENT.

Peter gasped. He couldn't believe his eyes. That woman from the *Times*, she had seemed so interested, so convinced. How could she do this to him?

Owen craned his neck to read the small print, feeling in the pit of his stomach Peter's disappointment and chagrin. But Dombey was looking on with vindictive relish.

"It's some Columbia professor," he said. "He's discovered who wrote the identification on the back of that picture of yours. You thought it was probably some relative, right? Well, he says it was the guy who originally sold the picture, back in the nineteen-sixties."



"Oh, God," whispered Peter. His eyes raced over the column of newsprint.

"... If only Professor Wiggins had done his homework," said Dr. Ransome, "he would know that the handwriting on the back of the picture is that of a New York collector notorious for his overoptimistic attributions."

Peter's lifeless fingers dropped the paper. Owen picked it up and gave it back. "It's just one man's opinion," he said.

"No, it's not," said Peter, his eyes racing down the page. "Oh, God." An expert in the photographic identification of criminals had been given the last word.



“If Wiggins claims to prove his theory with diagrams, it’s wishful thinking. Any quack can make diagrams. I could find you a hundred photographs of anonymous people you could diagram to prove they were Abraham Lincoln. If that woman is Emily Dickinson, I’m the Emir of Kuwait.”

Peter lowered the paper and gazed at Dombey Dell, not seeing him, staring right through him. Peter’s eyes had sunk back into their sockets. His body was covered with perspiration. The words *Any quack* were clucking in his head.

“Oh, well,” said Dombey Dell, “what the hell? At least our symposium made the front page of *The New York Times*, thanks to you. That’s a step up from *The Hampshire Gazette*.” Dombey clapped Peter heartily on the back, almost knocking him down. Then Dombey turned with relief to the long stream of Oriental scholars flooding down the stairs. “Excuse me, chaps,” he said. “I think I’d better continue my duties as the jolly host.” Swiftly, Dombey deserted Peter’s sinking ship.

But for Owen, a sinking ship was just another name for a lame duck. “Come on,” he said cheerfully to Peter, “have something to eat. You’ll see it’s not important. Write a letter to the *Times*, why don’t you? Refute everything they say. Nothing to it. This kind of thing happens to us all, every day.”

But Peter was utterly shattered. He had lost his appetite for breakfast. He had no courage to enter a dining room in which the morning edition of *The New York Times* would soon be passing from hand to hand, accompanied by exclamations of surprise and terrible reorderings of opinion about Professor Peter Wiggins of the University of Central Arizona and his controversial photograph of Emily Dickinson.

Weakly, Peter fumbled for Owen’s hand and shook it limply. Turning away, he stumbled out of the Lord Jeffery Inn. The bruises of his life-and-death battle with Winifred Gaw were beginning to throb in his arms and legs. Desperately his poor head tried to come to grips with the sudden collapse of his circumstances. He had hoped to sweep everything before

him in total victory. Instead there was this sickening defeat.

On the way back to the Homestead it seemed surprising to Peter that nature was carrying on as usual. A bird uttered a ticking note in the bushes. A small blue butterfly folded and unfolded its wings on a flower in somebody's front yard. An insect was buzzing in the grass. Across the street a pine tree lifted and dropped its branches in the warm wind, then lifted and dropped them again, as though the world had not become an entirely different place, as though the claims of Peter Wiggins were still valid, as though they had not suddenly become sensational, a piece of charlatanry, a hoax—as if it were still possible that some respectable institution of higher learning would rush forward and award him a teaching appointment with cheery accompanying perquisites, a private office overlooking the college green, a carrel in the library, a membership in the faculty club.

But then Peter took heart. He reminded himself that all was not lost. There was an escape, a possible way out. He had prepared himself for trouble, for disbelief. He was ready with an alternative, a drastic fallback position in case of disappointment.

Turning from Spring Street onto Churchill, tripping over every twig in his path, shying at fluttering leaves like a spooked horse, Peter wondered if he could work up the nerve, the unmitigated gall, to carry out a thing like that.

Hoping for comfort, he called Angie, using the phone in the hall on the third floor.

But Angie had no comfort to give. "Oh, Peter, you woke me up. Listen to that. You hear that? The kids, there they go, the two of them. You might have had the courtesy—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Angie, I forgot about the difference in time. How are things going?"

"Lousy. I mean it's just so incredible. There's green stuff dripping out of the air conditioner. Yesterday there was a scorpion in the bathtub. Nicole's diaper rash is back, and Michelle has these hives all over her neck. It's the heat."

Peter listened to his wife's complaints and made soothing noises and hung up at last, more miserable than ever, to find himself staring at the steep stairway to the cupola. The steps were bathed in dusty streaks of sunlight.

Careless in his wretchedness, Peter put his foot on the bottom step, climbed to the top, and stepped out on the cupola floor.

Around him lay the town of Amherst, with its airy domes of leafy green, the roofs of its comfortable houses, the pink blossoming of its apple trees. To the south he could see the hazy undulations of the Holyoke hills. It was easy to imagine Emily Dickinson climbing up here to gaze out at them, trying to look past them to Springfield, where Samuel Bowles was busy editing the *Springfield Republican*, cut off from Emily Dickinson by Long Mountain and Mount Hitchcock and Mount Holyoke, and by a much larger mountain range in the shape of Mrs. Mary Schermerhorn Bowles.

*The solemn Alps—  
The siren Alps  
Forever intervene!*

It struck Peter that Emily Dickinson's impossible longings were very much like his own. He too was reaching across a barrier. For him, too, there was a gap between desire and object. Like her, he was tottering across a shaking bridge, hammering at a door that was forever locked and sealed.

Slowly, Peter moved from one window to another, staring with greedy attention at the low hills of Pelham, at the cupola of Austin Dickinson's house next door, at the brick buildings of Amherst College, at the white wooden clock tower of Johnson Chapel. It was all so mellow—so mellow and old and green. Not red and raw and choked with dust!

A moment ago, climbing the stairs to the cupola, Peter had not yet settled the matter. Now, as he descended, he made up his mind.

He would fall back on his ace in the hole.

But first he leaned over the stair railing and looked down at the hallway on the second floor. Had Winnie's dead body been discovered? The house was quiet. There were no shouts of surprise, no tramp of running feet. How long would it take them to decide to open her door? Well, it didn't matter to Peter. His duty was simple. Until someone told him Winnie was dead, he would behave as if nothing had happened. Then he would register surprise and shock. Easy enough. There was nothing to worry about on that score.

Closing the door of his bedroom behind him, Peter took his wallet out of his pocket and reached into the secret compartment. In every wallet he had ever possessed, there had been a flap where you could secrete something, but this was the first time Peter had ever had anything to hide.

Like his original photograph, this one was protected by a wrapping of tissue paper. The second picture of Emily Dickinson was exactly like the first. And that was its glory, because Peter had manufactured it from nothing.

It had cost him a year of effort, a year of failure, a year of trying one thing after another.

One by one, the technical problems had been solved. An old photographic *carte de visite* had provided the right sort of paper and card stock. Peter had soaked them apart, then bleached off the old image in Farmer's Reducer, and resensitized the paper in baths of ammonium chloride and silver nitrate. Then, after taking a careful picture of the original photograph, he had worked over the new negative with a retouching tool until the image was a miracle of clarity. The perfection of the sepia coloration had simply been a matter of money—twenty-five dollars for a gram of gold chloride! And the glue was organic, a few scrapings from a horse's hoof, boiled down on the stove. (Angie had wrinkled her nose. "Peter, what are you doing? That stuff really stinks.")

But it was the writing on the back of the picture that would really prove his case.

Peter turned over his little forgery and smiled at the inscription. The oak-gall ink was organic, like the glue. The pen had been a sharpened goose quill. That part had been easy. It was the message itself that had called for all of Peter's scholarship and wit. It could not be too bald—*Emily Dickinson, poet, Amherst, Massachusetts*—that would never do. It must be the sort of swift identification scribbled on the backs of photographs by relatives as they sorted through old boxes of pictures, or the hasty comments jotted down just before a picture was slipped with a letter into an envelope—*Frieda's baby, six months old*.

Peter's choice had been clever. Looking at his forged inscription, he could almost believe it was real, it looked so right, so similar to Lavinia Dickinson's handwriting, so much like something Emily's sister might actually have said—

*Emily don't like this much.*

In one brisk sentence it identified the picture and explained why it had vanished from the family. *Emily don't like this much*—it was the perfect thing to say. After studying hundreds of Dickinson family letters, Peter was especially proud of his use of the word *don't*, rather than *doesn't*. It was the way they had talked. It was what they said informally, in writing to each other.

Holding the picture delicately, Peter went to the window and gazed at the distant view of housetops across the street. Somewhere in Amherst he must find it a home. His little counterfeit was small, after all. It wouldn't take much space, only a narrow slot two inches wide and four inches tall. Surely among these tree-lined streets there was a temporary hiding place for the woman with the magnificent eyes? A place where someone would discover her soon, and pounce upon her, and bring her to the light?

Peter Wiggins was no sentimentalist. He had been schooled in the dry astringency and healthy caustic skepticism of a great graduate department. But something had happened

to him that was worse than sentiment, worse than slipshod scholarship. The single overwhelming reason why Peter was willing to sacrifice his principles and endanger his scholarly good name was simply that he had fallen in love with a dead woman.



*There's something quieter than sleep  
Within this inner room!*

Owen, too, had lost his appetite for breakfast. Abandoning the Lord Jeff, he walked down Spring Street to his own house, where he found Homer Kelly making pancakes.

"Look at this," said Homer, handing him *The Hampshire Gazette*, tapping the front page with the pancake turner.

Owen took the paper cautiously, fearful of another brutal attack on Peter Wiggins. But it was only another report on the status of the Coolidge Hall fire investigation. Something had turned up in the bushes between the parking lot and Coolidge Hall. A guy looking for a lost hubcap had discovered an empty can of lacquer. The color of the paint was opal gold.

"Lacquer?" said Owen. "Not kerosene, after all?"

"Well, maybe. That is, if the can has any connection with the fire at all. It would narrow down the problem of the source, and that would be good. I mean, you don't buy lacquer at every supermarket, right?"

"But who uses lacquer?" said Owen, bewildered. "All I can think of is Japanese screens and lacquered boxes."

Homer laughed and waved the pancake turner. "I see. It was somebody in a kimono with long fingernails, skulking

around in Coolidge Hall, setting the place on fire. Aha! A member of the Japanese Poetry Society, no doubt. Whee, whoops!" Homer flipped a pancake inexpertly, and it did a somersault in the air, then dropped with a splat on the floor. Picking it up, he dabbed at it with a towel. "I'll eat this one. You want to know who uses lacquer? I'll tell you, my friend. Guys who work on dented chassis. They repaint the cars with lacquer afterward. Spray the stuff on with a compressor. Archie Gripp will have his hands full, poking around all the body shops in Hampshire County. Here we go again, whoopee!"

This time the pancake hit the ceiling, stuck for a moment, then fell on a bicycle pump that happened to be lying on the counter.

"Oh, that's *quite* all right," said Owen. "I know it will be *delicious*."

After breakfast, Owen said good-bye to Homer and hurried back to the Homestead. There he found Dombey Dell storming up and down the front hall, waiting for him.

"Listen here, Owen, I promised the Smith brothers a private tour of the house before the memorial church service this morning. Get that Gaw woman up! She doesn't answer when I knock. It's just like the day before yesterday. She's sulking. Come on, if you can't get her out of there, I'll drag her out by the hair."

In Owen's stomach Homer's pancake lay like a stone. He followed Dombey upstairs. "Are you sure she's here at all?" he said, staring at the bedroom door. "Perhaps she's gone home to Ware."

"Oh, she's in there all right. Her van is still parked outside."

Owen knocked gently on the door. "Winnie?"

There was no answer, no sound at all but the drowsy buzz of a fly against the sunlit panes of the hall window.

He knocked again, and called louder. "Are you there, Winnie?"

Again there was no reply. Dombey swore under his breath.

Owen put his ear against one of the white-painted panels,



remembering the last time he had leaned against the door and felt it quivering with the suspended breath of the fat girl on the other side. Today the stillness was different. It was the un-speaking habit of voiceless, lifeless things, the staring pictures on the wall, the china bowl and pitcher on the dresser, the cast-iron fireplace. It was the wooden silence of tables and chairs. Surely there was nothing alive on the other side of the door.

“Go on in,” demanded Dombey.

Owen tried the knob. It turned easily in his hand.

Bracing himself, he opened the door.



*Pain has but one Acquaintance  
And that is Death . . .*

“Oh, God bloody damn,” said Dombey Dell. “What’s the bloody damn woman done now? Gone and got herself killed! Didn’t I tell you she was going to ruin me? Didn’t I warn you she’d destroy the whole bloody goddamn symposium? Look at that axe! My God, think how that axe will look on TV! Think of the headlines! Axe Murder at Emily Dickinson Conference! Bloody God, bloody damn, bloody hell!”

Owen was on his knees beside Winnie, tears running down his face. Picking up Winnie’s hand, the one with the missing little finger, he felt the pit yawning once more beneath his feet. Grimacing painfully, he stared around at the chaos in Emily Dickinson’s bedchamber, at the fallen table, the upended chairs, the tipped-over sofa, the broken glass scattered on the floor. From a gold frame on the wall Edward Dickinson frowned down at Owen. George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning gazed at him blandly, indifferent to Winnie’s fate.

Then Dombey discovered the pills. “Hey, look at this,” he said. “Pills all over the floor. A couple of empty pill bottles. Look at that, two new cotton stoppers. Hey, maybe she took a lot of pills, see? There’s only a few on the floor. I bet she swal-

lowed the rest. So maybe she was committing suicide. Did she leave a note? Suicides, they always leave a note. Nope, I don't see any note. Just this book on the floor. Looks familiar. Library book, *Letters of Emily Dickinson, Volume Two*. What's this doing here?"

"I doubt very much it was suicide," said Owen sadly, getting to his feet. "You forget the axe."

"Oh, right, the axe. Well, what the hell do we do now? Listen, Owen, do we have to call the fucking police? I mean now? Do we have to call them right away? After all, our schedule for today is so harmless. All we're doing today is being pious, that's all. Can't we just go right ahead? We've just got a church service and a pilgrimage to the grave and a picnic, nothing but stuff like that. All in perfect taste. The symposium's practically over. Why can't we wait until everybody goes home before we call the cops?"

Owen shook his head grimly. "Of course we have to call the police. We have no choice." Then Owen's face brightened. "I know, I'll talk to my cousin Harvey. He's the medical examiner. He'll know what to do. And I'll get Homer over here. Homer used to be a policeman. Good heavens, why didn't I think of Homer right away?"

Dombey was flabbergasted. "You mean Homer Kelly, the big Thoreau man? *Homer Kelly* used to be a policeman?"

"That's right." Owen picked his way over the smashed fragments of the rose-colored wineglass and started downstairs.

"Oh, Lord," groaned Dombey, leaning over the railing. "It was spite, I tell you. The woman did it out of spite, just to make a monkey out of me. Listen, Owen, I don't care what *you* do, but I'm not going to say one word about this to anybody. Maybe by some miracle it won't hit the news until everybody's gone home. I'll give the Smith brothers some excuse, take them out for coffee or something before the church service. And then we'll cancel the open house this afternoon, during the picnic. We'll just let people use the garden and the kitchen, okay?" Dombey yelled louder as Owen moved out of sight at the bottom of the stairs. "Oh, God, Owen, do you know what day this

is? It's May fifteenth! It's a hundred years to the day since Emily Dickinson died in that very room. Oh, God bloody Christ. Another gruesome headline, *Axe Murder Commemorates Centennial of Poet's Death.*" Clapping his hand to his forehead, Dombey stamped down the hall to put on his church-going clothes and comb his hair.

Owen's cousin Harvey was not at home to answer the phone. At that moment Harvey was rolling up his sleeping bag in the state forest at Petersham, getting ready to spend the day on Quabbin's bright blue water. Therefore Owen heard only Harvey's recorded voice on the line, announcing with a hint of smugness that he would not be back in his office until Monday morning at nine o'clock, and in the meantime the emergency number at Cooley-Dickinson was . . .

But Homer Kelly picked up the phone on the first ring. When he heard the news about Winifred Gaw, he was darkly triumphant. "Didn't I tell you? Didn't I say these conferences are murder? An axe? Did you say an axe? And the medical examiner is unavailable? How about some other doctor?"

There was a pause. Then Owen's voice brightened. "Yes, I know another doctor. And she'll do very well."



*Presentiment—is that long Shadow—on the Lawn—  
Indicative that Suns go down—*

*The Notice to the startled Grass  
That Darkness—is about to pass—*

Tom Perry was feeling pressured. He was late. He had forgotten to bring his alarm clock, so this morning he had overslept, and there was no time to have breakfast before the Emily Dickinson memorial service in the First Parish Church. He couldn't possibly be late for that, because he was supposed to stand up in the front of the church and read a passage from First Corinthians.

But he had to phone Alison first. Tom was feeling guilty about Alison. He should have talked to her last night. He should have made up with her on the phone. He shouldn't have been such a self-righteous asshole. Opening the door, Tom looked out into the hall, rubbing his frowsy hair.

Where was everybody? Well, Dombey was still here, banging around and cursing in Owen's bedroom. But the rest of the house was silent.

Dressing quickly, Tom plunged downstairs to the kitchen, picked up the phone, and dialed Coolidge Hall.

A voice answered briskly, "Fourteenth floor."

"Hello, who's that? Listen, I want to speak to Alison Grove. Right now. I'm in a hurry."

"Well, bully for you," said the girl at Coolidge Hall. "Sorry, but Alison hasn't been around for a couple of days."

Tom was nonplussed. His voice rose in anger. "But that girl last night, she said Alison was there."

"Who said? Listen, Rachel told me at breakfast this morning—Rachel Clapp, she lives right across the hall from Alison—she told me she hasn't seen Alison for two or three days."

"Well, where is she?" shouted Tom. "That girl last night—" Tom slammed down the phone and stared at the wall where someone had tacked up a reminder, *Get sugar*.

Where the hell *was* Alison? Could she have gone home to her mother, there on Pomeroy Lane? Tom didn't relish the thought of calling Alison's mother. Mrs. Grove would get all upset.

Tom had met Mrs. Grove, back in March, on Easter Sunday. Alison had taken him home to the big builder's Colonial, with its brick facing and white shutters and foundation planting and lamppost. Alison's mother had turned out to be a handsome woman, worthy of her daughter, but Tom hadn't exactly taken to her. Mrs. Grove had hardly noticed him. She had kept her huge blue eyes fixed on Alison. She had fussed with Alison's hair. She had painted Alison's fingernails. And she had seemed less interested in Tom, the bridegroom, than in the wedding to come. The wedding was going to be complicated and magnificent, with all the trimmings. More like a coronation, Tom had thought, watching Mrs. Grove run her hands under lengths of transparent tulle.

The last thing he wanted to do right now was get Mrs. Grove all worked up. Besides, he didn't have time. He was supposed to be across the street in the church, right now, ready to climb into the pulpit.

Jumping up, Tom strode down the hall, jerking at his tie. But when he flung open the door, he found Owen Kraznik on the porch, with—Jesus God—Ellen Oak, and that tall craggy-looking guy who had been with the two of them last night.

"Why, Tom, good morning," said Owen, startled. "Oh, Tom, have you heard what's happened?"

But Tom was staring at Ellen, a painful flush surging up from his collar. "Oh, Ellen," he said heartily, "there you are."

Ellen's face reddened too. "Hello, Tom," she said.

"I—uh—read your letter," said Tom.

Owen looked from one to the other. "I understand you two are old friends," he said lamely. "Oh, excuse me, Tom, have you met Homer Kelly?"

There were introductions. Homer shook hands with Tom Perry and wondered what was the matter with everybody.

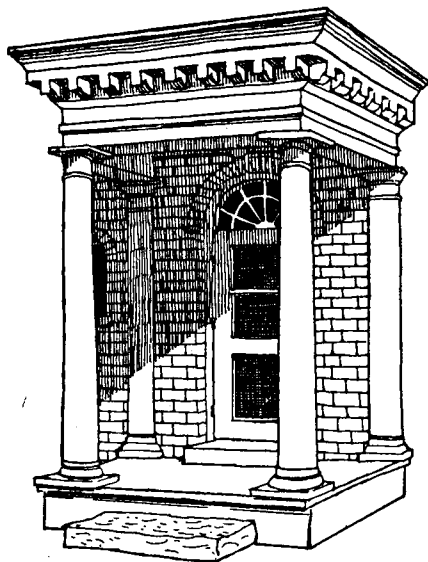
"Well, Ellen and I certainly *are* old friends," explained Tom, suddenly overcome with joviality. It sickened him, but he couldn't help himself. "You see, Owen, Ellen is a *doctor*, and I was her *patient*. We met in the hospital when I was having my appendix out. I lost my *heart* as well as my *appendix*, ha ha!" Tom was appalled by his own idiocy, but he gibbered on. "Well, Ellen," he chuckled, glancing at his wrist, where there was no watch, "we've got to get together and *talk*, don't we? But right now, if you'll excuse me, I'm supposed to be across the street. So long." Nodding and beaming, showing his teeth, Tom dodged past them and escaped, running long-legged in the direction of the church.

"She says it wasn't the axe," said Homer cheerfully, coming into the kitchen.

"The axe hardly touched her," said Ellen. "I know it looked like a lot of blood, but it wasn't really."

"Well, then," said Owen, fumbling with the coffee cups, "maybe it was suicide after all? Do you think Winnie really swallowed two whole bottles of pills?"

"Well, I'm not sure," said Ellen. She sat down and looked around the room at the electric stove, the dishwasher, the bright wallpaper. For a moment she was disappointed that this was no longer the same nineteenth-century kitchen in which Emily Dickinson had baked bread. Then she chastised herself and turned to Owen. "The pills were Secanol, a very commonplace sedative. Not very potent. It would have taken at least ten of them to knock her out. You're not allowed to pre-



scribe more than thirty at a time. But Winnie had two bottles. That would have been sixty pills. I counted eighteen on the floor. There may be more in the bedclothes. If she swallowed all the rest, she would have taken about forty altogether."

"Would forty have been enough to kill her?" said Owen.

"Well, it certainly wouldn't have done her any good. Not a woman in her condition. We'll have to ask Dr. Kloop, whose name is on the prescription. He's a colleague of mine at the hospital. I never knew he had such a distinguished cousin." Ellen smiled at Owen, and made a gesture of resignation. "Now we'll just have to wait till he's back in his office. Then he can do an autopsy and make a blood test. He was perfectly correct in allowing her only thirty tablets in each of those prescriptions, a month apart. That's supposed to prevent this kind of overdose. But of course he couldn't stop her from saving two months' supply and taking them all at once. If that's what she did. Homer noticed something interesting."



"The decanter," said Homer wisely, holding up one finger. "The decanter was still nearly full of water. And so was the wineglass beside it. How could the girl have choked down a lot of large dry pills without drinking any water?"

Owen was puzzled. "But if she didn't take the pills, and if it wasn't the axe, how did she die? And who on earth was in the room with her, throwing furniture around? There must have been a knock-down, drag-out battle. The poor girl must have been fighting for her life. The noise—think of the smashing of glassware and the crashing of furniture on the floor! And yet none of us heard a thing. When could it have happened?"

"Obviously, when you weren't here," said Ellen. "Have you called the police?"

"Yes," said Owen, "just now. I spoke to a man named Archie something. They'll be with us shortly."

"Good old Archie Gripp," said Homer importantly. "Old friend of mine. I'll talk to him, if you like, and show him around."

"Poor Dombey," said Owen, shaking his head. "He didn't want us to call the police at all. He wanted us to go on as if nothing had happened, so that he could finish up his symposium in perfect decorum. Good heavens, that reminds me." Owen looked at the kitchen clock and jumped up. "They'll be leaving the church in a minute, and heading for the cemetery. I'm supposed to read a poem beside Emily Dickinson's grave."



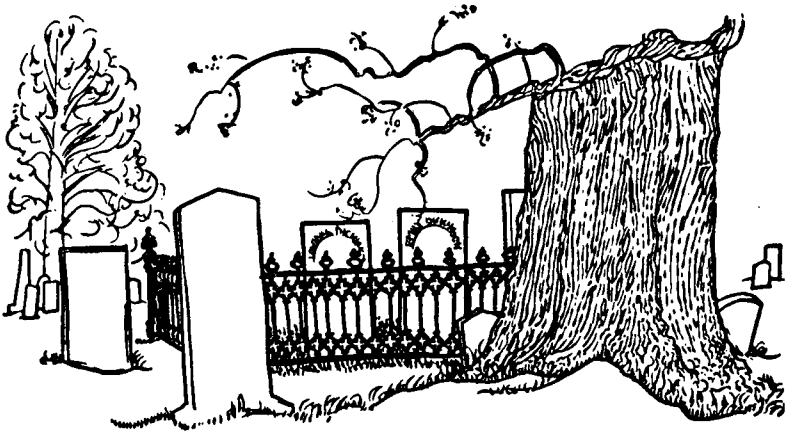
*"Called back."*

The ceremony was open to everyone. People came in throngs, and dropped their flowers over the railing of the Dickinson family enclosure. Schoolchildren reached through the iron fence to sprinkle violets around Emily's tall stone. The minister from the First Congregational Church said a prayer. And Ellen Oak recited a famous poem:

*"Because I could not stop for Death—  
He kindly stopped for me—  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—  
And Immortality . . ."*

It was Owen's idea. Owen was supposed to read the poem himself, but at the last minute he shoved the book at Ellen. She didn't need it. She knew the poem by heart.

Tom Perry was standing morosely at one side. Tom had come to West Cemetery in the hope of finding Alison Grove, but now he couldn't help listening to Ellen Oak. He couldn't help noticing that Ellen's way of saying a poem was different from Alison's. Altogether different. Different in a dozen ways,



a hundred, a thousand. Tom couldn't get over it. But then he told himself it didn't matter. Only one thing mattered—finding Alison herself. Stopping in at the Homestead after the church service, Tom had finally called Alison's mother. But Mrs. Grove had not seen Alison. And as he feared, she had turned hysterical. He had promised to go to the police.

Ellen finished the poem and moved away from the Dickinson enclosure, remembering what she had read about the burial that had happened here a century ago. It had been a day as fine as this. *The country exquisite, day perfect, and an atmosphere of its own, fine and strange, about the whole house and grounds. . . . The grass of the lawn full of buttercups.* Well, the buttercups were still springing up in the grass of the cemetery, but the mourners were not like the people who had followed Emily's coffin across the fields on that lovely May day in 1886. Today no one was wearing dark funereal colors. Only the shiny shoes of the Japanese delegation were black. Students from U Mass and Amherst College stood around in jeans and T-shirts. Some of the kids were barefoot. Everyone was talking cheerfully. After

all, it had been a hundred years since that funeral procession had trailed among the buttercups to bury its dead.

The Amherst Historical Society was handing out paper cups of wine. Owen gave one to Ellen, and congratulated her on her recitation. Then, with an excruciating effort at conviviality, he introduced her to Eunice Jane Kloop.

"I suspect your good husband has gone fishing," he said kindly to Eunice Jane.

"Who knows?" said Eunice Jane darkly. Eunice Jane was not interested in her husband's foolish outing on the Quabbin Reservoir. She had no eyes for Ellen Oak. With a grip of steel she fastened her talons into Owen Kraznik and pinned him to the back of a granite slab. What did Owen think about her new analysis of Poem Number 1615, "Without Diminuet Proceed?" Had he read it in the church bulletin? He hadn't? Well, then, she would explain it from line one.

Ellen looked on for a moment in horrified amusement, then interrupted boldly. "Oh, excuse me, Mrs. Kloop, but I think Professor Kraznik is wanted over there." Waving her hand at the gravestones behind Eunice Jane's back, Ellen called out, "He's coming."

Swiftly she walked him away from Eunice Jane.

"Oh, how fortunate," breathed Owen. "Oh, what an escape! I must confess I find that sort of analysis very trying. Who wants to speak to me?"

Ellen looked at him sheepishly. "Well, no one, I'm afraid."

Owen's jaw dropped. "But how courageous! What a brilliant rescue! You are a woman of valor!"

Peter Wiggins, too, was wandering among the urns and obelisks. It was Peter's first venture into the world after seeing the article about his picture on the front page of *The New York Times*. Furtively he watched the Smith brothers. They were sipping wine, standing in a huddle with Dombey Dell. If he were to speak to them, would they still be as cordial as they had been last night? Courageously Peter moved across the grass, determined to brazen it out.

But as he drew near, Dombey turned his back and shep-

herded the two Harvard professors down the hill. Peter followed, hurrying his footsteps, but now the three of them were ducking behind the graves of eighteenth-century Dickinsons and sidling along the edge of the cemetery, becoming entangled with a cluster of children who were climbing the straggling trees. By the time Peter changed direction, Dombey and the Smith brothers were driving away in Dombey's car, the children were high in the branches, and a woman was running across the lawn.

It was the Mother of Ten. "You get right down from there, Ronnie and Richie! You hear me, Sharon? Kevin and Brian, I'll tear you apart! Donna and Diane—"

Peter's footsteps faltered as the car disappeared on Kellogg Avenue. He flushed with humiliation, then jerked violently as someone spoke up at his elbow. "You know what I think? That article in the *Times* was really dumb. That's what I think."

Peter turned in surprise to find a gray-haired woman at his side. She was carrying a small child. "Oh, excuse me. My name's Tilly Porch. I heard your talk yesterday. Those experts in New York, they didn't hear it. They didn't see your diagrams. What do they know?"

Peter was comforted. He smiled faintly at the baby. "Your grandchild?"

"Oh, no. This is Debbie Buffington's baby. She's staying with me for a couple of days. I'm just baby-sitting at the moment. His name's Elvis." The baby was squirming in Tilly's arms, and she put him down. "Come on, Elvis dear. Time for the picnic."

Peter fell into step with Tilly, and together they walked along Kellogg Avenue with Elvis toddling in front of them. Tilly didn't seem to notice the raw state of Peter's nerves. Instead she talked comfortably about the Amherst Women's Emily Dickinson Association and all the fancy cooking they had been doing for the picnic. The more she talked, the more interested Peter became. His false photograph was burning a hole in his pocket. He was going to have to put it somewhere, very soon. Time was running out.

"I wonder," he said casually, "how many of the people who are here today had ancestors in Amherst in Emily Dickinson's time?"

"Oh, not many." Tilly thought about it. "I guess, as a matter of fact, I'm the only one. Good heavens, Professor Wiggins, I'm still living in my great-great-great-great-great-grandfather's house on Market Hill Road."

"No kidding?" Peter's interest in Tilly became suddenly more intense. "Did your ancestors know the Dickinsons?"

"Oh, well, I suppose everybody in town knew everybody else in those days. Here, Elvis, hold my hand while we cross the street."

"Do you have letters and—you know, old pictures, things like that from those days?"

"Oh, yes, I guess so. I haven't worked my way through all of it yet." But Tilly wasn't interested in her own family history. She was fascinated by Peter's picture, and wanted to tell him so. "You know, there's something wonderful about that photograph of yours, isn't there? It's funny, I have this feeling I've seen it before."

"In Sewall's biography," agreed Peter. "That's where you've seen it." Peter in his turn didn't want to talk about himself and his photograph. He wanted to find out more about the old papers in Tilly's possession. "You mean to say you have more nineteenth-century Amherst material to examine? Things you haven't looked at before?"

"Well, good grief, when your family has been living in the same house for a couple of hundred years, you get bogged down in so much *stuff*. I try to sort through a little more of it every year."

"A *little* more?" Peter pretended to be scandalized. "But how can you wait? You should look at everything immediately. At once! There might be something of great significance among your family papers. Surely you owe it to the—what do you call your organization? The Amherst Women's Emily Dickinson Association? Really, there's no telling what treasures you might find."

"Well, of course, that's true. That's absolutely true. That's right, Elvis dear. Here we go, right around the corner." Through the trees at the bottom of the Dickinson garden they could catch glimpses of blowing white tablecloths and women running back and forth with trays. "Now that my last child is in college, I really should have time to explore the attic. Until now it's been impossible. Raising five children and teaching school—it's kept me terribly busy, as you can imagine. And then my husband was ill, and I nursed him for five years. It's only since he died last fall that I've had any time to myself."

They walked up the granite steps and strolled across the lawn in the direction of the picnic tables. "Oh, Tilly, guess what?" Carolyn Chin was rushing forward, her face anxious, her hair in a frazzle. "We forgot the sugar and cream. I thought there might at least be some sugar in the Homestead kitchen, but there isn't a *speck*."

"I'll run home and get some," said Tilly decisively. Reaching down, she swept up Elvis and turned to say good-bye to Peter. Then her face dropped. Putting Elvis down again, she apologized to Carolyn Chin. "Oh, I forgot, I don't have a car. Debbie took it. You know, Elvis's mother. She dropped me and Elvis at the cemetery and went off in my car to meet a friend."

"Well, then, *allow me*." Peter couldn't believe his good fortune. Once again heaven was smiling! "I have a rented car. Permit me to provide transportation. No, no, I insist. I positively insist."

"Well, in that case," said Tilly gratefully, "I positively accept."

A blue-and-white patrol car and a big police van were parked beside Peter's little Datsun on the other side of the house. "What do you suppose they're doing here?" said Tilly, getting into the front seat. "Oh, I suppose they expect a big crush at the picnic, and there'll be a lot of traffic and all."

"I expect that's it," said Peter smoothly, picking up Elvis, settling him in Tilly's lap. Getting in on the other side of the car, he smiled at the thought of the forged photograph in his pocket. It was warm over his throbbing heart. The opportunity

was at hand. At Tilly's house he would delicately inquire if he might use the bathroom, and then surely he could make his way swiftly to the attic?

Grinning broadly, Peter swung the car around and headed out onto Main Street. His work of art, his handmade reproduction of the photograph of the woman with the dark eyes, was about to find a happy home.

*My Hope put out a petal—*



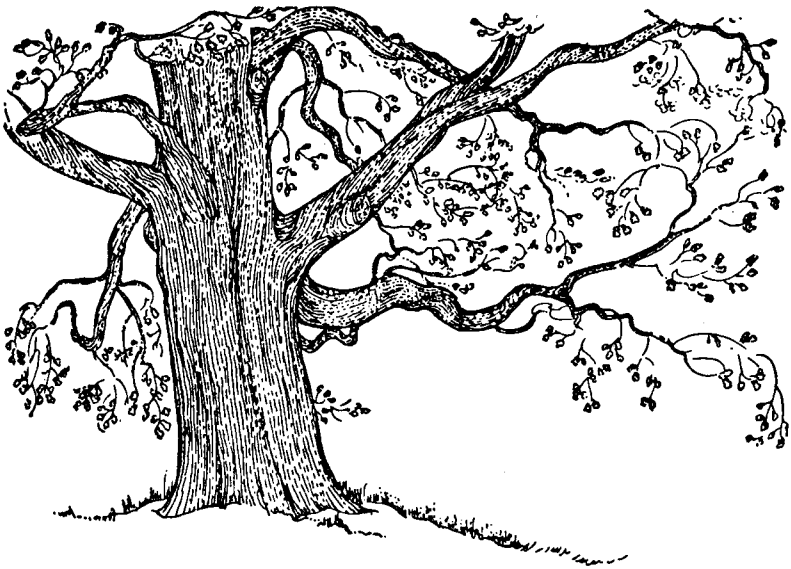


*New feet within my garden go . . .*

The shadow of the white oak tree lay across the lawn. With its dangling infant leaves it seemed as much in flower as the pear tree, the apple tree, the umbrella magnolia, the lilacs, the Jacob's ladder, the bleeding heart. A pitcher was passing around again, another kind of wine, sweet malmsey this time, a heroic attempt by Barbara Teeter to follow a recipe of Mrs. Edward Dickinson's. Everyone made the same joke, *I taste a liquor never brewed—From Tankards scooped in Pearl.*

It was the last event of the symposium. The sun was warm. The participants were mellow. They seemed to have known one another all their lives. Their reverence for Emily Dickinson was turning sentimental. What a miracle it was that she had been born, right here in this house, and lived to become so great a poet; how staggering that her words had survived to become talismans for the condition of all their minds and hearts! When Dottie Poole appeared with an enormous memento on a tray, everyone cheered.

It was the pinnacle and masterwork of the picnic, an enormous black cake, made according to Emily's own recipe. Dottie had stayed up all night to finish it. In a giant plastic washtub



she had beaten together three dozen eggs, four pounds of flour, four pounds of butter, four pounds of sugar, ten packages of raisins, and a pint of molasses. Then she had tucked the cake in the oven and drowsed on the sofa for six hours, leaping up every now and then to test it with a broom straw. Recklessly at last she had poured over it every drop of her husband's precious Armagnac brandy at five o'clock in the morning.

Owen was doing his best. Hastening up and down the sloping lawn, he tried to speak to everyone, to Professor Nogobuchi, to the emeritus professor from Hokkaido, to Marybelle Spikes, to Helen Gaunt, to the Smith brothers, to the Swedish schoolteachers, and to Tilly Porch, who was holding a big baby in her arms.

"Your grandson?" said Owen, peering at the baby politely.

"No, just a little friend."

Owen's jaws ached from smiling. When Mary Kelly came

up behind him and took his elbow, he jerked convulsively and barked, "It's been so good to know you," before he recognized Mary and clasped her in his arms. "Mary dear, oh, Mary Kelly, thank heaven. I'm extremely pleased you're here at last. I've been enjoying Homer so much. Have you found him? Does he know you're here?"

Mary looked at him soberly. "Homer's in the house with Archie Gripp. Oh, Owen, that poor wretched girl, Winifred Gaw. You know, I think I met her once in your office, a long time ago. She had a missing finger, isn't that right? I thought I recognized her, just now, as they were taking her away. Pitiful. What on earth do you think happened to her?"

Owen flapped his hands in distress. "I have no idea. And now something else is worrying us. A young woman has disappeared. She simply vanished into thin air. She's engaged to my young friend, Tom Perry. Naturally, Tom is beside himself. He's gone to the police."

"Good heavens," said Mary, "do you think there could be any connection between her disappearance and the death of Winifred Gaw?"

"Oh, Mary dear, I can't imagine how there could be. Now forgive me, but I've got to say good-bye to everyone. They're all about to go home. I'll be so grateful when the whole thing is over." Owen squeezed Mary's hand and returned to his duties.

Owen was struggling with his feelings. He had promised Dombey Dell to say nothing to any of the participants in the symposium about the death of Winifred Gaw. And so far the lighthearted guests seemed unaware that anything was wrong. They had not heard of the gruesome calamity in Emily Dickinson's bedroom. They had not witnessed the removal of Winnie's body to the police van on the other side of the house. And, with Homer's help, Dombey had made a deal with Archie Gripp. Everybody who had not been staying in the Homestead could go home without interrogation, as long as Dombey supplied Archie with a list of names and addresses.

There was Dombey, sprawled under the magnolia tree. He was polishing off the last of the malmsey wine, waving the

pitcher tipsily at one of the Smith brothers. Dombey obviously felt he had pulled off a great coup. But for Owen it seemed like treachery to grin and show his teeth while poor Winifred was on her way to a marble slab.

"Come, Professor Klaznik! Come, come!" It was the emeritus professor from Hokkaido. He wanted to take a group picture of the entire symposium. He had a camera with a 28-millimeter lens. Crowding everyone together, he pulled Owen Kraznik to the front with Dombey Dell, then ran around the outside, dabbing and patting, arranging and rearranging, shoving them all into a dense grinning mass. He took one picture, then another, and another.

"One more, please?" he said eagerly. But his orderly rows were falling apart. Someone was shrieking. It was Dottie Poole.

"Stop him!" hollered Dottie. "Oh, someone, please stop him!"

Startled, Tilly Porch turned around to look, and then she rushed up to the picnic table and reached for Elvis Buffington. Elvis was sitting beside the black cake, joyfully bashing his fist into the middle of Dottie's magnificent creation.

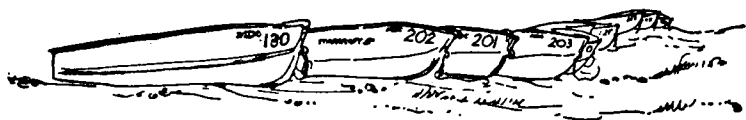


*It was not Death, for I stood up,  
And all the Dead, lie down—  
It was not Night, for all the Bells  
Put out their Tongues, for Noon.*

Harvey Kloop had escaped at last. Yesterday, with his car barreling down Route 9, weaving a little with the weight of the boat-trailer behind it, he had felt an impulse to look back over his shoulder for possible pursuit, for some messenger calling him back to his duties, for Eunice Jane tearing after him in her little Honda, beeping and waving her arm out the window.

But no one had followed to summon him home. Now, out on the water, chugging northward past Mount Zion, Harvey could feel all the tension in his body give way. At the place where the east branch of Fever Brook entered the reservoir, he turned off the outboard and sat for a minute, gazing around and smiling in the bliss of being at last in the place he had dreamed about all winter long. Last night he had set up his little tent in the state forest at Petersham and stretched out in his sleeping bag, rejoicing in the distance he had put between himself and his wife, with all her punishing little eccentricities and her perpetual harping on Emily Dickinson. "The hell with Emily Dickinson," Harvey murmured happily to himself as he drifted off to sleep.

And this morning, waking up at dawn, he had muttered it



again—"The hell with Emily Dickinson!" And then he had turned over luxuriously, deciding not to get up early after all.

He had slept till noon.

Now, floating close to the shore in the brilliant sunlight, admiring the translucent tassels suspended from the oak trees and the separate puffs of needles on the white pines, Harvey lifted his head and shouted, "THE HELL WITH EMILY DICKINSON!"

The words drifted across the water and echoed from the shore and the surrounding hills. Another fisherman was putt-putting in the direction of the pass beyond Mount Zion. He looked up and waved his Day-Glo orange hat in greeting, and the gentle wash from his stern rocked Harvey's boat.

For a while Harvey just sat there, grinning, studying the shore, looking for some sign of animal life, a deer coming down to drink, a wildcat in a tree, an eagle lifting from a top-most branch. Someday, if he lived long enough, he might even chance to see that creature he was so curious about, a mountain lion—the beast the old settlers had called a catamount—and hear its legendary scream. But now there was nothing moving in the undergrowth, not even a bird hopping from branch to branch. The only sign of life was a jet going over, taking off from Westover Air Force Base, ripping the sky into halves like someone tearing a wide blue piece of cloth.

Harvey turned his attention to the water below the boat. Down there he could make out poising shapes—largemouth bass, decided Harvey. He had been hoping for lake trout, here in the cold water flowing out of Fever Brook.

The shallow water was wonderfully clear. Squinting, Harvey could see the bottom. There was a dark strip there—no, two dark strips with a lighter strip between. Immediately he knew what they meant, and he was charmed. The dark

strips were the double track of a road, one of the old roads that had run through the Swift River Valley in the days before the dam was built, before the water had risen in the valley to drown the towns of Greenwich and Enfield and Prescott and Dana and make islands out of Mount Zion and Mount Pomeroy and Mount Lizzie. Harvey looked up curiously at the shore. Yes, there on the point he could detect a trace of the old road, coming abruptly to an end at the water's edge. Well, it was all a long time ago now. Forty years or more, wasn't it? No, fifty. More like fifty.

Harvey got to work preparing his tackle. Yesterday he had stopped at a bait shop along Greenwich Road for a jar of salmon eggs. Now, lifting his rod, he cast his line near the boat and watched the fluorescent eggs descend over the wheel tracks of the old road. He smiled. It seemed so queer that fish should be darting there now instead of birds, ten feet above the place where horses and wagons had once traveled with loads of hay, and tin lizzies had sputtered along on their way to Hardwick, and probably even Chryslers and Pontiacs in the streamlined nineteen-thirties.

Soon Harvey stopped reeling out his line. Hunched contentedly in the stern, he leaned a little to one side to gaze down into the shimmering amber depths. In his mind's eye he could imagine the old towns as they had once been, with their sunlit fields of white rye straw for the making of bonnets, their farmhouses and mills and box factories, their charcoal kilns and schools, and all the other buildings that had once housed a living population of three thousand souls.

Romantically, Harvey stared down over the side of the boat, letting his imagination rip, until he could almost see the lineaments of one of the old frame buildings wobbling under the water below him—a church, perhaps, with salmon passing in and out of the windows, and schools of silver smelt flashing into the door to nibble the hair of the ghostly sexton as he pulled down, down, down with his skeleton fingers on the slimy rope of the bell in the steeple to summon the long-dead flock. And then they would come floating along the road, those old

parishioners, men and women with hollow eyes, their Sunday clothes spreading behind them in the watery depths. There now, hear the bell ring—muffled but penetrating—*bong, bong, bong*—farther down, out there in deep water, the drowned bell in the drowned steeple!

With a start, Harvey sat up. A bell? What bell? There was no church underwater anymore, there was no steeple, there was no bell. All the villages had been destroyed! There was nothing left but stone foundations and cellar holes. The people had moved away. Even the dead bodies in the cemeteries had been dug up and reburied somewhere else.

Why then was there a deep watery ringing that tingled into Harvey's finger ends, a reverberating hum that rattled the metal sides of his boat, a hollow jangling that tightened the very scalp under his duckbilled hat? Clutching his rod with one hand and the gunwale with the other, Harvey leaned over as far as he dared, and peered down at the old road on the bottom of the reservoir, twenty feet below. How could a bell be tolling mournfully, down there under the water?

Then something caught Harvey's eye, something bright, something white, a columnar white shape moving along the road. He caught his breath in horror. It was a woman! A woman was walking along the road under the water! A woman in an old-fashioned dress, a *white* old-fashioned dress, a woman with red hair flowing out behind her in a filmy torrent. *Jesus God, it was Emily Dickinson.*

A terrible shivering seized Harvey Kloop as the ringing grew louder, clashing sonorously, *bongety-bongety-bong*, as though the church were directly below him, as though the bottom of the boat were about to be punctured by the invisible steeple. And then Emily Dickinson lifted her great dark eyes to look up at Harvey, and now—dear God—she was lifting her arm, pallid and limp in its white sleeve, and now—**HOLY MONKEY EYES**—she was *waving* at Harvey! She was waving at him with the slow, languorous motion of the dead!

Harvey nearly lost consciousness. His hundred-and-fifty-dollar Fenwick rod slipped from his lifeless fingers and



splashed overboard, carrying with it his forty-dollar Pflueger reel and his twelve-dollar lead-core line and his five-dollar Dave-Davis rig. But then, taking hold of himself, Harvey slammed the throttle to full speed and yanked on the starting rope. After a couple of false sputters and misfires, the engine caught and the boat zoomed away from Emily Dickinson, racing at full speed in the direction of the boat landing, skipping up and slamming down on the surface of the water, in Harvey's desperate eagerness to get away from the outlet of Fever Brook and the old underwater road and the apparition of the woman who had left the land of the living so long ago, a hundred years ago, *a hundred years ago today*, and the bell that was ringing her death knell.

*The waters chased him as he fled,  
Not daring look behind;  
A billow whispered in his Ear,  
"Come home with me, my friend . . ."*



*What triple Lenses burn upon  
The Escapade from God—*

The flowers were still blooming in Emily Dickinson's garden, the grass was still soft and green underfoot, the trees cast down the same glowing shade. But the party was over. The Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium had come to an end. Reluctantly, in knots and bunches, people began to leave.

Peter Wiggins was ready to go. He had accomplished his mission. He hovered at Tilly's elbow, saying good-bye, feeling a vested interest in Tilly, and in Tilly's old house on Market Hill Road, and especially in Tilly's attic, where his forged photograph was now tucked away in a dusty cardboard box, almost at the front of the wedged contents, sticking up invitingly from all the rest.

Tilly was polite, but her attention was elsewhere. She was keeping an eye on Elvis, who was toddling around on the grass. "Where do you suppose his mother is?" said Tilly, looking at her watch. "She was supposed to be here at one o'clock. Where can she be?"

"Why don't I drive you home again?" said Peter, smiling at Tilly like the old, old friend he felt himself to be. "After all, now that I know the way . . . ?"

So once again Peter Wiggins drove Tilly Porch and Elvis Buffington back to Market Hill Road.

"Now don't forget what I told you," he said roguishly as Tilly lifted a sleepy Elvis out of the car. "Just get right up there in that attic and go through all those old boxes of papers. Promise me?"

"Oh, yes," said Tilly. "I promise. I might as well start this very afternoon while Elvis takes a nap."

But even Peter could hardly believe his good fortune when Owen Kraznik came running out the back door of the Homestead at the sound of his returning car, with the announcement that another picture had turned up.

"Another picture like mine?" Peter was flabbergasted.

"Yes, more or less. But . . ."

*Already?* Peter grinned with satisfaction. Tilly must have galloped up the attic stairs two at a time and homed in on the right box and reached in to find his picture like Jack Horner pulling out a plum from his Christmas pie. Good for Tilly. "No kidding!" Peter beamed up at Owen. "Isn't that great!"

Owen didn't look happy. "Here, I wrote it all down. Telephone call just now."

What a magnificent woman, that Tilly Porch! Peter took the scrap of paper and glanced at it. The words blurred in front of his eyes. Owen's handwriting was almost illegible.

"You see, there was an inscription on the back," said Owen sadly. "Of course, it may not be genuine."

"Oh, I feel sure it's genuine," babbled Peter, leaning out of the car window, his glasses flashing with mad dancing lights. "I mean it just sounds so right, don't you think? *Emily don't like this much*. How *terribly* interesting. No signature, I gather? I can hardly wait to get my hands on it. I want to study the handwriting." Jumping out, Peter slammed the door of the car. He was dizzy with triumph. Once again everything in the world was shining with his good fortune, the needles of the hemlock tree, the sharp petals of the magnolia blossoms in the shrubbery, the sparkling windows of the garage. "'Emily don't like this much.' Well, good! That would explain why the picture disappeared,

don't you see? Emily didn't like it. How perfectly *fascinating*."

Owen was puzzled. "But that's not what it says." He took his note back from Peter. "See here, it says, 'Mother before we moved to Topeka.'"

Peter gasped. "It says *what*?"

Pointing his finger at the words, Owen read them again. "'Mother before we moved to Topeka.' That's all. It was written on the back. That's what the woman said on the phone."

"But Tilly wouldn't—" Peter caught himself. "It can't be. It just can't be the same picture. It's some other picture."

"Well, this woman claims it's the same one. She says she saw your slide lecture. A woman named Helen Gaunt. Somebody put the picture in her mailbox with a note asking her to tell me. She didn't look in her mailbox until just now, she said, when she got home from the picnic."

"But it's—it's *impossible*." Peter flapped his hands. The sense of blessing in the sunlight had disappeared. The day had become hard and shrewd and glittering. "I'll bet it's a—a forgery. It must be." Peter gulped with dismay as the realization smote him that he had made the thing worse. He had turned an unfortunate situation into a disaster. He had given the whole thing away. He had spoken too soon. He had recited the inscription on the back of his own precious forgery. He had spoken the name of Tilly Porch. Too soon, too soon!

Owen turned away, distracted by the ring of the telephone. Peter followed him into the house slowly, dragging his feet, hardly able to walk. As Owen picked up the phone in the kitchen, Peter leaned weakly against the doorframe and looked on, dizzy with regret.

"Oh, Tilly, hello there," said Owen.

Tilly, Tilly Porch? Peter closed his eyes and prayed that Tilly had *not* rushed up to the attic, that she had *not* found his picture in the cardboard box. But his prayer was in vain.

"A picture?" said Owen. "You found a copy of Peter's picture?"

At the other end of the line Tilly was all excited. "Peter just dropped me off, you see, Owen, and then I went right up-

attic the way he told me to, and the first thing I laid my hands on was this old photograph. I mean, it's the same one. It's another copy of Peter's photograph of Emily Dickinson. And listen to this, Owen. There's writing on the back. Wait till you hear."

Owen had a premonition. He could feel it coming. With his back to Peter Wiggins he stared at the refrigerator and mouthed the words to himself as Tilly pronounced them—*"Emily don't like this much."* Behind Owen's back Peter Wiggins was undergoing a transformation. From now on Professor Peter Wiggins of the University of Central Arizona was not simply a lame duck, he was a dead one, a dead, dead duck. Oh, the poor bastard.

"Isn't that wonderful?" said Tilly. "You know, Owen, I could swear I'd been through that box before. You'd think I would have noticed it. But I never did. What do you think of that?"

Owen knew precisely what to think of it, but he couldn't bring himself to say it aloud in front of Peter.

"He's not back yet?" said Tilly. "I'm dying to tell him."

Owen hesitated. "No," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Well, have him call me right away. I know he'll be so pleased."

"Of course." Owen hung up slowly, and stood for a moment longer with his back to Peter. The air in the Dickinson kitchen was thick and sickening with mutual understanding. Good God, what should Owen do now? Well, he would have to speak up. He would have to ask Peter for the truth. And the truth would be wretched and destructive. And then, somehow or other, Owen would have to find a way to be kind.

But the confrontation was forestalled. The phone rang again. Owen turned his head courageously to meet Peter's faltering gaze, then picked up the receiver, expecting still another photographic revelation.

But this time it was his cousin, Harvey Kloop.

Harvey's voice sounded strange and unnatural. It was high and thin and spasmodic, as though his teeth were chattering.

"Listen, Owen, I called Eunice Jane, only—she's in the—library, I guess. She always goes to the—library about—this time of day. Listen, Owen, I want you to—tell me something. Do you think—there are, like, holes in the—universe?"

"Holes in the universe? Harvey, what's the matter? You sound queer. Are you all right?"

"Well, no, as a matter of fact, I'm not. I ran my boat—into a rock. But that's not—what's the matter."

"Harvey, tell me, where are you?"

"And I busted my leg. But that's not it either."

"You broke your leg? Harvey, where are you?"

"And the boat sank, and I had to swim with my—broken leg, and I nearly drowned. But that's not what I'm—worried about—at all."

"Harvey, Harvey, I'm coming! Just tell me where to find you!"

Harvey's teeth were chattering uncontrollably. "It's the u-u-universe, you see, Owen, that's where the trouble is. Tell me, O-Owen, do you think sometimes the whole entire universe has sort of *cr-cr-cracks* in it, where the system as we know it breaks down? Dead people coming back to life, church bells under water, stu-stu-stuff like that? You know, maybe in retribution? For violating your Hippo-something oath? You know, times like that?"

"For God's sake, Harvey, I'll be glad to discuss the universe with you later on. Just tell me where you are right now so I can come for you, and then we'll discuss the whole thing."

"It's the boat dock. You know, at Qua-Quabbin, Gate Forty-three. You go out Route Nine, then turn left at Ware, and then you just keep going up Greenwich Road. There's this sign, Gate Forty-three."

"Oh, right you are. Just stay right there. I'll come right along."

Owen hung up and turned to Peter, putting out of his mind the nasty little problem of the multiple photographs and Peter's unfortunate new status as a dead duck. "It's my cousin,"

said Owen, running an anxious hand through his hair. "Harvey Kloop. I've got to go get him and bring him home."

"Harvey Kloop?" repeated Peter dully. His voice echoed meaninglessly in his own ears.

"He's a doctor. The medical examiner. My cousin. He's in some crazy kind of mental state. And he's broken his leg, so he can't drive. I've got to borrow a car."

"Borrow a car?"

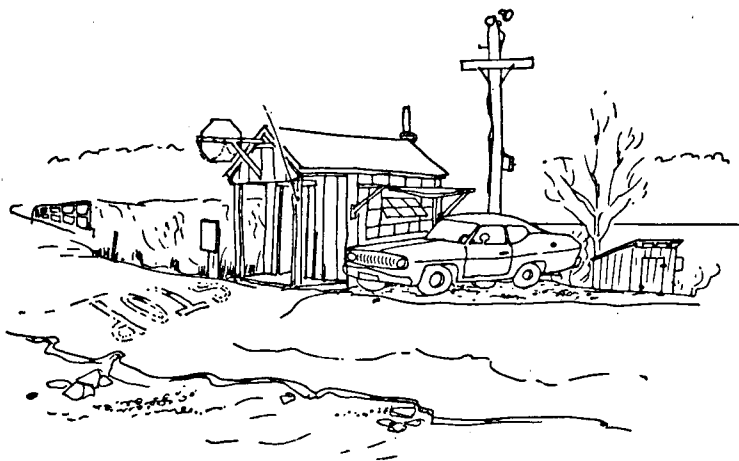
"All I've got is a bicycle."

Then Peter spoke up in a dream. It was a nightmare, of course, not a dream, one of those nightmares where everything that happens is obviously insane, and yet at the same time intensely logical. "I'll drive you there," said Peter. In his personal crisis he had only one impulse left, to cling to the man who knew he had planted a forgery in Tilly Porch's attic. Owen's knowledge of Peter's dishonesty was like a bond of blood between them, a kind of open wound from which vital juices would flow, unless Peter pressed his hand over it, both his hands, unless he pressed up against it with all the strength in his body. Somehow he must keep the blood from leaking out and drenching everything. *Owen must not tell.*

"Thank you," said Owen, and then his face lit up with a happy thought. "We'll ask Dr. Oak to come along. Poor Harvey sounded as though he might be in a state of shock, with nobody there to take care of him."

But Harvey Kloop was not alone at the boat landing. The dock attendant had taken charge. He had heard the cry for help, he had seen Harvey struggling in the water, he had rescued him in one of the rental boats, he had helped him hop up the beach to the shack, he had sat him down and covered him with his own jacket, and then he had dialed the telephone for Harvey.

But Harvey had forgotten to tell Owen something. "Oh, damn," he said, reaching for the phone again with a trembling arm. "Gimme it again, Jimmy. I forgot—to tell him turn right. Somebody took the—bars down, across the road the other way.



He won't know—which way to go. If he doesn't know any better, he'll end up—at Shaft Twelve. What's that phone number again?"

This time there was no answer.

"He's already on his way, I guess," said Harvey, huddling down under Jimmy's jacket again, trying to control his shivering. "Say, Jimmy, listen here. You know the—way we get used to having everything happen according to physical principles? You know, atoms and—molecules obeying the laws of nature? Well, here's what I wonder. I mean, do you think those principles ever go wrong? I mean, do you think sometimes these really qu-queer things happen as if there were these really huge systems—of truth, only they kind of—collide with each other"—Harvey made a feeble whamming gesture in the air—"and cracks appear, and you get glimpses of, you know, another *universe*? Like black—holes or something? Come on, Jimmy, tell me what you think."

"Well, I don't know," said Jimmy, tipping his cap forward



and scratching his head. "My grandmother had this really weird experience in a haunted house once. Did I tell you about that? Like she heard music? And there wasn't anybody there? Spooky!"

*It is a truth—of Blood . . .*

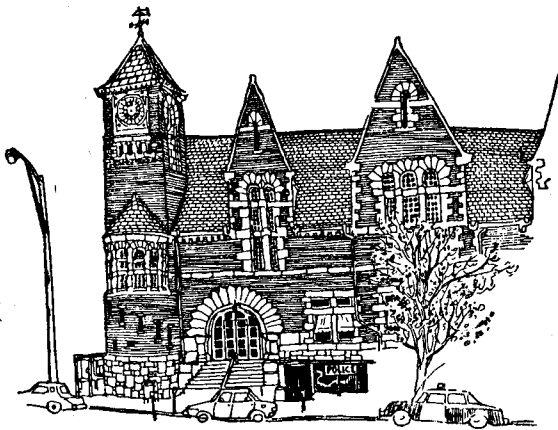
Homer and Mary Kelly walked up the stairs from the subterranean police station in the Town Hall and stared at the Common on the other side of Boltwood Avenue.

A fair had appeared out of nowhere. Pieces of Ferris wheel were debouching from giant trucks. Somewhere a caliope wheezed and merry-go-round cymbals clashed. Down the street a fraternity house throbbed with recorded sound. The afternoon had grown still warmer. On Main Street and South Pleasant the students were thick on the sidewalk. They milled around the Common as the tents jerked up with a windy flapping of awnings. In the parking lot a guy on a motorcycle blatted out onto the street, leaning sideways.

Mary had to shout in Homer's ear. "That man you were talking to—was that Archie Gripp? What did he say?"

"That was Archie," rumbled Homer. "Come on, I'll tell you all about it in the car." Homer began loping along the sidewalk, moving into the shade of the giant katsura tree and out again, hurrying in the direction of Spring Street. "I want to go to Ware and talk to Mr. and Mrs. Gaw."

Mary was scandalized. She ran after Homer and grabbed



at his arm. "Mr. and Mrs. Gaw? Oh, Homer, don't you think that's ghoulish, probing into people's misery like that?"

"Well, I gather Winnie's father is more angry than grief-stricken. You know, he's really foaming with rage. Jesse Gaw, his name is. Works for the Quabbin Reservoir, runs some sort of garage on the side. His wife works in a knitting mill. He was just here, Archie says. Came over to identify the body before they took it away."

"Winnie's father owns a garage?"

"That's right. He's got some sort of car-repair business. Archie thought it was kind of interesting. 'Take a look around,' he said."

"What for? What does he expect you to find in Winnie's father's garage?"

"Well, Archie's just sort of interested in places like that, ever since the fire in Coolidge Hall. He's been working on it, interviewing people who might have had some nutty reason for trying to burn the place down. Fat women, for instance. Kids who work in gas stations where they do paint jobs on cars, spray jobs with cans of lacquer. Body shops. Well, it may not mean a thing, but this time we've got a fat woman and a car-repair outfit in one fist, so to speak."

On Spring Street a big chartered bus was parked beside the Lord Jeffery Inn. In a chattering, orderly mob, the Japanese Poetry Society was climbing on board, laden with luggage and thousands of miles of exposed film. Through one of the big tinted windows Professor Nogobuchi beamed and waved at Homer. Homer grinned and waved back.

Mary was still trying to understand the Gaws. "You say Winnie's father is mad instead of sad? Who is he mad at? Does he know who swung that axe at Winnie?"

"No, I gather he's just mad at the whole world. You know, a mean sort of cuss, Archie says. It was his own axe, did you know that?"

"It was? Winnie's father's own axe?"

"That's right. It was Jesse Gaw's own personal axe. He claimed somebody must have stolen it from his garage." Homer waved again and shouted good-bye to the wood-burning-stove man, who was striding along the sidewalk, going the



other way, heading for North Pleasant Street and a hitch to Lake Winnepesaukee.

"Bitter, he was," murmured Homer.

"What did you say?" said Mary. The hurdy-gurdy noise of the fair was still tweedling and thumping, making a racket all the way down Spring Street. "Bitter? Who was bitter?"

"Jesse Gaw. That's what Archie said. Bitter at the whole damned world. Rancid bitter. You know the kind of guy."

"Well, maybe he had good reason to be bitter."

"That's exactly what I mean. And you know what? Bitterness interests me. It goes back a long way in a person, that kind of ingrown, self-destructive, all-consuming grudge."



*A Chill came up as from a shaft . . .*

*F*OR Peter Wiggins the expedition to rescue Harvey Kloop at Gate 43 was a surrealistic journey. Plunging along Greenwich Road at the wheel of his rented Datsun, Peter was alert to every nuance in the conversation between Ellen Oak and Owen Kraznik. Without taking any interest in it at all, he was aware that something was seeping into the car, something large and warm and formless. It did not mix with the clammy air surrounding Peter. Coldly he sat beside Ellen in his envelope of isolation, adjusting his touch on the wheel with frozen fingers. The car obeyed his least command, but Peter felt out of control. Overhead the trees whizzed by in a blur of branches and sky. With them swept the dark eyes of the woman in his photograph, gazing tragically down at him. His year of work in her behalf had gone for nothing. In a moment of carelessness, in a single instant of failed caution, he had lost it all.

What was left for Peter now? Home and family? Trying to think of Angie, Peter could hear only the dull whine of her voice. His children's faces were blank blobs of pink.

The parking lot at Gate 43 was full of cars. The gate was open. Peter turned in and drove straight ahead, sparing only a

glance for the road that branched off to the right. But his enhanced consciousness took note of every leaf on every tree and every uncurling fiddlehead fern. What the hell was going to happen now?

The road came to an end.

"That's funny," said Owen. "This doesn't look like a boat dock." There was no pier beside the water, no boats drawn up on shore. There was nothing but a solemn little building of gray stone. Owen stared at it. "Do you suppose Harvey's there inside?"

"The door's open," said Ellen. "Somebody must be in there."

Peter followed them up the steps, nearly treading on Owen's heels, clinging to Owen Kraznik like a wad of suffocating cloth, plugged into him like a bung in a barrel, a stopper, a cork. How long could he keep it up? The day would end at last, would turn into other days. Tomorrow Peter would have to remove himself, and then the oozing leakage would begin. Sooner or later Owen would let it be known that the word of Professor Peter Wiggins—as a scholar, as a teacher, as an instructor of young men and women—was not to be trusted. The news would go everywhere, to every college in the East, even to the University of Central Arizona in the West. The eager hope with which Peter had come to Massachusetts had been crushed. The Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium had looked like the beginning of a new career, but instead it had become the end of everything.

"There's no one here," said Owen. His voice reverberated against the cement floor, the stone walls, the lofty ceiling. "We must have taken a wrong turn. This must be part of the water-works. I'll bet the aqueduct is down there under those trap-doors. This must be the beginning of the tunnel that carries the water to Boston."

Ellen gripped his arm and pointed. A shoe lay on the floor, a woman's white sandal. "Alison Grove was wearing white sandals," she said gravely.

"Good God," said Owen. Together they turned to look at

the trapdoors. One of them had been pulled aside. It was only half-covering the opening underneath.

Fearful of what they might see, they walked across the floor and peered down into the shaft.

But they saw only the dark knobs of their own heads, reflected in the still water, ten or twelve feet down. Owen knelt on the trapdoor, trying to see below the surface into the depths. Ellen went to the window and stared out at the wind-driven ripples on the reservoir, half expecting to see Alison Grove in the water, drifting along with water lilies in her hair like the Lady of Shalott.

Peter Wiggins was not interested in the fate of Alison Grove. His only concern was with the man who was kneeling on the trapdoor. Coming up behind Owen, Peter stared at him with wide-open eyes, observing as with a hand lens every rib of corduroy in Owen's trousers, every pore in the sponge-rubber soles of Owen's shoes, every wiry strand of Owen's hair.

Then, shifting his glance to his own right shoe, Peter was astonished to discover that it had grown very large. And the foot inside it was quivering with eager strength. Cautiously, Peter lifted his foot until the toe of his shoe nudged the edge of the trapdoor. Then with a swift motion he kicked upward. The door dropped into the shaft, and Owen dropped with it, cracking his head on the edge of the floor as he fell. The room reverberated with the echo of Peter's shout, and the rumble of the trapdoor, and the splash of Owen's slight body in the dark water of the shaft.

"He hit his head," jabbered Peter as Ellen turned swiftly and threw herself down beside the hole in the floor.

Owen was nowhere to be seen. The water had closed over him. Ellen snatched off her shoes. "Go for help," she said quickly. "The boat dock must be right here somewhere." Putting her legs over the edge of the opening in the floor, she dropped into the shaft. Her narrow body made only a light splash, and then it too disappeared. The water slopped for a moment in widening rings, and flattened out again.

Peter was alone. For a moment he stared down at the still



water, and then he turned and stumbled out of the building. Panting in shallow gasps, he hurried to his car. Clever notions were boiling in his head.

With shaking fingers he lifted the hood of the Datsun and jerked out the distributor wire. Then he got into the driver's seat and went through the motions of trying to start the car. *Arahaha, arahaha, arahaha*, whined the engine, failing to turn over. Let them hear it, if they could, there in that watery hole! It was no use. It wasn't Peter's fault if his car wouldn't start, if he had to go for help on foot.

Abandoning the car, leaving the hood cocked up, he moved off slowly into the woods. Which way was the boat dock? Maybe it was this way. Maybe it was that way. Maybe it was some other way. Deliberately, Peter set out to lose himself in the wilderness.

Staggering in the ferny undergrowth, dodging between the trunks of trees, he headed away from the water. Help for Owen and Ellen would never come, not if Peter could help it. Not until too late, not until much too late. Lost he would be, for certain, wandering in a circle in the woods. Lost, and yet in some delirious way, once more in control of his life. Somehow or other, Peter Wiggins had once again taken a trembling hold.

*Cool us to Shafts of Granite . . .*

The car was Homer's old red Volvo, but Mary was doing the driving while Homer consulted the map. He looked up as she turned off Route 9 into a side road. "Hey," he said. "What's this?"

"Quabbin Cemetery," said Mary. "I'm just curious. It's the place where they reburied the coffins from all the cemeteries in the Swift River Valley before they filled the valley with water. Thirty-four cemeteries had to be dug up! Did you know that?"

Homer looked around curiously at the headstones as the Volvo meandered slowly along the loops and byways of the winding drive. "It must have been hard on the living relatives, picking up their great-grandparents' bones, losing the places where their ancestors had lived, never being able to go back. Nothing but water rolling over the acres they planted and plowed." Homer read aloud the names on the tombstones—"Doubleday, Conkey, Wheeler, Goodale. Hey, look at that! What do you know? There's a Gaw."

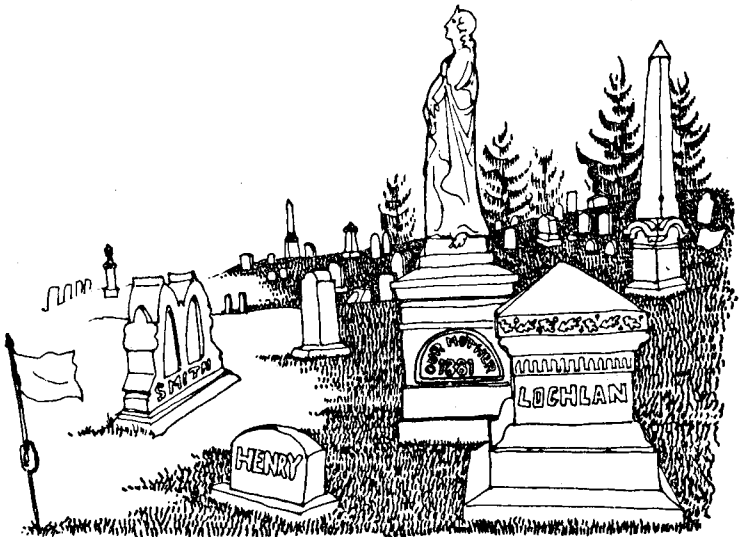
Mary stopped the car, and together they stared at the names engraved on the polished marble.

JOHN GAW 1875-1937  
EMMA GAW 1880-1930

"I'll bet they're Winnie's grandparents," said Mary. "Jesse Gaw's mother and father. Maybe his bitterness begins right here."

"Any more Gaws?" said Homer. "What's that one with the lady on top? Gaws? No, Smiths. '*We shall meet on that beautiful shore, Mother!*' Well, poor souls, I hope they're all up there right now, somewhere in heaven, all those Smiths, frolicking on the sand. But I suspect this shore right here is all they're going to get, this high ground around the reservoir. Hey, look, what's that wooden temple?"

Getting out of the car, Homer and Mary walked up the steps of the little columned house and inspected the memorial tablets on the porch. There were a great many names on the



tablets. They were honor rolls of the war dead from the lost towns of Greenwich, Prescott, Dana, and Enfield. One tablet bore only a single name—

To the memory of RICHARD GROVE, 1896–1936,  
Civil Engineer for the Metropolitan District Commission,  
who died in the line of duty,  
this tablet is dedicated  
by his fellow engineers.

“Hey,” said Homer, “you don’t suppose he was Alison Grove’s father, do you? Her mother is a widow. That’s what Tom Perry told Archie.”

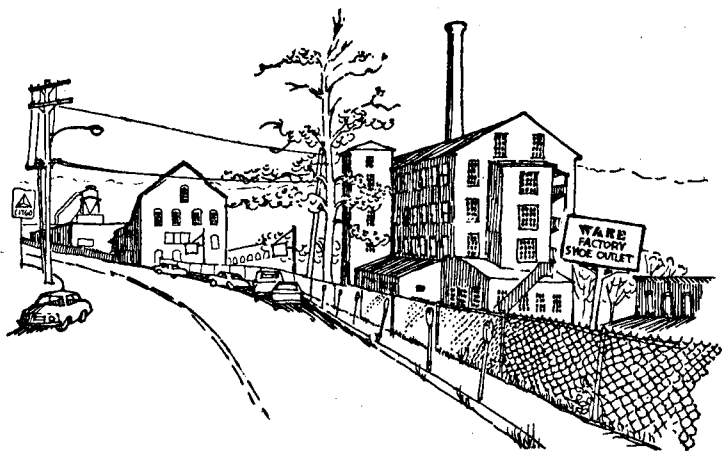
Mary shook her head. “Couldn’t be. How old is she? Look, this man died fifty years ago.”

“Oh, sure, right you are.” Homer smote his forehead. “Common name anyway. Millions of Groves, probably. Billions.”

They left the cemetery and drove to Ware, the melancholy little mill town Winnie Gaw had called home. Beside the Ware River the old mill buildings were still in use, still manufacturing shoes and knitted yard goods. But the ponderous brick Town Hall in the center of town looked half derelict, and so did the big brick church beside it. In the empty lot next to the defunct Casino Theater, a dead truck was engulfed in weeds.

The house belonging to Jesse Gaw was a sullen structure faced with asphalt shingle. The windows looked blind, their shades pulled down. The front yard was a litter of smashed cars.

Homer sucked in his breath with pleasure. “Hey, look at that sign. Jesse Jack Gaw, Collision, Front End Work. It’s a body shop, by God. Not just a garage, a body shop.” Getting out of the car, he looked longingly at the garage window, but he didn’t have the nerve to go up close and take a look. He felt eyes on his back, looking out from the edges of the drawn shades.



“Come on, Homer,” muttered Mary. “They’re waiting for us.”

Homer looked up to see Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Gaw framed in the open front door, staring down at them.

Mary walked up the porch steps and smiled ingratiatingly, “How do you do,” she said. “I’m Mary Kelly. This is—”

“We already been interviewed,” said Mrs. Gaw.

“I been up there already,” growled Jesse Gaw, yanking his head over his shoulder. “I already talked to the police.”

Homer fumbled in his pocket for an old card, dating back to his years of service in the office of the District Attorney of Middlesex County. He flashed it, then pocketed it quickly. “I just wondered if you would be so good as to answer a few more questions.” Gently he moved forward an inch.

Jesse Gaw stood his ground, but Mrs. Gaw dropped back. Then, with a surly shrug of his shoulders, her husband gave in. Limping ahead of them into the living room, he sat down in a vinyl-covered lounge chair. Mrs. Gaw smoothed her thin hair and sat down too, on the edge of another overstuffed chair.

Her eyes were red. She was a sharp-featured rawboned woman. Mary guessed Winnie's clumsy frame came from her father. Jesse was a big man with thick muscular arms and a loose belly.

The Gaws' living room bulged with showy furniture. It was crowded with knickknacks. Mary hesitated, then sat down on the sofa, sinking in deep. Homer sank down beside her. Their knees were high. They didn't know what to do with their hands. The formality of the encounter struck both of them dumb—Strangers Confront Bereaved Parents In Darkened Parlor. Mary was desperate to say something, anything.

She turned to Mrs. Gaw. "Tell me about Winnie. I'll bet she was a good student. I mean, as a little girl."

Mrs. Gaw's eyes slid sideways to her husband, then returned to Mary. "Oh, sure, Winifred always liked school. Except she was sick all the time, you know?"

"Sick?" said Mary.

"Oh, you know." Mrs. Gaw had a flat, unblinking gaze. "Viruses, they used to settle in her chest. She was absent a lot. You know."

"Who you kidding?" Jesse Gaw spoke up roughly. "She run away. Kid was always running away."

"But she came back?" murmured Mary.

"Oh, sure. Police, they'd bring her back."

"And then he'd get out the strap," said Mrs. Gaw, looking peevishly at her husband.

"Well, what you going to do with a kid like that? Got to teach 'em. Listen"—Jesse Gaw sat forward in his chair and spoke with passionate resentment—"if the police was really going to do their duty, they'd find out who the hell is ripping me off. Shaft Twelve, my key to Shaft Twelve, somebody stole it off the wall of my garage."

"Shaft Twelve?" Homer's interest was suddenly engaged. Shaft Twelve! Somewhere there were a lot of shafts, twelve of them, twelve bottomless crevasses plunging into the bowels of the earth, twelve boiling pits with devils brandishing pitchforks. "What do you mean, Shaft Twelve?"

Jesse Gaw jerked his head backward. "Gate Forty-three, up Greenwich Road. Or you go out Route Thirty-two. It's where the water comes into the tunnel from the reservoir, goes to Boston. You know, sixty miles blasted through rock. No amount of money they wouldn't spend, build a reservoir, take the water to Boston. Do we get any water around here? Not on your life. All goes to Boston. All those millions of dollars they spent to build it, how much for the houses they tore down? Couple a thousand, that's all they give my father for the house his family lived in, you know, all their lives, going way back. Lousy couple a thousand. And look at this here, you see this here?" Jesse Gaw stuck out one leg. "That ain't my leg. That there's a prosthetic leg. One of *them* did that to me. You know. I was just a kid, playing around the old schoolhouse. I was picking up stuff, you know, the way kids do, and a wall fell on me. This big shot drove into me with his bulldozer. Didn't see me, he says. Well, my dad took care of him."

"You lost your leg?" Mary's self-possession had vanished. In the face of so much misery she felt like a callow ladylike fool.

But Jesse Gaw was off on another tack. "And how about the axe? And my bell? They took the axe and the key to Shaft Twelve and walked off with my bell."

Homer sat forward and looked mournfully at Jesse Gaw. "Your bell? Somebody stole your bell? What bell?"

Jesse fell back in his chair, his passion spent, and waved a surly hand.

Mrs. Gaw licked her upper lip and explained. "It's his old school bell. They knocked down the school. I mean, we both went there, the Greenwich Village School. When they knocked it down, he found the bell, only the thing that holds the clapper—you know—it broke, and yesterday, he—" She stopped and looked at Jesse.

Her husband spoke up again, with venom. "I fixed it. Welded a new piece on the inside. You know. And then somebody swiped it. Must of been still warm. Hardly even cooled off. I told the police just now, I told 'em, they don't find the

shit stole my bell, I'll—” A nameless threat hung in the air. “They don't give a goddamn shit about my bell.”

Mrs. Gaw picked nervously at a fold of her dress. “See, he really cared about that old bell.” Suddenly she turned to her husband and whined at him. “More than about Winifred! He don't seem to care what happened to Winifred!”

“You shut your trap,” said Jesse Gaw, without looking at her.

Mrs. Gaw's eyes were wet. She closed her lips and said nothing more.

Mary and Homer sat silent too, unable to inject any pious thoughts into the poisoned air.

But then the atmosphere changed. Jesse Gaw looked at his watch and stood up. He had become a man of affairs. “I got to go to Oakdale, throw the switch. It's my job, see, throw the switch. Chief engineer, he called me. Got to shut off the Ware River outlet, open the valve at Shaft Twelve. Oakdale, that's where it's at. Got to go throw the switch.”

“Open the valve?” said Homer. “You mean it's been shut? Boston hasn't been getting any water?”

“Oh, Boston don't need no water. Not all winter long. See, all winter, Quabbin fills up at Shaft Eleven-A from the Ware River overflow. Only today you stop your flow that way, and you open up your valve at Shaft Twelve, so all summer the water goes to Boston. Four hundred billion gallons.” For the first time the querulous note in Jesse Gaw's voice was gone, replaced by prideful know-how.

“Four hundred billion gallons?” Mary couldn't believe it. “You mean, all at once?”

“Oh, no, that's the head of water, see, in the whole reservoir. Eighteen miles long, the whole thing. Six hundred million gallons a day going through the pipe, after I throw the switch.”

The man was a paradox, thought Homer. On the one hand there was his background of seething family resentment, on the other his pride in the massive statistics of the Metropolitan Water District, and in his own importance as the man with his hand on the switch. Homer had a vision of the entire



population of Boston reaching out to Jesse Jack Gaw, millions of parched throats and open mouths, gasping for the water only he could supply.

And now he was departing, to throw that switch, to satisfy that thirst. Lifting and swinging his game leg, Jesse Gaw left the house. In a moment they heard his car start up and zoom backward out of the driveway.

Mrs. Gaw's hunched shoulders relaxed. Mary sensed her relief. Jesse Gaw's presence was the kind that filled a house, that bore down heavily on everyone else, no matter where one might hide, from attic to basement.

Mrs. Gaw was looking at Homer. For the first time there was a light in her sharp eye. "You want to see Winifred's darkroom?"

"Her darkroom?" Homer glanced at Mary. "Oh, that's right. Owen told me Winnie liked to take pictures."

"Down cellar," said Mrs. Gaw firmly. "Winnie did everything herself. Taught herself, you know, how to do it." Opening a door, she pulled a light string and led the way downstairs. "Come on, take a look."

The darkroom was a walled-off section of the basement. The space inside it was orderly and narrow. The three of them crowded in. Mary wondered how Winnie had managed to turn around. A camera was fixed to the stand of an enlarger. There were photographs pinned to a bulletin board, Winnie's work, obviously, mostly snapshots of a startled Owen Kraznik. Clothespins held negatives on a string over the set tubs. The overhead bulb shone through one of them, illuminating an image Homer recognized. "May I?" he said to Mrs. Gaw, reaching to take it down. Holding it carefully by the edges, he held it to the light for Mary to see. "It's Peter's photograph of Emily Dickinson, the one he talked about in his lecture." Homer turned to Mrs. Gaw. "I wonder why Winnie was copying this picture?"

Mrs. Gaw squinted at it and shook her head. She didn't know.

Homer hung the negative back on the line, then poked

furtively in a small cardboard box. The cover had a label, PROF. KRAZNIK, but inside there was only a miscellany of worthless objects, ends of pencils, rubber bands, bits of eraser, and a collection of little notes asking Winnie to do small errands or go to the library. Homer put the top back on the box. Winnie's crush on her boss was apparent. She had collected pieces of Owen Kraznik like fragments of the True Cross. Gloomily, Homer followed Mary and Mrs. Gaw upstairs.

Then he remembered the garage. "Oh, Mrs. Gaw," he said, "do you think we might look in the garage? You know, your husband seems to be having trouble with theft. I just wondered if—?"

"Oh, sure, help yourself. Wait a minute." Mrs. Gaw picked up her pocketbook and scabbled inside. "Here's the key to the side door. Just stick it under the shingle when you're done, see? Loose shingle beside the trash can."

"Oh, thank you. Good-bye, then. Thank you again. Good-bye." Homer and Mary nodded and smiled, backing out the door.

But Mrs. Gaw seemed reluctant to let them go. "Winnie's finger," she said, whispering, glancing behind her as if her husband might suddenly reappear. "He done it."

"He—?" Mary blinked at Mrs. Gaw. "You mean her father? You mean there was an accident of some sort?"

"Wasn't no accident." The resentment in Mrs. Gaw's voice transcended the virulence of her husband's smoldering anger. "He got into this really bad mood, once when she run away and they found her and drug her home. He done it. He had this axe. You know. The one they found with Winnie."

Homer and Mary stared at Mrs. Gaw, too stunned to speak.

"And then he wouldn't let me take her to the doctor."

There was nothing more to be said. Mary wanted to put her arms around Mrs. Gaw, but the woman wasn't inviting comfort. Her eyes were dry. There was a fierce look of triumph on her face. She stood aside, and Homer and Mary left the house.

But on the front porch, Homer turned to ask a final question. "Mrs. Gaw, do you think your daughter killed herself?"

"Winnie?" The look of triumph disappeared. The corners of Mrs. Gaw's mouth turned down and quivered. "Honest to God, I just don't know."

They were glad to get away. Homer unlocked the side door of the garage and pushed it shut behind them. "My God," he said angrily. "I don't believe it. His own daughter."

Mary could hardly speak. "Maybe—maybe it was Jesse this time too. Maybe *he* killed Winnie. It was the same axe."

"But don't forget, the axe didn't kill her. And anyway Archie says no. They've looked into it. They know where Jesse was the whole time."

Glumly they examined the crowded interior of Jesse Jack Gaw's garage. A Chevy Impala took up most of the space. It was waiting for a paint job. Its windows were blanked out with cardboard. Against the wall a couple of narrow tanks stood beside a cluttered workbench. The floor was a tumble of chains and hoses and instruments for clutching metal.

"Tut, tut," said Homer in pious disapproval, picking up a greasy shirt, dropping it again. "The man doesn't know how to keep himself tidy. Where's the paint? That's what I want to know."

Mary pointed to the back wall. "There's a cupboard. Could that be it? Look, it's locked."

"Sign on it too," said Homer. "'No Smoking Private Keep Your Fucking Hands Off.' Well, isn't that nice." Stepping over the snaking tangle of hoses, Homer looked through the heavy wire grille. "It's paint, all right. Automotive lacquer. All kinds of colors, aquamarine bronze, apricot-pearl fleck, opal gold. Hey, that's the color of the can they found in the bushes, opal gold, I'll swear it is."

Mary sniffed. "That smell, it reminds me of high school. I used to paint my nails in the girls' room. This place smells like nail polish."

"Nail polish? Say, that's exactly right. Nail polish is lacquer." Homer picked his way back across the floor. "So maybe

the fat girl in Coolidge Hall was Jesse Gaw's own daughter Winnie. Maybe she started here, right here in her father's garage. She unlocked the fucking cupboard with the fucking key, swiped the fucking can of lacquer, took it to Coolidge Hall, poured it into the buckets and set fire to it, and nearly burned down the fucking building. But, Christ, whatever for? Come on, let's get out of here before the fucking man gets back."

Dismally they got back in Homer's car. And then Mary had another idea. She fumbled in the glove compartment. "Homer, where's that map of the Metropolitan District Commission we used to have? Oh, here it is. I just wonder if we could find our way to Shaft Twelve."

Homer darted her a keen glance. "Shaft Twelve?"

Mary nodded. "I really think we should take a look at it. Look, Homer, somebody stole a can of paint from Jesse Gaw, and tried to burn down Coolidge Hall. Somebody also stole the key to Shaft Twelve, and—what's the name of that missing girl?"

"Alison Grove? My God, do you think she might be down the hole?"

"Well, why would you steal the key to a hole in the ground unless you wanted to get rid of something? Something big?" Mary jabbed her finger at the map. "Here it is, I found it. Gate Forty-three, that's what Jesse said. Where's Route Thirty-two? Oh, here it is. You'll have to turn around."

Route 32 was a paved country road, running in a straight line past forests and empty fields and signs advertising bait for sale, and small houses tucked into pockets in the woods. Homer gripped the steering wheel and stared at the road rushing toward him, struggling with a depression of spirits, thinking about Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Gaw.

Somehow they threw everything into question. Oh, it was all very well, reflected Homer, for Miss Emily Dickinson of Main Street in Amherst to sit in her garden, basking in eternity, but what about the Jesse Gaws of the town of Ware, and people like that? They had surely done very little basking. For

the working people of Ware, life must have been an endless succession of long days in the mills, fastening heavy soles to leather uppers, or endless days at home, weaving palm-leaf hats by hand. Of course, sometimes the monotony was varied by national strife. Homer winced, remembering all the gold stars on the memorial tablets in the Quabbin Cemetery. In the grim company of Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Gaw, the ethereal respectability of Emily Dickinson seemed a cruel irrelevance. For an instant Homer saw a new Emily, cross-eyed with mystical rapture, clasping her hands at butterflies while her brother paid a substitute to fight in his place in the Civil War and her father drove hard bargains in his office in the Palmer Block. Homer snarled, and wrenched the car to the side of the road. "This doesn't feel right. I'll bet we've gone too far."

"Oh, Homer," groaned Mary, consulting the map, "we missed the fork."

Homer swore, and jerked the car into reverse. Swooping to the left in a clumsy curve, he careened back down the road the other way.



*Death's tremendous nearness . . .*

**B**lood was seeping from a great swollen bruise on Owen's forehead, but he was breathing. He was not drowned. At first Ellen wore herself out trying to tread water and keep him afloat at the same time. But then something nudged at her shoulder, and she grasped at it gladly. It was the trapdoor. It would do for a life preserver.

Heaving and hauling at Owen, Ellen managed to drag the upper part of him onto the trapdoor. Then she reached one arm over his chest, gripped the rope handle on the other side, and hung on.

It was a stable arrangement, decided Ellen gratefully. They could stay this way forever. And Owen was opening his eyes.

He seemed blissfully deranged. Rolling his head to one side on the trapdoor, he smiled at her and said, "My dear."

"We're all right," said Ellen, grinning back at him, tossing the wet hair out of her eyes. "No, don't move. Just lie back. Can you bring up your legs and let them float? Good for you. Peter's gone for help." She was speaking softly, almost whispering, to diminish the echo, the booming reverberation against the curving cast-iron wall. "Does your head hurt?"

"No," lied Owen. He leaned back again, feeling feeble and dizzy, and stared up at the square patch of light. The hole through which he had fallen looked small and far away. They were imprisoned in a dark circular room with water for a floor and a pitch-black ceiling. How deep was the water below them? Owen shuddered.

"Are you cold?" said Ellen quickly.

"No, no," he said, lying again. Then the trapdoor slipped out from under him, and water lapped over his mouth.

Swiftly, Ellen wrestled him up again. "Don't talk," she said gently. "Here, can you wrap your fingers around the other handle?" Skillfully she closed Owen's hand over the rope.

He was lifting his head, looking at her with concern. "You must be tired."

It was Ellen's turn to lie. "No, not at all. I can stay like this forever. And Peter will be back in a minute."

Dreamily it occurred to Owen that Peter was not the messenger he would have picked, if there had been a choice, but he merely gazed at Ellen and smiled. "Your face," he said. Then he closed his eyes and dropped his head back. "Beautiful. You shouldn't have—come down here—after me." Then his fingers opened on the rope handle. Letting go, he rolled off the trapdoor and his head went under.

Panic-stricken, Ellen seized the shoulder of his jacket and hauled him up again. And then she was aware of a change in the water around her. There was a noise, not just the hollow ricochet of their voices, but a deep shuddering echo, a tremendous booming that rattled against the metal walls. Below them, far, far down, there was a heavy rushing, a thundering, vibrating hum.

Around them the water had begun to move in a slow circle. Now it was swirling faster and faster. It dragged at Ellen, and she struggled to keep her place, paddling with one arm, splashing with her legs. The trapdoor was swept away. Like bathwater gurgling down a drain, the water was spinning in a descending vortex, guided by the helical vanes on the cylindrical walls of the shaft. Frantically, Ellen clung to Owen as they

whirled in the sucking darkness, dropping lower and lower like chips of wood tossed into a whirlpool.

Far below them the valve at the bottom of the shaft was opening. In a mighty flood the water of the Quabbin Reservoir was bursting into the tunnel, gushing in a pouring tide fourteen feet high, surging toward the spinning blades of the hydroelectric station of Wachusett, and from there, plunging through deep rock, to the thirsty pipes and water mains of the city of Boston.





*The River reaches to my Mouth—  
Remember—when the Sea  
Swept by my searching eyes—the last—  
Themselves were quick—with Thee!*

“*H*ere we are,” said Mary. “This must be it.”

In the clearing beside the reservoir stood a little building of gray stone. The door was open, banging against the granite wall in the chill wind that was lapping the blue water into whitecaps. A car was parked beside the building, its hood thrown high.

“I know that car,” said Homer. “Did you meet Peter Wiggins? That’s his car, I swear. I remember the fog lights, and the nick in the fender. What on earth is Peter Wiggins doing here?” Homer got out of the Volvo, then stopped to listen.

A huge sound was pouring out of the building, a thick liquid sucking, an appalling, terrible noise.

“My God, what’s that?” said Homer, staring at the open door.

Together they ran up the steps and entered the building, then stopped short, their ears assaulted by a deafening roar, as though someone had pulled the plug in a stupendous sink.

The room was empty except for a scattering of shoes on the floor. Grasping Homer’s arm, Mary shrieked at him, “Something’s wrong.”

Then both of them saw the hole in the floor, and they ran forward and knelt beside it to look down.

What they saw seemed not of this earth. *Black hole*, thought Mary. Below them was nothingness, and below the nothingness, water swirling, plunging down in a vortex like a whirlpool, and, spinning in the whirlpool, a square object and two small round ones, bobbing like corks.

Homer shouted, and the two round objects became infinitesimal pale spots, looking up.

Mary gasped and stretched her arm into the hole. "We're here," she cried, but her words were lost in the overwhelming noise that pounded on the iron shaft and dinned against the walls.

"Christ," bellowed Homer. "It's the shaft over the tunnel. The valve is open. Jesse Gaw opened the gate. He just opened the gate."

With one motion, Homer and Mary leaped to their feet and stared at each other. Wildly they looked around, their hands jerking involuntarily in grasping, saving motions. They were too far away. They couldn't reach. Then Mary saw the bucket, the great metal bucket, lying on its side on the floor.

Homer saw it too. "Overhead crane," he roared, pointing at the ceiling. "Runs along a rail, see? Kind of a trolley. How in the hell does it—?"

"Box on the wall," screamed Mary, and she ran for it, falling over the wood that was stacked beside it, barking her shins painfully, leaping up to throw open the metal door. "Overhead lights," she muttered under her breath, reading the labels beside the switches. "Outdoor lights—crane." There it was, the switch that controlled the crane. Swiftly, Mary yanked it up, then turned her head to see if anything had happened. The crane was shaking slightly. The power was on.

Homer found the ropes that worked the pulleys. It wasn't easy. Jerking too hard, he kept overshooting. The great hook raced past the bucket, while below them the vast sucking sound in the shaft grew lower in pitch and began to throb with deep harmonic overtones as the column of air above the descending water grew ominously longer and longer.

Homer Kelly had always been butterfingered, his muscular coordination was terrible, his mechanical know-how had been neglected, and he couldn't even repair a defective lamp cord. But in this crisis he caught on quickly, and soon he was jerking at the pulleys with clumsy effectiveness.

"More," cried Mary, her hands on the dangling hook. "A little more. Oh, ow, ow! What? Never mind!" Careless of her pinched fingers, she eased the hook under the heavy bail of the bucket. "Now, up, up! Up, first, then bring it over. No, no, Homer, not like that!"

Homer was dragging the bucket across the floor. The metal bottom shrieked on the concrete floor and struck out sparks. "Stop," screamed Mary, but it was too late. Bashing into Homer, the bucket knocked him down.

He hardly seemed to notice. He was up on his knees, yanking on the ropes, staring up at the crane, his face bleeding.

At last he had the bucket poised directly over the hole, hanging silently above the abyss, shaking gently up and down.

Gasping, Homer climbed in, and Mary ran to take over the guide-ropes.

Blood was running down Homer's cheek. He shouted at Mary, "The echo will be bad. You may not understand me when I yell at you. One yell for stop, okay? Two yells for go."

Mary nodded. With a jerk she started the bucket down, and then hurried back to the hole in the floor. Dropping to her knees, she peered past the bucket to catch a glimpse of the water.

Deeper! It was deeper down! Where were they, the two faces? Gone? Drowned and gone? No, no, now she could see one of them. It was much smaller than before, much farther away. Mary gasped as the head submerged, then reappeared. The second one appeared again too, dragged up by the hair. Then the bucket descended and the faces vanished.

Mary stood up again and watched with her heart in her mouth as Homer's frowzy head fell slowly out of the light into the hollow reverberating darkness of Shaft 12.



*It sets the Fright at Liberty—  
And Terror's free—  
Gay, Ghastly, Holiday!*

*P*eter Wiggins was lost in the wilderness.

Peter had meant to wander aimlessly for four or five hours, then find his way back to the road and flag down a car, and explain that two people had fallen into a hole, back there at the gate where people went fishing, only it didn't look like a fishing place, and he didn't know exactly where it was because he had been lost, but those two people certainly needed help and somebody should call the police or the fire department right away.

But at dusk Peter couldn't find the road.

When the stars came out, he was still stumbling in the middle of the square mile of roadless forest that lay south of Shaft 12. He was exhausted, but he didn't dare lie down on the ground and go to sleep. The thought of spending the night in the woods was too frightening. He had never slept in anything but a bed. He had never been a Boy Scout. He had never even gone to summer camp.

Peter was lost in the woods for forty-two hours. After the first blundering night of shivering cold and fear there was an endless day of mist and fog, and then a final terror-stricken twelve hours of utter horror.

If Peter had been a student of Calvinist doctrine, if he had agreed with the notion that God punishes the evildoer, or even if he had believed with Henry Thoreau in the moral lessons of nature—*Every zephyr speaks of some reproof!*—then he might have taken his misadventures in the woods as a personal reprimand, a kind of savage, enforced atonement for his misdeeds. But Peter was too close to those misdeeds to see them in a moral light. What he had done seemed perfectly natural to him, the necessary response to the circumstantial crises in which he had found himself. And of course during his two nights and a day in the forest, he was too galvanized with fear to think sensibly about anything at all.

The terrors of the first night were perfectly ordinary. In his ignorance, poor Peter failed to understand how trivial his misfortunes were. If he had known anything about the animal life of the New England backwoods, he would not have been so dismayed when he stumbled up to his knees in a beaver pond at midnight. Later on, struggling out of a swamp and shaking in every limb, he would not have screamed when a startled partridge flew up in his face out of the undergrowth. A few minutes later, he would have recognized the warbling gobble of a wild turkey, and then he might have been able to dodge the sharp beak that raked at his thigh. Of course the nest of bobcats that swarmed under his groping hand in the small hours of the night would have electrified anyone, but only an ignorant innocent like Peter would have run shrieking away from the wild howl that rent the silence of the deep woods just before daybreak. It wasn't a pack of wolves, it was only a coyote.

But Peter knew nothing about any of these creatures, and therefore at dawn he was a gibbering wreck. Dragging his bleeding leg from tree to tree, mopping his torn face with his bleeding arm, he was tearfully thankful to find himself alive.

A mist had formed during the night, and now there was a chill drizzle of rain. Peter was glad to sink down under the stone arch of an abandoned railway and try to sleep, before making another attempt to find the road that surely lay just within his reach over that way—or perhaps *that* way, or—of course, he was completely turned around—it must certainly be

just a few hundred yards in *that* direction over there.

But when darkness came again, he was still lost. And his second night in the woods was a thousand times worse than the first. Or perhaps it was a thousand times better, since it was a succession of extraordinary adventures.

If Peter could have known the rarity of the things he was to behold that night, if he could have imagined the thousand failed attempts by sportsmen and nature-lovers to catch glimpses of the astonishing wonders he was about to witness, then perhaps he might have rejoiced when he was trampled by the largest deer in North America, a gigantic sixteen-point buck. He would have been thankful for his good fortune when at the top of a rocky ledge the only nesting eagle in Massachusetts rose above him, spreading her enormous wings, and dived at him, driving a beak like a dagger deep into the flesh of his shoulder.

And then there was a final miracle. As the mist at last dispersed, as Peter staggered, sobbing, into a moonlit clearing, bleeding from three places at once, he nearly tripped over a giant cat. He should have fallen to his knees in gratitude. Instead he stumbled backward in helpless dread as the catamound gazed at him with its luminous eyes, lifted its narrow head, opened its terrible jaws, and uttered a scream like a woman's.

The gracious greenwood of New England, the forest of leafy verdure for which Peter had hungered, had brought him to death's door.



*No Wilderness—can be  
Where this attendeth me . . .*

On the second morning after Peter's disappearance, Owen and Ellen joined the search party that spread out to look for him, a network of volunteers and MDC police, fifty people strong.

Ellen's face was bruised from slamming against a corner of the trapdoor as she whirled, half drowned, at the bottom of the shaft. Owen's forehead was bandaged and one arm was set in plaster to support the shoulder joint, torn from its socket when Homer snatched him from the last guttering revolutions of the swirling water before it sank into the tunnel, to be swept away forever in the rushing underground river.

But now they were risen souls. It was a bright morning. Hand in hand, they crossed a meadow and entered a sunny patch of woodland. Red-winged blackbirds flew ahead of them, alighting to utter their piercing peep. Ferns unrolled in fronds of fresh pale green. Rabbits sat in trances.

At first Owen didn't recognize the pitiful apparition that tottered toward them, whimpering, his hair full of twigs, his face black and bleeding, one eye swollen shut, his clothing in shreds, his body poulticed with clusters of blood-soaked leaves.

But when the stranger said Owen's name in a feeble croak, Owen and Ellen ran to him and helped him to the road.

Owen had no suspicion Peter had ever meant him harm.





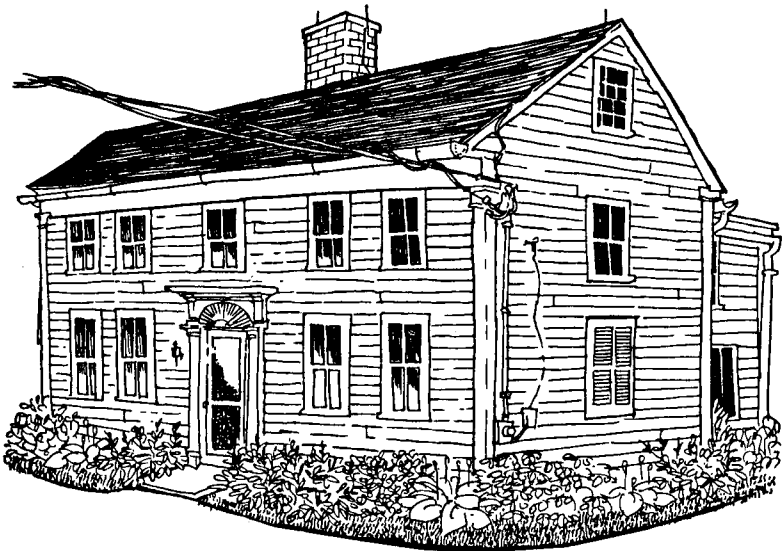
*How much can come  
And much can go,  
And yet abide the World!*

Next day the wind picked up, tossing the expanding leaves of the white oak tree in the Dickinson garden, blowing a shower of pointed magnolia petals onto the lawn. On the Common it snapped the flag on its tall pole and swung the traffic lights dangling over the crossing. In Ware the projecting sign of Astrella's Doughnut Snack Bar trembled on its supporting wires. All over the Connecticut Valley men and women students trudged to their final exams, their hair blowing this way and that. And at the Quabbin Reservoir the nesting eagle left her three white eggs to soar above the sunny wooded slopes on the rising thermals and gaze down with her golden eyes at a disturbance in the water.

A diver was dragging something out of the reservoir, depositing it on the stony riprap beside Shaft 12.

It was the body of Alison Grove. Taking off his face mask and flippers, the diver watched as the MDC patrolman picked up Alison and carried her to the police van. The bell on her ankle tonked dismally once or twice.

The chief engineer for the Quabbin branch of the Metropolitan District Commission was looking on, feeling a melancholy pride in the correctness of his prediction. As the



patrolman laid Alison in the back of the van and covered her with a blanket, the chief engineer explained with sweeping gestures how he had figured out where to find her.

“That guy in the boat—what was his name? Koop? No, Kloop. He sighted her right there east of the pass at Mount Zion. So she was sure to drift through and go south, because that’s the way the current goes, and then I was positive she’d end up at Shaft Twelve sooner or later, especially since we opened up the valve. I mean, the pull in the direction of the opening was bound to create a swift underwater current and drag her right up against the screen, do you see?” Then the chief engineer was moved by the sight of Alison’s childlike round arm protruding from the blanket, and his face fell. “Poor thing,” he said.

The diver was unaffected. “That screen down there, it really needs cleaning, Jeez, you oughta see it. Choked with smelt!”

\* \* \*

It was a good day for drying. Tilly Porch was hanging out the laundry, and she had to hold on to the sheets firmly to keep them from whipping out of her hands.

At the same time Tilly had her eye on Elvis, who was playing in the tall blowing weeds that had shot up overnight around the vegetable garden. Elvis was shrieking happily, chasing something. Suddenly there was a yowl and a wild tumble, and the neighbor's cat leaped as high as a house and bounded away. Elvis's head appeared again above the weeds. Grinning, he toddled after the cat.

"No, no, Elvis," called Tilly. "Time for your nap." Chasing him, she scooped him up and carried him, giggling, upstairs to bed.

Debbie Buffington had not come back. It was beginning to look as though Tilly was going to be stuck with Elvis. And stuck with her husband's old boat of an Oldsmobile Cutlass, because Debbie had disappeared in Tilly's little Toyota. Tilly wondered what her daughter Margie would say when she found out. Well, she would be furious with Tilly, tying herself down at her age with somebody else's child! "Mother, *really*, it's not *your* problem."

And of course Margie would be right. But somehow Tilly had become fond of Elvis. Of course he was a horrid child in many ways, but there was a curious new cheerfulness in him that looked promising to Tilly. When he choked the cat, he didn't do it out of malice, he was simply holding it firmly to get a good look at it. For the past few days Elvis had reveled in Tilly's house, and in the yard around it, inspecting everything with voracious curiosity, rolling over and over down the little grassy slope between the house and the driveway, entangling himself in the roll of chicken wire in the shed, climbing the grapevine to the shed roof, tugging at the plastic covering on the woodpile until the wood tumbled down on him, poking his finger in the nest of a house wasp and getting himself stung, pulling all the petals off the tulips, falling down the cellar stairs, eating all the crackers in the cupboard, breaking a Toby jug. Elvis reminded Tilly of that old explorer in the poem, the way he was looking at the world with a wild surmise.

Now he was safely asleep. Tilly smiled down at him in his crib and sighed with relief. For the next hour she would be free to indulge herself in the new pastime that was becoming so absorbing, her investigation of the old boxes in the attic. Tilly had begun it as a matter of duty. But now she was really enjoying her random study of life in the little village of Amherst in the old days.

And therefore, on the day the body of Alison Grove was removed from the Quabbin Reservoir, on the day Owen Kraznik and Ellen Oak drove Peter Wiggins to the emergency room of the Cooley-Dickinson Hospital, on the day Dr. Kloop was able to stump with his new crutches into the hospital morgue to do a postmortem on the body of Winifred Gaw, on the day all the lush grass in Amherst suddenly needed cutting for the first time—on that very same day, Tilly Porch came upon an interesting photographic negative, an old glass plate, in her attic.

Holding it up to the light, Tilly could see four small dark images, the same one repeated four times over. Darks and lights were reversed, of course, but it was obviously a photograph of a woman with a full face, her hair parted in the middle and pulled down and back in the fashion of the eighties-sixties.

Climbing over a pile of her husband's ancient camping equipment, Tilly stepped boldly on a pillow of pink insulation batting and inspected the plate in the sunny attic window. Of course she couldn't really be sure, but the silhouette on the plate looked an awful lot like that of the *Emily don't like this much* picture that had been planted in Tilly's attic by Peter Wiggins. Owen Kraznik had said to forget about Peter's picture. It was just a mistake, he said. And then he had begged her not to say anything, just to keep quiet about it forever. Well, that was all right with Tilly. It was none of her business. But now she doubted the genuineness of what she had found. What if the glass plate, too, had been planted by Peter Wiggins? Was it just another example of his sly presence in her attic? Holding it firmly in both hands, Tilly went back to the chest and exam-

ined the big faded envelope in which she had found it.

The envelope was obviously an old one, yellowed and disintegrating at the edges. And surely that was Great-Great-Grandmother Louisa's handwriting on the outside? Tilly had already found sheaves and sheaves of Louisa's letters. There was no mistaking that tiny hand.

Tilly squinted at it, reading in the dark. Then she almost dropped the glass plate.

There was a date on the envelope, *February 18, 1860*. And the name of the woman whose image was recorded in quadruplicate was *Emily D.*



*Life is deep and swift—*

The wind was still whipping down Main Street when the party of five assembled in the Gas-lite restaurant for lunch.

Harvey Kloop struggled out of his car and heaved himself up on the sidewalk with his crutches. The door of the restaurant gave him a hard time. At last he opened it a crack, but then the wind took it and slammed it against the wall, and one of Harvey's crutches went sailing away down the street.

"Good heavens, Harvey," cried Owen, jumping up from a table, rushing to the door. For a moment the two of them spun around each other, Harvey's plaster leg as helpless as Owen's plaster arm. Then Mary Kelly ran up with Harvey's crutch and Homer held the door open, and the two cripples at last achieved an entrance into the restaurant. At the table Ellen Oak slid over on the bench so that Harvey could sit on the outside and stretch his leg.

Dr. Kloop did not know Homer and Mary Kelly. There were introductions by Owen and Ellen, followed by joyful announcements and hearty congratulations. Then Harvey too had an announcement.

"I think," he said shyly, "my wife has gone away."



“Oh, Harvey,” said Owen, “you mean Eunice Jane has”—it seemed too good to be true—“left you?”

“That’s right. At least I think that’s what she’s done. She left this note. I guess it’s a quotation from Emily Dickinson.” Harvey drew a scrap of paper out of his pocket and passed it around. They all looked at it and shook their heads in mystification.

*Good night, because we must,  
How intricate the dust!*

“I’m pretty sure it’s some kind of farewell,” said Harvey. “Anyway, all her clothes are gone. And her case of sauerkraut juice.” Harvey smiled wickedly, then cleared his throat and got down to brass tacks. “I performed an autopsy on the body of Winifred Gaw this morning. Fortunately I had some familiarity with Winnie’s medical history, since she had been a patient of mine. Not a very good one, I’m afraid. Terribly obese, as you know. Wouldn’t take my warnings seriously. Of course I wanted to put her on a diet, but she claimed dieting gave her

insomnia. She wanted diet pills. Well, I wouldn't give her the pills, of course, but I wrote a prescription for Secanol tablets to help with the wakefulness. And the other day when she requested a refill, I assumed she was taking them. But I gather she had been hoarding them instead."

"But, Dr. Kloop," said Ellen, "we suspect she didn't die from an overdose of Secanol. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right." Harvey tucked into his plate of fried clams. "And of course, as you indicated in your report, it wasn't the axe. I'll tell you how the poor girl died. It was cardiac arrest."

"You mean a heart attack?" Owen was astonished. "Good heavens. Then she didn't commit suicide?"

"Well, I'm not sure what she meant to do with those pills. All I know is she succumbed from a coronary first. Sudden arrhythmia. This morning I was shocked at the condition of her arteries. I mean, she was such a young woman. And there was a lot of sugar in her urine, and an enormous amount of fibrous tissue in her pancreas. She must have been diabetic into the bargain. No wonder she keeled over." Harvey poured ketchup on his fried clams. "Did they ever figure out what happened in that bedroom? The axe and all? The overturned furniture?"

Homer picked up his beefburger club sandwich. "No, not so far. We can't think who could have been mad enough at Winnie to get into a real battle. Unless it was her father. I must say, he strikes me as a really sinister sort of bastard. But Archie Gripp claims Jesse Gaw was miles away all the time, working the night shift with a whole gang of men and a supervisor. And then he was doing a special job at somebody else's repair shop, working on a front end."

"There's one more thing." Harvey's face had lost its good humor. His melancholy eyes drifted vaguely from Ellen to Mary to Owen, then fixed upon Homer in a hollow stare. Reaching across the table, he gripped Homer's shoulders convulsively. "Listen, there was this amazing—I mean, you won't



believe it, but something happened at the reservoir, something strange, something really weird. Well, you know, it was a *miracle*."

Homer stifled an impulse to recoil and cry out, *I fear thee, Ancient Mariner, I fear thy skinny hand*. Instead he laughed. "Oh, sure, Owen told me. I gather the two of you were in the hospital together, having your miscellaneous broken parts patched up. I know what you're going to say—you saw Emily Dickinson, right? Walking along under the water? Wow, that was a big help. They found her. I just heard from Archie. Picked her up this morning from the water at Shaft Twelve."

Harvey's cadaverous face paled. He dropped his fork. Fried clams skittered across the table. "They found *Emily Dickinson*?"

"Oh, Homer, who was it?" said Owen, looking at him in pained anticipation. "Not—?"

"Yes," said Homer flatly. "It was Alison Grove."

Owen gasped, and his eyes filled with tears.

Then Homer explained it to Harvey. "Alison was a student at U Mass. She turned up missing a few days ago. Alison Grove, you see, not Emily Dickinson."

Harvey frowned, clinging stubbornly to his terrible vision of the woman in the white dress. "But she was walking, I tell you. She was walking along the road under the water. And the church bell was ringing. I heard it. I did, I really did. I figured it out. It's a big hole in the nature of things, you see. Like maybe sometimes there are these big cracks in the universe. I mean, it had to be something like that."

Mary Kelly exchanged an amused glance with Ellen Oak, and then Homer shed more light on Harvey's metaphysical dilemma. "Listen, don't worry. You're right. She *was* walking along the road. But it was because she had a weight attached to her ankle. It made her drift along upright. It was a bell, a heavy bronze bell. That's what was ringing. It was Jesse Gaw's own personal bell."

"No kidding?" Relief flooded Harvey as the universe

turned rightside up again and snapped into place in seamless perfection.

"The trouble is," said Homer, "we can't figure out how Alison's body got there. We think she was at Shaft Twelve sometime or other, dead or alive, because she left a shoe there. But her body couldn't have made its way into the reservoir from Shaft Twelve, because the valve was closed at the time. And, anyway, there's a screen over it to keep fish out of the water supply—deer carcasses, things like that. All we know is that somebody opened the door with a key stolen from Jesse Gaw. We can't help thinking of Winnie."

"But if Alison's body didn't get into the reservoir from Shaft Twelve," said Mary, "how did it get into the water?"

"Darned if I know." Homer scooped up a huge gelatinous bite of lemon meringue pie with his fork. "Musht have been toshed in shomeplashe elshe. Mmmm, izhn't thish delishiouseh."

Then Harvey Kloop gasped with understanding. "Oh, my God, I saw it. I saw the whole thing, and I drove away. Oh, Lord, my oath. I knew it, I violated my Hippo-something oath."

"Your oath?" said Owen. "Harvey, for heaven's sake, tell us what you saw."

"I saw Winifred Gaw pick up the body. I was too far away to see her clearly. But that's what must have been happening." Harvey groaned in tortured recollection. "I was going off on my little fishing holiday, you see, really anxious to get away, and I couldn't be bothered to stop and find out what was going on. Oh, Lord, there was this huge woman in the street, in front of a truck, a big van, right there at the traffic light. I sort of half recognized Winnie Gaw, but she had her back to me. She was bending down, picking up something. All I could see was something white. But that's what it must have been. It was the girl I saw in the water, later on. Winnie must have run her down. It all fits, do you see? And I just drove away, violating my Hippogriffic oath. Oh, Jesus, how could I do a thing like that?"

"Well, good for you, Dr. Kloop." Homer was ecstatic. "So that's it. Winifred Gaw set fire to Coolidge Hall. Winifred Gaw killed Alison Grove, and dumped her in the Quabbin Reservoir. Congratulations! That explains everything. Pippohoptic. Hippoticktock. I know the oath you mean."

Harvey reached for his crutches, and wrestled himself to his feet. "I'm sorry, but I've got to get back to the hospital. Work to do. My oath. From here on out, I swear I'm going to obey my Hippospastic oath, or whatever the damn thing's called. So long."

"Just a minute, Harvey." Ellen slipped off the bench and accompanied him to the cash register. Then she held the door open for him and followed him onto the sidewalk. "Hippocratic," she said firmly, helping him into his car. "I swore one of those things myself."

She came back to find Owen staring at Homer in shocked disbelief. "But surely it wasn't Winifred. It couldn't have been Winifred. Winnie couldn't have killed Alison Grove. Why would she do such a thing? And why on earth would poor Winnie set fire to Coolidge Hall?"

"Damned if I know." Homer grinned at Owen. "I suppose there are things we aren't meant to understand in this world. Holes in the nature of things. Yawning cracks and voids in the rational universe. Like the axe. We'll probably never know what that crazy girl was doing in Emily Dickinson's bedroom with her father's axe. All we know is that she stole it from his garage, along with the can of paint and the bell and the key to Shaft Twelve. But whatever for?"

"The axe?" said Ellen quickly. "I think I understand the axe. It was a metaphor."

"A metaphor?" said Mary, astonished. "The *axe* was a metaphor?"

"That's right. Even poor old Winnie was clever enough to know a good image when she saw one. Remember, Homer, the book on the floor in Emily's bedroom? *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*? I shouldn't have touched it, I suppose, but I did. I

picked it up and noticed that one passage had been heavily underlined. It was in one of those three mysterious love letters Emily wrote to someone she called 'Master.'" Ellen closed her eyes and tried to say the passage by heart: "*Tell me my fault, Master. You send the water over the dam in my brown eyes. I've got a Tomahawk in my side, but that don't hurt me much. My master stabs me more.*" Something like that. Winnie underlined the words and put the book on the bedside table as a kind of suicide note. I think she meant to take a lot of pills and go to sleep with the axe on the bed beside her."

"I see," said Mary, nodding wisely. "The axe was supposed to represent the tomahawk. You mean it stood for the pain some perfidious person had inflicted on her? Someone she loved?"

"Ah, but how do you know Winnie did the underlining?" objected Homer. "And how do you know it was that particular page she meant someone to read?"

"Simple," said Ellen. "It was covered with blood."

"Oh," said Homer. There was a mournful silence, and then Homer slapped the table and snickered in callous sarcasm. "A metaphor, by God. Listen, you know what? Maybe Lizzie Borden's axe was just a metaphor too. I mean, maybe Lizzie was just thinking about poetry when she gave her mother forty whacks, did you ever think of that? And then when she saw what she had done, maybe it was just another pretty little figure of speech she had in mind when she gave her father forty-one. How about it?"

Owen clutched his throat and gagged, struggling to breathe. Mary kicked Homer under the table. "Shut up, dear, it's lunchtime."

"Oh, sorry," said Homer. He looked at Ellen inquiringly. "But who was Winnie's message for? I mean, who was this loved one, this 'Master?'" And then, as Owen moaned and got up from the table, his face ashen, Homer murmured, "Oh, of course," and reached for his wife's hand in remorse, remembering the keepsakes in Winnie's darkroom, the bits of eraser,

the ends of pencils, the scraps of notes, *Dear Winnie, would you please call the library—Dear Winnie, this book is overdue.* Homer was ashamed of himself.

But it was too late. Owen was breaking down. Ellen had to take him outdoors and sit him down on a park bench on the Common.



*Given in Marriage unto Thee  
Oh thou Celestial Host—  
Bride of the Father and the Son  
Bride of the Holy Ghost.*

And Owen was destined to shed more tears at the funeral of Alison Grove. As he entered the sanctified gloom of the memorial chapel, he could feel them welling up.

"That must be Mrs. Grove, Alison's mother," murmured Ellen. "Doesn't she look like the mother of the bride?"

It was true. Alison's mother seemed to have planned her daughter's funeral as if it were the splendid wedding reception she had been denied. In her powder-blue dress she stood behind the casket in queenly grandeur. Beside her, the groom, Tom Perry, looked uncomfortable in morning coat and striped trousers. Between them Alison lay like a lovely doll, her white wedding dress foaming around her in clouds of net and lace.

The viewing line was long. One by one the guests shuffled forward to exclaim at Alison's loveliness and touch the glove of Mrs. Grove. Owen joined the line timidly, gripping Ellen's arm. Warily he studied Alison's mother as she listened hungrily to exclamations of sorrow and took greedy note of weeping eyes. No tears were falling down the ivory cheeks of Mrs. Grove, but her hands were never at rest. Again and again they darted for-

ward to rearrange Alison's hair, or smooth her lacy gown, or fluff her tissue veil.

It was Ellen's turn. "I'm so sorry," she said to Mrs. Grove.

Alison's mother closed her eyes and nodded majestically. But Tom Perry was waiting for Ellen. Hurrying around the casket, he took her arm. "Listen, Ellen, I want to talk to you."

Ellen hardly saw him. Beside her, Owen was dissolving. He was leaning over the casket, sobbing, "Poor child, poor child."

"Oh, Owen dear, sit down," said Ellen. Once again she helped him to a chair.

Homer and Mary Kelly were late. Homer refused to join the line filing past the open casket, but Mary decided to do what was expected of her. When it was her turn to take the hand of Alison's mother and encounter Mrs. Grove's large tragic eyes, she was at once reminded of Mrs. Jesse Gaw. And that was strange, because Mrs. Grove was a strikingly handsome woman, utterly unlike Winnie's scrawny mother. It was in the rapacity of their grief that the two women resembled each other, decided Mary. Nodding at Tom Perry, she moved away, as Mrs. Grove reached out her hand again to the casket and fiddled with Alison's ring, turning the flashing diamond up to the light.

At the other end of the chapel two women were pouring tea. Mary made her way past the sobbing organ, accepted a cup gratefully and introduced herself. Soon she was chatting comfortably with Barbara Teeter and Dottie Poole.

"It should have been Alison's wedding, don't you agree, Mrs. Kelly?" said Dottie Poole. "Lemon and sugar?"

"Sponge cake?" said Barbara Teeter. "Oh, Mrs. Kelly, isn't it terrible? When you think of all the sorrow she's been through. Poor Shirley Grove."

"Sorrow?" said Mary. "You mean, there have been other—?"

Dottie Poole leaned forward confidently. "First it was Alison's grandfather, and then it was Alison's father, and now it's Alison herself. It's like a curse on the family." Dottie lowered her voice to a whisper and leaned still farther in Mary's direc-

tion. "And they couldn't even *bury* Alison's grandfather."

"Why not?" whispered Mary, bending over Dottie. "Did he die at sea?"

"*Would* that he *had*," said Dottie with melancholy emphasis, rolling her eyes at Barbara Teeter.

Barbara crooked her finger at Mary. Obediently, Mary came closer and bowed her head until her ear was next to Barbara's lips. "He was a civil engineer, you see," hissed Barbara. "Alison's grandfather, I mean, during the construction of the Quabbin Reservoir. You know, clearing the land, building the dam. And there was this tragic accident. He fell into the concrete core while they were pouring the cement for the dam."

Mary gasped and withdrew a few inches. "How terrible."

It was Dottie's turn. With solemn pride she touched Mary's sleeve. "They never found him."

"They never found him? You mean he's still there in the dam, buried in the cement?"

Dottie and Barbara nodded regally.

"But how did it happen?"

"Nobody really knows," said Barbara. "Some of the people say there was this man, one of the people who were forced out of the villages in the valley, and they say he was driven mad with the injustice of it all, and they say he was standing next to Alison's grandfather on the dam when it was under construction, and he gave Alison's grandfather a little push. But of course nobody actually saw it. I mean when it was happening. Nobody was ever prosecuted. There's a nice memorial plaque to Alison's grandfather's memory in the Quabbin Cemetery, only it doesn't say what happened."

"Well! So much for Alison's grandfather," said Dottie Poole, picking up the story eagerly. "Wait till you hear about her *father*."

"Her father?" whispered Mary. "What happened to him? Did he drown in the reservoir or something?"

"Oh, no." Dottie's solemn expression gave way to cruel giggles. Barbara Teeter laughed. "All *he* did," said Dottie, "was run away with another woman."



"Nobody could understand it," offered Barbara. "She was plain as a mud fence. She had, you know, these big buckteeth and bulgy eyes. And Shirley Grove is so beautiful."

"Inscrutable," murmured Mary, "the ways of the male sex. May I have some tea for my husband?"

She found Homer standing dolefully in the corner beside a gigantic basket of white pompom chrysanthemums. Homer gulped down his tea thirstily, and inclined his head to hear the sorrowful history of the death of Alison's grandfather, while the organ played the wedding march from *Lohengrin* at a funereal *largo vibratissimo*.

"Do you suppose it was Jesse Gaw's father who pushed him?" said Mary. "You know, in retribution for crippling little Jesse with his bulldozer?"

"Are you suggesting that Winnie Gaw killed Alison Grove, and Winnie's grandfather, by some zany trick of fate, killed Alison's grandfather?"

"It does sound ridiculous, when you put it that way."

"God knows what really happened," said Homer. "You know, we're surrounded by cracks in the universe on all sides, holes in the rational undergirding firmament, fundamental anomalies in the—*whoops!*"

"Oh, Homer, watch out!"

It was too late. Homer's teacup was falling from its saucer, exploding on the floor with a hideous crash, fracturing the reverent mood of the soprano as she sang "O Promise Me." Reaching for a high note, she squawked instead, and muffed it.

*So give me back to Death . .*

“Sorry, you people,” said Dombey Dell. “You’ve all got to leave today. The people at the College, they want to start the regular tours again.”

The front door was open. Another mild spring day glistened outside. Sunshine streamed through the parlor windows, glowing through the translucent porcelain of the Dickinson china, filling the hollow cups with light. Invisible pollen drifted into the front hall, mingling the fragrance of lilacs with the hot smell of tar from the truck that was cruising down Main Street, repairing winter potholes. The lilacs themselves were turning rusty. The flowering trees had dropped all their petals and put on a thick new growth of leaves. Grass rushed up out of the ground. An employee of the buildings and grounds department at the College was taking care of it, running a noisy lawn mower around the garden, guiding it deftly with one hand under the bushes, leaving a few tall whiskers between the elephantine toes of the white oak tree. In the narrow front yard a sprinkler whirled, sparkling in pulses in the sunlight, making a light pattering on the ground.

Tom Perry was ready to go. He came down the stairs

heavily, lugging his suitcase. Sourly he looked at Dombey Dell. "Did you hear about the job at Harvard?"

"No," said Dombey sharply. "What about the job at Harvard?"

"There isn't any job at Harvard. You know that guy they were going to fire, Rexpole? He just won the Nobel prize."

"Oh, my God."

"So relax."

"Well, what the hell," said Dombey Dell. "*C'est la vie.*"

Owen, too, had packed up his slender possessions. Sitting on the top step of the back porch, he waited for Ellen. It was broad noon. A fly buzzed around his head. Leaning against one of the porch pillars, he closed his eyes.

When the door opened behind him, he was too sleepy to turn around. But he looked up as the long white skirt rustled past him, flowing easily through the floor of the porch. Yes, that made sense, because the porch wasn't old. There had been nothing here a hundred years ago but a pair of granite steps. The white skirt rippled with the briskness of the woman's forward motion as she walked away from Owen and hurried past the barn. Now she was climbing into the field beyond the stone wall. Soon she was only a determined bobbing note of white, farther and farther away, walking firmly in the direction of the cemetery.

Owen's head jerked up. Getting awkwardly to his feet, he stared at the place where the barn had been so clearly visible a moment ago. It had vanished. There was only the garage on the other side of the driveway. Beyond the stone wall lay the backyard of somebody's house, with its green lawn and swimming pool. The spell dissolved.

Owen smiled. His dreams were improving. This one was particularly satisfactory. Emily Dickinson was burying herself again. From now on she would lie in her own alabaster chamber, *Untouched by Morning And untouched by Noon*. Untouched at least by anybody at the Emily Dickinson Centennial Symposium, because the symposium was over. Even Dombey Dell

was abandoning Emily Dickinson, getting ready to rip and claw at somebody else. This time it was Julia Moore, the Sweet Singer of Michigan.

But, decided Owen, it was not just Dombey's greedy territorial ambition that was to blame for the indignities Emily had suffered, and for the tragedies that had engulfed them all. Blame, too, the passions of mind and heart, those very same terrors and fervors that reeled in her poetry. Those ardors were still raging in Amherst, tormenting the strong and maddening the weak. Blame disappointed yearning, *the drop of Anguish That scalds me now—that scalds me now!* Blame the frustration of reaching without achieving, of longing for the impossible. *I'll clutch—and clutch—Next—One—Might be the golden touch.* And as for the nightmares and fatalities of the last few days, who had known better than Emily Dickinson the terrors of death, *the supple Suitor That wins at last?*

"Open the screen door, would you, Owen?"

Owen turned hastily to open the door for Ellen. She was carrying a bag and a slide projector for Peter Wiggins. Peter stumbled after her clumsily, moaning a little under his breath.

"Now, see here, Peter," said Owen, taking the slide projector, following him to his car. "Are you sure you can drive all the way back to Boston?"

Peter smiled wanly, and climbed into the front seat, favoring all his bandaged places. "Oh, yes, no problem."

Owen felt sorry for Peter Wiggins, his newest lame duck. He stood beside the car with Ellen and rested his plaster arm on the open window. "Oh, Peter, I forgot to tell you the good news about that picture that turned up. You know, the one that said, *Mother before we moved to Topeka.* You can forget about it."

"I can?" Peter's drawn face brightened.

"You certainly can. Helen Gaunt brought it over and showed it to me, and there's no question about it. It's brand new, not nearly as sharp as the original. And the cardboard backing was just cut out of a shoe box or something. It's a very crude job. Helen said somebody left it in her mailbox. Homer Kelly assures me it must have been Winifred Gaw."

"Oh, so that's what Winnie meant by documentary evidence?" Peter smiled faintly, and then hunched his shoulders, waiting for Owen to say something about another embarrassing forgery. But Owen was silent. Impulsively Peter burst out, "I hate to leave." And then all his frustrated hopes came gushing forth. He looked up at Owen with his sad rabbit eyes. "You see, the truth is, I was hoping to get a teaching job somewhere in the East. You know, around here." Peter gestured at the woodsy confusion of light and shade beyond the garage. "Someplace with trees and flowers. Things like that."

Owen didn't know what to reply. But Ellen looked at Peter in surprise. "You mean you don't like it in Arizona?"

"No," said Peter, closing his eyes and shaking his head from side to side. "I don't like it in Arizona."

"But that's such great country out there," exclaimed Ellen. "Why don't you enjoy it? Why don't you just wallow in it?"

"Wallow in it?" Peter stared at Ellen, and blinked. Once again he shook his head in clumsy protest, and then he recited the names of his gods, Henry Thoreau, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson. "They all belong here, you see. Here in New England."

"No, they don't," said Ellen quickly.

"They don't?" Peter gaped at her.

"They don't?" said Owen, amused.

"Of course not. Emily Dickinson isn't here. She's not in this house anymore. She's not distilled somehow in the fragrance of the flowers in the garden. She's not folded into the pleats of that white dress in the bedroom. Emily Dickinson is dead."

"Dead," agreed Owen sagely.

"Dead," agreed Peter, nodding his head up and down.

"Stone dead. She only comes alive when some kid in Anchorage, Alaska, or Nashville, Tennessee, or Brooklyn, New York, or—where do you come from?—Pancake Flat, Arizona!—opens an anthology of American poetry and reads one of her poems for the first time. It's all the life she's ever going to have. Listen, you idiot, Emily Dickinson is alive and well in Pancake Flat as long as you're there to pass the book around."

"Pancake Flat," said Peter dreamily. "Alive and well in Pancake Flat."

"That's where she is," concluded Ellen, beaming at him kindly. "Not here."

"Pancake Flat," said Peter again, nodding sleepily. Owen and Ellen watched him as his car floated backward, then drowsed forward out of the driveway like a piece of mesmerized machinery.

"My dear, you were superb," said Owen Kraznik.



*I had a guinea golden—  
I lost it in the sand . . .*

The black glass negative on the mantelpiece was gathering dust. Tilly couldn't seem to get time to examine it carefully. At first she was kept busy by her duties in the Amherst Women's Emily Dickinson Association. Marilyn Wineman, the chairperson, had asked her to write up an account, for the minutes, of the historic march on the Homestead. And then it was Tilly's daughter Margie. Margie sent Tilly three yards of fabric and a dress pattern, urging her to make it up in a hurry. And then it was the clothing exchange at Grace Church. Tilly was in charge of collecting all the stuff.

All of these things had taken one hundred percent of the time left over from the care of Elvis Buffington, who was such a little go-getter Tilly had to keep an eye on him every minute.

But today for sure, decided Tilly, she would get a look at that glass plate during his afternoon nap. The trouble was, when Tilly at last dumped Elvis into his crib, she felt so tired herself that she couldn't resist lying down just for a couple of winks.

And then her nap turned into a really good snooze.

Elvis woke up first. Taking hold of the bars of the crib, he tried hoisting himself over the top. It was easy. Elvis was proud



of himself. Clambering quickly down to the floor, he turned around and looked across the room at Tilly. Her eyes were shut. She was still asleep. Toddling to the stairs, Elvis negotiated them rapidly, scrambling down backward on hands and knees.

Downstairs he explored the house, looking for something to play with. In the living room he climbed a chair. Behind the chair a bookcase offered easy handholds. On the top of the bookcase he stood up carefully. A jar of flowers wobbled. A statue thing tipped back and forth, then righted itself. Elvis stood silently on the bookcase watching it, a drop of water suspended from his lower lip. Then he turned his head. Beyond the bookcase, on the shelf over the fireplace, he saw something interesting. A black thing, shiny and flat. It was made of glass. It would break. It looked like "No, no, Elvis!" Edging sideways along the top of the bookcase, Elvis leaned his stomach against the edge of the mantel and grasped the piece of black glass. Miraculously he carried it to the floor without mishap.

Where to now? Outdoors! Holding the piece of glass carefully in both fists, Elvis made his way purposefully to the



kitchen door. With extreme care he set the glass on the floor and undid the hook of the screen. Then he picked it up again, clutched it to his stomach, and pushed the door open.

The sun was high over the treetops, yellow and bright. A dog was barking up the road. Elvis slid down the grassy slope to the driveway and got to his feet. What next?

And then he saw something worthy of his epic journey. Once again the neighbor's cat was stalking beside the field. Catching sight of Elvis, the cat froze, then streaked across the street.

Dropping the piece of glass on the driveway, Elvis took off after the cat. Soon he was toddling along a path on the other side of Market Hill Road.

And therefore it wasn't until much later that afternoon, it wasn't until the neighbors had been summoned to look for Elvis, it wasn't until the police had organized a search party along Cushman Brook and were wondering whether or not to drag Factory Hollow Pond, it wasn't until Elvis turned up at Whittemores' Store at the bottom of Market Hill Road and the people at Whittemore's called the police and the police called Tilly and Tilly rushed down to get him and hug him and scold him and take him home for supper and a bath, it wasn't until she put him to bed and locked the bedroom door—it wasn't until then that Tilly discovered the disappearance of the glass plate from the mantelpiece in the living room. Only then did she begin to look for it all over the house. Only then did she find it at last in the driveway, crushed into a million splintered shards by the wheels of the police chief's car.

"Oh, well," said Tilly regretfully, stirring the pieces with her foot, "who cares what Emily Dickinson looked like? It's the poems that count, after all."

*I reckon—when I count at all—  
First—Poets—Then the Sun—  
Then Summer—Then the Heaven of God—  
And then—the List is done—*

*But, looking back—the First so seems  
To Comprehend the Whole—  
The Others look a needless Show—  
So I write—Poets—All . . .*

# Afterword



The photograph that appears at the front of this book and on page 247 became famous when it appeared as the frontispiece for the second volume of Richard Sewall's 1974 biography of Emily Dickinson. Below the picture, on the same page, Professor Sewall displayed the scribbled, misspelled identification from the back of the photograph, *Emily Dickenson 1860*, but he took no position as to the genuineness of the attribution:

This frontispiece is an enlargement of a 3" x 1¼" photograph reproduced here by the kind permission of Mr. Herman Abromson, who bought it "some years ago" from a bookseller in Greenwich Village, New York City, since deceased. The name and date (in handwriting unknown) appear on the back of the photograph. Opinions vary as to whether it is an authentic picture of Emily Dickinson, the poet. . . .

The Greenwich Village bookseller was one Samuel Loveman, who actually did not die until 1976, at the age of eighty-nine. According to his former partner, David Mann, Loveman had owned and cherished the picture for a long time before he

offered it for sale in 1961. The catalogue for his Bodley Book Shop listed it incorrectly as a daguerreotype, *an unknown daguerreotype portrait of Emily Dickinson*, and described it like this:

95 DICKINSON, EMILY. Original Portraits of Emily Dickinson, are, alas, all too Few—a Daguerreotype or Two, a Drawing or a Verbal Description, and the Sum of Portraiture of this Unique American Poet is Complete. We offer a Completely Unknown Photographic Portrait of Emily Dickinson on a Crad [sic] de Visite (4 x 2¼ Inches)—an Exquisite Likeness of One of the Loveliest Faces recorded in Early Photography. This is a Bust-Portrait, and a Pencilled Inscription on the Verso reads: "*mily* [sic] *Dickinson, 1* . ." \$25.00

Mr. Loveman failed to explain that the inscription on the back of the picture had been written, and misspelled, by himself. His handwriting has been identified by David Mann.

How did Samuel Loveman acquire the photograph and why did he think it a likeness of Emily Dickinson? Among Loveman's surviving friends, no one seems to know. As a self-taught scholar, he made attributions that are sometimes dismissed as naïve or overly optimistic. Lorraine Wilbur of the Gramercy Book Shop in New York remembers an example. When she asked Loveman why he claimed that his unsigned landscape had been painted by Albert Bierstadt, he said, "I feel it."

At the same time, Loveman had a considerable reputation in New York as a cataloguer of rare books. An occasional poet himself, he was a close friend of the poet Hart Crane. After Crane's suicide and after the death of Crane's mother, Loveman became his literary executor. Many people attest to his interest in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Perhaps he "felt" that the woman in this photograph resembled the seventeen-year-old Emily as she appears in the famous daguerreotype of 1848.

And then, perhaps he made a guess at the date of the *carte de visite*. Or perhaps, on the other hand, he had a solid reason for his attribution.

Unfortunately there is no photographer's insignia on the back of the little card to help with a more positive identification. It is unlikely that the photograph was taken by Amherst photographer J. L. Lovell, whose studio was patronized by other members of the Dickinson household. Amherst scholar Ruth Owen Jones has studied the friendship of Lovell with David Todd and his wife, Mabel Loomis Todd, Emily Dickinson's first editor. The three were such close friends that the Todds wrote a brief biography of Lovell after his death. Surely if he had taken such a picture of Emily Dickinson, Mabel would have sought it out.

The photograph remains mysterious.

The End



*A daguerreotype of Emily Dickinson taken shortly after her seventeenth birthday in 1848.*



*A photographic carte de visite. On the back, someone has scribbled in a careless hand, Emily Dickenson 1860.*





**A LEGACY FROM TENERIFE**

BY

*NOAH WEBSTER*

Published by special arrangement with Doubleday & Co., Inc.



*For Winifred and Geoff*



“Estates, heritable and moveable, fall as *bona vacantis* to the Crown as *ultimus haeres* from various causes. This can include moveable property in Scotland of foreigners who have died intestate. . . .”

H.M. Exchequer Office

“If it doesn’t belong to anyone else,  
it belongs to us.”

A former Queen’s and Lord  
Treasurer’s Remembrancer,  
in conversation



## CHAPTER ONE

It was the kind of night in February when anyone with even a half-decent excuse stayed indoors and was glad. Edinburgh had spent most of a cold, dull Monday just recovering from the weekend, then snow had begun falling as the early winter dusk arrived.

Two hours later, at 7 P.M., snow was lying several inches deep and the Scottish capital had been brought to an undignified standstill. Trains stopped running from Waverley Station, the airport closed, every suburb had its quota of stranded buses and abandoned cars. A young cop in Corstorphine acted as midwife when a woman gave birth to twins in a snowed-up taxi. Then he fainted. Two girls won a bet by skiing down the Royal Mile dressed as penguins. A fanatical activist on his way to plant a bomb at a political rally in the Usher Hall slipped, fell, blew himself up, and demolished the roof of a public lavatory. The political rally had been cancelled anyway.

Over it all, a stark Gothic silhouette on a fantasy white wedding-cake of rock, Edinburgh Castle scowled down on a Princes Street where only the occasional vehicle still struggled past the steadily blinking traffic lights.

Jonathan Gaunt didn't give a damn.

He was home in his apartment on the west side of the city. He had got there after work at the Exchequer Office while the roads were still brown slush. His only plan for the evening centred round half a dozen scratched but playable old jazz 78's, all recorded long before he'd been born. Gaunt had discovered them in a junk-shop off Leith Walk.

If you respect vintage 78's you play them with a freshly sharpened hardwood needle. Gaunt had a small, cherished stock, teamed with a modern Japanese rack system and an adapted pick-up arm. The result also needed some extra filter channels, but was good. Jack Teagarden pulsed an improvised blues number with a reasonable

minimum of hiss and crackle, at sufficient volume to fill the slightly shabby but comfortable little two-room apartment.

The cheese omelette he'd been tending was ready. Gaunt eased it onto a plate, dumped the pan to wash later, and brought the plate through from the kitchen. There was enough left in a bottle of Muscadet to fill a glass and he poured it, sat down, then began eating.

The Teagarden number ended in a monotonous rasping whirr. Gaunt changed it for an even scratchier but rare Earl Hines, lowered the pick-up arm by hand, waiting for the first few notes, then returned to his chair. Lounging back, he sipped some of the wine, listened to the jazz piano washing over the room, and relaxed.

Jonathan Gaunt was a tall man, in his early thirties, with a compact build, a slightly freckled, raw-boned face, and untidy fair hair. He had moody gray-green eyes, the kind which gave a hint of an occasionally stubborn temperament. Because he didn't plan to go anywhere, he was wearing faded denim trousers and an old sweater which had a hole in one elbow.

He felt content, something that didn't happen too often.

First, there had been the weekend—which had meant Janey.

Janey had raven-black hair, was in her late twenties, and was a surgical nurse. She'd been part of the team at the army hospital where he'd arrived as Lieutenant Gaunt, Parachute Regiment, his back broken but still lucky to be alive after a partial chute failure. It had been long months before he mended and even then the long haul wasn't over. There had been things like being told by Patti, his young, blond wife, that she could now tell him she wanted a divorce. Things like the army notifying him he was being invalidated out, discharged unfit, the verdict reaching him the day after the dull formality of the divorce hearing.

But Janey had kept in touch. A year to the day later, she had arrived, dumped her overnight bag inside the apartment door, and announced she had come for the weekend. From then on, it happened every now and again.

On the practical side, he even had a little money to spare—and that was rare enough. For once, his small-time stock exchange gambling had paid off, he had recouped most of his losses of the previous six months.



He'd risked half the previous month's pay-cheque on shares in an apparently terminally ill manufacturing company because he had heard that a group of visiting strangers had been given the red carpet treatment. Ten days later, the shares had soared on a take-over bid. He sold out and suddenly, unbelievably, had a bank statement which didn't show an overdraft.

But the practical came second. His thoughts strayed to Janey again. They were two normal people, she was more than a friend, but neither of them wanted beyond that. It might be months before he saw her again; that was Janey's way.

Earl Hines came to a raunchy finish. Gaunt drank the last of the wine then checked the next 78 on the pile. It was an old Bessie Smith classic with a Columbia label, scored and useless on one side but looking surprisingly fresh on the other. It took a moment or two to resharpen the hardwood needle with a slip of emery paper, then Gaunt set the record turning and went to lower the pick-up arm.

The telephone rang. Cursing mildly, he crossed the room, lifted the receiver, and answered.

"Jonathan?"

"Yes." He knew the voice only too well. Henry Falconer was senior administrative assistant to the Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer and as an external auditor Gaunt was several rungs lower down the department ladder. He liked Falconer, but when Falconer called him at home it was seldom good news.

"I'm snowed in," said Falconer unhappily. "How are things with you?"

"I don't know," admitted Gaunt. "Probably not so bad." He knew Falconer's home, on the outskirts of the city close to Edinburgh Zoo. He'd also met Falconer's wife, a hard-faced, demanding woman. The unkind said that Falconer lived close to the zoo so that his wife could see her relatives more often. "Anything wrong?"

"Yes. There's a problem." Falconer sighed. "It needs something done, and now. You'll have to turn out."

"Tonight?" Gaunt winced at the thought.

"Tonight," said Falconer. "I can't, you're nearer—"

"And I'm supposed to be fronting for you at a meeting in Amsterdam tomorrow," Gaunt reminded him.

"If the airport is open, yes," said Falconer. "This will only take an

hour or so, and it won't interfere with the Dutch thing. Anyway, the department file behind it is coming your way." He broke off, his wife's voice sounding sharply in the background. There was a muffled silence, as if Falconer had put his hand over the mouthpiece, then he came back on the line, his voice lower and slightly strained. "Look, Jonathan, I've also got a certain amount of domestic friction happening at the moment. If you remember what that was like—" He stopped short, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. That wasn't tactful."

"Don't let it worry you," said Gaunt drily. "What's gone wrong?"

"Here?" Falconer was surprised.

"No," said Gaunt patiently. "The other thing."

"I've a meeting scheduled for tomorrow with a Canadian woman who is over here; I haven't met her, but she made contact with us." Falconer paused. "Now I've had a call from the police. She was robbed at her hotel this evening; I don't know the details. But she seems to have some crazy idea we might be involved."

"That's a good start." Gaunt knew the sarcasm was wasted.

"Her name is Mrs. Lorna Anderson, she's a widow, from Vancouver, and she's at the Carcroft Hotel," said Falconer, unamused. "She's bad news. Soothe her down, pat her on the head—whatever is needed."

Falconer's wife interrupted. There was a repeat of the previous silence, but longer.

"Where was I?" Falconer came back on the line. "Yes—get to her, do what you can. She's some kind of genealogy freak, an ancestor hunter, and she came over from Canada about three weeks ago to do some research on her family tree. Her particular branch left Scotland generations back, but she believed she might have one relative still alive over here."

"And?" So far, Gaunt had heard the same kind of story several times over.

"And she found him," said Falconer. "A man named Peter Fraser who died last year—we took his estate for the Crown as *ultimus haeres*."

Gaunt whistled. "And now she wants it back?"

"Yes. She may be genuine; I'm not sure yet." Falconer was impatient to finish. "So show we care, emphasise we're ready to listen—but don't promise anything."

"If I can get to her," warned Gaunt. "I may need a sledge and dog team."

"That makes two of us," said Falconer and hung up.

Bessie Smith was still spinning idly on the turntable. Gaunt switched off the player, then went over to the window and looked out. The snow was falling steadily, nothing moved in the street, the few parked cars had become lumps of white.

A few minutes later he was driving through the blizzard, in towards the city.

Driving. To be handling a car of his own again was sheer poetry.

His last set of wheels had been sold to prevent a long-suffering bank manager going critical. There had been a gap of months before these industrial shares had cleared his overdraft, cleared it and left enough to spare for the down payment on an accident-damaged bargain. Less than a year old, it had been sold when the previous owner lost his licence after failing a blood-alcohol test.

The car was a small black two-door hatchback Ford Escort, the high-performance XR3 version with Bosch fuel ignition. The accident damage had been fixed for him by a disabled army veteran, an ex-sergeant who ran a repair and tuning shop in one of Edinburgh's back streets. They'd worked on it together, shading down the already lowered suspension, breathing an extra edge into the 1600-c.c. engine's four small cylinders.

After that, the XR3 had shown an ability to accelerate from thirty to seventy mph. at a stop-watch time of under eight seconds. Gaunt had found there was road-holding to match. If it was possible to really love a car, he decided, this was it.

But tonight it was enough of a struggle just to keep moving, wipers battling to clear part of the windscreen, wheels scrabbling for grip on the soft, treacherous surface.

Half a mile from the apartment, the main road was blocked by a stranded truck. Gaunt managed a U-turn, made a detour, then swore as two pedestrians appeared out of the white murk, walking blindly towards him.

Braking wouldn't help. Saying a prayer for the Ford's freshened paintwork, he heaved at the wheel, dropped from top to second gear, and gunned the engine. Tyres clawed for grip, the car slewed

and swung, then bounced as it met an invisible kerb. Scattering snow, shaving a lamp-post, he caught a final glimpse of the two pedestrians in his rear mirror. They were plodding on as before.

But at least when he got to Princes Street, snow-ploughs and gritting trucks were at work. Crunching in their wheel-ruts, he managed to make a turn and reach Rose Street. Then, after another turn, he partly tobogganed down an incline to stop outside the Carcroft Hotel. Leaving the car, he hurried across into the shelter of its lobby.

The Carcroft wasn't imposing. It was one of several Edinburgh hotels which existed on the middle-income bed-and-breakfast tourist trade. The lobby carpet was threadbare, the decor was a mixture of excursion posters and souvenir showcases, and the reception desk was positioned under a moth-eaten stag's head which had only one glass eye.

Gaunt caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror. He was wearing a black leather jacket over a brown tweed suit and an open-necked white shirt. There was snow on his hair and on his shoulders. Maybe he should have worn a tie. But at least he'd made it.

"I'm here to see Mrs. Anderson," he told the red-haired girl behind the reception desk. "She's expecting me."

"Well—" The girl hesitated and looked past him, giving a quick, beckoning gesture. A tall, middle-aged man with a horse-like face stopped considering one of the showcase displays and ambled over.

"You want to see Mrs. Anderson?" he asked in a bored voice.

Gaunt nodded.

"Any identification?"

"Yes," said Gaunt. "Have you?"

"Police." The long face flushed and a warrant card appeared briefly. "Detective Sergeant Angus."

"Remembrancer's Office," said Gaunt and showed his own plastic-sealed identification. "Thank you, Sergeant."

"Just routine," said the policeman defensively. "Your boss doesn't want any kind of publicity, Mr. Gaunt—and the hotel feels the same way." He indicated the elevator. "I'll take you up."

Gaunt followed him into the old-fashioned iron basketwork cage. The door clashed shut and they creaked two floors up. Then they stopped, Sergeant Angus heaved the door open, and led the way

down a badly lit bedroom corridor. He stopped at one of the doors and tapped with his knuckles and it opened. A younger man looked out, nodded a greeting, and stood back as they went in.

"Detective Constable Dunn," said Angus. "We're all that's here."

The hotel room was small. It was also a chaos of emptied drawers and scattered clothing, the sheets dragged from the bed and the mattress overturned.

Gaunt turned as he heard the door close behind him.

"Where's Mrs. Anderson?"

The two policemen exchanged an awkward glance.

"She collapsed on us," Angus said uncomfortably. "We were half-way through getting a statement from her and she just keeled over."

"Like that," said the younger policeman and snapped his fingers. "Like she blew a fuse."

"I see," Gaunt chewed his lip. "Where is she now?"

"In hospital," said Angus. "There's an Australian doctor staying in the hotel. He took a look at her, said it was some kind of heart attack, and we called an ambulance."

"An aunt of mine died that way," murmured Dunn. "It was at a wedding—too much excitement."

"Dangerous things, weddings," said Angus caustically. He turned back to Gaunt. "Mrs. Anderson is in the intensive care unit at the Royal Infirmary. I called them a few minutes ago; she's still unconscious, but they think she might make it."

"When did it happen?" asked Gaunt.

"About half an hour ago," Angus said. "I phoned your boss again and told him."

"I'd have been on my way here by then." Hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, Gaunt stood silent for a moment, looking around the ransacked room. "What about this lot?"

"Well, I wouldn't blame room service." Angus gave a mirthless grin. He had large, yellowed teeth which made him look more horse-like than ever. "A plain, ordinary piece of sneak-in hotel thieving. As a crime, it's on the increase—and this place is made to measure for it."

"Why?"

"Most of the guests are tourists, they leave after a few days and

another lot arrive. Tourists go out and about, so the rooms are deserted in daytime. There's such a turnover of faces that anyone could walk in and out without being noticed."

Gaunt nodded. It sounded reasonable enough.

"Who discovered this had happened?"

"She did—Mrs. Anderson." On surer ground, Angus leaned back against a wall and relaxed. "She told us she'd been out most of the afternoon. Then the snow delayed her, and she didn't get back until well after six. She'd left the room locked, and it was that way when she got back." He paused and gestured at the door. "Locked? Breathe on a lock like that and it would open. Chummy would only need five minutes then he'd be on his way out again."

"He was thorough enough." Gaunt walked around the hotel room, feeling a strangely detached anger at the way it had been left. Underwear dumped from a drawer had been scattered over the carpet. A padlocked case had been slashed open across the lid and more clothing thrown about. Even the contents of a make-up bag hadn't escaped, and a bottle of nail varnish had been smashed. The contents had hardened as a blood-red pool on a white silk blouse. "How much did he get?"

"He—or they," said Angus. "They sometimes work in pairs." He scratched his chin. "Just some junk jewellery and her camera; that's all, she reckoned. Have you met her?"

Gaunt shook his head.

"She's in her sixties—"

"Sixty-three," said Dunn.

"Sixty-three," agreed Angus wearily. "A bright little terrier of a woman, maybe a bit odd, but nobody's fool. Uh—you know about the long lost relative?"

"Who happens to be dead?" Gaunt nodded.

"Yes, she told us." Angus eyed Gaunt slyly. "She also reckoned your Remembrancer's Department were an illegitimate gang of thieving vultures; that's toning it down a little." He produced cigarettes, put one between his lips, but left it unlit. "Anyway she was smart, or lucky, or both. She has a damned great haversack of a shoulder bag, with anything that matters to her stuffed into it. She had it with her."

Gaunt was at the window. He looked out, but all he could see was

the hotel backyard, the dark outlines of other buildings, and snow. He thought how it must be to be elderly, to be a long way from home, and to come back to the kind of chaos around him. He felt the anger come again.

"Where's her bag now?" he asked, turning.

"It's here." Angus ambled over to his companion. "Dunn, how about doing something useful? I could use a cup of coffee; they'll have some somewhere."

Dunn nodded and left them. As the door closed behind the detective constable, Angus made a slow business of producing matches and lighting his cigarette.

"Any time I feel like a private talk, I want it really private," he said ponderously. "Like—well, right now, Mr. Gaunt. Here we've got a pretty ordinary little hotel theft. But Mrs. Anderson made some wild-as-hell suggestions about documents and your department—"

"Never on Mondays," said Gaunt. "Wednesday is our breaking-and-entering day. Or did you believe her?"

"I believe trouble when I hear it," sighed Angus. "That's why I contacted my divisional boss. He felt the same. That's why he gave me your boss's home number and told me to let him know."

"Then it was my turn." Gaunt looked around again. "Were any other rooms touched?"

"No." Angus couldn't find an ashtray and used a flower vase as a substitute. "The hospital desk asked me about next of kin. Do you—?"

"Sorry." Gaunt shook his head. "Maybe you should try the shoulder-bag."

"I was thinking about that." Angus seemed pleased at the suggestion. "The Aussie doctor rummaged it anyway, to see if she was on any kind of medication." He went over to the wardrobe, reached up to the space above, and brought down a large, old-fashioned bag made of well-worn cowhide. "But she'd create hell if she knew about this."

The bag had a simple brass latch. Angus opened it then raised startled eyebrows at the crammed interior.

"Women!" he said feelingly.

They cleared a space on top of the dressing-table, Angus up-

ended the bag, and its contents came spilling out in an untidy heap. Sighing, he handed the bag to Gaunt and began sorting through the collection. Gaunt checked the bag again. It had two zip pockets inside. He found a purse and lipstick in one; the other yielded a thin fold of travellers' cheques, an airline ticket, and a Canadian passport.

Muttering to himself, Angus was still busy. Gaunt opened the passport at Lorna Anderson's photograph and looked at it for a moment. It showed a woman with neatly styled grey hair, a thin, lined, but potentially cheerful face, and intelligent eyes. She looked the way Angus had said: nobody's fool.

He closed the passport. Angus was still sorting through the hand-bag's contents and pushed two spectacle cases and a small first-aid kit over to join a suede jewellery case, a set of keys and three different colours of headscarf.

"Look at this." Angus picked up a small, tartan-clad souvenir doll. He shook his head. "Thank God men only have pockets."

"Usually with holes in them," said Gaunt absently.

He turned to another collection Angus had set to one side. A notebook, two large, bulky envelopes, and some old, faded photographs in a plastic folder were held together by a thick elastic band. Another envelope, smaller and separate, was sealed. He picked it up. Across the front, in small, precise handwriting, was the instruction "Only to be opened in the event of my death. Last Will and Testament of Lorna Anderson."

"Better keep that safely." He pushed the sealed will across to Angus, then picked up the bundle and removed the elastic band. "I'll try these."

The two large envelopes were unsealed. Both seemed to contain collections of yellowed documents and other papers. He decided not to disturb their contents, took a quick glance at the photographs in the folder, mostly faded family snapshots, then tried the notebook. It was the spiral-backed type and pages appeared to have been torn from it as they were used. Any that remained were blank.

But there was something on the inside cover. He took it over to where there was more light. A heavy inked circle had an exclamation mark added above it.

"Found something?" Angus joined him.



"Maybe." Gaunt growled at the words scribbled inside the circle. "It says 'Lorna 2'; then these figures could be a phone number."

"That's no exchange code I know." Angus grimaced. "But we can find out." He gestured towards the two large envelopes, scattering cigarette ash in the process. "What about that stuff?"

"She was getting ready to fight a war," said Gaunt. "That looks like her ammunition. Unless you need it, I'd leave it alone."

Angus nodded. "We've enough problems—more, if she doesn't recover."

The rest of the pile thinned. They found a small, cloth-bound address book, the listings all Canadian.

"One way or another, we'll get something," Angus declared. "I'll let your people know—and we'll stay in touch with the hospital."

Gaunt nodded and glanced at his wrist-watch. "And I'll try to get home."

"I'll come down with you," said Angus. "I want to find where that young idiot Dunn has hidden himself."

They locked the door behind them when they left, then took the creaking elevator down to the hotel lobby. Angus walked with him to the main door, then stopped.

"I've got to ask this," he said awkwardly. "Is there—well, anything special about Mrs. Anderson I should know about?" He rubbed his chin and forced a grin. "I mean, I've heard you Remembrancer people are a pretty weird outfit."

"There's nothing special," Gaunt assured him. "And you've got the rest of it wrong, Sergeant. We're ordinary. The weird is what we can get landed on us."

They went out into the street. The blizzard had eased to an occasional flurry of white and the roadway had been gritted while Gaunt had been inside. He wiped the worst of the snow from the car's windscreen glass, reached for the door-handle, then saw Angus still looked unhappy.

"Something worrying you, Sergeant?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Angus slowly. "Maybe it's just the way that room was turned over—like someone was really determined." He sniffed his disgust. "Damn this weather. It's getting me down."

He went back to the hotel doorway and Gaunt got into the Ford.

As the car started and began moving, Angus gave a brief wave of farewell and went indoors.

Road conditions were still bad as Gaunt worked his way back down to Princes Street. He saw where a taxi had embedded itself in the railings on the Gardens side, close to the Scott Monument, but an ambulance was there and a policeman waved him to keep moving. He did, driving gently, following the old army winter driving code of "Keep your eyes on the road and your hoof off the brakes." Switching on the car radio, he punched buttons and located a music programme.

The route home took him close to Edinburgh Royal Infirmary. He glanced briefly at the hospital, one more bulk on the night skyline, and thought of Lorna Anderson. Her life was probably still in the balance; the thief who had raided her room was just as responsible as if he'd physically attacked her.

Even if the law wouldn't see it that way.

He reached a stretch of uncleared, ungritted road where the Ford's wheels slithered for grip. The rear-view mirror gave him a glimpse of another car in equal trouble, headlights swinging as it went into a partial skid.

Then the road took an uphill slope. Gaunt fed the car a shade more acceleration, heard the Ford's response, and avoided the temptation to do more. Children had built a snowman on some waste ground. It wore an old hat and a scarf made of sacking, and he chuckled as he passed. The snowman's face had a doleful expression that reminded him of Sergeant Angus, puzzled and wary about any involvement with the Remembrancer's Department.

Gaunt could understand it. At first, though he'd been glad to find any kind of job, he'd felt totally unsure about what it involved. On the surface, the office of Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer appeared a total anachronism—something that could only have survived by accident.

The history side was cut and dried. The first Remembrancers had existed in mediaeval times, body servants to the early Scottish kings and queens, going around with them, literally remembering things for them, maybe even being able to read and write.

What he had discovered was that the modern Remembrancer was a senior-grade civil servant heading a department with computer-age

responsibilities that spread like a thin, almost invisible web. Surviving politics, wars, reorganisations, cutbacks, generations of Remembrancers had taken on new tasks, evolved a new role, offering a home to the awkward or the unusual.

It had become quite a list.

It ran from having a say in how the law courts were run to making sure government employees didn't try to fiddle their tax returns. Sometimes involved in defence areas, the Remembrancer processed what was vaguely termed "state intelligence," handled the security of the Scottish Crown jewels, moved in on things like treasure trove, acted as a watchdog on company registrations and returns—and a whole lot more.

Including, as Lorna Anderson had discovered, *ultimus haeres*. Meaning that when anyone—even a visiting foreigner—died in Scotland without a will or heirs the Remembrancer seized everything possible for the Crown.

And no lawyer on earth had ever got round that.

Traffic lights on ahead changed to red. Letting the Ford coast towards them, Gaunt spared a glance at his rear mirror. There was only one other vehicle in sight, some distance behind him, just a pair of headlights half obscured for a moment by another flurry of snow.

He reached the traffic lights, stopped, looked again, then frowned. The other car had stopped some distance back, and there was something strangely familiar about its lights, one brighter than the other, the way a replacement unit might outperform older, original equipment.

He remembered. It was the same car he'd noticed earlier, skidding.

The lights changed. Gaunt set the Ford moving again and, curiosity roused, kept a more deliberate watch on the rear-view mirror.

The other car started again, keeping the same distance behind him.

A junction was coming up, the main route to the right, the other fork one he knew as a simple loop round some office blocks which joined the through route again. The radio was still murmuring its music and he switched it off. Then, as the junction came up, Gaunt took the left fork and kept driving at the same unhurried pace.

The car behind stayed with him, at the same distance, and was still there when he was back on the main road again.

But why? Gaunt nursed the steering-wheel with his fingertips, one part of his mind coping with keeping the car moving through the snow, the rest of his thoughts on how to find out what was going on. Then he saw a brightly lit snow-plough coming towards him through the snow flurries, followed by a long slow-moving convoy of vehicle lights.

The other car was still behind him, still keeping the same distance, and the snow-plough with its followers was coming nearer.

Dropping a gear, slamming his foot hard on the accelerator, Gaunt sent the Ford lurching forward at full throttle.

The snow-plough loomed ahead. He saw the driver's startled face as the Ford's headlights lit up the cab, saw the man's mouth shape a startled curse. Then the Ford had rammed through the snow being piled aside by the snow-plough blade and was performing a mad, barely controlled forward dance past the rest of the oncoming convoy.

He got clear and saw a narrow lane to his right. Braking, skidding, he stopped, slapped the gear lever into reverse, and took the Ford tail first into the lane's soft, deep snow. Then he stopped again, killed his lights, and waited.

The other car appeared several seconds later, fighting its way past the oncoming vehicles. It passed the lane and kept going, a big Peugeot station-wagon with two men aboard, red in colour under the street lights, registration plates obscured by snow.

Grinning, Gaunt put the Ford into gear and released the clutch, ready to reverse the roles. The little car's wheels spun furiously, but it didn't move. He tried again, and the engine stalled.

He was stuck. He got out, sank half-way up to his knees in soft snow, and saw it was hopeless.

Fifteen minutes digging with his hands got the car free. Damp and frozen, Gaunt drove the rest of the way home with the heater fan churning at full and his trouser legs gradually steaming.

Why the Peugeot had tailed him, whether it had picked him up at the hotel or later, everything about it was a mystery.

Except that it had existed and the two men aboard had been equally real.

It was 6:30 A.M. and still dark outside when the bedside clock radio came to life next morning. Gaunt had another time-switch wired to a coffee percolator and when he'd showered, shaved, and dressed, the coffee was ready to pour.

He went to the telephone, dialled the Royal Infirmary number, and got through to the hospital's inquiry desk.

"You had an emergency brought in last night, a Mrs. Lorna Anderson," he told the receptionist. "How is she?"

He had to wait. Then the girl came back on the line.

"I'm sorry." Her voice held the sympathy hospital staff kept as stock-in-trade. "Mrs. Anderson didn't regain consciousness. She died soon after midnight."

Gaunt thanked her and hung up. He poured the coffee into a mug, taking it black and without sugar, and carried the mug over to the window. The snow had stopped, the first grey traces of dawn showed a clear sky.

So Lorna Anderson hadn't made it.

He wondered how Henry Falconer would feel when he heard, and remembered Falconer's statement that the Fraser file was coming his way. Maybe Falconer could make sense out of the two men in the Peugeot.

He used the phone again to call the airport. It had reopened, with services more or less back to normal, but roads were still difficult on the way out from the city.

Finishing the coffee, Gaunt collected his coat and the black department-issue brief-case he was going to need, then left. When he reached the street, the XR3 was crusted with overnight frozen snow but still started at a touch.

The drive to the airport didn't pose too many problems, though breakdown trucks were out hauling vehicles out of ditches and other cars were still lying where they'd been abandoned. He arrived with time to spare before the Amsterdam flight was called, bought two newspapers, and checked them both.

Neither of them mentioned Lorna Anderson. Somehow, he hadn't expected they would.

Amsterdam was a hassle which lasted all day and into early evening, a low-key squabble with two Dutch government officials, a lawyer and an accountant. It centred round what was going to happen to the assets of a Dutch national who would spend the next few years in a Scottish jail for drugs offences.

The Dutch officials, both women, had him boxed in from the start. At the end, the Dutch settled for what they called a compromise and still won. When that happened they stopped being stolid and their English improved dramatically. The two women took him out to dinner and showed a formidable capacity for tankards of foam-topped beer.

His return flight was delayed. It was close on midnight before he reached Edinburgh, after 1 A.M. by the time he got home. By then, his back had begun the low-key throb which came with tiredness and Gaunt took a couple of the pain-killing tablets prescribed by the army doctors.

When he did sleep, the old, familiar nightmare soon roared in. He was falling through never-ending space, his parachute had only partially opened again. It was a nightmare which always ended just before the stark, remembered reality of impact and he jerked awake, sweating, shaking.

At last, Gaunt dozed. It was late when he wakened again and daylight had brought a thaw which had begun to turn the snow to slush. He got to the Exchequer Office in George Street at 10 A.M. and by then the gutters everywhere were flooded torrents, the pavements and roads a brown, slopping mess. Only the high-peaked roofs up above remained white.

The Remembrancer's Department, where he had his own cubby-hole of an office, was two floors up. One of the girls in the typing pool, a blonde who felt that an unmarried man was an asset going to waste, brought him coffee and a slab of cake as soon as he arrived. Then she stayed for a couple of minutes, asking about Amsterdam.

Gaunt lied a little, to brighten her day. Then, as she left, he saw a note propped against his telephone. Falconer wanted him.

He went along the corridor to the senior administrative assistant's room. Falconer's secretary, a well-built, coldly efficient woman in her thirties, pursed her lips when he arrived.

"He was looking for you almost an hour ago," she said with stud-

ied disapproval. "Since then, there's been a telex in from the Dutch. You seem to have made them very happy."

"Hannah, you always brighten my day." He grinned to annoy her. Hannah North regarded Falconer as private property, to be defended against all threats—including Falconer's wife. "Do I get my wrist slapped, or will you keep me in late after school?"

"Personally, I'd keep you in a cage." The thought pleased her. "Yes, then I'd use a long pole, with something sharp at one end."

The door to Henry Falconer's room was ajar; Gaunt tapped and went in.

"Kind of you to come," Falconer greeted him with laboured sarcasm. A big, middle-aged man with a big, middle-aged face, dressed as usual in a conservative dark suit, white shirt and golf club tie, he was standing at the window. "Damn this weather. You know that idiot tag 'the Hardy Scot'? I don't feel particularly hardy. Do you?"

"Not this morning," admitted Gaunt, closing the door. "Sorry about Amsterdam, Henry. It just didn't work out."

"You should have brought back some tulips," said Falconer. "That would have been better than nothing." He went over to the big, slow-ticking grandfather clock which adorned one corner of his office. The rest of the furniture was civil service issue but the clock was Falconer's. Opening the cabinet door, he performed his daily ritual of hauling up the weights and closed the door again. "Clever people, the Dutch—not as thick as they look. Two women?"

Gaunt nodded.

"I've heard of them. Like a Mafia hit team." Falconer left the clock, sat behind his desk, and motioned toward the chair opposite. He waited until Gaunt had settled there. "How much do you know about boats?"

"Boats?" Taken by surprise, Gaunt blinked. "Not a lot."

"That's what I expected." Falconer gave a faint shrug. "Well, it doesn't particularly matter. You know our Mrs. Anderson died?"

"Yes." Gaunt waited.

"The autopsy report says a cerebral haemorrhage; it could have happened any time." Falconer opened one of his desk drawers and brought out a bundle of papers, among them the bulky envelopes and album of old photographs Gaunt had last seen in Lorna Anderson's hotel room. Feeling the edges of the papers with his thumb,

Falconer looked anything but happy. "These make it seem she was genuine."

"Were there doubts?"

"She claimed to be related to our late Peter Fraser," said Falconer stonily. "Fraser's assets totalled over one hundred and twenty thousand pounds sterling. That buys plenty of doubt."

"But if she'd lived?"

"She had us over a barrel," admitted Falconer. "Queen's Bounty style."

It wasn't diplomatic, but Gaunt chuckled. Now and again even the Remembrancer's Department got things wrong. When that happened, when they'd already clawed in money, there was only one face-saving solution. The Queen's Bounty meant a single lump sum payment on a 'take this and go away' basis. Even if it didn't mean the Queen sitting down and writing a cheque, the civil servant who had to unlock the money-box lost a lot of popularity.

"Who handled the Fraser estate?" he asked.

"I did. There were reasons." Falconer built a steeple with his fingertips and scowled at the result.

Briefly, the only sounds were the slow ticking of the grandfather clock and an outside rumble as a mass of snow came off some roof and plunged down into George Street. Knowing George Street, Gaunt hoped it had hit one of the meter patrol traffic wardens.

"Henry." He made sure he had Falconer's full attention. "Tell me why two men with a car would want to tail me after I left Lorna Anderson's hotel on Monday night."

"Did they?" Falconer stared at him. "Do the police know?"

"Not yet." Gaunt shook his head. "But would you call it a coincidence?"

"I don't know," said Falconer wearily. "I wish I had the answers to a few things. Will I give you a start point?"

"It would help," said Gaunt.

"Our late Mr. Fraser may have had some strange friends."

"You mean he was on the crook?"

Falconer scowled. "I don't want to libel the dead."

"But you taught me they're the only ones who can't sue," said Gaunt.

"In life, he interested the police once or twice a few years ago—



suspected fraud, nothing spectacular, never charged, never convicted. In death, he left Inland Revenue's tax squad wondering how he apparently managed to escape their little skinning knives," grunted Falconer. He leaned back. "I said there was a boat—"

"You asked me if I knew about boats," corrected Gaunt.

"Same thing." Falconer treated it as irrelevant. "There's a British-registered motor yacht, the *Black Bear*, lying at a marina at Puerto Tellas, in Tenerife. The *Black Bear* was Fraser's boat—and I've had some tricky discussions with the Spanish authorities about present ownership. If the registration had been under their flag—" He shrugged. "Anyway, we've won. They agreed a few days ago, almost at the same time as the Anderson woman surfaced."

"Interesting," said Gaunt carefully. He had a sudden picture of sun and surf along a shore, a prospect ahead.

"Very." Falconer gave a nod. "The *Black Bear* is independently valued at twenty thousand pounds. There are a few final formalities to clear on the spot, then we already have an offer to purchase from one of Fraser's former associates, a resident out there"

"But someone has to go out?"

"You. The Remembrancer personally decided it was an external auditor's job; Hannah has your travel details." Until the last round of staffing cuts, Falconer had nursed his own hopes for the trip. One small, malicious consolation remained. "You're taking over the whole file, of course—not just the yacht. For instance, I've been liaising with the police over that name and telephone number in the Anderson woman's notebook."

"Lorna Two?"

"Lorna Fraser Tabor, single, lives in Winnipeg; she was in the address book you also found. I called her yesterday. Apparently another Fraser blood relation crawling out of the Canadian woodwork. She said she'd take the first available flight to Britain; in fact, I expect her here before noon."

"In full mourning?" Gaunt raised a quizzical eyebrow.

Falconer shrugged. "If she's genuine, if there aren't any more like her hidden away, she takes over from Lorna Anderson—after we've checked her out. She already knows about the Queen's Bounty situation."

"Lorna Anderson left a will," murmured Gaunt.

"It doesn't alter anything. She named this Tabor woman as her sole beneficiary." Falconer glanced at his wrist-watch, then at the grandfather clock. "I've a full schedule until she gets here, but I'll also take care of mentioning your—ah—episode with that car to the police. You can draft your final report on the Amsterdam business, then work your way through the Fraser papers—and these."

Gaunt took Lorna Anderson's bundle of documents as they were pushed across. He started to rise, but Falconer cleared his throat in a way that made him settle again.

"Anything particularly interesting in the investment world at the moment? Anything you'd call safe—my style?"

"Nothing special." He had heard a whisper of some Australian mining shares, currently cheap and chaotic, but Falconer would have had a nervous breakdown at the thought. "I could ask around."

"I had a passing thought about property." Falconer said it casually. "A small villa, or perhaps an apartment—Spain, even the Canary Islands. Property values out there usually seem to keep ahead of inflation."

"Usually," agreed Gaunt.

"Yes. Somewhere quiet, in the sun, off the beaten track." Falconer basked in the thought. "Perhaps, while you're out in Tenerife—"

"I'll ask around."

"Fraser's contacts might be able to help, if they seem reliable." Falconer beamed at him. "Fine. Hannah will give you the Fraser file—and ask her to bring in her notebook, will you?"

Gaunt left him. Outside, Falconer's secretary had the Fraser file waiting along with a ticket envelope.

"Notebook time," Gaunt told her, thumbing towards Falconer's door.

She nodded, unplugged a coffee-pot from a wall socket, and placed the pot on a tray which already held two bone china cups and saucers, sugar and cream.

"A word of warning, Jonny." The words came with a frost-edged smile. "Go easy on your Amsterdam expenses. There's a purge on this week."

Taking the tray, she headed for Falconer's door. Her shorthand

notebook still lay on her desk. Falconer and Hannah always shared their coffee break and probably more.

But that was Falconer's business, and he went home at night.

He checked the ticket envelope first. There were a reservation on the next Monday scheduled flight to Tenerife from London Heathrow and a return reservation for the Thursday morning. That was probably Falconer's idea of a generous timing, but it might be enough. The *Black Bear* was lying at Puerto Tellas marina and he was to make his own arrangements when he got there.

Gaunt turned to the Amsterdam report. It took about half an hour, then he delivered the tape to the typing pool, returned, closed his office door, loosened his collar and tie, and sat down to tackle the Peter Fraser file.

It didn't take long to read and digest.

Aged forty, renting a two-roomed office in the heart of Edinburgh's business sector, Fraser had represented a Spanish-owned company named Hispan Trading, handling import, export, and general commercial contacts for firms in the Canary Islands. Fraser's office was apparently its total British representation and he ran it single-handed, only hiring occasional and casual secretarial help.

That didn't seem to have required too much effort. The Hispan office could sometimes be closed for weeks on end, then Fraser would return with a new suntan and things would pick up as before.

He lived alone in an old farmhouse cottage a few miles out of the city, near Bathgate, and the story there was the same. Every so often the cottage would lie locked and empty, then eventually his Fiat sports car would be parked outside again.

It was over a year since Peter Fraser had left his office one dark evening to drive back to his cottage. He had been almost there when the Fiat had collided head on with a delivery truck. Fraser had been killed, the truck driver had eventually been jailed for six months for reckless driving.

Peter Fraser's funeral had been attended by his lawyer, the elderly widow who cleaned his cottage, and a neighbour who drove on into Edinburgh afterwards to do some shopping. Hispan Trading sent a wreath from Tenerife.

But it ended there. Peter Fraser had no known relatives, no particular friends. His lawyer had only dealt with occasional business matters such as paying the Hispan office rental and knew nothing about a will. Hispan Trading telexed from Tenerife that Fraser had represented them for about two years and they had no knowledge of next of kin. They were installing a new manager in their Edinburgh office.

It happened. People like Fraser, people with no known background, were part of every city. When they died, there was a routine. It involved the police first, then social security and tax records, other government data banks—and legal process.

Gradually, a few facts had come together. An only child, Fraser had been born in Glasgow, the son of a Scottish shipyard worker. Fate had repeated itself: his parents had died in a car crash while he was still in his teens. No other family could be traced and he had been reared by foster-parents until he was old enough to leave them and become a merchant seaman.

There were gaps after that. A tax return mentioned two years' work in the Argentine. Later, employed briefly by a London security firm, he had broken a leg in an accident. Hospital records showed he'd answered "None" to the formal question about next of kin.

Peter Fraser had been a drifter and drifters were bad news. At last a halt was called, legal process took over, and the Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer moved in.

The usual notices appeared in the usual newspapers. The usual letters from the usual professional claimants arrived, were investigated, dismissed.

One more announcement followed: "Notice is hereby given that the estate of the late Peter Fraser of Mallard Cottage, near Bathgate, West Lothian, has fallen to the Crown as *ultimus haeres*."

Gaunt turned to the next page. A photograph of Fraser had been clipped to the top; taken in life, it showed a man with close-cropped hair, handsome in a thin-faced way, but with a hint of truculence about his mouth and eyes. He was wearing an open-necked shirt and the background, a dramatic coastline, had to be Tenerife.

Below it came the Remembrancer's Department final statement of executory.

Mallard Cottage had been rented by Fraser. But personal effects,

including several solid gold chains, had been valued at fifteen thousand pounds. Three bank accounts added close on seventy thousand pounds; another two thousand in cash had been found in a drawer. The crashed car's replacement value, paid over by Fraser's insurance company, amounted to almost eleven thousand. Another six thousand pounds, brought together in different ways, gave a total of over one hundred thousand after allowing for funeral and other expenses. The *Black Bear* had a separate listing "at broker's valuation of twenty thousand pounds sterling."

Under the final net figure of one hundred and twenty thousand, Henry Falconer had pencilled an angry scrawl.

"Not bad on declared taxable income of sixteen thousand a year."

Gaunt grinned, skimmed the rest of the file, then turned to Lorna Anderson's papers. They had the appearance of years of work—a thick bundle of documents of all kinds, notes, old letters, even a photostat page from someone's family Bible.

Itemised where necessary in the woman's small, neat handwriting, they began in the early nineteenth century with Adam Fraser, a crofter in the parish of Glenkirk, near Inverness. Lorna Anderson had patiently charted the descendants of that long-dead Scot through generations of births, deaths, and marriages. A few of the earliest papers were yellowed, faded originals. Others were modern copy extracts and the sources, beginning in Scotland, spread to Canada and the United States, then New Zealand and the Far East and some remote corners of what had once been the British Empire.

It was all brought together in one final, carefully rolled sheet of heavy parchment paper. Lorna Anderson's idea of how to present a family tree might have made a professional genealogist cringe, but it was a tree in which every branch was detailed.

Fraser males appeared to have died in war at least as often as through accident or natural causes. Fraser females had been few and frequently childless. Branch after branch had withered.

Until only Lorna Anderson and Peter Fraser had remained, with Fraser's date of death now under his name and the note "without issue."

So where did Lorna Fraser Tabor from Winnipeg come in? Old Adam Fraser had been their common great-great-grandfather.

One of the pool typists stopped it there, coming in with a query

about the Amsterdam report. As she left, one of the Companies Branch team telephoned, with an update on the case of a Dundee insurance broker who had been spending everybody's money except his own and was now dodging around the Greek islands.

"It doesn't belong with me," complained the Companies official. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

Gaunt told him.

There was a shocked silence, then the line went dead. Grinning, Gaunt hung up—and the phone immediately rang again. Sighing, he lifted it.

"Come through, Jonathan," said Henry Falconer. "Our visitor is here."

He fastened his tie as he trekked along the corridor. Hannah wasn't at her desk, and he went straight into Falconer's office. The woman sitting opposite Falconer turned in her chair as he entered and closed the door. She was in her late twenties, a brunette, wearing a grey leather jacket and trousers suit over a white roll-neck sweater. The trouser legs were tucked into neat midcalf boots; a sheepskin coat hung on Falconer's coat-rack.

"Introductions first," said Falconer, smiling. "Miss Tabor, this is Mr. Gaunt, who is handling the whole situation." He barely paused. "I've tried to save time, Jonathan: I've given Miss Tabor a basic outline of how things stand."

"As you people see it." Lorna Tabor's soft, unobtrusive Canadian accent underlined the words. She gave Gaunt a slightly weary smile. "I won't necessarily feel the same way."

"We'll try to cope," said Gaunt mildly. He looked at her for a moment, liking what he saw. She had dark eyes, high cheek-bones, and a wide, generous mouth. Her hair was cut short and her skin had a light outdoor tan, her only makeup a touch of lipstick. Apart from a wrist-watch, her only jewellery was a thin gold neck-chain worn outside the white sweater. "None of us actually met Mrs. Anderson."

"I called her Aunt Lorna—" She saw Falconer raise an eyebrow. "She asked me to do that. But I didn't know she existed until about eighteen months ago. Then she made contact, said we were—well, family, and explained how she'd traced me." She gave a faint smile. "She'd really worked at it."

Falconer nodded. "Then you kept in touch?"

"She lived in Vancouver, that's not exactly next door to Winnipeg," shrugged Lorna Tabor. "But she made the trip a few weekends and I spent a week with her last summer. I liked her."

"And if you were family, that would be enough for her," said Gaunt. He sat on the edge of Falconer's desk. "She'd talk to you about that?"

"A lot—though I'd never thought too much about where I came from." For some reason Lorna Tabor chuckled, showing perfect white teeth. "That damned family tree may have started as a hobby for Aunt Lorna, but it became the most important thing in her life." The smile ended and she turned to Falconer. "Then it killed her."

"A cerebral haemorrhage can happen any time," said Falconer uncomfortably. He glanced at the papers in front of him, then at Gaunt. "Miss Tabor intends to take care of—ah—funeral arrangements."

"Because there's no one else," said Lorna Tabor simply. "Just some distant relatives on her husband's side; that's maybe why tracing people like me mattered to her."

"The family tree," mused Gaunt. He stuck his hands in his pockets. "But your name isn't on it. Why not?"

"You could say she just wanted to pencil me in—that I was a minor embarrassment." Lorna Tabor surprised them with a chuckle, showing perfect white teeth. "Aunt Lorna was old-fashioned in some ways. My grandmother was a Fraser by birth and never married; my mother was born illegitimate, in the 1920s."

"In Canada?"

"No, here in Scotland—a family scandal. Mother and baby were packed off to Canada, double-quick, and the whole thing kept quiet. It was the way they did things then."

"That could happen," said Falconer. "The great god of Respectability. But Mrs. Anderson—?"

"Got a scent of it, followed the trail." Lorna Tabor shrugged. "My father is still alive, but my mother died about five years ago. Aunt Lorna said that now she knew about me that only left Peter Fraser in Scotland. She knew he existed, but not much more."

"Except that his line was legitimate?" suggested Gaunt. He saw

Falconer was quite happy to sit back. "You knew she was making this trip?"

"Yes."

"Thinking Fraser was still alive?"

She nodded. "Then she cabled me about a week ago, from here, saying he'd been dead more than a year, that the State had grabbed his money, but she might be able to get some of it back."

"Queen's Bounty," agreed Gaunt. "You know that you've an equal right to claim now—that your mother's illegitimacy isn't a barrier?"

"Yes." Her mouth tightened for a moment, her voice chilled several degrees. "Are you asking if that's why I'm here?"

"Some people might." Gaunt felt that it had to be said and settled. "You didn't waste any time."

Henry Falconer made a weak, protesting noise. She ignored him. Fists clenched, her dark eyes hard and angry, she got to her feet. For a moment, Gaunt thought she might hit him.

"You play rough, don't you," she said softly. "Rough and dirty—but you happen to have it wrong, Mr. Gaunt." She swung towards Falconer. "Before he came, I told you I work for a land company in Winnipeg. Maybe I should have told you my father owns the company—or would you want to see last year's balance sheet?" She drew a deep breath and glared at Gaunt again. "Yes, maybe I will claim. If I didn't I'd be a damned fool. But Lorna Anderson wanted me to come and help her. Now I'm here, I want to know exactly what the hell happened before she died."

Falconer moistened his lips. "I don't think I understand."

"Don't let it worry you," she snapped back.

"But we're paid to worry," said Gaunt. "And sometimes that means pushing people a little." He gave her an apologetic grin. "You've told us more now. How about the rest? There are things we want to find out too—and as far as I know, we're still on the same side."

Lorna Tabor didn't answer straight away. They waited the slow steady ticking of the grandfather clock seeming to dominate the room. She looked at it, walked over and considered the farming scenes painted on the old-fashioned dial. Then, at last, she sighed and turned.



"You're right—and I'm frayed, jet-lagged and the rest that goes with it." She came back to Falconer's desk. "I had a telephone call from Aunt Lorna on Sunday, from here."

Falconer stiffened. "The day before she died?"

Lorna Tabor nodded. "I was going to stay quiet about it, till I found out what was going on. But—"

"But now you'd better tell us," suggested Gaunt.

"She told me she'd found out something about Peter Fraser, something she didn't know how to handle. Then—well, she was certain she was being followed by someone."

"Followed?" Falconer swooped on the word. "Why?"

Lorna Tabor shook her head. "She said she wouldn't tell me over a phone line. But she needed me, she needed some old family papers my mother had left—and she said maybe she could make your Queen's Bounty look like peanuts."

"Did you believe her?" asked Gaunt.

"I wasn't sure." The dark-haired girl gave a small, helpless gesture. "I told her I'd have to think about it, that I couldn't just drop everything and run."

"Did she say anything else?" demanded Falconer anxiously.

"About what was going on? No. But she asked me to remember Scotch Harry."

"Who?" Falconer blinked.

"Another Fraser she kept off the family tree." Lorna Tabor grinned a little, and smoothed a hand down the edge of her leather jacket. "He was three or four generations back; he ran with Ned Kelly's wild bunch in Australia. The Australians hanged him for murder and bank robbery."

"Fascinating." Falconer swallowed hard but kept control. "You brought the papers you mentioned?"

She nodded.

"And you understand that we'll—well, still have to verify you're related to our Fraser? We'll need your help."

"When do we start?" she asked calmly.

"Now," said Gaunt. He glanced at his watch. "First we visit someone. Then we can talk some more, over lunch."

"If I stay awake long enough," she warned.

Falconer came round from his desk to help her into her coat. He

shook hands with her as she left with Gaunt. Then, as the door closed and he was at last alone, the senior administrative assistant to the Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer looked earnestly at the ceiling.

"Why me?" he asked plaintively. "Why always me?"

He flicked the intercom switch on his desk.

"Hannah," he said wearily. "Have you any aspirin out there? Bring the damned bottle!"

## CHAPTER TWO

"The only other time I've been in Scotland, I was child-sized," said Lorna Tabor. "I expected all the men would wear kilts."

"And play bagpipes?" Gaunt grinned. "At that age, I thought most Canadians were lumberjacks or singing Mounties."

They were walking along Princes Street, and sunlight and slush looked like being the main ingredients to the Edinburgh scene for the rest of the day. Only the bulky mass of the castle rock was still totally covered in a mantle of white, and the shopping crowds were out again. That meant window-gazing knots of low-season tourists, bell-ringing patrols of Hare Krishna monks, and, reinforcing the local population, large, tweed-clad women in from the country trailing thin, tweed-clad men on invisible leashes.

Lorna Tabor had elected to walk and they had only a short distance to travel. She had become friendlier, and despite the tiredness in her eyes she was interested in everything around her.

"This place we're going"—she grabbed Gaunt's arm for a moment's support as they crossed another patch of slush—"you think they'll be able to help?"

"There's something wrong when they can't," he told her obliquely.

They were almost there. New Register House, at the east end of Princes Street, was an elegant dome of a neo-Georgian building mildly embarrassed by having a Woolworth's chain store as its next-door neighbour. A national repository, it treated history as just yesterday. One of its thousands of volumes of old parish records included the simple entry when Mary Queen of Scots married Darnley. Nearer the present, it held the documentation for every birth, death, and marriage in Scotland since—because the staff liked to be exact—one minute after midnight on the morning of January 1, 1855.

Anyone had access to them.

Anyone from the casual visitor to the concerned professional—and everything between, from lawyers and police to nosing journalists or suspicious wives, the occasional hopeful confidence trickster or puzzled insurance investigators.

And ancestor hunters.

A small queue of people were waiting at the main reception desk, Lorna Tabor glanced at them and frowned.

"What do we do?" she muttered. "Stand in line?"

A woman built like a duchess was arguing how much she had to pay for some photocopied extracts. She was on the staff of an Eastern Bloc consulate. The man behind her, scowling impatiently, was an Edinburgh lawyer with a reputation for charging clients as if he used a taxi-meter. The others in the queue seemed patiently resigned to waiting.

"Just smile," advised Gaunt, guiding her on. "We know people."

He knew Andy Deathstone, who had an office high up under the dome. It was a room lined with bound index volumes and with a ladder to reach the upper shelves. The only window looked inward, giving a view of the main research and reading area far below. Deathstone was small, middle-aged, and had a vague seniority in the New Register House staff.

"I knew this was going to be a bad day," he said to Gaunt. Then he eyed Lorna Tabor and smiled. "But it might get better."

Gaunt made the introductions, and Deathstone fussed to get them chairs. The little man looked as mild as a rabbit, but he and Gaunt had played poker together a few times, often enough to reveal a piranha-like side to Deathstone's actions.

"What's the problem?" asked Deathstone. Then, ignoring Gaunt again, he considered his other visitor. "Tabor—not too usual a name, but let me guess. Canada—French Canadian, probably Bois-Brûlés, somewhere around the Red River?"

"That's right." Surprised, she nodded.

"French and what?" Deathstone's interest was total. "Cree, Blackfoot?"

"Chipewyan," she corrected. She saw Gaunt was lost. "My father is a Métis—mixed blood. I work out at one-eighth Indian."

"We had a MacKenzie in from Canada last month," said Death-

stone. "He's chief of a tribe in the Blackfoot Confederacy." He gestured apologetically. "That's not why you're here."

"This is." Gaunt took Lorna Anderson's handwritten family tree from his pocket, unrolled it on Deathstone's desk, and kept one hand on the paper to hold it flat. "Andy, I need this authenticated—and something extra."

Deathstone raised a quizzical eyebrow, produced a pair of thick-lensed spectacles, and studied the charted names for a moment.

"It has a reasonable feel about it," he said and glanced up. "You're going to tell me there's something missing?"

Gaunt nodded. "A birth."

"Ah." Deathstone nodded, then glanced apologetically at Lorna Tabor. "Wrong side of the blanket?"

"Yes. My mother."

"Her place of birth?"

"Inverness, Scotland, June 1924; her name was Mary Fraser, her mother was Lorna Jane Fraser."

"That's reasonably precise. Authenticating what we can of the rest may take longer—and we can't necessarily vouch for some of the overseas stuff." Deathstone paused, removed the thick-lensed spectacles, and glanced at Gaunt. "Do I ask why?"

"Would you expect much of an answer?" countered Gaunt.

"No." Deathstone was more amused than offended. "But what do you think you're holding, Jonny—a pair of tens or a full house?"

"Neither. My people are holding the pot," said Gaunt laconically. "Miss Tabor is making the call."

"Even better." Deathstone grinned. "I can enjoy this one. I take my lunch break soon; could you both come back at 3 P.M.?"

They left him. When they were in the street, Lorna Tabor looked back at the Register building with unconcealed respect.

"Is it really so easy?"

"For him, yes," said Gaunt. "People fascinate him—as long as they've been dead for a spell."

He knew a small wine bar three streets away. It was in a basement, the day's menu was chalked on a blackboard, the tables and stools were old wine barrels and cut-down casks. They found an empty table in one of the gloomier corners, ordered two glasses of the house white wine, then chose from the blackboard menu. When

their drinks arrived, Lorna Tabor took a first sip from her glass, propped her elbows on the solid wood of the table, and gave a contented sigh.

"Thanks—from the last of the Frasers," she said wryly. "But stop calling me Miss Tabor. People call you Jonny, right?"

"Some do." He tasted his own drink, looking at her over the rim. She was smiling, but her eyes were tired. "Have you got an hotel room yet?"

"I'm booked in at the Carcroft—not Aunt Lorna's room, and I checked the door lock when I dropped off my suitcase." She fought back a yawn. "I asked about her things, but they said I'd need police clearance first."

"I'll try and fix it," he promised. "Anything else I can do?"

"Yes." Nursing her glass, she shaped a frown. "Jonny, once your people moved in, what happened to Peter Fraser's private stuff—personal possessions, things like that?"

"They'd be sorted out, mostly sold at a public auction or destroyed."

"But not the yacht at Tenerife." She smiled at his surprise. "Your Mr. Falconer sort of mentioned it, and that you were going out there."

"At the end of the week."

"To sell." She nodded her understanding. "All right. I won't challenge that. But I think I'll do what Falconer suggested and get myself a lawyer. Now—how about telling me about Peter Fraser?"

"There's not a lot." He paused as the waiter arrived with the bowls of soup and the toasted sandwiches they'd ordered. "What did Falconer say?"

"Very little. He was too busy trying to find out about me."

Gaunt chuckled. Then, while they ate, he quietly sketched through most of what he knew. When he'd finished, he knew the young, dark-haired woman sitting so close to him was disappointed.

"It's not enough," she said. "Look, Jonny, Lorna Anderson was only here about three weeks. She found out something, how?"

He shook his head. "I wish I knew."

"Then that hotel robbery—could it have been for a reason?"

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"Maybe gets a hell of a lot of use around here," she said causti-

cally. Then, just as quickly, she sighed. "I'm sorry, but I can't forget how she sounded when she made that last telephone call. She was scared, Jonny. Whatever she'd discovered, she was scared."

"I'm ready to believe that," he said quietly. Their glasses were empty. He signalled the waiter to bring two more.

"Then what do we do?"

"We?"

"Yes." She made it a challenge, then waited, taking a pack of cigarettes from her purse and lighting one.

"You've got enough to do for now," he said slowly. "But I can try to find out more about where she went—and get more background on Peter Fraser."

For a moment she seemed ready to argue. Then, reluctantly, she nodded.

A little later, Gaunt paid the bill. His back had stiffened again, and he winced as he rose to help Lorna Tabor with her sheepskin coat.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

"Rust," he said wryly. "Blame the weather; there's a lot of it about."

"I've noticed." She looked at him for a moment but said nothing more.

It was still early. Gaunt had heard the thud of the one o'clock time gun firing from the castle while they'd been eating; most of the city was still on its lunch-break.

Lorna Tabor didn't object when he suggested she take the chance and go back to the Carcroft to unpack. She stood stifling another yawn while he hailed a taxi for her.

"I'll meet you at New Register House at three," promised Gaunt as they parted. "If I'm late, ask for Andy Deathstone."

As her taxi pulled away, he started walking to where his Ford was parked. He got aboard, sat behind the wheel for a moment, then made up his mind and set the car moving.

Central Division police station was hidden up a side street off Leith Walk. He got there at the same time as a large, struggling drunk was brought in by a couple of policewomen. The drunk wanted to charge the policewomen with assault and was walking as

if it still hurt. Gaunt waited until the noise had cleared from the general office then asked for Detective Sergeant Angus.

Angus was in. He came along a corridor to find Gaunt reading the wanted posters on the station notice-board.

"You." The horse-faced detective didn't pretend to be pleased. "What's it this time?"

"Can we talk?" asked Gaunt.

Angus beckoned and led the way through to the main C.I.D. room. For the moment, they had it to themselves. Angus's desk was beside a radiator. He had a carton of milk and a sandwich lying to one side of the typewriter he'd been using. He dragged over another chair for Gaunt, then slumped into his own.

"I've got to go out in a few minutes." He swallowed some of the milk. "Crime Prevention conned me into giving a talk to a school class. Half the kids there probably know more about crime than I do. So—?"

"Lorna Anderson," said Gaunt. "How do things stand?"

"They don't," said Angus gloomily, taking a bite from his sandwich. He chewed for a moment. "Scenes of Crime drew a blank in her room—not as much as a smudged fingerprint. We circulated a list of the junk she said was stolen, but none of it has turned up." He shrugged. "We've nothing else."

"But you had doubts," reminded Gaunt.

"Yes." Angus showed his yellowed teeth in a grimace. "And you were followed—but we only hear about it today."

They considered each other in silence. At last, Angus gestured towards his typewriter.

"Like to guess how many reports I've had to write because that woman died?"

Gaunt shook his head. "Only if any of them mention Peter Fraser."

"He's mentioned." Angus took more of his sandwich and another swallow of milk. "I got curious about him afterwards and asked around."

"And?" Gaunt raised a hopeful eyebrow.

"I don't think he ran much risk of being asked to join a Rotary Club." The detective grinned. "Though who knows, these days? The Fraud Squad had him on their books a few times, but never did



nail him for anything. That was his style: they had him tabbed as a good front man in some low-risk confidence tricks, the kind that don't often backfire. But he dropped out of the frame two, maybe three, years back."

"Would that be when he got the Hispan job?"

Angus nodded.

"Did anyone take a look at Hispan?"

"They're foreign but they seem legitimate enough." Angus made it clear that, as far as he was concerned, the two things together were unusual. "No complaints from anyone, and they don't do a lot of business." He got on with his lunch again. "Anything else?"

"We've a relative of Lorna Anderson's in town now—from Canada. She wants to know about Mrs. Anderson's property."

"It's here," nodded Angus. "If she's authorised, we'll be glad to get rid of it."

"But I want to see it first," said Gaunt.

Angus sighed, lumbered to his feet, and led the way.

The division's regular property and productions room was being painted and two spare cells were being used. Going into one of them, Angus located a suitcase and a plastic sack, dumped both on a small table, and stood back.

"That's everything." Noise was filtering through to them from farther down the cell block. Gaunt recognised the voice: the drunk he'd seen brought in now claimed he needed a doctor. Angus ignored the shouts. "Look, can I leave you on your own? That's not going by the rule book, but I've got these damned kids—"

"If I want to borrow anything, I'll ask first," promised Gaunt.

"Fine." The detective hesitated. "About Fraser—was he on the crook when he died?"

"It's possible," said Gaunt. "If that does surface, I'll let you know."

Angus left him. In the background, the drunk farther along the cell block had fallen silent, giving up.

Gaunt turned to the case and plastic sack. The case, the one with the slashed lid he'd seen at the hotel, had been neatly packed by someone. The plastic sack had a hospital tag and apparently held the clothes Lorna Anderson had been wearing when she arrived there by

ambulance. The fact she was dead now didn't make what he had to do any easier.

The suitcase yielded nothing new. He turned to the hospital sack and spread its contents over the table. A quilted blue parka, trimmed with grey fur, had two outside pockets. One was empty, the other held a handkerchief and the remains of a bar of chocolate. He was folding the parka again, ready to put it back in the sack, when he spotted an inside pocket. Checking it, he thought it was empty at first. Then his fingers met crumpled paper.

The pocket had a hole at the foot; most of his find had slipped through into the lining. Gaunt teased the single sheet out and flattened it on the table.

Headed "Hispan Properties," it was an advertising leaflet offering properties for sale in the Canary Islands. At the foot were two boxes giving Hispan's addresses in Edinburgh and Tenerife. Full-colour illustrations showed villas and apartment blocks with a foreground of bronzed girls in bikinis and a backdrop of swimming-pools and palm trees. Hard-sell advertising copy talked of sun, sea, and warm, romantic nights.

He grinned and turned the leaflet over. The reverse side listed purchase prices and finance plans without mentioning possible interest rates. But a whole series of pencilled figures ran down one of the margins, all in Lorna Anderson's small, neat handwriting. He looked at them and stopped grinning.

First there was a telephone number, meticulously circled. Then a small series of calculations, converting British pounds into dollars, were followed by another circled telephone number. The sums involved in the calculations were modest; both telephone numbers began with local Edinburgh exchanges.

The drunk in the cell along the way came to life again, singing off key, slurring his words, happy now. Another prisoner began shouting, telling him to shut up. Ignoring the noise, Gaunt repacked the rest of the clothing. Then, with a silent apology to Sergeant Angus, he slipped the leaflet into an inside pocket and left.

The officer on duty at the general office said Angus had gone out. Gaunt asked if he could use a telephone, and one was pushed across.

He dialled the first of the telephone numbers and it rang out, then was answered.

"Universal Travel," said a voice. "Can we help you?"

Mouth tightening, he broke the connection and dialled the second number. This time, a woman's voice answered.

"Good afternoon," she said briskly. "Spanish Consulate."

He hung up and swore under his breath.

"No luck?" asked the hovering duty officer.

"Not a lot," said Gaunt.

But he wondered. If Lorna Anderson had been thinking of travel, if Tenerife had been her possible destination, he didn't think the Canadian widow's reasons had had anything to do with property investment.

He thanked the constable, then went out to his car. One thing was certain. It was time to find out a little more about Hispan Trading, even if that meant being late for the meeting with Andy Deathstone.

Hispan Trading's office was in Calvin House, a large glass-and-concrete commercial development located on the edge of a strip of green parkland Edinburgh called the Meadows. Calvin House was owned by an absentee landlord insurance company; the first two floors were occupied by a computer sales organisation, and the other floors housed a variety of tenants.

There was a directory board in the lobby. Jonathan Gaunt was standing checking it when a small, wizened man in a grey porter's uniform came over.

"Lost?" he asked.

"Where's Hispan Trading?" asked Gaunt.

"Them?" The little man gave a monkey-like grin. "Fourth floor. But I haven't seen any of them today, except young Angela. Don't particularly expect to, either."

"They seem difficult to contact," said Gaunt.

"Difficult?" The little man snorted. "Do you know them?"

"No." Gaunt shaped a grimace. "That's my problem."

The little man gave him a wise look. "What's your line? Selling?"

"Well—" Gaunt left it at that.

"I'll give you a tip." The little man lowered his voice confidentially. "The boss is a tall, thin character, John Cass. Looks soft, talks

the same way. But don't let that fool you. He can be a hard man if things don't go right."

He winked and ambled away.

Gaunt took the elevator up to the fourth floor. Hispan Trading's office was the last door on the left, past a trade union branch and a photographic agency. He went in, and a chubby-faced girl looked up from her desk, then put down the magazine she'd been reading. Her desk was the main piece of furniture in the sparsely furnished room.

"Hello." She eyed Gaunt with open curiosity.

"Hello." He smiled at her. "Is John Cass in?"

"No. Just me." She was about twenty, with mousey hair, a button nose, a multicoloured sweater and an air of total boredom. "I'm Angela."

Gaunt nodded. "The porter told me."

"Charlie?" She grinned. "He's the resident gossip."

He looked around. There were two filing cabinets beside her desk and a couch and small table near the window. Some photographs of villas and apartments were pinned onto the walls and a closed door behind the girl was marked "Private."

"Suppose I want to buy an apartment?" he asked.

"I take the inquiries, then pass them on." The girl chewed a fingernail for a moment. "Mr. Church is the property salesman, but he's part time, usually works from home. I could give you some leaflets—"

"No thanks." Gaunt tried again. "When will John Cass be in?"

"I'm not sure," she said vaguely. "He phoned this morning and said he might be here late this afternoon. Mr. Cass only looks in now and again; sometimes I see him, sometimes I don't. I just look after the office and answer the phone."

Gaunt nodded sympathetically. "How long have you worked for Hispan?"

"About two months." She inspected the fingernail she'd been chewing and seemed satisfied. "It's just temporary."

"And dull?"

"There's not much to do," she admitted.

"Someone I knew came here not long ago," said Gaunt casually.

"A Canadian woman, in her sixties. Remember her?"

"Mrs. Anderson?" The girl grinned. "Yes. She kept phoning and

calling until she got hold of Mr. Cass. Then she came here and they had a talk."

"When?"

"About a week ago." She leaned her elbows on the desk, obviously glad of an audience. "I don't know what happened, Mr.—uh—"

"Gaunt."

"Well, they were in Mr. Cass's office. And he wasn't too happy after she left."

"Did they have a row?"

The girl frowned. "No, I don't think so. I mean, I didn't hear any shouting. But he was angry about something; then he told me to take the rest of the afternoon off." She stopped. "Should I be telling you all this?"

"No." He smiled at her. "But don't let it worry you, Angela. I'll maybe look in again."

She nodded, and picked up her magazine as he went out. When he reached the lobby, the little porter waved a casual farewell.

It wasn't easy to find a parking space around New Register House. Finally, he managed to slide the Ford into a newly vacated slot, then splashed through the last of the Princes Street slush and went into the building.

When he got there, Lorna Tabor was already in Andy Deathstone's office. They sat side by side, their heads bent over a scatter of documents spread on a table in front of them.

"Where the hell have you been?" asked Deathstone, removing his thick-lensed spectacles. He scowled. "I sweat blood to do you a favour, and what do you do?"

"Turn up late," said Gaunt apologetically. He pulled over a chair, sat opposite them, and glanced at Lorna. "How has he made out?"

"It's amazing." She gestured at the spread of documents in near-disbelief. "Everything's here. Names, places, dates—"

"And the Canadian papers Miss Tabor has complete it, Jonny," said Deathstone, equally pleased. "As far as I'm concerned, she's Grade A approved, a direct descendant of Adam Fraser, crofter."

"Last sprig on the family tree?"

"We can't find any other."

"He'll want that in writing," Lorna warned. "Probably in triplicate."

"No problem." The small, middle-aged figure beamed. "That family tree of Mrs. Anderson's was excellent—amateurish but excellent. Then, of course, I've explained to Miss Tabor that tracing descendants is usually a damned sight easier than going for ancestors." He sighed at the thought. "People come in here and say they want to know about their ancestors. Damn it, go back six generations and everybody can claim sixty-four great-great-great-great-grandparents—"

"I'll take your word for it," said Gaunt hurriedly. He smiled at Lorna. "If Andy says you're legal, even Henry Falconer will go along with it."

"So now everybody agrees I exist." Her quiet Canadian drawl didn't hide the sarcasm behind the words. "Good."

"I traced my wife's family tree once," mused Deathstone. "Then she wished I hadn't. I discovered a couple of particularly nasty skeletons in her ancestral cupboard, nice conversation stoppers." He sat back and folded his arms. "Jonny, I've got to ask you this. What the heck has been going on?"

"Meaning what?" Gaunt raised an eyebrow.

"Meaning our records staff are getting slightly sick of the name Fraser," said Deathstone almost peevishly. "First, we had requests soon after he died. Then—well, this is the third in the last couple of weeks. One was Lorna Anderson." He paused and glanced at Lorna. "That's a clue on its own, of course. 'Lorna' is a regular name in your family." He saw Gaunt's impatience and cleared his throat. "Yes—first Lorna Anderson, about two weeks ago. Then, a few days later there was a man."

"Did he have a name?" demanded Gaunt.

Deathstone sighed. "Yes. At least, he signed the request slips as John Smith."

"That helps," said Gaunt drily.

"These are public records," said Deathstone defensively. "We don't ask for reasons or identification."

"Any way he could come across a mention of a Lorna Tabor?"

"No." Deathstone was positive. "Lorna Tabor only exists in Canada."

"Do your people remember anything about John Smith?"

"No." Deathstone shook his head sadly. "Sorry."

Lorna Tabor frowned at each of them, puzzled.

"Would one of you like to explain what the hell you've been talking about?" she asked.

"Peter Fraser, your Aunt Lorna, and someone who became interested in them both," said Gaunt quietly. "There was the break-in at her room, then other things. Add them together, remember what she told you."

"Like how she hinted Peter Fraser was a crook?" Lorna nodded.

Gaunt saw Andy Deathstone was listening, bewildered. But that wasn't important.

"Maybe there is this hidden money or something else that matters," he said slowly. "And it looks like someone else wants to get to it first."

She sat silent for a moment, still looking at him, a stray ray of sunlight from the window glinting on her dark hair. Her face, suddenly empty of emotion, could have been an Indian carving in stone. But her dark eyes were angry.

"He won't," she said simply. "Not if I can damned well help it. I owe her that much."

Andy Deathstone gave Gaunt a slight headshake, meaning explanations could wait but he'd want them later. They thanked him and left.

A tour bus was unloading its well-wrapped, camera-hung passengers outside the building. Their guide was gathering them into a group, like so many sheep, counting heads.

"Jonny." Lorna touched Gaunt's arm as they went past the group. "Can you spare me some time?"

He nodded. "That's why I'm here."

"Then"—she hesitated—"then would you show me where Peter Fraser is buried?"

He tried to hide his surprise. But there had been a note in the department file, along with a statement of funeral costs.

"Yes. Why?"

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "I just feel I should—well, know." She gave a wry twist of a smile. "Humour me, will you?"

Gaunt nodded and led her to where he'd left the Ford.

The cemetery was on the southeast side of the capital, big and old, a stark, desolate place in the winter sunlight. Leafless trees stood like gaunt mourners, the last of the melting snow still dripping from their branches onto mildewed gravestones. Vandals had broken the head from a winged angel guarding a tomb near the entrance and had spray-painted a couple more nearby.

Gaunt stopped his car at the cemetery superintendent's office and went in. The superintendent, a bald, elderly man, abandoned a cup of coffee and a blazing coal fire when he saw he had a visitor.

"No problem." He nodded cheerfully when Gaunt asked where Fraser's grave was located. "Are you a relative?"

"Distant," lied Gaunt.

"Right." The man went over to a cupboard, hummed under his breath while he consulted a ledger, then came back. "It's in one of the new sections. Take the third avenue on the right, straight along till you come to the Fergus family; it's a damned great monument like the Taj Mahal gone wrong. Take the left-hand path from there."

Gaunt thanked him and turned to go.

"The ground's a bit slippery down there," warned the superintendent. "Mud. Can't keep things tidy this time of year." He grinned. "Not that we get many complaints."

Lorna was standing beside the car when Gaunt returned. They walked together between the close lines of graves, reached the Fergus memorial stone, then went along a narrow gravel-covered path.

The "new section" was no pleasant place. They passed two newly dug, waiting graves topped by planks and canvas. Others were still low humps of settling, broken earth. Mud and small patches of snow seemed everywhere.

Peter Fraser's plot was a comparative oasis of uncut grass with a simple headstone. His name and the date of his death were on the stone in leaded black lettering.

Gaunt glanced at Lorna. She gave him a small, reassuring smile, took a step nearer, then stopped and frowned.

A withered wreath of flowers lay on the grass at the base of the stone. Stooping, Gaunt lifted it and disturbed a large white slug in the process. A small card, almost reduced to pulp, was still attached



to the wreath by thin green twine. But the smudged message it bore was still readable.

"What does it say?" Lorna came beside him and read the words aloud, softly. "'Remembering. Marta, Puerto Tellas.' That's Tenerife?"

He nodded. "And where his boat is lying."

"Marta." She said the name thoughtfully. "A woman; you're sure he hadn't anyone out there?"

"If you mean a wife, no. We checked." Gaunt broke off the card, put it in a pocket, and returned the withered wreath to the wet grass. "Want to—well, stay for a moment?"

"No." She shook her head. "I've been. That's enough."

They went back to the car, then Gaunt on his own made another visit to the superintendent's office.

"Find him all right?" asked the man, not bothering to stir from the warmth of his coal fire.

Gaunt nodded. "There was a wreath. Has anyone else been asking about the grave?"

"Fraser?" The cemetery superintendent scratched his chin. "No, he hasn't had visitors. But I remember the wreath. We don't get too many that way."

"What way?"

"Delivered." The man shrugged. "This florist's van arrived. The driver had the wreath with him, said it had been sent Interflora. You know, ordered by cable."

"Can you remember the firm's name?"

"No. But I know when. It was the first anniversary of his death—spot on." The superintendent gave a soft chuckle. "There's always someone, somewhere, eh?"

"Somewhere," agreed Gaunt.

Dusk comes early to Scotland in winter and the sky was already grey as they drove back into the city. By the time they stopped outside the Carcroft Hotel the first street lights were coming to life.

"Enough for one day?" Gaunt asked.

"The way I feel, yes." Lorna Tabor, her door half opened, rested back against the seat for a moment. She looked tired. "A bed and some sleep, that's most of my programme—a bed and a lot of sleep, just as soon as I've phoned my father in Winnipeg."

"About tomorrow," said Gaunt. "Henry Falconer will want to see you again."

"Now I'm legal?" She shrugged. "I'll think about it. I've a few things to sort out."

"Tell me," invited Gaunt.

"Later." She managed to stifle a yawn. "I want to do some thinking first, Jonny. Maybe talk to some people, get some advice." Her lips pursed for a moment. "Will you help me do one thing?"

"Tomorrow?" He nodded. "If it's legal."

"Before she left Canada, Aunt Lorna wrote to various places and got hold of an old address for Peter Fraser. My guess is she'd work on from there. Then, when she found he was dead—well, at least she'd know about the cottage where he'd been living. I'd like to see it."

Gaunt nodded. "I can probably arrange that. In fact, I'll come with you."

"I was counting on that. Thanks." She smiled at him and got out of the car.

Gaunt waited until she'd gone into the hotel, then set the Ford moving again. He had a choice between seeing Henry Falconer or trying the Hispan Trading office again, and he'd had enough of Falconer for one day.

There was more traffic on the roads, the build-up towards the evening rush-hour, and when he reached Calvin House there was already a choice of empty parking places.

Gaunt took the elevator up to the fourth floor. Hispan Trading's outer office was in semidarkness and deserted, but a light showed behind the frosted glass of the private office at the rear. He could hear a murmur of voices, indistinct but belonging to two men. Going over, he knocked on the door, and the voices stopped. He heard the scrape of a chair being shoved back, and a moment later the door swung open.

"How the hell did you get in?" asked a tall, thin man.

Gaunt thumbed towards the main door. "It wasn't locked."

"Damn that girl." The man, about Gaunt's age, had close-cut fair hair, a small mouth, and a large beak of a nose. His voice was soft, just short of being a woman's, and he wore a grey business suit with a white shirt and wine-coloured silk tie. He stayed where he was,

blocking the view into the private office. "We're closed. Come back tomorrow."

"If you happen to be John Cass, this will only take a minute," said Gaunt easily.

The man frowned, but nodded. "Well?"

"I was here earlier," Gaunt showed his Remembrancer's identification. "I told Angela I'd be back."

"She mentioned someone had been." Cass's small mouth tightened a little. "You asked about the Canadian woman. Why?"

"She died," said Gaunt.

Cass shrugged. "I didn't know."

"No reason you should," said Gaunt. "But there's a legal problem. It goes back to Peter Fraser."

"I thought it might." Cass glanced deliberately at his wrist-watch. It was gold, with a thick, matching bracelet. "I'm in the middle of a private meeting, but I'll give you two minutes, no more."

Gaunt nodded. Cass came out into the main office, carefully closing the door behind him.

"Mrs. Anderson happened to be a distant relation—" began Gaunt.

"I got all that the first time I met her," said Cass wearily. "The family tree waved under my nose, the lot."

"Then how often did you see her?"

"Twice, which was twice too often," snapped Cass. "She badgered her way in, the first time about two weeks ago, then last week—last Wednesday."

"What did she want?"

Cass's thin shoulders shaped a shrug. "The woman seemed to think we might have some of Fraser's stuff still lying around."

"And did you?"

"No." Cass made it plain he was trying to be patient. "Look, I never knew Fraser. I came here after his death; one of the first things I had to cope with was his lawyer and the police wanting to go through his desk." He pursed his lips. "They took a few things. Anything they left behind was thrown out—anything, everything."

"You told Lorna Anderson?"

"Twice. Maybe she thought we had a bag of gold hidden away." Cass rubbed a finger down one side of his beak of a nose and sniffed

derisively at the thought. "So what's happened now? You say she's dead. Has another like her turned up?"

"There's a possibility," said Gaunt vaguely. "And we haven't totally settled Fraser's estate."

"That yacht." The thin man sniffed again. "I was talking to head office in Tenerife yesterday. They mentioned someone was going out to Puerto Tellas to sell the thing. You?"

Gaunt nodded.

"Then you'll meet my boss, Paul Weber. Ask him about Fraser; he knew him well enough."

"Will Marta be there?" asked Gaunt mildly.

"Weber's sister?" Cass stopped and blinked. "I suppose so. How does she come into it?"

"Someone mentioned her," said Gaunt vaguely. "What's she like?"

"Like the boss's sister," countered Cass. "Finished?"

"For now, yes." Gaunt ambled over to one of the displays of property posters. "I've a friend making noises about buying one of your apartments. How's the market?"

"Reasonable." Cass hesitated then added grudgingly. "Tell him to contact us. Or you could have a word with Paul Weber when you're out: he's building a development at Puerto Tellas as a sideline."

Cass shepherded him towards the main door and out into the corridor. The door closed again, and he heard the click of a lock. John Cass was making sure there would be no further interruption.

Gaunt walked to the elevator, pressed the call-button, and thought while he waited. At least the name Marta now meant something. But Cass hadn't asked how Lorna Anderson had died.

Either he didn't care or, despite what he'd said, he knew.

The elevator arrived. Gaunt squeezed in beside a chattering group of secretaries and they fell silent, looking him up and down, leaving him feeling like a bull in a sale ring.

He let them leave first when the elevator reached the lobby. Then, as he headed out of the building, Charlie the hall porter appeared in his path.

"Back again?" the wizened little man in grey uniform gave him a grin. "Any luck this time? I saw Cass in the building."

"We had a talk." Gaunt stopped, remembering the porter was Calvin House's resident gossip. "But he kept it short; he had someone with him.

"Probably one o' that bunch he calls 'business associates.'" The little porter gave a dry cackle of a laugh. "I wouldn't like to meet any o' them on a dark night."

Another wave of homebound office-workers came heading for the door. Gaunt took him by the arm and eased him to one side, next to a concrete tub filled with greenery.

"You could help me, Charlie," he said quietly. "Angela said you'd a pretty good memory. Do you remember Peter Fraser?"

"The one who died?" The porter rubbed his chin. "I might, friend. But my throat can get dry."

"Would this help?" Gaunt produced two pound notes, folded them, and waited.

"I think so." Charlie expertly palmed the notes. "Fraser had the same visitors, right?"

"I've heard he wasn't around very much."

"Away more than half o' the time, and his mail piling up; it's still the same." The porter scowled. "We've got some weird tenants in this place, but that Hispan outfit win hands down."

"How much mail does Hispan get?"

"Plenty of books an' magazines—which must cost them. But not much in the way o' letters." Absent-mindedly, the little porter stripped some leaves from the nearest plant and crumpled them in one hand. "Mail—I heard enough about it when that long beanpole up there took over."

Gaunt frowned. "Trouble?"

"Aye. He'd hardly got here before he started shouting. First he said there were office files missing and wanted to know if the cleaners had thrown anything out."

"Had they?"

"If it's in a waste bucket, it gets heaved; that's all. But then he started blaming me for losing mail he said should have come."

"And?"

"I just told him to go to hell," said the little man proudly.

"You said books and magazines," reminded Gaunt casually. "The interesting kind?"

"No. Business stuff, technical things. The nearest thing to a pin-up in any o' them would be a five-ton truck," said the porter caustically. "They came—they still come—then most of them are thrown out unopened. That's more work for the cleaners, an' more work for me."

"It's a hard world," murmured Gaunt.

"A damn thirsty one too, eh?" The little man gave him a gnomish wink. "Any time you want another wee chat about things, look in."

"Any time I can afford it, I will," promised Gaunt. "Goodnight, Charlie."

Edinburgh's nightly emptying ritual was near its peak. By the time Jonathan Gaunt got back to the Exchequer Building, the Remembrancer's Department was almost deserted.

For twenty minutes he sat at one of the typewriters in the otherwise empty typing pool area and tapped out a basic, outline report for Henry Falconer. Finished, he corrected some of the more blatant typing errors in ink, put the report in an envelope, and dropped it in the internal mailbox.

Then he left.

It was Wednesday, and Wednesday night was poker night. He was one of half a dozen regulars in a tightly knit "school," and the rules were simple. The game rotated to a different house each week, the stakes weren't allowed to cause financial disaster.

It was the turn of John Milton to play host. Milton was a stockbroker with enough humour to have the telegraphic address Paradise Lost and enough patience to cope with Gaunt's investment whims.

He also had a wife who spent Wednesday evenings at keep-fit classes.

John Milton lived in a big old house in the Barnton area, where most of his neighbors were other stockbrokers, company directors, or retired generals. On the way over, Gaunt stopped at a restaurant for a sandwich and it was about eight when he parked his car behind the other vehicles already outside the house.

He crunched up a gravel path, through a tree-lined garden which looked like a neglected public park, and rang the doorbell; after a few moments a porch light snapped on. Then the door opened.

"We've started," said Milton, beckoning him in. "You're late."

"I was working," said Gaunt.

"That brings tears to my eyes," said Milton and led the way through to his study.

He was last to arrive, and a hand was in progress. The dealer, a trade union official, greeted him with a wink. The other regulars included a geriatrician, a right-wing city councillor, and a professional footballer. But one of the players was Andy Deathstone.

Gaunt waited. The hand finished and Deathstone ambled over to join him.

"I hoped you'd show up," said Deathstone amiably. "That's why I came over tonight."

Gaunt nodded, and they stood for a moment, watching the new hand being dealt.

"Like to tell me what this Fraser business is all about?" asked Deathstone as the cards were lifted. He settled his small, plump shape against Milton's desk. "When people start playing fast and loose with New Register House I prefer to know why."

"Money," said Gaunt, his eyes on the game. Milton, with four queens, was being bluffed superbly by the geriatrician, who nursed three tens. "Probably a lot of money—if it exists."

"And your Miss Tabor had to prove she exists." Deathstone nodded. "I checked around again after you left, Jonny. Your Mrs. Anderson—the late Mrs. Anderson—kept our staff busy. Not just your basic family tree stuff; she wanted reference books, then some of the old parish records, and even tried nibbling at some of the overseas archival stuff in the other records sections."

"Did she say why?"

"Vague noises, and we don't push it," reminded Deathstone. "But she used us like we were a lending library."

Milton scowled round at them from the table and told them to shut up.

"What could she get from the overseas side?" murmured Gaunt after a moment.

"Just about anything. Though our people had a feeling she was maybe disappointed." Deathstone gestured expansively. "The trouble is, there's so much lying around. You get a family clearing out after someone dies, and they find an old shoe-box of diaries, letters left over from when Granddad tried to make his fortune abroad.

They dump them on us. You want to know what North America was really like before those uppity colonials forgot their manners? We can give you chapter and verse. Or if you want India under the Raj, maybe Africa whilst Livingstone was doing his tourist bit—”

A concerted growl from the poker game stopped him there.

They joined the game at the next hand. Gaunt pushed his luck with two high pairs and was hammered by John Milton with a fat hearts-and-diamonds flush.

“That’s what happens when you don’t pay attention,” said Milton, scooping up the pot. “Whose deal?”

As usual, the game ended at midnight. Nobody had lost much, nobody had won much. One by one, the players said goodnight and left, but Gaunt hung back, finishing a can of beer, watching Milton slotting a pile of plastic chips into their storage box.

“John, give me a help with something,” he said as Milton finished. “Suppose I want to hide away money, hide it so the tax man doesn’t sniff it. I know where he might look, so what do I do?”

“How about a tin box under your bed?” Milton grinned. “Since when did you have that kind of worry?”

“I think someone did. Then he died.”

“And we presume he didn’t take it with him.” Milton sighed, opened a can of beer for himself, and took a gulp. “Dirty money?”

Gaunt nodded.

“Then its a laundry job.” Milton wiped a hand across his mouth. “Swiss banks are fussier than they used to be. There’s the Caribbean; I know places where they’ll let you set up your own bank if you want.”

“How about Spain?”

“Tricky. Not impossible, but tricky.” Milton shook his head.

“And here, in Britain?”

“There’s always ‘Now you see it, now you don’t.’” Milton took another sip from his can. “It’s like playing snakes and ladders. You use different banks, different names, different accounts. The money moves around, back and forward, in small lots, fast. Except you’re always draining some off to where you really want it.”

“Somewhere different?”

Milton nodded. “You’ve bought yourself a little private company, ceased trading, more or less dormant, assets just about zero. You



keep reversing money into it—simple, no fuss. The company isn't trading, so you don't have to make tax returns."

"It happens?"

"Some of my best friends deny it," said Milton, and grinned.

A chill, gusting wind from the northeast was rustling its way through the trees and shrubbery as Gaunt left Milton's house and began walking back through the garden towards his car.

He heard the sound of breaking glass as he reached a thick patch of laurel beside the entrance gate. He ran forward, then swore.

A burly figure wearing a heavy parka jacket stood at the front of his Ford. One headlamp had just been smashed in, the man was already swinging a short metal bar of some kind, aiming a blow at the other light.

Gaunt shouted and began sprinting. The second headlamp glass shattered then the man turned, grinning.

And a second figure slipped out of the shadows.

Gaunt stopped, watching them come towards him. The second figure, parka-clad like his companion, was swinging a bottle as they closed in. Neither said a word.

He had to let it happen, had to let them come close in. That had been the gospel according to a gritty little unarmed-combat instructor in the Parachute Regiment who made life hell if you got it wrong and slightly worse if you got it right. Don't think it: do it. And do it first.

They were almost on him when he moved. A roar of simulated, bubbling rage, a rush forward, a sideways blow at the one who had smashed the headlamps. Then Gaunt concentrated briefly on the thug with the bottle.

He dodged a wild swing and aimed for his head, and it grazed his shoulder. He countered hard and fast, kicking the thin figure just below the left knee. Screaming with pain, the man lurched back and the bottle smashed as it was dropped.

Snarling, the second thug came in. His iron bar lashed the air like a whip, he was ready for Gaunt to retreat. That left him unprepared for the opposite as his target used footwork again, fast sideways and forward. Almost behind the man, Gaunt grabbed his arm, jerked him round, then butted him hard and square on the face.

Half stunned, lips smashed, nose pouring blood, the parka-clad attacker staggered blindly. Then, suddenly, headlights were coming towards them.

One man cried a warning. Both fled at a shambling run.

As the car arrived and braked to a halt, John Milton came hurrying down the gravel path from his house. He was armed with a golf club.

"I heard noises," he began. "What the hell's going on?"

The car driver, a middle-aged woman, climbed out.

"I saw them," she snapped angrily. "Drunks—this whole damned area is going to pieces. And do you want to know what our overpaid police are doing about it?" She gestured angrily in towards the city. "A whole damned carload are back there, running a speed trap."

Tight-lipped, Milton looked at the Ford then at Gaunt.

"You all right?" he asked.

Gaunt nodded.

"Good." Milton frowned at a stain on the roadway. "That's blood. Yours?"

"No."

"Even better."

"What's wrong with flogging anyway?" asked the woman driver to the world in general.

"Drunks." Milton looked at him again, faintly suspicious. "Do I call the police?"

Gaunt shook his head. Both men would be far away by now. He wondered how many drunks ended up wandering an exclusive area like Barnton, or would have chosen his car as their target.

He thanked Milton and the woman, then got into his car. It started as usual. Though the headlamp glasses had been smashed, both bulbs still worked.

And it was time to drive home.

## CHAPTER THREE

He was late for work again next morning.

Leaving the little black Ford at Dan Cafflin's repair shop, its two smashed headlamps like reproachful wounds, was almost as bad as consigning a relative to a hospital ward.

Maybe worse, when he thought of the few relatives he had around.

Cafflin's workshop was a grimy hut on the edge of an Edinburgh canal, surrounded by dilapidated tenement property. Cafflin, a large hulk of a man, frowned at the damage, picked up an oil-stained note-pad, and scribbled quickly with a stub of pencil. He showed the result to Gaunt.

"I didn't hit a damned thing," protested Gaunt. "Blame two heavies with an iron bar."

Cafflin threw back his head and gave a strange, strangled whoop which was meant to be a laugh. Sergeant Cafflin, Royal Tank Regiment, had been blown up by a land-mine in one of those pennyplain, twopence-coloured wars in the Arab Trucial States, where there were always a few British military advisers up front. It had left him without speech or hearing. He'd met Gaunt in military hospital.

But Dan Cafflin could lip-read, he could tune engines by feeling their vibrating life through his fingertips.

Cafflin scribbled again. The car could be ready by lunch-time. He paused, then added another line.

"How much trouble are you in?"

"I don't know yet," admitted Gaunt. "But I'm not making the rules, Dan."

Cafflin looked at him, nodded soberly, then turned his attention to the car.

"How much trouble are you in?"

This time, it was Henry Falconer who asked the question. Gaunt had arrived at the Remembrancer's Department to find one of those "See me" notes propped against his telephone. When he'd gone along the corridor to the senior administrative assistant's office, Hannah North hustled him in, then retired quickly.

"Trouble." Falconer repeated the word. Hunched behind his desk, it was hard to decide from his manner whether he was concerned, angry, or both as he watched Gaunt settle in the chair opposite him. "Your friend Milton called; said he thought I should know about last night. Well?"

"I think somebody feels I'm a nuisance," admitted Gaunt.

"A lot of people probably do," said Falconer grimly. "Some of us have formed a club. Narrow it down."

"Hispan Trading," said Gaunt. "I must have been followed from there—"

"This—ah—" Falconer glanced at some notes—"this John Cass?"

"His people."

"But it wouldn't have looked that way." Falconer nodded, then sighed. "If you treat it as ordinary vandalism, can you claim your own insurance for those headlamps?"

Gaunt nodded.

"Good. We're still in an economy mode." Falconer showed some relief as he turned again to the scatter of papers in front of him. "I've read your report. Now we're sure she's genuine, I'll need to see the Tabor girl again."

"I told her it was likely." Gaunt clasped his hands round one knee and eyed Falconer moodily. "What else do we do about it, Henry?"

"I'm not totally sure." Falconer rubbed his nose as he considered. "The Tabor girl obviously believes Lorna Anderson found a possible pot of gold at the end of this Fraser rainbow." He paused. "But of course, it may not have been Fraser's gold—not all of it, at any rate. His—ah—associates would have been suitably annoyed when he died and they couldn't find it."

"Then along comes Lorna Anderson and she knows something they don't—" Gaunt shaped a lop-sided grin. "I think you've just won a prize."

"Probably something unspeakable and uneatable," said Falconer. He tapped the report sheets. "You say you'll arrange to take the Tabor girl to Fraser's cottage."

"This afternoon, if I can fix it. She's keen; it might be useful." Gaunt counted the rest on his fingertips. "I want to get hold of Detective Sergeant Angus and see if he'll run a check on John Cass. Then there's a part-timer on the Hispan staff called Church; he works from home, handles the property side. He might be worth a look. The other thing—well, how busy are Companies Branch?"

"Underpaid, understaffed, overworked," said Falconer. "Their golf is suffering. What do you want there?"

"To see if Lorna Anderson pestered them—or if they can find anything odd in the Hispan set-up."

"You tell them," said Falconer grimly. "If they even see me they start moaning. I'll handle the police, slightly higher up the ladder than your detective sergeant. This man Church"—he sucked his lips, then his broad, doleful face crinkled in a surprising smile—"Hannah could see him. We—she has been checking on some of those Spanish property offers; she can make prospective-customer noises."

"Why?"

"Because it keeps you out of it," said Falconer. "As of last night, your face is a liability. I need you in one piece for Tenerife—that damned boat, remember?" His face sagged again. "Not that we'll see more than expenses out of it. I've talked with the Remembrancer, he says we're morally bound to hand over the rest to the Tabor girl."

"You don't approve?" asked Gaunt. He chuckled when he didn't get an answer. "Henry, watch it. You could end up robbing orphans."

"Show me an orphan," said Falconer. "I'll think about it."

Henry Falconer began his share of the work by asking Hannah North to look in, and Gaunt left them. Back in his own room, he coaxed a mug of coffee from the typing pool girls, then reached for the telephone directory.

The quickest way to locate the owners of the cottage Peter Fraser had rented was through the lawyer who had handled most of the

dead man's business. Another call after that, and he was speaking to a farmer's wife near Bathgate. Her name was Maisie Roberts, her husband had gone out to one of the local markets, and she agreed that Mallard Cottage was their property.

"It's empty at the moment," she said cheerfully. "If you're interested in renting it—"

"No, it's something different," said Gaunt, stopping her. "One of your previous tenants was named Fraser."

"That's right." A note of caution entered her voice. "Why?"

"A relative has arrived from Canada," explained Gaunt. "Call it a sentimental thing. She'd like to see inside the cottage, but it wouldn't take long."

"Another of them?" The woman didn't hide her surprise. "We had a visitor like that a week ago—a Mrs. Anderson. How many more are there?"

"None I know about," soothed Gaunt. "Could we come out this afternoon?"

"No." She was firm. "I'm going out, neither of us will be back until evening. But we could arrange it for then, if it's just a quick look around."

They agreed on nine o'clock.

"But no later," she warned. "If you're not there, we won't wait."

Gaunt thanked her, broke the connection, then dialled Detective Sergeant Angus's office number. Angus was in. He answered his extension with a gloomy lack of enthusiasm that didn't change when he heard who was calling.

"What is it this time?" he asked resignedly. "I've got a warehouse break-in, we're trying to sort out a bus-load of shop-lifters, and there's some damned idiot flashing his way around Princes Street Gardens. Exposure? He's risking frostbite."

"It's back to Lorna Anderson," said Gaunt. "When you talked to her that night, before she collapsed, did she say anything about leaving Edinburgh, taking a plane trip?"

The policeman took a moment or two to organise his thoughts. "I didn't say anything about that in my report—"

"But did she?"

"Yes." There was another, thinking silence. "I made some moan about the weather, she said our snow was kid stuff to what they got

in Canada; then she said she'd be in the sun and heat within the week."

"Did she say where?"

"No." Angus was positive. "What's happening?"

"A few things." It seemed fair to give him some kind of warning. "Don't ask why, but keep your paperwork up to date." Gaunt grinned at the policeman's muttered obscenity. "You can thank me later."

He made one more call, the travel agency number Lorna Anderson had written on the Hispan leaflet. The girl at the Universal Travel Agency inquiry desk was friendly and helpful and kept him waiting less than a minute.

They had Lorna Anderson's name on file. She had inquired about both package-tour and scheduled-service flights to Tenerife but hadn't confirmed a booking.

"We told her there wouldn't be any problem," said the girl. "Two people travelling to the Canary Islands at this time of year—"

"Two?" asked Gaunt.

"That's right," said the girl. "Mrs. Anderson said she'd have to wait until someone arrived from Canada."

He thanked her and hung up. Another small but significant thread of the pattern had stopped being a loose end.

Companies Branch came next. They were located on the ground floor of the Exchequer Building, seldom spoke to anyone else if they could avoid it, and lived in a world of indexes and listings. Old wooden cabinets crammed with filed documents fought for space with computer terminals and software. Somewhere along the centuries the Remembrancer had collected Companies Branch, but they never quite admitted it.

The typing pool answered Gaunt's telephone when he wasn't around. He left a message with them in case Lorna Tabor called, to tell her of the Mallard Cottage situation. Then he went down the broad marble stairway to the Companies den.

The help he wanted was in the library area. Annie Blackthorn ruled there. She was tall, angular, grey-haired, and no one could remember when she hadn't been that way. Winter or summer, she always wore dark blue with a single string of pearls. Juniors quaked

when she approached, even the Remembrancer was alleged to go in fear of her wrath.

But she knew more about Companies Branch and its workings than anyone else, and she possessed an unerring ability to untangle the most complex company structures and strip what remained to basic fact.

Gaunt approached her cautiously. He always did. She listened, frowning. She always did.

"You want to know about Hispan Trading?" Annie Blackthorn brushed a speck of almost invisible lint from one blue sleeve and pursed her lips. "We looked into that months ago, soon after your man Fraser died."

Gaunt nodded. "Do you remember the details?"

"Certainly." She treated the question with near-surprise. "Hispan is Spanish-owned. They registered a small company here using the same name; there can be taxation benefits."

"Did Fraser have any financial interest?"

"No." She shook her head firmly. "That was what we were asked to establish, Mr. Gaunt. The same applied to a subsidiary of the subsidiary—a property company."

"Hispan Properties." Gaunt sighed. That kind of explanation would have been too simple. "Could you look at both of them again?"

Annie Blackthorn raised an eyebrow but left the question unspoken.

"There's something wrong. Fraser may have been using Hispan, or Hispan may have been using Fraser. Don't ask me to prove it, either way."

"I see." She frowned again, unimpressed. "We can't tell you anything about the parent company. Is the suggestion that your Mr. Fraser was—ah—cooking the subsidiary books?"

"Maybe." Gaunt shrugged. "There's something hidden away somewhere—or that's how things look. It doesn't have to be bags of gold."

"These days, certified cheques are more convenient," said Annie Blackthorn. It was the nearest thing to a joke he'd heard her make. She gave a slight smile. "I'll have another look at what we've got."

"Thank you." Another thought struck him as he turned to leave.



"Has anyone else—anyone outside—been asking about Hispan lately?"

"No." She shook her head. "I would have heard."

He believed her.

There were no messages waiting when he got back to his desk. For the moment, he was in the kind of situation he hated, when other people were setting the pace, leaving him little or nothing to do. He puzzled and doodled, abandoned that to itemise an expense sheet for the Amsterdam trip, finished that, then almost grabbed the telephone when it rang.

The call was from Lorna Tabor.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Fine." She chuckled over the line. "I slept like the legendary log, woke up feeling human again, and right now I'm at the Canadian Consulate. They let me borrow a phone."

"Why the consulate?" he asked.

"Why not?" she countered. "I pay my taxes." Her manner sobered. "Two reasons, Jonny. I wanted to check the arrangements they've made to fly Aunt Lorna's body home. Some of her late husband's relatives want her buried out there, beside him. I thought—well, I should make sure there were no problems."

"They'll appreciate it," he said quietly. "And the other reason?"

"I asked the consulate to give me the name of a good lawyer over here, to look after things for me." She paused. "How about the cottage, Jonny? Can we go there?"

"It has to be tonight." He explained the arrangements.

"That's reasonable. We're asking the favour." She sounded pleased. "How do you react when a lady offers to buy you dinner?"

"I check her credit rating, then say yes." He grinned at the telephone. "I'll pick you up at your hotel, six-thirty. I know a restaurant near where we're going."

"Does your boss still want to see me again?"

"More than ever," he said.

"Tell him today's busy, but I'll be on his doorstep tomorrow morning," she suggested. "Right now, I'm going to see your friend Andy Deathstone. I called him, told him I wanted to ask some more questions about that family tree."

"Why?" asked Gaunt suspiciously. "What do you want to find out now?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "But I've got a strange feeling about it—that it matters." Her voice became suddenly business like. "I've also got an appointment with that lawyer; I'll have to go."

Gaunt said goodbye and hung up.

It was almost noon when he was summoned to Henry Falconer's office. He found the senior administrative assistant standing by his window, framed in the pale winter sunlight, an incipient scowl on his big, broad face.

"I've heard from Hannah," said Falconer brusquely. "She talked to Church, the Hispan Properties salesman—called him at his home number, told him she was interested in apartments in the sun, and he was on her doorstep almost before she could put the phone down." He grunted. "Our Mr. Church turns out to be a retired bank clerk, trying to earn some extra cash. All he knows about the Hispan set-up would leave space on a postage stamp."

"It helps to know," mused Gaunt. "Narrows the options, Henry. Where's Hannah now?"

"Taking the rest of the day off." Falconer wasn't pleased.

"How about your police friend?"

"I spoke to him. He called back, and I've to meet him for lunch; he didn't say anything more." Falconer moved away from the window and became more human. "When are you seeing the Tabor girl?"

"Tonight, to take her out to Mallard Cottage. She said she'd visit you tomorrow."

Falconer frowned. "Keep an eye on her. I'm not in a mood to totally trust anyone."

His telephone rang. Sighing, Falconer crossed to his desk, lifted the receiver, and answered the call. He put his hand over the mouthpiece.

"Annie Blackthorn, for you," he said gloomily. "Why does that damned woman always make me feel I should stand at attention?"

Gaunt took the receiver.

"Hispan Trading and Hispan Properties," said Miss Blackthorn briskly over the line. "I've done what you asked, gone over everything we've got."

"I appreciate it—" began Gaunt.

"I don't think you will," she stopped him. "They file normal trading returns on schedule, they haven't caused us any problems."

"No rough edges?" asked Gaunt.

"None," she said. "Except, if you go by the trading returns, I wouldn't call it a particularly profitable enterprise. At least, not until the property subsidiary started up. It's doing reasonably well."

"What about names?"

"Only one: a Paul Weber, listed as sole proprietor, resident in Tenerife." Annie Blackthorn drew breath, then finished with a final whipcrack. "If Henry Falconer is still with you, tell the big buffoon I'm still short of staff down here."

"I will," promised Gaunt, and hung up.

"Anything?" asked Falconer.

He shook his head. "On paper, they're clean."

"That's when there's usually something wrong," said Falconer. "What else did she say?"

"She sent her regards," said Gaunt.

"I'll try to believe it," said Falconer grimly. He looked at his desk, then at his wrist-watch. "Maybe we'll have better luck with John Cass. You'll be around?"

Gaunt nodded.

"Then this will help you pass the time." Falconer lifted a folder from his desk and handed it over. "Revised security arrangements at royal residences in Scotland. We've been asked to comment." He grinned at Gaunt. "Just give me an outline reaction. There's no rush: any time this afternoon will do."

Gaunt had a sandwich lunch out, then was back at his desk before two. He sat for a while, thinking, getting nowhere, then gave up in disgust and opened the royal residences folder.

Once he got past the long-winded preliminaries, some of the recommendations made interesting enough reading. Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh and Balmoral Castle in Deeside were just two of the places covered. When the Queen crossed the border from England and entered Scotland, some of her own permanent security team followed but the balance became local. In the same way, some of the problems changed.

A sniper with a high-powered rifle and telescopic sights, hidden in a deer forest, was at least as big a danger as someone with a handgun, close up, in a London street.

The same applied to the places where she might stay. The army supplied ceremonial guards, the police could chase away inquisitive tourists. But real security meant an invisible web of electronic sensors and monitor devices.

Or it should. There were gaps. Lift a manhole outside one stately home which was a royal favourite, cut a telephone cable, and there wasn't much left.

A lot of money was going to have to be spent. Even then, Gaunt wondered if there could be any real guarantees, if a small, determined team of people couldn't still achieve pretty much what they wanted.

He was still reading when there was a knock on his door. One of the typing pool girls looked in.

"You've a visitor," she said. "He says he hasn't an appointment, but he knows you—"

"And I only want a minute," said a soft, wheedling voice behind her. The smartly dressed figure of John Cass smiled in at him over her shoulder. "Can you spare that?"

Gaunt nodded to the girl, beckoned Cass in, and indicated the spare chair. As the door closed, Cass settled his tall, thin frame and faced him.

"I thought I'd come and see you." Cass looked around. "And where you work too, I suppose." His small mouth shaped a smile. "But mainly to apologise. I more or less threw you out last night."

"I've known worse." Gaunt waited.

"Hispan hasn't many important clients. The man with me when you arrived is one of them, and is short on patience." Cass gestured apologetically with his hands. "You asked about Peter Fraser; I could have told you more, certainly more than I would have told Mrs. Anderson."

"Go ahead," invited Gaunt.

"He may have had his fingers in the till. There were—well, certain shortages when I took over."

Gaunt raised an eyebrow. "Did you tell them in Tenerife?"

"I made that mistake." Cass grimaced. "I didn't realise that he'd

been—ah—a close friend as far as they were concerned. I was told that accounting errors can happen.”

“Meaning they didn’t want to know?”

The man nodded. “That’s why I’m cautious when anyone asks about Fraser.”

“Let dead thieves lie?” Gaunt kept a tight grip on his reactions.

“Something like that.” Cass leaned forward in his chair. “You could also say I like my job.”

“How much did he take them for?” asked Gaunt.

“A lot. I can’t put a figure on it.” Cass shook his head. “Probably as much again as he earned. It isn’t too difficult when you’re operating so far away from your owners.”

“Did he have help?”

Cass sighed and rubbed his beaked nose. “I’ve no idea. But—well, I couldn’t say much to that Canadian woman, could I?”

“A gentleman wouldn’t,” said Gaunt. He got to his feet. “Thanks for looking in.”

“I wanted to.” Cass rose then hesitated. “You said there’s another relative—”

“We’ve had an inquiry.”

“Well, you know my difficulty. But you can tell anyone who asks that we’ve nothing that belonged to Fraser still in our office.” Cass shaped a rueful half-smile. “And the rest needn’t be mentioned—here or when you’re in Tenerife, please.”

Cass left, closing the door gently behind him, and Gaunt stayed on his feet for a long moment. He swore softly, with something close to admiration.

He’d been conned before, sometimes successfully, by experts. But John Cass had been as convincing as any he’d come across.

It was almost a pity he had to be lying.

Another half-hour passed before Henry Falconer returned from lunch. His breath smelled of gin, and he strode into Gaunt’s room with an excited confidence.

“I’ve got what we wanted on this man Cass,” he declared, rubbing his hands. “Out of the shadows, Jonathan, a beginning of reality.”

"That's poetic," said Gaunt. He leaned on his elbows and looked up at Falconer. "If you'd been earlier, you could have told him."

"He came here?" Falconer blinked. "Damn his brass neck. Why?"

"Apologetic noises and a story that Hispan wanted to hush up the fact Fraser had been on the fiddle."

Falconer swallowed and sat on the edge of Gaunt's desk. "Did you believe it?"

"No," said Gaunt. "How was lunch?"

"Expensive, but worth it." Falconer drew a deep, satisfied breath and let it out in a new cloud of gin fumes. "My—ah—policeman ended up contacting Interpol. I'll say this much for this Hispan organisation: if they're honest, they've a damned unusual recruiting policy."

"Meaning Cass?"

Falconer nodded. "He's Belgian by nationality, but after that he's almost a carbon copy of what we know about Fraser—on various people's books for suspected fraud, possible fringe involvement in criminal activities, all the rest of it. The only difference is he seems to have moved around Europe a little more."

"Any convictions?" Gaunt felt no particular surprise.

"One, in France. Sentenced to two years for sticking expensive labels on cheap bottles of wine." Falconer allowed himself the luxury of a smile. "He was selling to some of the best hotels in Paris and they didn't spot the difference. He got out about three years ago, turned up in London briefly, then vanished. One story was he'd got to New York. Nobody knew he was in Britain."

"The same man? No chance of a mistake?" asked Gaunt. It was important to be sure.

"None. That's what took a little time." Falconer eyed him blandly. "It seems the Hispan office telephones developed a fault about midmorning. A telephone engineer had to pay them a visit and change the instruments. That way, we had fingerprints."

"You've got a very friendly policeman," said Gaunt, startled.

"All in the interests of justice," murmured Falconer. "Though—ah—I may have told you I was elected membership convenor at my golf club. We've a very long waiting list, but there can be exceptions."

"Bribery and corruption?"

"That's right," agreed Falconer, unperturbed. "He plays quite a good game too." He paused and frowned. "But what about Cass? Why try to sell you that story?"

"It could be his own idea, or he could have been told to spread the confusion." Gaunt winced at another gust of close-up gin fumes. "We're being pointed away."

"From Hispan Trading?" Falconer considered it, then sighed. "I checked on them, pure routine, right at the start—the Tenerife end, I mean. The Spanish authorities hadn't anything against them."

"Maybe you should try again," Gaunt told him.

Falconer nodded.

"And Cass?"

"That's being arranged; he'll be watched only, for now." Falconer heaved a sigh. "Any of these typing pool children know how to make a decent cup of coffee? With Hannah off—"

"Live dangerously," suggested Gaunt. "Try them."

"I will." Falconer got down from the desk. His eyes caught sight of the royal-residences security folder. "Making progress with that?" Gaunt nodded.

"Any—ah—observations?"

"So far, just one," said Gaunt. "Be glad the national anthem is still 'God Save the Queen.' From the looks of this lot, no one else can."

The rest of the afternoon crawled past without anything happening. At five-thirty, he left the Exchequer Building and caught a crowded bus out to Dan Caffin's workshop.

The Ford was lying outside the dilapidated hut, headlamps replaced, ready for the road again.

"How much do I owe you?" asked Gaunt.

Caffin scribbled on his notebook, then offered it.

"Bill me for it later, but no charge for the extra," read Gaunt, and raised an eyebrow. "What extra?"

Caffin's oil-grimed face split in a grin, he beckoned, and Gaunt followed him into the workshop. Caffin pointed to a small metal tube lying on a bench. Capped at one end, fitted with what looked

like a release button, it was no bigger than an old-fashioned fountain-pen.

"Well?" asked Gaunt suspiciously.

Cafflin gestured him to one side, then picked up the little metal tube, pointed it almost casually at a thick wooden support beam, and pressed the button.

There was a faint click, then a soft thud as a small steel dart flashed across the workshop and embedded itself deep into the wood. Swearing softly, Gaunt took the tube from Cafflin.

"A damned spring-gun—" He knew how they worked, a tightly compressed-steel spring packing enough energy on release to throw its projectile with killing force, but had never seen one quite so small and neat. "You made it?"

Cafflin nodded and pointed to some fine-gauge tubing lying on the work-bench.

Gaunt scowled. "You know you could land in jail for making that kind of toy?"

Unconcerned, Cafflin wrote in his notebook.

"You said you had trouble," reminded the scrawl.

Gaunt sighed and nodded. "Trouble, yes—but I'm not in a war."

"Be prepared," scribbled Cafflin. "I was a Boy Scout once." He turned away, breaking all communication, and used a small tool shaped like a thin clamp to reload the spring-gun. Finished, he faced Gaunt, slipped the metal tube into his visitor's top jacket pocket, hidden from sight, then raised a hopeful eyebrow.

"All right," surrendered Gaunt.

Cafflin relaxed, smiled, and clapped him on the shoulder.

It was a ten-minute drive from the workshop to the Carcroft Hotel, the evening sky above the city black as velvet and sprinkled with stars. Princes Street was a blaze of lights and the castle floodlights had also been switched on. Gaunt reached the hotel, parked outside, and found Lorna Tabor already waiting for him just inside the lobby.

"Am I late?" He glanced at his watch.

"No, I just don't like hanging around hotel rooms." She wrinkled her nose. "Anyway, I wanted to talk to the girl on the desk."

She seemed totally rested, the tiredness gone from around her dark, lively eyes. Her black hair was brushed high and back, and she



wore a purple wool dress with a throat-hugging cowl neck. It was held at the waist by a matching belt with a large silver buckle.

"You look good," said Gaunt, meaning it. He nodded towards the reception desk. "Is there a problem?"

"I don't know." Lorna Tabor pursed her lips a little. "I was out most of the afternoon, but they told me when I got back. A man phoned; he said he was a reporter on the *Scotsman* newspaper and he'd heard a relative of Lorna Anderson had arrived from Canada. He asked if they knew anything about me."

"Did they tell him?"

She nodded wryly. "They said I was here, but didn't give him my name. He hasn't called again—not yet, anyway. What do you think?"

"None of the papers reported her death," said Gaunt slowly. "Did he leave a name?"

She shook her head.

"It might be genuine, it might not." He shrugged, but the possibilities worried him. "If he hasn't called by the time we get back, I can check it."

"And I'm not worried about my room," she said. "Whatever this place was like before, it's security-mad now: they've got staff practically prowling the corridors."

Her sheepskin coat was lying over a chair. She picked it up, Gaunt helped her into it, and they went out to the car.

She was wearing a light, tantalising perfume. It teased at his senses as he drove out of the city, heading west, slotted into a busy, slow-moving traffic stream.

"How was your day?" she asked, curled comfortably in the passenger seat.

"Reasonable." He had to brake as the car ahead slowed. "We're still burrowing, but not getting too far."

"Was Peter Fraser a crook?"

"It looks that way." Gaunt gave her a sideways glance. "Did you know Aunt Lorna was thinking of a trip out to Tenerife—for both of you?"

"No." There was total, puzzled surprise in her voice. "Why?"

Gaunt shrugged. Just about everything ended up with that same

question; one single answer might make sense of the whole tangled, uncertain mess.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"Quite a lot." She lit a cigarette using a match. The tiny flame reflected in her eyes, then went out, leaving her face little more than a silhouette in the dull glow of the instrument lights. "I saw the consul, then went on to my lawyer; you knew about that. The legal side doesn't seem to have too many problems. He says he'll handle everything."

"Then deduct his bill," said Gaunt sardonically. "How was it with Andy Deathstone?"

"That's one amazing little man." She chuckled. "He even bought me lunch. But there we were in his office, and he's dragging out files and papers, showing me chunks of microfilm; I practically know the Frasers backwards. Then he explained about who can inherit what, and I got lost."

"They're called succession rights," he said absently. "It's a jungle." The traffic was thinning and he took the chance to overtake an airline coach and a heavy truck. "The trouble is, most people still don't make wills. They've decided they're going to live forever."

Except they didn't, and the moment one died, relatives could begin squabbling and a lawyer somewhere could order his new car.

Different countries had different laws. In Scotland, succession was an up, down, and sideways affair when there wasn't a will. A husband or wife came first, but didn't get everything. Next in line in terms of legal rights came children; legitimate, illegitimate or adopted, it made no difference. If a child had already died, that same priority could be claimed by his or her children or grandchildren—which had happened.

Then it all jumped back, to brothers, sisters, and parents of the deceased. They were followed in turn by uncles or aunts, then grandparents, grandparents' relatives, and from there into more tenuous blood-line outposts.

Either they all came swarming or you couldn't find any. He glanced sideways at Lorna Tabor and grinned to himself. Or they popped up at the last minute, out of nowhere. But there was something else nagging at his mind.

"That phone call to your hotel," he said. "You're sure this so-called reporter didn't say anything more?"

Lorna shook her head. "The girl who took the call says no."

"Have you contacted any people who knew Peter Fraser?"

She looked at him, puzzled. "Not yet. But—"

"Do me a favour," suggested Gaunt. "Don't rush into it."

He checked his rear-view mirror. He'd done the same thing regularly since they'd left the hotel, in a way that had nothing to do with normal driving.

So far, he hadn't seen those oddly balanced headlamps anywhere behind him—or any other indication that the Ford was being followed.

But he'd been the one who had more or less told John Cass that another blood relation of Fraser's had arrived on the scene. It had happened, there was nothing he could do about it now, and it had him worried.

After last night, he couldn't take chances.

Gaunt shifted slightly in his seat, and the hard, slim metal shape of the spring-gun tube in his top pocket jabbed at his chest. Suddenly, it was strangely reassuring.

Johnstone House was a one-time mansion converted into a restaurant for people who cared about food. Located on a minor road about twelve miles west of Edinburgh, it had a proprietor who made his own rules for commercial success. There was no elaborate menu. Instead, each day, Johnstone House offered a strictly limited choice of courses for an evening meal at a price just on the modest side of high.

They were decided that morning after the best of the day's market supplies had been purchased. Wines were selected from the cellar to match.

Johnstone House considered it knew best. If a guest didn't appreciate perfection, the guest could go somewhere else and needn't hurry back.

It was still early enough for the flood-lit car-park at the end of a tree-lined driveway to be almost empty. Gaunt stopped the Ford in a space near the stone arch of the doorway, came round to help Lorna

Tabor out of the passenger side, and let her stand for a moment, looking around.

"Nice," she said appreciatively, glancing at the old stone walls and high-pitched, turreted roof-lines. "No hamburgers?"

"No hamburgers." Gaunt wouldn't have been surprised if Johnstone House shed a few tiles at the thought.

"Why the hell not?" She gave him a white-toothed grin and took his arm. "And I'm still paying; I've got Expectations, remember?"

They had a drink in a cellar bar which Johnstone House liked to pretend had once been a dungeon. But it had a stone fireplace with a log fire smouldering and smoking up a vast chimney and the old stone-flagged floor, like the rest, had once been part of the original kitchen.

The restaurant was on an upper floor, a long, narrow room with antique furnishings. The table settings were silver, the napkins damask linen, and the oil paintings on the oak-panelled walls included two by Canaletto.

It was still early, only one other table was occupied, and once they were seated the service was smooth and unhurried. Delicately sliced smoked salmon was followed by a consomme, the main course was rare fillet of Beef Wellington, and the wines were a muscadet and a '70's Château Guerry.

They talked generally, casually, while they ate, and settled for coffee after the Beef Wellington; it came accompanied by two tiny silver dishes filled with miniature Drambuie truffles.

"How many more hideaways like this do you know?" asked Lorna Tabor contentedly, settling back.

"A few." Gaunt grinned at her. "For when someone else is paying."

She looked at him for a moment, wisely.

"Andy Deathstone told me you were divorced; I asked him."

He nodded.

"And she remarried?"

"Yes."

It didn't particularly hurt now. Patti's new husband owned an electronics factory, they now had a child, a baby a few months old. Gaunt had been invited to the christening, had taken a gift, and

sometimes visited them. The way he and Patti had broken, it was hard to blame anyone; things just happened that way.

"I went through that," said Lorna Tabor. "He was a college lecturer, we thought everything would be roses." She paused. "Well, there's a lot of it about. Now—how far from here to the cottage?"

"About four miles." Gaunt swirled the last of the wine in his glass, watching it thoughtfully. "I'd like to know the real reason for going."

"What do you mean?" Calmly, she opened her handbag, took out her cigarettes, and lit one. "It's the way I said. I just have this feeling—"

"I remember." He considered her moodily. "Nothing more?"

Lorna Tabor hesitated, then reached out and touched his hand.

"Let's put it this way, Jonny," she said quietly. "If and when there is, I'll tell you."

He had to make do with that.

They left a few minutes later. Outside, the car-park was beginning to fill up and Gaunt took a deliberate, outwardly casual glance around as they walked back to the Ford. But there was no dark Peugeot, no sign of anything out of the ordinary.

He remained on guard as they drove away, and Lorna seemed to sense his tension, even if she misunderstood it.

"Angry?" she asked. "There's no need to be."

Gaunt shook his head, then took another glance in the rear-view mirror. The road behind them was empty.

"Just being careful," he told her.

"I forgot." She sighed, came closer, and her hair brushed his shoulder. "Damn all this and damn the Fraser family tree—but don't blame me."

"I'll try," promised Gaunt.

"Thanks." Her lips brushed his cheek. "Then after tonight, to hell with it; that's a promise."

He'd checked the route to Mallard Cottage. It lay at the end of a twisting web of minor roads, through partly wooded farming country. The Ford's headlights lanced along hedgerows, touched on field gates, and every now and again reflected back from small, bright animal eyes watching from cover.

When the cottage appeared, it was small and single-storey, with

white stone walls and a grey slate roof. An old Land-Rover was parked at the front door and lights showed inside the building.

They left the Ford beside the Land-Rover and walked towards the door. It was open and the couple waiting there greeted them with reserved smiles, then invited them in. David Roberts was an elderly, amiable bull of a man, in baggy farming tweeds. His wife Maisie, who did most of the talking, was small and birdlike in her manner.

"We don't mind you looking around as long as it doesn't take too long," she said briskly. "This place hasn't been lived in for a couple of months now—and it's a cold night."

Gaunt had felt the chill the moment they'd stepped inside. Lorna Tabor kept her sheepskin coat tightly buttoned as the Roberts began to show them around.

"It's small, of course," said Mrs. Roberts. Standing in the middle of the hallway, she gestured around. "Just one bedroom, the living-room, and a lounge, kitchen, and bathroom. There was a garage—"

"But it fell down," said her husband. "Old age."

His wife brushed the interruption aside and led them into the bedroom. It was plainly furnished, the bed stripped down to the mattress.

"The last people here were a young couple—about your ages," she explained. "But they left before Christmas." Her attention switched to Lorna. "The other Canadian lady who came here—your aunt, was she?"

Lorna nodded.

"She just wanted to see round the place too. I can't say I understand why, but I suppose there's no harm in it."

They moved on. Kitchen and bathroom came next, both equally cold and with a hint of dampness. A glance in each was enough for Lorna, and she was ready to move on.

"How was Peter Fraser as a tenant?" asked Gaunt as the Robertses led them into the lounge, a large room, again sparsely furnished.

The couple exchanged a glance.

"We never had any trouble," said the woman uneasily.

Roberts added, "But he wasn't what you'd call sociable. Kept to himself; didn't seem to have many visitors. Almost refurnished the place on his own, of course. He had plenty of money."

"Any problems after he died?"

"A few," said Roberts. "Ask Maisie; I kept out o' it."

His wife sniffed at the reminder. "The settling-up was bad enough: his things went, we moved our own stuff back in. But first we had people out from his firm, trying to find business papers—turning the place upside-down. Then the cottage was burgled."

"Nearly wrecked," said Roberts gloomily. "Ach, that happens. Somebody dies, a place is lying empty—"

"When did it happen?" Gaunt cut short the man's grumbling.

"Two or three days after the funeral." Roberts scratched his chin. "Not that they got anything we know about."

While they talked, Lorna Tabor had been moving around the room. She had stopped at a small alcove beside the fireplace; her attention seemed fixed on a small, framed engraving.

"Where did this come from?" she asked in a slightly strained voice.

"That thing?" Maisie Roberts joined her. "It was his: one or two small bits and pieces got left behind." Reaching up, she removed the engraving from its wall-hook. "It's strange you should ask. The last lady—your aunt—noticed it too."

Lorna Tabor said nothing but glanced at Gaunt in a way that brought him over.

He saw for himself and was puzzled. The engraving looked more like a photocopy of an original, a Highland lochside scene with a small fishing-boat moored offshore. Mountains formed a background, and there were cottages further along the shore. But the frame was cheap black plastic and the engraving, copy or otherwise, was mounted behind a white board cut-out which filled more than half of the space available.

He looked again. The artist had had a degree of homespun talent, but this was no masterpiece.

"You can have it if you like," volunteered the woman and smiled at Lorna. "Something to take back to Canada with you; you've more right to it than we have."

"And we don't even like the damned thing," said her husband.

"Thank you." Lorna took the frame and moistened her lips. "You've been very kind. I—I think I've seen enough."

Neither Roberts nor his wife seemed displeased. The cottage interior was cold enough to discourage anyone from lingering.

Gaunt thanked them again. Then, as they began to lock up, he went with Lorna to the car. She got aboard clutching her trophy.

"Well?" asked Gaunt as he settled behind the wheel. "What was that about?"

"Not here," she said quietly. "Pull in somewhere down the road."

He set the car moving and they travelled about half a mile through the night darkness, back along the same narrow, winding road. Then their headlights showed a stretch of level verge. Gaunt let the car roll to a halt on the rough grass and switched off.

"I need some light, and a knife," said Lorna in a flat voice.

He flicked on the car's interior light and gave Lorna his small pocket-knife. Placing the frame glass side down on her lap, she used the sharp tip of the knife blade to cut round the thick tape which sealed the rear of the frame, then tugged the entire back free. She paused, then gently eased the engraving out. Turning it over, she inspected it closely, biting her lip.

"I wouldn't call it valuable," said Gaunt absently. "It's more like someone copied from an original."

She didn't answer. Opening her handbag, she produced an envelope, then took out the single folded sheet of photocopy paper inside it. Spreading out the paper, she placed it beside the engraving. Both showed the same scene. But there were heavy, old-fashioned print above and below Lorna Tabor's copy.

Gaunt took them from her, stared, and swallowed hard. The single line of type above Lorna Tabor's photocopy read proudly, "Watermoor Milling Limited, Inverness." Then, beneath the loch-side engraving, heading the small-print articles of association, had been penned in copperplate writing, "Matthew Ronald Fraser, thirty fully paid shares of one pound each. May God prosper this venture."

There were signatures below. The date was 1864.

"Where the hell did you get this?" he asked, bewildered.

"Lorna Anderson had the original. She gave me a copy," said the girl beside him almost wearily. "Two Fraser brothers set up business as millers: Angus Fraser was the eldest and put up most of the money, Matthew was junior partner. She said the mill went out of



business almost a hundred years ago. That's when Matthew Fraser emigrated to Canada. He was her great-grandfather."

"She asked you to bring your copy over?"

Lorna nodded.

"Did she tell you why?"

"No. But it was the one thing she didn't have with her." She looked at him intently. "I asked your friend Andy Deathstone about Watermoor Milling this afternoon. He said the records show it was a totally private company, that it didn't go bankrupt; it simply ceased trading."

Gaunt looked again at the papers in his hands. He'd seen old private company share documents often enough, worthless commercially except as collectors' pieces. But an old company lying dormant, forgotten—he remembered John Milton's dry advice. According to the Edinburgh stockbroker, a private company could be a perfect way to hide shady money from outside eyes.

Bring an old, legitimate family business back to life and who would pay any attention in the big wide commercial world?

He compared the two copies again, then peered closer, frowning. The copy from Mallard Cottage, everything but the illustration masked off, was still different. The little fishing-boat had a name on her bow; something had been written in very small lettering in the bottom right corner.

"What is it?" asked Lorna, puzzled.

"Wait." He got closer to the car's interior light, squeezing against her, then swore under his breath.

The name on the fishing-boat's bow was *Black Bear*. The message in the corner was short and simple. "To Marta, who will remember the storm. For everything. P.F."

He showed Lorna what he'd found. She moistened her lips.

"Marta—that was the name on the wreath," she said in a low voice. "Jonny, if he wanted her to have that—"

"Why?" agreed Gaunt.

There was a lot to sort out, he had no idea where some of it might lead. But at last it appeared there was something to work on.

"Nothing else up your sleeve?" he asked drily, giving Lorna back both copies.

"Nothing," she said positively.

She was still very close, looking at him steadily. Gently, he brought her nearer and their lips met. Her hand stroked down his face while he held her. Then, at last, she eased away again.

"There's got to be somewhere more comfortable," she said.

He grinned, and started the car.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The attack came exactly one mile on. In two stages.

They had just passed a farm lane when the big Peugeot roared out from cover and began pursuing them, ill-matched headlamps glaring, almost blinding. Gaunt used one hand to knock the rear-view mirror to one side before he snatched down from top to second gear and rammed the accelerator to the floor. Engine bellowing, the Ford shot forward.

Lorna was shouting, but he hadn't time to listen. The Peugeot slammed their rear, fell back, then came on again. Gaunt gained third gear, the little car still shuddering, tyres smoking as they fought for grip. A bend appeared ahead. He wrestled the Ford round, losing the Peugeot's lights for a moment. Then the glare appeared behind them again, and Lorna gripped his shoulder.

"Who are they?" She had to shout again to make herself heard. "Jonny—"

"I don't know." He concentrated on the pot-holed road, too narrow for the Peugeot to pass them, a danger in itself at the speed they were travelling. "Just hold on."

Another bend came up. Gaunt caught a glimpse of large, cut logs piled high beside the verge, then steered into the bend.

Like a long, dark snake, a thick, rusty metal chain suddenly quivered up from the road. At steering-wheel height, it spanned between a large tree and a heavy, partly loaded logging trailer left parked on the opposite verge. He had only seconds, knew he could forget about the brakes at that distance. It came down to the piled, heavy logs on one side or a hedge, trees, and God alone knew what on the other.

Gaunt chose the hedge and hauled the steering-wheel hard over. Lurching into a skid, the car swung like a demented pendulum and he heard Lorna cry out as they hit the hedge side-on. Then there

was a tree, something like a giant hammer-blow hit the car on Lorna's side, it seemed to leave the ground, and they were rolling, metal tearing, glass shattering.

The Ford came to rest on its passenger side, at an angle, in a ditch. Dazed, thrown forward, left hanging against his seat-belt, Gaunt tried to move. Pain stabbed through his back. He turned to Lorna Tabor and she lay slumped and silent. Then, where there had been darkness, there was light. The Peugeot had arrived and had stopped. He saw blood on Lorna's forehead at the same time as voices began on the road.

"You almost mucked it," said one, hoarse with tension. "You nearly left it too damned late with that chain."

"It worked," said the other indignantly. He paused then added in near awe, "Hell, look at his car—"

"I was doing sixty-five on the clock, he was pulling away from me." The first man's voice steadied. "All right, we'll finish it. You make sure of them, I'll get rid of the chain."

"I reckon they're dead," said the second man hopefully.

"Just do it before something else comes along." From the sound, his companion was already moving. "We burn the car. That was the deal—and the basket nearly crippled me last night. Shift. We don't want an audience."

Hurrying footsteps and the low background murmur of the wind were punctuated by an occasional crackle from the Ford's cooling exhaust. Gaunt managed to release his seat-belt, tried to turn, and something hard dug into his chest. Fumbling, his fingers closed around the little spring-gun tube Danny Cafflin had tucked in his top pocket.

He waited. One set of footsteps came nearer but he was too low down in his seat to see anything until, suddenly, the door beside him was wrenched open and thrown back. The man who appeared there was scrawny and thin-faced, uneasy in his manner. He balanced a plastic container on the car's angled door-sill; then, as the reek of high-octane fuel reached Gaunt's nostrils the man peered in.

Gaunt moved. The man yelped in surprise, his head jerked back, and Gaunt pressed the spring-gun release.

The little tube gave its modest, deadly click and a round hole

blossomed high on the man's throat, the sharp steel dart tearing on through soft flesh and tissue, angling upward.

A strange, gobbling sound, like a half-choked sigh, came from the thin figure and he slumped backwards. The container toppled with him, contents slopping out on to the ground.

But there was still the other man, the one freeing the chain. How long would that take, how long until he missed his companion? It took most of the energy Gaunt felt he had left to lever himself out of the wrecked Ford into the spread of light from the Peugeot's headlamps. He fell on hands and knees beside the sprawled figure on the roadside verge.

The man was dead, his blank eyes staring up at the night sky. Beside him the fuel can was still gurgling as it emptied. But close beside it, also dropped by the man, lay an automatic pistol. Each movement a stab of pain, Gaunt grabbed the pistol. It was a nine-millimetre Luger.

He looked around. The Peugeot was thirty yards down the road and empty. In the other direction, the chain had gone. Something moved in the shadows there and he dropped instinctively behind the shelter of the dead man. A bullet sang over his head. Rolling, gripping the Luger two-handed, Gaunt squeezed the trigger twice and the automatic bucked in his grasp as it snapped back a reply.

A cry of pain came from the shadows. There was a moment's pause. A man appeared, one hand clutching his side as he bolted towards the Peugeot. Coldly, deliberately, Gaunt brought the Luger up again.

Another sick wave of pain washed through him. He couldn't hold the weapon steady, he saw his target almost tumble into the Peugeot, heard it start, then it was moving, accelerating. It swept towards him, racing past, and Gaunt steadied enough to squeeze off one more shot at the near-side front tyre.

The nine-millimetre bullet, hitting at close range, tore through rubber and fabric, then his mind registered the rest in a confusion of almost individual pictures. First the tyre collapsed, causing the Peugeot to skid first one way, then the other. Still accelerating, it travelled wildly, totally out of control for perhaps another hundred yards. Its headlamps showed another of those tall stacks of cut logs—and the car rammed the base of the stack.

Cut trees rose and tumbled like matchsticks thrown from a box. They smashed down on the Peugeot and the noise was like a long roll of thunder. When the noise ended, there was no more movement, only the murmur of the wind, and there was only the faint moonlight.

Gaunt got to his feet. Clutching the Luger, he lurched along the road, reached the half-buried car, managed to look into the passenger compartment, then turned away and wanted to vomit.

The man who had shot at him was still behind the wheel. But he didn't look very much like a man anymore. A long, thick log had penetrated the windshield like a great, blunted lance. It had taken the man high on the chest.

Gaunt went back to the Ford, dropped the pistol, and climbed into the wreck again. Lorna Tabor still lay slumped and motionless, but she was breathing. He tried to move her, but couldn't. No strength left, he let his head fall against the steering-wheel.

Something was coming along the road. He was vaguely conscious of its lights, heard the engine, and the vehicle halted. There were hurrying footsteps and voices, and the voices were somehow familiar. The voices came nearer, there was a gasp, then a hand tugged at his shoulder.

He raised his head. Maisie Roberts was staring at him, wide-eyed. Her big farmer husband stood behind her; their old Land-Rover was a few yards away.

"What happened, Mr. Gaunt?" The woman peered past him then gave another sharp intake of breath. "David, the girl—"

"She's trapped," Gaunt managed to croak. "Get a doctor. Police too—"

"We will." The woman's husband eased her aside and saw for himself, and his mouth tightened briefly. Then his large, strong hands gathered Gaunt up and helped him out, half supporting him. "What about that car along the road?"

Gaunt shook his head. Then the world began to spin, and he fainted.

He came round briefly, in an ambulance. They were travelling fast, the ambulance siren was wailing, and an attendant was bending over the stretcher berth on the other side of the vehicle. The man

moved and he saw Lorna was there. Her dark hair was matted with blood and her face, which had been cleaned, was deathly white. Her eyes were closed.

Then the darkness came in again.

Later, he was in a hospital bed. This time he felt better and stayed awake for a spell. The world seemed interspersed between doctors and nurses and police in uniform who seemed to increase in rank with every visit. He was vaguely aware that Falconer was there too.

There were questions, quiet, sympathetic, but insistent. He tried to ask about Lorna Tabor, but didn't get a real answer.

He got angry then, and the pain came back. The police uniforms vanished; a woman doctor in a white coat was bending over him with a nurse in the background.

"I know," soothed the woman doctor. "Don't worry. She'll make it, Mr. Gaunt."

Then he felt a prick in his arm and all he wanted to do was sleep.

When he wakened again his body seemed to ache all over, but he still felt better. He was in a private room, there was daylight outside, and the cool, starched staff nurse who came in was friendly. He was in Edinburgh Royal, it was midmorning, and, medically, there wasn't much wrong with him.

"Slight concussion, a lot of bruising and a cracked rib," she said cheerfully, checking his pulse rate finger-and-thumb-style. Finished, she gave him a smile. "We know about your back; it may feel tender for a spell, but there's no damage."

"That helps." His lips felt dry, there was water in the jug beside his bed, but he had to know about Lorna first. "I had a passenger—"

"The Canadian girl." The staff nurse looked away and spent a moment busily straightening his sheets. "I—well, I'm afraid she needed surgery, Mr. Gaunt." Then she paused and gave him a quick, professional smile. "She came through it all right, don't worry about that."

"How is she?" persisted Gaunt. The staff nurse didn't answer and made a pretence of smoothing one of the sheets again. He seized her wrist. "I want to know."

"They're not certain, it's early yet." She tried to release her wrist then gave up. "I know there's a neuro consultant coming in later."

Maybe after he's been—" she paused again, sympathy in her eyes. "Miss Tabor was brought in with head, leg, and apparent pelvic injuries, none of them really serious. But there's some possible damage to the spinal nerves. You—well, you've been through that."

Staring at her, Gaunt let go.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Can she—will she be able to walk?" He struggled up on his elbows. The world went into an immediate slow spin and he had to sink down again.

"They don't know," said the staff nurse quietly.

She left. Numbed, Gaunt lay staring at the ceiling. Old memories came back, memories of the fear he had felt while he had waited, his back injured and the future uncertain. It had been a long, agonising wait until at last they'd told him he'd been lucky. Afterwards, alone, he'd wept with relief.

He knew Lorna Tabor had courage. She would need it.

A doctor arrived a little later, poked him, prodded him, made a few satisfied grunts, then left without any attempt at conversation. A young orderly brought him something to eat—scrambled eggs on toast and lukewarm tea—and giggled when he asked whether it was breakfast or lunch.

He had eaten and had pushed the tray aside when Henry Falconer walked in. Falconer looked tired. He gave Gaunt a small, tight smile, sat on the edge of the bed in a way that made it creak, and gave the room a cursory glance. His big, heavy face was grim.

"You know about the girl." He made it a statement.

Gaunt nodded.

"The consultant they're bringing in is good—the best," said Falconer. "I've advised her father and he's flying over. You'll be kept here until tomorrow for observation, then discharged unless anything goes wrong." He shrugged. "And the rest is a mess, agreed?"

"Total," said Gaunt.

"However, we're having co-operation from the police and some other people." Falconer considered a spot on the opposite wall and scowled. "We got some garbled rubbish from you last night—enough to get us started. But I want it again, from the beginning."

Gaunt told him. It seemed to take a long time, and he felt



strangely exhausted at the finish. Falconer sat silent for a moment, then asked a few questions. The answers seemed to satisfy him.

"There's a lot to be done. I'll get on with it." He rose as he spoke. "Officially, all that happened last night was that two men were killed when their car went out of control and crashed. No other vehicle was involved. You understand?"

"Yes." Gaunt nodded wearily. "Henry, about Lorna—"

"I told you. The man seeing her is the best." Falconer went to the door, opened it, then glanced back. "You know, you look bloody awful."

"I feel it," admitted Gaunt.

"That's usually a good sign," said Falconer drily. "By the way, your car is a write-off. You'll have to think up some interesting story for your insurance company."

He went out, the door closed, and Gaunt was left alone again.

He slept for a spell, ached much as before when he wakened, but he could think more clearly. The staff nurse returned. She wanted him up into a chair but he insisted on walking around the room first.

"Not bad," said the staff nurse approvingly. "Now do it again."

He did, grinned triumphantly at her, then decided the chair might be a sensible place for a couple of minutes. The staff nurse helped him wash and shave, considered the results, and seemed satisfied. She produced a dressing-gown from a cupboard and Gaunt saw his clothes were hanging beside it.

"I'll take you visiting," said the staff nurse. "Your friend is conscious and asking for you." She frowned and gave a small, warning gesture. "She's sedated, it'll only be a moment, and she hasn't been told anything." She shook her head, anticipating Gaunt's question. "He hasn't seen her yet."

There were a wheelchair outside and an orderly waiting. Wrapped in the dressing-gown, Gaunt found himself propelled along a maze of hospital corridors and they arrived at a women's surgical ward. The ward sister and Gaunt's staff nurse had a brief, murmured conversation, then he was wheeled into one of the side rooms.

"You've a visitor, Miss Tabor," said the ward sister cheerfully. Then she glanced at the orderly and nodded, and they went out.

Lorna Tabor lay very still on the bed, her dark hair almost covered in bandages, a saline drip connected to one arm, her strong, tanned

face strangely drained of colour against the white of the pillows. For a moment Gaunt thought she was asleep. Then her eyes opened, she looked at him, and her mouth shaped an attempt at a smile.

"Hi." It wasn't much more than a whisper. "I like the wheels. You're okay?"

"Just dented." Carefully, Gaunt got himself out of the chair, bent over the bed, and kissed her on the cheek. "You?"

"I don't feel much." She gave a puzzled grimace. "I suppose they've got me doped—"

"To the eyeballs," agreed Gaunt softly.

"But we made it." She let her eyes close. "We were pretty lucky."

"Yes."

"Why, Jonny?" She looked at him again, pleading. "Was it that damned Fraser thing?"

He nodded.

She sighed and her eyes closed again.

The room door opened, the orderly and the ward sister came in. Ignoring the wheelchair, Gaunt walked past them.

"Jonny." The whisper reached him at the door. "See you."

"Soon," he promised and went out.

He made it back to his own room, the empty wheelchair following close behind. Then he was glad to get back into bed, glad to be left alone for another spell.

Dusk was greying the sky when the same staff nurse as before looked in. She wore an outdoor coat over her uniform.

"I'm going off duty now." She came over, stood beside the bed and automatically smoothed a wrinkle from the sheets. "I thought you'd want to know—about Miss Tabor. They've decided to operate again."

"When?"

"Tomorrow sometime. Then—well, it'll be a few days." She gave him a small, encouraging smile. "The consultant seems to think there's a good chance."

"Thanks for telling me," said Gaunt.

"They say a very good chance." She glanced at her wrist-watch and winced. "I've a bus to catch. Good luck, Mr. Gaunt."

Time dragged. A new nurse brought him an evening meal, another doctor looked in for about ten seconds. He got up, made a

brief, exploring expedition along the corridor, and was chased back to bed by an indignant night sister.

Then at 8 P.M. he had a surprise visitor. Hannah North swept in, carrying a plastic shopping bag.

"I'm here because I was sent." She settled in the chair, inspected Gaunt for a moment, then allowed herself a slight chuckle. "I was told you looked pretty awful. I don't see much difference."

"Thanks." Gaunt found himself grinning. "What's been happening?"

"A lot." Hannah took time to loosen the fastenings of her fur jacket. It looked like mink; he hadn't seen it before. "I've to tell you that Henry can't make it here tonight. You're still being discharged tomorrow and a car will collect you at 10 A.M."

"Fine." He propped himself up on one elbow. "I want to hear the rest of it, Hannah. You usually know more than most people."

"Sorry, not this time. He'll tell you tomorrow," she said primly, but a brief twinkle showed in her eyes. Gaunt suddenly realised that when that twinkle showed or when Hannah North smiled she was a particularly attractive woman. She pursed her lips for a moment. "But I can tell you this much, Jonny. You haven't done anyone's blood pressure much good."

"I didn't plan any of this," said Gaunt.

"I know." She said it soberly. "I'm sorry about the girl, Jonny."

He nodded, with a feeling she meant it.

"How about my car?" It was something to say.

"We got your friend Dan Cafflin to haul it in. He asked me to bring you something." Hannah opened the shopping bag, took out a brown paper parcel tied with string, and laid it on the bed. Then she brought out another package. "And maybe this will help pass some time; I always bring gifts to the sick and needy."

"Thanks, Hannah." He felt touched.

"I'll try and get it back in expenses." She got to her feet and fastened the mink jacket. "Sleep well, Jonny."

Once she had gone, Gaunt reached for the packages. The one sent by Dan Cafflin had a faint scent of engine oil in its wrappings. When he got it open, it held a quarter bottle of malt whisky. He grinned then explored Hannah's package. Tied with gift-wrap rib-

bon, it was a book on the history of jazz. He wondered how she'd known it would interest him.

But he'd have been even happier if she had told him what was going on.

There was rain pattering on the window when he was wakened the next morning. A doctor came in after breakfast, an elderly man who chain-smoked while he prodded and pummelled.

"Right." The doctor lit a fresh cigarette from the stub of its predecessor and sat on the edge of the bed. "You'll do. In an ideal world, I'd prescribe a week or so rest, no physical or mental strain, and similar rubbish. We don't strap up cracked ribs any more; nature's happier that way." He eyed Gaunt with a mild interest. "You've a prescribed supply of pain-killers, for your back?"

Gaunt nodded.

"Army style." The doctor snorted. "I wouldn't prescribe them for a horse. But keep them handy, as before, be ready to feel stiff and sore for a day or two, and count yourself damned lucky." He drew on his cigarette, coughed, then ordered, "Stand up straight, then touch your toes."

Gaunt obeyed and stifled a yelp as his bruised muscles stabbed an indignant protest.

"That's what I mean," said the doctor amiably. He got up to go. "We're running more tests on Miss Tabor, to make sure we've got the complete picture, then surgery this afternoon, tomorrow at the latest. So no visitors; sorry."

The man left. Gaunt stood at the window for a spell, looking out at the rain. Then, with plenty of time in hand, he got his clothes from the cupboard and dressed. They'd been sponged and brushed but there were some small stains of blood, Lorna's blood, on the jacket and he found some tiny fragments of glass still clinging to the material.

He was in a sober mood when he left the hospital at 10 A.M. An Exchequer Office car and driver waited for him outside and they purred their way through the wet streets of the capital, through the normality of Saturday shopping crowds and umbrellas, hooting taxis, and lumbering buses. It was a different world, maybe the real world, but for the moment Gaunt knew it was no longer his.

He was in the Remembrancer's Department a few minutes before ten-thirty. Because it was Saturday there were few staff around, but Hannah North was at her desk outside Falconer's room. She greeted him with a slight smile, but made no comment and told him to go straight in.

Henry Falconer already had a visitor. There were three chairs round a table in the middle of the room, where a pot of coffee was waiting.

"Good." Falconer looked him up and down and seemed satisfied. He turned to the stranger beside him. "Jonathan, this is Detective Superintendent Afton. He's been—ah—taking an interest on our behalf."

"Lambert Afton." The policeman eyed Gaunt quizzically while Falconer steered them over to the table. As they sat down he said, "You've caused some turmoil, Gaunt."

"I didn't look for it," said Gaunt.

Falconer made a general clucking noise which could have been agreement or the opposite, and poured them coffee. It gave Gaunt a moment to study Afton. The detective superintendent was a tall, grey-haired man in his late forties. He had a thin, calm face, deceptively sleepy-looking eyes, and a brand-new golf club tie identical to the one Falconer wore.

"Shall we start?" asked Falconer and took it for granted his guests agreed. "I think the first thing, Jonathan, is bring you up to date. Thursday night—for the moment that stays a simple road accident, as I suggested."

Gaunt glanced at Afton. "How did you square it?"

"Temporarily and with some difficulty," said the policeman. "Particularly when we'd one dead body a hundred yards away from another." He put a hand in his pocket, drew it out, flicked, and the tiny spring-gun tube rolled across the table. "Yours?"

Gaunt didn't answer.

"Concussion is bad for the memory," said Afton with a studied solemnity. He picked up the little tube again. "Well made—about the best I've seen, and I'd better keep it. You think you'll remember most other things?"

"I believe he will," said Falconer stonily.

"That'll do me for now." Afton shrugged. "Humanity hasn't suf-

ferred any particular loss. The man in the car was a Frankie Marcus, according to his fingerprints. The other was called Josh Reilly. Two total nasties, straight out of rent-a-thug, both of them ready to kill if the price was right."

"Nothing to tell us who employed them," said Falconer. He sipped his coffee, the cup held neatly between finger and thumb. "But that thing they had across the road was a logging drag-chain. If you'd hit it, neither of you would have lived."

"They didn't do too badly," said Gaunt bitterly. "Henry, why the cover-up job on it?"

"To buy some time; I thought I explained that yesterday," said Falconer patiently, as if addressing a backward pupil. "The Mallard Cottage people who found you agreed to co-operate, so did the hospital authorities. We even got the kind of newspaper stories we wanted and a mention on local radio—"

"The Peugeot went out of control, probably on a patch of black ice," said Superintendent Afton, his sleepy eyes almost closed. "It happens."

Gaunt nodded. He could appreciate it had meant fast and considerable work.

"But suppose someone tries Lorna's hotel?" he asked.

"Someone has," murmured Falconer. He folded his arms. "Your alleged newspaper reporter telephoned twice yesterday—once in the morning, then in the late afternoon. We had the hotel organised. First, Miss Tabor was out. Second time, she had finished her business, had paid her bill, and had left—going down to London first, then flying back to Canada." Slight amusement entered his voice. "We've something even more positive as far as you're concerned. John Cass of Hispan Trading came here yesterday afternoon, wanting to see you again."

Gaunt blinked. "Did he say why?"

"To have another talk with you about Peter Fraser." Falconer's big broad face didn't alter in expression. "The front office staff told him you'd taken the afternoon off, to say goodbye to Miss Tabor at the airport."

Put together, it sounded reasonable—watertight, in fact. Gaunt tried his coffee, hearing the grandfather clock ticking away in its

corner, knowing both men were watching him, certain there was more to come.

He took another swallow, then set down the cup.

"What's the rest of it?" he demanded.

Falconer and Afton exchanged a glance. Afton gave a slight nod.

"Lorna Anderson," said Falconer. "She was right, there is more money—a hell of a lot of money. The old Fraser family firm of Watermoor Milling may have stopped trading over a century ago. But right now it has about two hundred thousand pounds in its bank account."

"Peter Fraser," said Superintendent Afton gloomily. "The account hasn't been touched since he died, and God knows where it all came from." He scowled at Falconer. "You tell him. You did the legwork—and put the frighteners on that bank manager."

Henry Falconer cleared his throat before he started, then told it carefully, precisely, as if already framing the written report which would have to go to the Remembrancer, then on from there.

He had taken the Watermoor Milling private company share certificate copies found in Gaunt's car. He'd started with an initially incredulous Miss Blackthorn in Companies Branch, and gone on from there.

The old Watermoor company was still listed in Companies Branch records. The Bank of Central Scotland had been one of the little company's original guarantors and Miss Blackthorn had a friend in their bank's central computer records section.

An hour later, Falconer had been bumping north aboard an uncomfortable, knuckle-cracking feeder airline flight to Inverness, to be met by a car. He'd arrived at one of the Bank of Central Scotland's country branches in time to spoil lunch for the bank manager.

Getting at the truth had taken most of the afternoon, while the manager's dreams of promotion faded and reality took their place.

It had begun almost four years earlier—three years before Peter Fraser's fatal car crash.

Amiable, confident, obviously prosperous, Peter Fraser had arrived at the little country branch. He was, he explained, an investment consultant based in London with business interests throughout Europe. But he also had a large sentimental streak, he wanted to

bring some benefits to the mountains and glens of his forefathers. The bank, of course, would share in that aspect.

He was planning to resurrect the old and local Watermoor Milling company, set it up as a modern factory manufacturing electronics components. Though, of course, it was the kind of secret ambition that would take time to achieve.

One small, bemused bank manager had the rest of it explained to him. Fraser owned two thirds of the share capital in the original Watermoor company; the certificate was laid on his desk. Fraser would open a current account with the branch: thirty thousand pounds in cash came out of his brief-case. Until the time was right, of course, the electronics factory would remain a dream. But the bank account would be a starting point and Fraser would use it for various purposes.

One fat new account and rosy prospects, the kind that would impress head office when the day came, was too much. The bank manager and his wife were entertained to dinner by Fraser that night and the Watermoor Milling account was under way.

"You can guess the rest of it," said Falconer. "Large chunks of cash paid in at regular intervals, then occasional major withdrawals. But the account always well in credit, no problems—a banker's dream."

Then, suddenly, the regular visits by Fraser ceased. No more cash came flowing in, none was drawn out. Two cautiously worded letters sent to the London hotel address Fraser had given brought no reply. Leaving only the bank account with that two hundred thousand pounds' credit—and one puzzled but not particularly worried bank manager.

"Bank managers usually like references," said Gaunt.

Superintendent Afton grinned. "Money's a good reference, anywhere. Like to guess how much cash passed through that Watermoor private account?" He sucked his teeth and didn't wait for a reply. "Almost a cool million, Gaunt, going in and out like that bank was a revolving door."

"Cash withdrawals?"

"Not the way you mean," said Falconer gloomily. "Foreign currency most of the time—everything from dollars to Deutschmarks."

"And pesetas?"



Falconer nodded.

"What happens to our bank manager?"

"Initiative brings its own rewards," said Falconer. Scowling, he drained the last of the coffee in the pot into his cup. "He'll end up a director or a lavatory cleaner; he broke enough rules to qualify either way."

But once the thing started, Gaunt accepted, it could have gone on from there so easily. Even if the little bank manager had at any time suspected he was at the end of a money-laundering operation, the smoother path lay in letting it go on rather than bringing a large account to a grinding halt.

"No leads, in or out?" he asked.

"No." Afton leaned his elbows on the table. "That's all we've got—so far. Except that Fraser wasn't big enough to run any racket this size on his own. Come to that, the same applies to John Cass. As of now, we're watching Cass. But—" He left it at that with a shrug.

There was another silence and again Gaunt knew both men were watching him, deciding something—or making sure.

The grandfather clock ticked on. Outside, a telephone rang and was answered. He could hear the muffled tapping of Hannah's typewriter.

"What's left is Hispan Trading," said Henry Falconer at last. "Hispan—and Tenerife." He paused. "The doctor who saw you this morning says you're fit to travel. Are you?"

"Yes," said Gaunt.

If the truth was in Tenerife, he wanted it, and not least because he had his own bitter anger to settle.

"Good." Falconer gave Afton a quick, relieved glance. "You're already booked on Monday's flight, they're expecting you out at Puerto Tellas to dispose of that damned *Black Bear*. You arrive, you act normally. But you find out anything you can, any way you can."

"Within reason," murmured Superintendent Afton. "The way I see it, you'll be walking on eggs. It could get messy if they break." He gave a slight, apologetic grimace. "Remember, we haven't a single thing against them. You'll have back-up if you really need it; we'll fix that with the Spanish authorities. But no direct contact."

Falconer surprised him with a beaming smile.

"But there will be an arrangement," he said brightly. "Hannah will be out there."

"Hannah?" Gaunt stared at him in disbelief, then turned towards the sound of muffled typing. "You mean—"

"She's going out on the same flight, she'll be staying in Puerto Tellas," agreed Falconer. "Nobody knows she works here. She's already on record as being interested in one of their apartments—so she's out on a short holiday and inspection trip. She saw their salesman again last night, told him she'd go out." He saw the rebellious glint in Gaunt's eyes. "Hannah happens to speak fluent Spanish. She'll be your link—nothing more."

"Does she know that?" demanded Gaunt.

"Of course," soothed Falconer. He frowned. "What's more natural? You walk into an hotel bar, talk casually to a good-looking woman; I know plenty of people who'd grab the chance."

"And Hannah," said Gaunt.

"Perhaps." Falconer's frown became a scowl at the thought. "Anyway, that's how you'll do it."

Gaunt nodded reluctantly, knowing he was beaten.

The rain was still coming down when he used the back way out of the Exchequer Buildings. A lane led down to Princes Street and he rode a bus from there to Dan Caffin's canalside workshop.

Caffin was getting ready to close for the weekend. But his broad face split in a grin when he saw his visitor, then he seized Gaunt's shoulders in a welcoming bear-hug.

"Go easy," protested Gaunt.

Caffin stopped the hug and frowned an anxious question.

"I'm classified fragile," said Gaunt. "Where's my car?"

Caffin beckoned. They went out into the rain and along to a row of lock-ups beside the workshop, Caffin opened one of the doors, then stood back with a grimace.

The black Ford lay inside, a pitiful wreck of crumpled metal, a flattened wheel propped against the driver's door, the whole interior a shambles. Grunting, Caffin produced his notebook and wrote quickly. He could arrange a decent funeral at the nearest scrap-yard.

Tight-lipped, Gaunt walked round the car once. He had seen enough.

"You know what happened?" he asked.

Cafflin nodded and scribbled again. How was the girl?

"Not good." Gaunt looked grimly at the one-time sergeant. "But we'd both have been barbecued if it hadn't been for you."

Cafflin imitated a dart stabbing through the air. Gaunt nodded.

For a moment, Cafflin moved his lips in dumb frustration. Then he used the notebook. Was it finished?

"Not yet, Dan." Gaunt shook his head. He saw Cafflin was waiting, still watching his lips. "But maybe soon; I'm going on a trip on Monday. That might do it."

Frowning, Cafflin scraped his unshaven chin and left it grubbier than ever. Then he seemed to make up his mind about something. Signalling Gaunt to wait, he marched back across his rain-soaked yard and into the workshop. He was gone two or three minutes. When he returned, he was carrying a small, khaki-coloured canvas bag. Face impassive, he handed the bag to Gaunt.

Gaunt opened it and started at two dark green plastic-cased grenades—standard British army issue blast grenades.

"Where the hell did you get these?" he asked.

Cafflin grinned and used his pad. Souvenirs.

"And what the hell am I supposed to do?"

Cafflin used the notebook, scowled, tore out the page, and tried again. Use them.

He turned, looked at the car, then at Gaunt, and raised a hopeful eyebrow.

"Maybe," said Gaunt, and Cafflin was satisfied.

It was early afternoon by the time Gaunt got back to his apartment. There was some mail behind the door, but nothing that mattered. He laid out clean clothes, showered, made a pensive examination of some of the bruising he'd acquired, then dressed again. Opening a couple of tins in the kitchen, he ate without feeling particularly hungry.

Soon after he'd finished, the doorbell rang.

The man waiting when he opened the door was a tall, grim-faced stranger carrying a raincoat. But he had high cheekbones, dark, greying hair, and steady eyes which told their own story.

"I'm John Tabor," said the man in a soft Canadian accent. "Lorna's father. Your boss gave me your address. Can we talk?"

"Yes." Gaunt held out his hand. Tabor gave a wry smile, gripped it for a moment, then came in.

"A drink?" asked Gaunt once Tabor was seated.

"Scotch—on its own. Thanks." Tabor let the raincoat drop on the floor. "Don't worry, this won't take long."

"I'm not going anywhere." Gaunt brought over the drinks.

For a moment, Tabor sipped in silence. Then he looked up.

"I got to see her. I've just come from the hospital." He bit his lip. "It wasn't much of a conversation. They'd finished the tests, were getting her ready for theatre. Probably I shouldn't have been allowed to see her, but they said five minutes." He paused again. "Then I talked to the surgeon. He seems to know what he's doing."

"I'd heard that," said Gaunt.

"Lorna wanted me to meet you." Tabor took a swallow from his drink this time, then swirled what was left in the glass. "She reckons you're the reason she's alive."

"You know what happened?" asked Gaunt. "I got the outline from your boss—enough for now."

Tabor finished his drink, picked up his coat, and rose abruptly. "I'm keeping in touch with the hospital. When there's real news, I'll call." He gave the same wry smile again. "That's the least I owe you."

The rest of the afternoon passed, then early evening. Gaunt stayed in, tried to watch television, then read more of Hannah North's jazz book.

It was nine when John Tabor telephoned.

"She came through it," he said simply. "Some kind of pressure on a nerve; it'll be two or three days before they know anything. No visitors until after that."

"I won't be here," Gaunt told him.

"Your boss explained." Tabor's voice was suddenly cold and bitter. "I hope your trip works out, Mr. Gaunt. By God I do."

Tabor hung up.

Five minutes later, the telephone rang again. This time it was Henry Falconer on the line. He was at home, he was curt and impersonal.

"Just keeping you in touch," he said. "Superintendent Afton called me. His people lost John Cass this afternoon; it looks as though he decided to disappear for a spell."

"Sensible," said Gaunt.

"But probably temporary." In the background, a woman's voice spoke loudly, querulously. Falconer sighed. "I'll leave it at that unless anything happens. Good luck with the trip and—ah—"

"I'll watch out for Hannah," promised Gaunt. "Good secretaries are hard to find."

"They are," said Falconer fervently, and his receiver went down.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Pilots on the big jets rate the late afternoon approach to the Canary Islands, off the north west coast of Africa, as among the most dramatic in the world.

First a strange cluster of low, dark shapes appears far ahead on the otherwise limitless blue of the Atlantic. The shapes grow, separate, and become cloud-capped islands with Tenerife the largest, the bulky, snow-capped volcanic peak of Mount Teide jutting through her clouds. Teide serves as a marker—and a warning. Jagged and ferocious, a whole family of sister mountains, only slightly smaller, lie waiting beneath those clouds. When the clouds dissipate, they emerge in awesome ranks.

Jonathan Gaunt had a window seat midway down the tourist section in an Iberia scheduled service jet, a Boeing 737. He finished his drink, had the glass snatched by one of the scurrying Spanish stewardesses, and a moment later the "Fasten seat-belts" sign flicked on in three languages. Hannah North was somewhere up front on the aircraft, travelling first-class. Henry Falconer had explained it, claiming that Hannah, as a possible property buyer, had to project the right image.

She did. He'd seen her sweeping aboard the Boeing at London Heathrow, though she hadn't given him any sign of recognition.

But it had been planned that way.

Gaunt looked down from his window as the Boeing came in. They crossed a rocky coastline edged with surf, and he caught a glimpse of some of the tall white hotel and apartment blocks on part of the island's tourist strip. Then the flight path swung inland, over barren hills and volcanic outcrops of dark rock, punctuated here and there by tiny peasant villages and their small green patches of cultivation.

The flying time from London had been just over four hours—and

forty-eight hours had now slipped past since his first Saturday meeting with John Tabor.

Gaunt had stayed indoors most of Sunday except for an hour, when he'd forced his bruised muscles to life, jogging his way round the nearest public park. John Tabor had telephoned again, but only to report there was no change in Lorna's condition. Later there had been a couple of calls from Henry Falconer, sorting out details for Tenerife, saying that the police, still unable to locate John Cass, had one possible sighting of him driving south, towards the English Midlands—and that there was a growing chance of proving a link between Cass and the two men who had died.

But Edinburgh, with all that had happened there, was now a long way behind and what now mattered lay ahead. Gaunt eased his stiffened body into a slightly more comfortable position as the final approach began. The passenger beside him, a thin, elderly Irishwoman who had read a book most of the way, surreptitiously made the sign of the cross, then looked determinedly at the seat-back in front of her.

A few minutes later they had touched down at Reina Sofia airport and were disembarking into warm, welcoming sunlight. Tenerife in February was like summer compared with the cold and damp of winter in Britain. The air was dry, flowers fringed the terminal buildings and were backed by screens of cactus plants and palm trees.

They were at the south end of the island. Reina Sofia was still new enough an airport to look half finished, and immigration and customs formalities came down to a couple of men in uniform who lounged at their desks and waved people to keep moving.

He caught another brief glimpse of Hannah North in the shaded cool of the main concourse. A porter was wheeling her bags in a trolley; then he saw a man holding up a piece of cardboard with "Sr. Gaunt" printed in bold capitals.

He went over. The man was in his late twenties, thin, olive-skinned with a mop of black, well-oiled hair. He wore a well-cut lightweight fawn suit with a white, open-necked shirt, had a couple of thin gold chains round his neck and a much thicker one at his left wrist, and he gave a white-toothed grin as Gaunt arrived.

"Señor Gaunt?" The man tossed the cardboard into a waste basket and held out his hand. "I'm Milo Bajadas. I work for Paul Weber; he asked me to meet you." His English was faultless, the handshake was light and casual, then he took Gaunt's battered travel-bag. "I've a car outside."

The car was a white Mercedes with air-conditioning and sheepskin seat-covers. Bajadas tossed Gaunt's bag into the rear, held the front passenger door open for him, then unhurriedly went round to the other side and got behind the wheel.

"Good flight?" he asked casually, starting the Mercedes and steering it through the bustle of loading coaches and departing cars.

"No problems." Gaunt settled back, then coaxed his rusty Spanish to life. "*Muchas gracias* . . . I didn't expect to be met."

"Paul likes to be helpful," answered Bajadas. He used the car's horn to blast other newly arrived passengers from their path. "*Si* . . . and you're here to sell something he wants to buy." He gave Gaunt a quick, sideways glance and chuckled. "I work as his personal assistant, so I know how things stand. You have the legal side sorted out?"

"A few last formalities, that's all." They were on the main road, and the Mercedes began to accelerate. Gaunt shook his head as Bajadas offered his cigarettes. "I've given them up. How long have you been with Hispan?"

"Two years, Señor Gaunt." Bajadas took a cigarette, then used the dashboard lighter. He left the cigarette dangling from his lips. "First time on the island?"

Gaunt nodded.

"I come from mainland Spain, Barcelona." The man handled the car lightly, fingertip style. "Paul Weber's father came here from Switzerland. The locals"—he shrugged—"mostly, they are still peasants. What you would call thick, not too clever."

"Then they must be glad to have you around," said Gaunt.

Bajadas grinned but didn't answer.

Heading north along the island's west coast road, it was an hour's drive to Puerto Tellas. Flat, level, partly cultivated land, the soil poor, light brown, and stony, rapidly gave way to barren, rocky desolation. The road narrowed, climbed, and wound through stark cliffs of black volcanic rock. Occasionally, when the road swooped nearer



the sea again, small banana plantations clung precariously to a slope with rusting irrigation pipes running down from some source above. The few houses near the roadside were glorified shacks, with bare-foot children playing outside their doors.

Most of the time, Bajadas was content to drive, hum under his breath, and point out the occasional landmark. After a spell, Gaunt was equally content to nod and watch through half-closed eyes.

Yet it wasn't all lunar desolation. To their left, the sea was often near and sometimes a village huddled in a cove, boats like toys moored to a tiny stone quay. But that was the old island. The new could be the surprise glimpse of a concrete-and-glass hotel development—and the main road stayed busy with traffic, from tour coaches to rasping motorcycles and heavy diesel trucks.

Another headland showed ahead. The Mercedes climbed the ribbon of road and topped a final rise, and Gaunt had his first view of Puerto Tellas and its bay.

He was looking down at a wide cup-shaped depression which had to be the collapsed remains of some prehistoric volcano. The northerly half had almost vertical cliff escarpments of rock rising directly from the sea. The rest, to the south, amounted to a fringe of rocky foreshore, then steep slopes, the foreshore streaked with black sand, the slopes partly wooded by pine trees, one large section the uniform green of a banana plantation.

Puerto Tellas itself seemed split equally between the old and the new. The northern, larger section was tourist territory, built around a modern marina harbour with a large stone breakwater, and included a large multistorey hotel building and its surrounding complex. A small, much older stone quay and a cluster of little houses with red tile roofs, the original village, still held out along the southern edge of the bay. But the rest was a sprawl of villas and swimming pools, tennis courts and apartment developments, most of them clinging absurdly to the slopes.

It was all as if a mad giant with a sword had hacked and sliced the original mountains from top to bottom, had thrown his debris towards the sea below, then had left man to come in and do what he could with what was left.

"Welcome to our little empire," said Bajadas ironically, taking the Mercedes down the twisting approach road at an alarming rate. He

shaved the stone wall guarding a bend and a sheer drop, turning the wheel casually. "You came at a good time, Señor Gaunt. This is off-season, with not too many tourists around." He chuckled. "You'll see that when they do come, it isn't easy for them to escape again."

The road continued its downward plunge, then reached shore level at the dusty edge of the old village. Shabby little houses had walls which were cracked and crumbling, a single dilapidated fishing-boat was tied to the quayside, and the rotted remains of another lay beached on the shore.

"How long before this part is wiped out?" asked Gaunt.

Bajadas shrugged. "Soon—another two years, maybe. *Muy triste* . . . but that's progress."

The new took over, a broad concrete shore road lined with modern villas and apartment blocks. More were building.

"That's our latest." Bajadas gestured towards a construction site, a two-storey apartment development where cement-mixers were throbbing. "Paul is getting ready to start another, on one of the upper slopes. It has one hell of a view, if your legs last out."

They reached the new village centre. Bare and a few shops clustered around the high-rise bulk of the Hotel Agosto, which had palm trees and a fountain at its entrance. Hannah North was booked into the Agosto, and there was a separate reservation in Gaunt's name. The car didn't slow.

"Don't worry about it," advised Bajadas easily. "Paul will explain." He swore and braked as a group of tourists ambled out in front of them, the men in shorts and sports shirts, three girls wearing bikinis and dark glasses. One of the girls laughed at them. Bajadas forced a grin but muttered viciously. "Dam' fool. Does she want shipped home in a box?"

Gaunt grinned. His real interest was on the small forest of yacht masts showing ahead, at the marina.

"I'd like to see the *Black Bear*," he told Bajadas. "Do you know where she's lying, Milo?"

Bajadas nodded, but gave a slight frown. "Maybe later, Señor Gaunt," he suggested. "Paul Weber first, okay?"

Gaunt decided not to argue. The car turned at a corner where a small bar had tables outside its door but only a few customers. A *guardia civil* in grey-green uniform and black patent leather hat,

thumbs tucked in the leather belt that supported his holstered pistol, nodded a greeting. Bajadas waved in reply.

"Stay friendly with the law." He winked at Gaunt. "A good rule here . . . *comprendes?*"

"*Comprendo,*" agreed Gaunt. "It's a good rule anywhere."

The car kept on, passed more apartments and villas, then turned in at a driveway lined by young pine trees. A red roof showed behind the trees, then they stopped outside a large two-storey villa. It had a sun patio, a blue tiled swimming pool, and a terraced garden. As they got out of the car a large German shepherd dog rose lazily from the shade of a bush and growled.

Gaunt heard a sharp chirping whistle, then quick, light footsteps. A young girl appeared from the villa. Barely in her teens, wearing shorts and an old shirt, she reached the dog, grabbed it unceremoniously by the neck, and it turned and tried to lick her face.

"*Hola, Milo,*" she said.

"*Buenas tardes,*" answered Bajadas, a scowl on his thin, handsome face. "One day that dam' animal will kill someone."

"Not unless I tell him." She laughed and gave the German shepherd an affectionate hug. "You don't know about dogs, Milo."

"And things can stay that way," snapped Bajadas.

She laughed again, gave Gaunt an interested glance, then dragged the dog away towards the swimming pool.

"That's Marta—Paul Weber's sister," said Bajadas. "She runs wild most of the time."

Gaunt hid his surprise. "She's young."

"Thirteen." Bajadas shrugged. "God help us when she's older; then she'll really be a handful." He gestured towards the villa. "Let's go in."

Gaunt followed him into a cool, terrazzo-floored lobby which had a tank with tropical fish set into one wall. Bajadas stopped at a door, knocked, then opened it and ushered Gaunt through into a large room, wood-panelled on three sides, the other wall a complete picture window. The man who stood beside the window was in his late thirties, tanned, stockily built and medium height. He had thinning light brown hair, sharp, confident eyes, and wore a plain grey open-necked sports shirt and matching slacks.

"So you found him, Milo." He came towards them and shook

hands with Gaunt. "I'm Paul Weber. All ready to sell me one boat, Señor Gaunt?"

"Nearly. Once I get the local paperwork sorted out," agreed Gaunt. "That won't take long."

"So far, it's taken a year," said Weber. He nodded to Bajadas. "Find yourself a beer, Milo. But don't stray too far."

Bajadas left them, closing the door, and Gaunt looked around the room. It was plainly but expensively furnished, a large, paper-littered desk in the middle, armchairs upholstered in dark green leather positioned round a low marble-topped table. Some silver cups and trophies sat on a sideboard, and an architect's impression of a sweep of apartment developments hung above an elaborately carved stone fireplace.

He faced Weber again, knowing the man had been silently sizing him up.

"Yours?" he asked, indicating the trophies.

"Target-shooting." Weber shrugged. "I don't get much time for it now."

"Then how much time will you have for a boat?" asked Gaunt.

Weber's eyes narrowed for a moment, then he chuckled.

"Enough. I'll make sure of that. But there are other reasons, Gaunt. Call me sentimental, but that was Peter Fraser's boat; I sailed in her with him. Then I also reckon she'll be a good investment. We get plenty of tourists arriving here who can handle a boat, so I may rent her out." He paused. "Could you use a drink?"

"A beer, if it's handy." Gaunt nodded gratefully.

The stocky figure went over to the sideboard and opened it, to disclose a built-in drinks refrigerator. He brought out two cans, pulled their ring-tops, poured them expertly into glasses, and handed one to Gaunt when he returned.

"*Salud.*" Weber tested his drink, then nodded towards the armchairs. "We might as well be comfortable. Sit down."

They settled in two of the chairs, facing one another across the marble-topped table. Gaunt took a long, grateful swallow from his glass, the cool beer washing its way down.

"Did you know Fraser well?" he asked.

"Better than that." Weber shrugged. "He worked for me, but I'd call him a friend. Why?"

"He left us a few problems," said Gaunt. "No will, no relatives—at least, that's how it looked for long enough. Then one turned up, we started to cope—and she died."

"I heard a little about it, through John Cass." Weber gave a casual nod. "He told me that a second relative seemed to have turned up."

"A second possible; we're still checking." Gaunt injected a suitable doubt into his voice. "She appeared, she made a claim, and now she is heading back to Canada; it'll all take time."

"It would take even more time here, under Spanish law," murmured Weber. He lounged back, nursing his glass. "I still miss Fraser; his death was a loss to us. Do you know much about the Hispan Trading operation?"

Gaunt shook his head.

"The opportunities are limited. Tenerife exports bananas, some fruit and vegetables, sometimes a little wine. But there's less in the way of manufactured products; new markets are hard to find." Weber grimaced. "We're middlemen with not much going for us at either end. John Cass doesn't have an easy life."

"I tried to contact him before I left," said Gaunt. "I heard he was off on a trip."

"Chasing orders; that's what he's paid to do." Weber sipped his beer again. "But we're into something better now, property development. We sell people a place in the sun—so that we can relax in the shade." He gave an amused grin. "I'd like you to sample what I mean, as my guest."

"How?" Gaunt raised an eyebrow.

"I cancelled your booking at the Agosto," said Weber. "I'd like you to try one of our new apartments; I think you'll enjoy it. For meals you'll be my guest at the Agosto's restaurant. That's arranged."

"All right." Gaunt knew that to refuse could have been awkward. "Thank you."

"If you like the apartment, tell your friends," said Weber. "That's all I ask. One other thing: tomorrow evening, once we have completed the *Black Bear* sales contract, will you stay for dinner here?"

"What if something goes wrong?" asked Gaunt.

"It won't. I know the people you have to see, and the local magis-

trate is a good friend of mine." Weber set down his glass and rose. "You'll be staying at our El Barco development; I can show you it from here." He led the way over to the window and pulled a cord, and the slats of the blind opened. Sunlight flooded the shaded room and he pointed. "Over there, on the slope overlooking the marina."

What Weber casually called a slope looked more like a young cliff face and the apartment block, beginning to take on a pink hue, was built in stepped style, so that it seemed to cling to the rock.

"I have other plans." Weber lingered at the window. "There are seven main islands in the Canaries, and on Tenerife our nearest neighbour is Gomera—smaller, still hardly developed. I own land on Gomera, and Hispan Properties will build there eventually. My father and my stepmother have a house there already." He chuckled. "You would like to meet my father. He is an old Swiss goat: my mother died when he was sixty, a year later he married again, his bride a woman half his age. A year after that, I had a new sister."

"Marta." Gaunt nodded. "I met her as we arrived—and her dog."

"Where Marta goes, Oro goes. She lives here most of the time; my father has enough money to travel and spends half of the year in Europe, with my stepmother." Weber seemed in a confiding mood. "Marta took it hard when Peter Fraser died. He was like a *tío* to her, a favourite uncle."

"Didn't he leave you a problem when he died?" asked Gaunt.

"There was a stupid story that our British accounts might have been doctored." Weber's mouth tightened slightly. "I had the accounts audited. That was the end of it."

"A boat like the *Black Bear* doesn't come cheap," said Gaunt. "Some people wondered how he got the money."

"Some people wonder too much." Weber stayed surprisingly patient. "When I met him, Fraser had just finished a contract in the Middle East. He could afford what he wanted. Should I have asked to see his bank statement?"

The meeting was over. Paul Weber escorted Gaunt out to the car, where Bajadas was waiting.

"Enjoy the apartment and enjoy your stay," said Weber as they parted. He smiled. "I'll look forward to tomorrow evening. I've never owned a yacht before."

It was a three-minute drive to the apartment block, which had a wooden carving of a fishing-boat above the main door, but no elevator. Milo Bajadas took Gaunt's bag and led the way up the long climb of stairs to the top floor. There were three doors on the landing. He used a key to open the last of them, put down Gaunt's bag and stood back.

"Any problems, just let me know," he said. "We have a sales office at the Agosto; tell them, and they'll contact me."

He swaggered off.

Gaunt took his bag, went into the apartment, and closed the door. It didn't take long to inspect his unexpected quarters. The apartment was small but well furnished, the layout studio-style but with a separate bedroom. A large window led on to a narrow balcony which gave an almost bird's-eye view across the marina and its lines of moored pleasure craft.

One was the *Black Bear*. A year spent lying idle, probably with minimal maintenance, wouldn't have helped her general condition. Yet why was Paul Weber so eager to become her owner? Gaunt sighed, looking down at the gently bobbing masts and hulls. After that year—more than a year—could the *Black Bear* still hold some key to the whole tangled mess that stretched from Tenerife to Edinburgh and back?

The thought prompted another, gloomier. If Weber hadn't been able to get his hands on what he wanted in that time, what chance had anyone else?

The man's veiled determination to have his visitor in the comparative isolation of an apartment block instead of the Hotel Agosto was easy enough to understand. Weber wanted to keep an eye on him, and that wasn't going to make life easier.

Gaunt stayed a moment longer, watching the sunset. It was dramatic, almost savage, deepening every moment as the sun's dying rays caught the rock escarpment to the north, colouring the whole sweep a deep red.

Like blood. He went in, closed the window, and explored the rest of the apartment. A small bathroom had a modern shower unit. The kitchen fittings included a large well-stocked refrigerator and a bot-

tom shelf with enough bottles to double as a built-in bar. A gas water-heater, already lit, hissed in a vented compartment at the rear.

Gaunt unpacked his bag in the bedroom. Under the top layers of clothing lay some camera equipment. The camera was genuine. He picked up a cardboard box beside it, a box sealed with tape and labelled "accessories."

The accessories were Dan Caffin's two blast grenades. Hefting the box, he looked around for a hiding place, then found one in the bathroom, a small ventilator hatch set in the ceiling and held by two chrome-headed screws. His penknife blade was enough to loosen the screws and there was trunking on the other side, with plenty of space for the box. Another minute and the hatch was screwed back in place.

Gaunt went back to the window. Dusk had come quickly, a neon sign at the Agosto Hotel was a bright green slash of colour, and there were lights showing in many of its windows. Hannah was there somewhere, probably puzzled at why he hadn't booked in. She'd have to stay that way, until he knew the kind of ground rules Paul Weber was operating under.

Half an hour later, showered, wearing a fresh shirt and a pair of lightweight slacks, he left the apartment. It was almost pitch-dark and the bright stars in the sky had an unfamiliar pattern. More neon signs had appeared in Puerto Tellas's little tourist strip and the Hotel Agosto had become a white, floodlit pillar in the night.

Gaunt walked past it, just one more ambling figure among the drifting holiday-makers beginning to appear in the cool of the evening. He kept on, leaving them behind as he reached the edge of the tourist strip, and made his way into the old fishing-village.

The lights, the smells, the total atmosphere was different. Small children eyed him wisely from doorways, but always with a vigilant grandmother within reach. Here and there a TV screen flickered behind a window. He heard a woman singing and a baby crying. A small black cat with a white patch on one paw stalked something unseen along the top of a wall, and a boy in a waiter's white jacket roared past on a motor cycle.

The Bar Tomás had a tin roof. Gaunt chose it because the door lay open and the customers, all locals, included two members of the



Guardia Civil. Police, whatever their nationality, were a good guide when it came to eating out.

He went into the smoky atmosphere. The chatter of gossip died for a moment, he drew a few surprised glances, then the Bar Tomás's patrons decided to ignore this stranger and the voices began again. A few small tables were ranged against one wall, under a gallery of magazine pin-up photographs. Four old men were engrossed in a game of cards at one table; the others were empty.

Gaunt chose a table which allowed him to keep an eye on both the door and the bar and sat down with a feeling of relief, the low separate aches in his chest and back reminding him he'd already had a long day. A stained, handwritten menu lay on the faded oilcloth cover and, as he glanced at it, a man came over from behind the bar.

"Señor?" A small, broad-built, middle-aged man with curly grey hair, he had a considerable paunch which strained against a grubby white shirt tucked tightly into dark blue trousers. "You wish to eat here?" He looked slightly worried. "Our food is *guanche*, for local people."

"I'll take my chance." Gaunt eyed the man's paunch. "You seem to survive on it."

"Sí." The man chuckled and relaxed. "There is paella; everywhere has paella. But maybe you would like *sancocho*; it is a fish stew."

Gaunt nodded. The man waddled off to a kitchen at the rear and appeared after a few moments with a laden tin tray. He placed a brimming bowl of the stew on the table, flanked it with a spoon and fork, then solemnly filled two chipped glasses with pale yellow wine from an old mineral bottle.

"*Salud*." He raised one glass, moistened his lips with it, and waited until Gaunt had completed the ritual. "Tourists don't come this way too often, señor. We don't expect it—not here."

"Maybe I liked the architecture," said Gaunt. How could he have explained to the man that he felt more relaxed, safer, in the tumble-down bar. "Is this your place?"

Grinning, the man rested his paunch on the edge of the table.

"Sí. I am Tomás—Tomás Reales." He thumbed towards a younger, slimmer, muscular version of himself still behind the bar. "That one is my son, Miguel; he helps in the evenings."

Gaunt nodded. Miguel was watching them with a degree of suspi-

cion. He had chestnut-coloured hair and a gold ear-ring and was dressed in a black singlet and dark trousers.

"What does Miguel do the rest of the time?" he asked politely.

"Sometimes he is in jail." The bar owner's voice held little humour. "Mostly he works at the marina, or finds work on the building sites." He poured more wine into the chipped glasses. "Are you a tourist, señor?"

"No." Gaunt shook his head. "I'm here on business. My name is Gaunt."

Curiosity partly satisfied, the man still seemed in no hurry to leave. He pointed towards the bar. "The Guardia sergeant saw you in Señor Weber's car. Is Senor Weber a friend?"

"Today was the first time I'd met him," said Gaunt. "Why?"

"We wondered." The bar owner glanced round, pursed his lips, and whistled a few harsh tuneless notes. His son shrugged, seemed to lose interest in them, turned away, and the bar owner explained. "We are from Gomera." He saw it wasn't enough. "At home, on the island, we speak in words, or we whistle, señor. A man can talk by whistling, from one hill to the next—"

"Or across a bar and no one else understands?" Gaunt rubbed a hand across his chin. "What did you tell him?"

"That you were not a friend of Señor Weber." Tomás said it unemotionally. "Miguel has had—*es*, some difficulty there. So have other people."

"Weber told me his father lives on Gomera," Gaunt said. "He said the family own some land there."

"Not some, a lot," corrected Tomás. He scowled at the notion, then mellowed. "Have you met Marta, the little one?"

"And her dog," said Gaunt and took a spoonful of the rich, dark stew. The fish was sea bass, the rest a thick, spiced mixture of chopped vegetables, the sauce hard to identify but totally appetising. He glanced up at Tomás. "I like it."

"*Gracias*." The man topped Gaunt's glass again. "So—how long will you stay in Puerto Tellas?"

"A few days," said Gaunt. "It depends on Paul Weber."

The bar owner looked pensive for a moment and scratched at his paunch.

"Maybe I should give you some advice, señor," he said seriously.

"Paul Weber is not patient with people who are difficult. Whatever your business, go carefully." He stepped back and twisted a quick smile. "And next time, when you come, bring a friend. Then you can both talk about our architecture, eh?"

He went back behind the bar. As Gaunt had expected, one of the Guardia officers beckoned and the two men talked quietly for a moment. At the finish, the policeman gave a satisfied nod and helped himself to another drink from a bottle on the bar.

He was left alone after that. Finishing the fish stew, he sipped his way through a final glass of wine then put some money on the table and left. The old men playing cards didn't look up; no one else seemed to pay any particular attention.

A light wind, cool from the Atlantic, had sprung up while he'd been in the bar. It murmured through the narrow streets, banged a loose window shutter somewhere, and brought a salt tang of the sea to challenge the hot smell of the land. Back in the tourist strip, among the neon signs again, more people had appeared at the pavement bars and cafés. Taxis murmured by, disco music rasped into the night.

And he was being followed. At first, it was only a suspicion, a brief glimpse of a figure trailing a stone's-throw distance behind him, a figure who happened to be there a couple of times as a reflection in a shop-window.

He crossed the street and deliberately strolled back the way he'd come for a short distance. The same figure turned on the opposite pavement and kept parallel with him. He was medium height, thick set, and his hands were stuffed in the pockets of a loose brown zip-fronted jacket.

Gaunt loitered outside one of the bars for a moment, then turned on his heel and began walking again. A little way past the Hotel Agosto he stopped and stooped, pretending to tie a shoe-lace. The same man came to a sudden, awkward halt, caught under the glare of Agosto's entrance lights.

Gaunt smiled to himself and walked on, towards the marina.

It had no fence and no gate, just a dusty parking area and a few workshop buildings. The main concrete pier was lit along most of its length and there were other lights all along the curve of the outer breakwater. Floating pontoons extended out from both sides of the

pier in a herring-bone pattern, each with a quota of boats creaking at their mooring lines as the black water nuzzled their hulls. Most had been stripped of their deck gear, others lay under protective nylon covers with bare masts protruding as if in protest.

Gaunt walked a short distance along the pier, reached the first pontoon, then glanced round. The lighting around the marina left a multitude of shadows and the man with the brown wind-cheater jacket could have been in any of them. But perhaps he had decided to wait at the marina entrance until his quarry returned. Either way, it hardly mattered. Paul Weber would not be surprised to hear where his visitor had gone.

The first pontoon held a line of small power boats. He moved on to the next, where a big German-registered catamaran was the only one of a row of yachts to show lights. Going past, Gaunt caught a glimpse of a blond woman, totally naked, padding around the cabin.

He checked another two pontoons without success, but a white boat lying isolated and moored bow-on at the next looked a possibility. He went nearer, saw the name painted on her bow, and stopped. His search was over.

The *Black Bear* was roughly as he'd pictured from the few details in the Remembrancer's file. A sleek thirty-foot Bermuda-rig sloop, she had a midships cabin under a smooth fibreglass blister. There was a large cockpit at her stern and a small, upturned dinghy was lashed to the deck for'ard. But even at night, looking at her shadowed lines, he could see that a year lying idle had taken its toll. The white hull was dirty and stained, her deckworks needed painting, her basic rigging hung slack and frayed.

A lot of work would be needed before she was anyone's pride again.

A catwalk led from the pontoon to her deck. Gaunt stepped onto the slatted treads, crossed over, reached the deck, then froze as a rustle of movement reached his ears. The sound had come from the cockpit.

He waited. A fish splashed somewhere in the darkness, then he heard the same rustle followed by a low animal growl.

"Marta?" He called the name softly. "Come on out."

A head appeared at first, looking at him over the cockpit combing. A moment later there were two heads, the other the German

shepherd dog, teeth bared, another low growl coming from its throat.

"*Hola*," he said mildly. "Remember me?"

Marta Weber nodded and climbed out of the cockpit, the dog following her, staying close to her heels, still growling. The girl stopped, spoke in a murmur, scratched the massive head lightly behind one ear, and the dog sat on its haunches, bright eyes still fixed unwaveringly on Gaunt.

"Thanks." Gaunt smiled at the youngster. Wearing jeans and a sleeveless sweater, her long dark hair tied back by a ribbon, she was still very much a child. "Don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not." She scratched the dog's head again.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked.

She nodded. "You're here to sell Peter's boat."

"My friends call me Jonny." Gaunt sat on the overturned dinghy and gave her a moment to get used to him. "What were you doing?"

"*Nada* . . . nothing special." She gave an embarrassed shrug. "I come here sometimes. I like it."

"Good memories?" suggested Gaunt. "That wreath you sent, Marta—the wreath for Peter Fraser's grave. Did Paul know about it?"

She shook her head. "I used my own money. It—did it get there safely?"

"Yes." He watched the girl come closer, Oro inching beside her. "I've heard you liked him a lot."

"Peter?" She gave a slight, wistful smile. "Yes. Did you ever meet him?"

"No. But I knew about him." Gaunt nodded towards the cockpit. "Did you go sailing together?"

"Any time he was here. Paul didn't like it—but Peter just laughed." Her face brightened at the memory. "He said every captain has to have a crew."

"That's true." Gaunt considered the neglected rigging above them. "But didn't he need more help to sail a yacht this size?"

"Peter could handle her." The youngster's voice held a confidence that couldn't be challenged. "Even when we lost the mast in a storm, it didn't worry him."

"When did that happen?" he asked casually.

"Two summers ago." She grinned at him. "Paul thought we'd drowned. *Sí* . . . he almost looked disappointed when we got back. We were missing for eight hours, they had a search plane looking for us."

Gaunt thought of a man and a child facing the angry Atlantic in a boat the size of the *Black Bear* and decided Peter Fraser had to have been a reasonably competent sailor.

"How bad was the damage?" he asked. "You said the mast; what else?"

"A lot." Marta grimaced. "Things were broken, things were swept away. Peter tied me to the rail in the cockpit; I was crying some of the time." She gestured her disgust. "I was younger then, Jonny. Only eleven."

"Much younger," agreed Gaunt solemnly.

He stopped as Oro gave a sudden growl. The dog rose, ears erect, staring at the darkness. Then it began to bark, until Marta grabbed it by the nose. Frowning, the girl peered into the darkness. Gaunt did the same. But whatever was there, whatever the dog had seen or sensed, nothing moved. He glanced at the puzzled child beside him. Even being Weber's stepsister might not guarantee her safety.

"It's late," he said quietly. "Maybe you should go home, Marta."

"Now?" She was disappointed.

"Now," said Gaunt firmly. "But we can talk again, another time."

Marta sighed. Then she went past him and along the catwalk. Glancing back, she gave one of her quick, chirping whistles and Oro bounded to join her. Dog and girl went along the pier and vanished into the night.

He didn't worry about her out there, not with that great, padding animal for company.

But now it was his turn. He went out onto the pontoon and from there to the pier. He heard a soft chuckle, then a stocky figure stepped from behind a small brick store-shed.

"My father sends his regards, señor." The figure halted, grinning. The last time Gaunt had seen him, he had been serving behind the counter at the Bar Tomás.

"You're Miguel, right?"

The young man nodded and came nearer, the gold ear-ring glinting in the darkness.

"What the hell are you doing here?" demanded Gaunt.

"Being a dutiful son." Miguel Reales said it drily. "When you left us, my father saw someone followed you. He decided I should follow him . . . so I did."

"Then what happened?" asked Gaunt suspiciously.

Miguel beckoned, and Gaunt followed him behind the hut. The man with the brown jacket lay as if sleeping, his head pillowed on a large coil of rope.

"He will have a sore head, that's all," said Miguel apologetically. "I made a mistake, I got too close—so I had to hit him before he could do anything." He paused then asked contritely, "Does this embarrass you, Señor Gaunt?"

"No." Gaunt knelt beside the unconscious man. "What did you use—a sledge-hammer?"

The bar owner's son showed his teeth. For a moment a small, leather-bound cosh appeared in one hand, then vanished back into a trouser pocket.

"Do you know him?" asked Gaunt.

"He works for Weber." Miguel squatted down. Quickly and expertly he removed his victim's wrist-watch, then a leather wallet from an inside pocket. He winked. "This way, when he comes round—*es muy triste*, but every now and again someone gets mugged and robbed in Puerto Tellas. Usually a *turista*, of course, but anyone can make a mistake."

"Anyone." Gaunt got to his feet. "Thank your father for his—his thoughtfulness." He pursed his lips. "He said you had run into trouble with Weber. Like to tell me about it?"

Miguel looked embarrassed for a moment, then shrugged. "Sometimes, when money is difficult, I am a thief," he admitted. "Señor Weber is a man with several interests and some wealth."

"So you tried to rob him?"

"Sí." Miguel scowled at the concrete at his feet. "He has a banana plantation, just outside the village. I heard he kept money in the plantation office, and his workers are paid on Fridays—"

"So Thursday would be a good night to find out?"

The man at their feet gave a first, faint groan. Miguel ignored him and nodded.

"The plantation is fenced and has barbed wire; that was no problem. But when I got to the office there were guards—guards, on a banana plantation! They caught me, they had guns, and Weber was there too." He turned and hauled up his black singlet, showing his back to Gaunt. "Can you see, Señor Gaunt?"

Gaunt stared at the criss-cross of healed scars across the tanned flesh.

"They did that?"

Miguel nodded. "Beat me, whipped me, then threw me out. I was to tell my friends so they would know to stay away."

"*Gracias.*" Gaunt drew a deep breath. "Were you inside the office?" The only reply was a headshake, and he tried again. "This plantation—where is it?"

"From here?" Miguel pointed along the shore, to their right. "Ten minutes' walk out of the village, Señor Gaunt. But I crawled back that night, and it took an hour."

The man at their feet groaned again and started to stir.

"I owe you, Miguel," said Gaunt quietly. "Tell your father the same."

They set off along the pier and parted before they reached the lights of the village.



## CHAPTER SIX

Puerto Tellas's tourist strip was still blazing with lights and noisy, but Jonathan Gaunt had had enough for one night. He went back to his top-floor apartment in the El Barco building, locked the door, and checked the ventilator hatch in the bathroom. The hatch, with its hidden package, hadn't been disturbed.

The rest of the apartment appeared to be just the way he'd left it. Yet appearance wasn't enough—and he knew where to look to make sure.

He'd left a few traps for any intruder. They were simple enough, they relied on the rule that a careful, searching visitor usually tried to be tidy—and things could be left in better order than before.

The traps had worked, the room had been searched.

A couple of typewritten sheets of paper in his briefcase, left protruding a little from the rest of the contents of a file, were now back in line with the rest. An envelope with the flap only half tucked in was neatly closed. He'd left clean shirts in a drawer, the top shirt slightly rumpled. Now it was smooth.

Even his shaving kit had been checked.

But, apart from the package in the ventilator, there had been nothing to hide.

Satisfied, Gaunt made some coffee in the little kitchen, then filled a mug and took it out on the balcony and looked at the lights below.

Being in the El Barco was a problem. That one entrance at street level, the only apparent way in and out, made it like a mousetrap, but even the best mousetraps had to have a weak point, and maybe he had already seen the answer.

Going in, Gaunt went through to the gas water-heater's compartment at the rear. It had a small, hinged window. Paint flaked from the hinges when he opened it, showing it had never been used. He

looked out across a narrow gap at the rock slope behind the El Barco.

The lower levels of the apartment block had been built against the slope. But the top floor was different. Murmuring a thanks to whoever had decided a window would look good there, Gaunt straddled the sill, jumped over onto the slope, and scrambled up from there.

At the top, a small lizard scuttled clear as he crouched down. Where he was, the slope levelled off briefly. There were some trees, then the ground rose again.

The whole vast curve of the bay lay in front of him and, far out, a few bobbing pin-points of light showed where some fishing-boats were working. Another small, isolated cluster of lights caught his eyes. They were to the south, inland, somewhere beyond the village but near the shore. He hadn't noticed them before, they hadn't been visible from either the marina or his balcony.

Paul Weber's plantation lay over there. Someone was working late.

He pursed his lips, remembering what Miguel claimed had happened when the young thief went exploring. What kind of a banana plantation used night guards and handed out that kind of treatment to intruders?

Gaunt stayed at the top of the slope for another few moments, then made the difficult downward scramble through the darkness and climbed back in through the little window.

Now, at least, he had his own back door.

Some of the tension drained from his body, to be replaced by tiredness and familiar pain. Yet Gaunt felt he had made a reasonable start.

He took two of the pain-killer tablets, washed them down with the last of the coffee, and headed for bed.

It was 8 A.M. when he woke. Showered and shaved, dressed again in a shirt and slacks, he went out on the apartment balcony.

For a few minutes, Gaunt forgot why he was in Puerto Tellas and how much still had to be done. The sky was a cloudless blue, the air was fresh and already warm, and the sun had just begun to appear above the high curtain of the rock escarpment.

But it was the sea which held him. A gentle swell was coming in, creaming against the shore, and far out in the bay a school of dolphins were heading south. Fifteen to twenty in number, leaping and sporting, they travelled fast on the same steady course, linked by instinct, totally sure of their purpose.

Gaunt watched until they had gone from sight, then heard voices below him. A couple were having breakfast on one of the lower balconies, ordinary, pleasant-looking people. He switched his attention to the street. It was still quiet, but he felt sure that someone was down there somewhere, watching him.

He checked carefully and spotted a man lounging in a patch of shade. Suddenly, the man moved as a girl came hurrying along the street. They met, got into a parked car, and drove off. Gaunt grinned and gave up.

He waited until 9 A.M., then collected his brief-case, left the apartment building, and walked across to the Hotel Agosto. Breakfast was being served in a terrace beside the pool and when he gave his name to a waiter he was shown to a table. Gaunt ordered coffee, toast, and orange juice, ate slowly, and watched a first few swimmers plunge into the pool. He got up and went into the hotel.

No one seemed to follow him. He made a leisurely tour through the lobby and lounges, looked at the display in the hotel shop, and noted the Hispan Properties office in a corner, still closed; then he found a house phone, asked the operator for Hannah North's room, and waited.

Hannah answered at last, yawning. But she came totally, indignantly awake when she heard his voice.

"Where the hell have you been?" she demanded. "You could have been dead in a ditch for all I knew!"

"Weber changed things for me." Gaunt sketched what had happened, including the marina encounter. "Could I have done it any other way?"

Hannah paused. "Probably not." Gaunt heard the click of a cigarette lighter. "All right, you had problems. I've made contact with the friendlies here: they're not happy, but they'll co-operate. What help do you need?"

"Right now?" He'd puzzled over that himself. "I need to win

some time, Hannah. By tonight, I'm supposed to sign over that boat to Weber—"

"Unless we can stall it. Why not?"

"Fine," said Gaunt acidly. "But how? He could go for my throat."

"We could make it someone else's—keep yours for later." She paused again, thinking. "Look, I know the permissions and clearances you've to get. Which comes last?"

Gaunt scowled at the house phone. "The local magistrate—his official seal. That'll be no problem. He's friendly with Weber."

"What's his name?"

He had to check the prepared list in his pocket. "José Martínez, in Avenida Atlántico. But—"

"Stop saying 'but,' Jonny," said Hannah North patiently. "I'll work out something. Just be good and do what the list says. If you're back here around 2 P.M. you'll probably find me around the pool."

"How about floating in it, face-down?" suggested Gaunt.

"I've better plans," she said tolerantly, and hung up.

He left through the hotel lobby. It had a marble fish-pond and a central fountain, and a small boy, escaped from his parents, was leaning over the edge and tormenting the small fish darting frantically in the water.

"Having fun?" asked Gaunt.

"Yes." The boy grinned at him.

"As much as look at those fish again and I'll kick your tail in," said Gaunt softly. "Move, you little monster."

Open-mouthed, the child backed away, stumbled on the edge of the stonework, almost fell into the water, then turned and ran. Feeling better, Gaunt went on his way.

He had four calls to make and they were all within walking distance. First on the list was the government tax official for the district. The man had a cool, air-conditioned office above one of Puerto Tellas's two banks. The man wore a dark jacket and tie to emphasise his official status, sat behind a desk almost the size of a football field, and insisted on reading his way through every line of the already agreed documents Gaunt placed in front of him.

At last, reluctantly, he rang for an assistant, signed the papers,

and had them witnessed. The *Black Bear* and the estate of the late Peter Fraser were officially clear of all Spanish taxation claims.

The marina manager came next. A balding, middle-aged expatriate Englishman, Gaunt found him stripping down a boat engine in a shed behind the marina office. Abandoning the engine, wiping his hands on a rag, he led the way through to an untidy shambles of a room, offered Gaunt a seat and a can of beer, opened one for himself, then burrowed among the litter of yachting literature, bills, and correspondence piled on an old kitchen table.

"Got it." Triumphantly, he dragged out a badly typed invoice on the marina company's headed paper. "That's our final account of charges, including berthage until the end of the month. You sign this, I'll sign your release. Fair?"

Gaunt glanced at the charges, decided the marina were making a fast final killing, but didn't argue. Once he'd signed, the marina manager cheerfully did the same to the release forms.

"That damned *Black Bear* hasn't been any asset to the scenery, rotting out there," he confided. "Your people are selling to Paul Weber, right?"

Gaunt nodded.

"He can afford her." The man grinned. "I tried to steer him onto a couple of better buys—bargain offers, Mr. Gaunt. But he wanted that boat, nothing else."

"Did he say why?" asked Gaunt.

"No—and all he knows about sailing wouldn't get him round a bath-tub. But with Weber, you don't ask." The marina manager took another mouthful of beer. "Still, when he's owner that should scare off the local criminal element. You knew we had trouble that way?"

Gaunt showed his surprise. "With the *Black Bear*?"

The man nodded. "Twice in the month after Fraser died, an overnight job each time. The vultures broke into her cabin, practically ripped every fitment apart." He shrugged. "Maybe it should have been an insurance situation, but nobody knew what had been stolen—if anything. So we did a patch-up job, minimum charge, and left it at that. The charge is on your bill, friend."

They talked a little longer but the man couldn't help further, wasn't particularly interested. It was the first Gaunt had heard of

the yacht being raided: Weber hadn't mentioned it, there hadn't even been a hint in Henry Falconer's file.

Another short walk and he was at his third destination. Spanish law demanded that legal documents binding within their territory had to be drawn up by a Spanish attorney. All the arrangements had been made from Edinburgh, the contract for sale had been prepared by the Puerto Tellas lawyer, complete with duplicates and English translations. But first Gaunt was kept sitting in a waiting-room for half an hour, then the small, gloomy, chain-smoking *abogado* concerned took as long again mumbling and muttering his way through the collection. Eventually, reluctantly, he finished, scribbled his initials on each page, signed the last with a flourish, then didn't waste energy in rising or saying goodbye when Gaunt left.

It was close to midday, the streets were hot and dusty, and the temperature had to be in the high eighties. Gaunt felt his shirt sticking to his back with sweat as he found the Avenida Atlántico and reached the last address on his list. Señor José Martínez, magistrate for Puerto Tellas and its surrounding district, lived in a large villa. The perimeter walls were a mass of purple bougainvillea, a large brass plate by the iron gates proclaimed his importance, and a private pool and tennis-court took up a large slice of the garden area.

The young male secretary who came to the door looked flustered when he saw the visitor.

"*Buenos días.*" He gave Gaunt an awkward smile. "Señor Gaunt, we expected you, of course. But—"

"If it helps, I can come back later," suggested Gaunt.

"It will have to be tomorrow." The young man gestured his embarrassment and came out on to the porch. "Señor Martínez has been summoned to the Governor's office in Santa Cruz, on official business. It was unexpected, a matter of urgency—"

"When did he hear?" asked Gaunt unemotionally.

"Less than an hour ago, by telephone. He had to leave by car, immediately. There was no warning."

"Don't worry," soothed Gaunt, straight-faced. Hannah North's ability to make things happen left him stunned. "Tell Señor Martínez I'll call again tomorrow." But he knew he had to be sure. "I have these papers to be notarised. Perhaps another magistrate—?"

"No, Señor Gaunt." The answer left no room for doubt. "Señor

Martínez knows the situation, has been involved. Anyone else would require time to study each document, perhaps obtain additional confirmation."

It was all he needed. He left the villa and walked back along the tourist strip to the Hotel Agosto.

The Hispan Properties sales office in the hotel lobby was open for business but empty of customers. The plump Spanish girl behind the desk smiled when he asked for Milo Bajadas and murmured into a telephone; Bajadas emerged from a private office at the rear.

"Hola." His thin, tanned face split in a white-toothed grin as he came over. "Everything okay now, Señor Gaunt? Work over, and you can relax until tonight, eh?"

"No." Gaunt shook his head sadly. "There's a hitch."

The grin vanished. "Impossible. You told Paul—"

"His tame magistrate has been summoned to Santa Cruz," said Gaunt brutally. "When or if he gets back tomorrow, I can have the papers stamped. Not before."

Bajadas chewed his lower lip and looked worried. "Paul won't be happy."

"He's your magistrate, not mine," shrugged Gaunt. "Don't blame me."

"Okay." Bajadas sighed and ran a hand over his long black hair. "Paul is over at the plantation. I'll tell him when he gets back."

"I could take a taxi over," volunteered Gaunt.

"Better not." Bajadas shook his head then forced a smile. "Out there is *privado*—no visitors, and an awkward gateman. Anyway, Señor Gaunt, I forgot. Paul planned to go on from there, to view some building plots that could be for sale."

"All right." Gaunt didn't have to feign his disappointment. "Then you can help me with something else. I'm no expert on boats, but I still haven't been aboard the *Black Bear*. I took a look at her last night, from the quayside. But I want to be able to say I looked her over when I get back home."

"You mean now?" Bajadas glanced at his gold wrist-watch first, then nodded. "I have a prospect, a woman, to take round some of the apartments. But I can spare a little time. Do you want to see below deck?"

"Yes."

"We can pick up a key." He turned, spoke briefly to the girl at the enquiry desk, then touched Gaunt's arm. "Let's go."

Milo Bajadas seemed to know most people on the short walk from the hotel to the marina basin. Every few yards was punctuated by a wave, a smile, or an exchange of greetings.

"You're popular," said Gaunt drily.

"Part of my job." Bajadas took it as a compliment. "Paul Weber is the kind who prefers to stay in the background. He likes to have—well—"

"Front men?" suggested Gaunt. "Was that how he used Peter Fraser?"

Bajadas frowned. "Perhaps. Ask him yourself tonight at dinner—if he is in a good enough mood."

At the marina basin, Bajadas went over to an elderly watchman sitting outside a hut, spoke to him, and came back tossing a key in the palm of one hand. Then he led the way out along the concrete pier and over the pontoons, past the other moored craft, to the *Black Bear*.

Tugging listlessly at her lines, the white sloop looked shabbier than ever in the bright sunlight. But Gaunt could imagine her spruced up and under sail, white water chuckling from her bows. He could understand how she could stir a man's pride—particularly a man with no other ties, as Peter Fraser had been.

Though more and more the picture he was building of Fraser was a strange amalgam of good and bad, of strangeness and uncertainty.

"Señor Gaunt." Bajadas had crossed to the sloop's deck and was waiting. "If you're ready; I haven't much time."

He nodded and crossed over. They reached the cockpit, where the small steering-wheel twitched idly against its lashing, and Bajadas fitted the key into the hatchway door which led to the cabin space. Then he stopped and frowned. A small dinghy with a tiny, rasping outboard engine was steering in towards them, Marta Weber small and confident at the tiller, the great bulk of her dog sprawled comfortably at the gunwale, his head staring down at the water.

"*Hola*." She grinned at them and spun the dinghy round. "Since when did you know about boats, Milo?"

"I know enough." He scowled at her. "Why aren't you at school?"



"I had a headache again, so I went swimming instead," she called back, and winked. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing that is your business," said Bajadas impatiently.

"*Gracias, Milo.*" She held the dinghy close to the *Black Bear's* stern and mocked him with a grin. Then she switched her attention to Gaunt. "Do you like swimming, señor—for real, in the sea? I could show you some good places to try."

"I don't swim," lied Gaunt, thinking of the bruises beneath his shirt. But the boat, with its puttering engine, sparked an idea. "How about taking me a trip round the bay, Marta?"

"Okay." She nodded cheerfully. "I'll be back."

As the little boat curved away, Bajadas unlocked the hatchway door, opened it, then led the way down the short flight of steps to the main cabin. Gaunt followed him, the smell of stable bilges and general damp hitting his nostrils as he looked around in the light coming in through the few small windows.

It was a compact layout, saloon berth couches running along each side, a small galley installed to starboard, the broad stem of the aluminium mast like a centre-piece to it all, the sole of the mast resting on a metal plate sunk into the cabin deck. Nearer the bow, behind a light screen door, the sloop's builders had fitted a complete shower and toilet unit. Aft, squeezing along a narrow companion-way, Gaunt glanced at the neatly installed diesel unit. Beside it, tools hung in position on a rack and an open locker was stocked with a variety of spares.

Bajadas had been following him, always close at his heels, saying nothing. Gaunt waited until they were back in the main cabin again.

"She's in reasonable shape," he said casually. "How much had to be fixed after the local pirates broke in?"

"That?" Bajadas swallowed and gave a dismissive gesture. "Only a few things. There are always thieves, Señor Gaunt; lockers were emptied, they searched around for valuables."

Gaunt stooped and fingered a long, repaired cut which ran along the fabric edge of one of the couches.

"They certainly tried," he said drily.

"Sí." Bajadas moistened his lips. "It was unfortunate."

"That's a good word," agreed Gaunt.

They went back up into the cockpit and Bajadas carefully locked the hatchway door again, then glanced at his watch.

"I have to keep that appointment," he said. "If you are having lunch at the hotel, I should be at our sales office by then."

"I'll look in, sometime," promised Gaunt. He leaned back against the cockpit rail, hands in his trouser pockets. "But maybe not for lunch; I found a bar I liked in the old village last night. I'll maybe try it again."

Bajadas frowned but showed no surprise. Nodding, he made his way across the deck to the pontoon, then set off along the pier at a rapid walk.

Gaunt stayed in the cockpit, the heat of the sun soaking into him, glad of a few moments to himself. A big, solitary gull came planing in, circled the mast-head, landed on the sloop's deck, then saw him and took off again in a noisy flapping of wings. One of the yachts at the next pontoon, slightly smaller than the *Black Bear* and with a bright blue hull, was heading out to sea and he watched the brief bustle aboard as she cleared her mooring and her sails began to shiver in the light wind.

As the yacht moved out, he saw Marta's dinghy returning. His mouth tightened. She was very young, totally innocent, and he was using her in a way that he hated. Paul Weber was her stepbrother, she could be badly hurt if things went the way he planned.

But he had to balance against that all the other things which had happened, the deaths, the bitter memory of Lorna Tabor in a hospital bed. He couldn't afford the luxury of choice, he had to use whatever means came his way.

He waved a greeting as the dinghy came pattering in. It bumped lightly against the *Black Bear's* hull and he climbed down and settled in the centre thwart.

"What would you like to see?" asked Marta.

"The lot." He gestured vaguely at the bay. "How about the north side first?"

"That's what I'd choose." She opened the outboard's throttle and swung the tiller. "When did Milo leave?"

"A few minutes ago." He leaned forward, stroked the dog, and was rewarded with a muted rumble of approval.

"I know what's wrong with Milo." Marta concentrated on the

boat's heading for a moment. "One of the site foremen is off sick; he was in a fight last night. Milo had to get his shoes dirty, sorting things out; he doesn't like that."

"I can imagine." Gaunt had his own idea what had happened to the sick foreman. He watched as they neared the breakwater then rounded it, the dinghy starting a gentle, regular pitching as it met the low swell of the open sea. "Who taught you to handle a boat—Peter Fraser?"

"Who else?" The youngster looked surprised. "It wasn't Milo—or Paul."

He nodded. "How do you get on with Paul?"

"This is *prohibido*, that is *prohibido*—" She grimaced. "All right, I suppose. Mostly, he ignores me."

Gaunt left it at that and the little boat throbbed on, nosing along the north side of the bay, close under the towering cliffs.

The sea was deep and clear, dappled by underwater patches of dark, wavering weed. Fish of all sizes and colouration darted below the boat, an occasional inquisitive sea-bird hovered overhead, and his young boat-handler was content to steer, point out an occasional landmark, and sometimes sing to herself. Then, at last, they turned and with the tide pushing behind them they swept on a new course towards the other side of the bay.

There was shoal rock on that side of the bay, and they stayed farther out. But as they drew level with the dark green slopes of Paul Weber's banana plantation Gaunt considered it closely.

He could see the high wire fence that ran unbroken down to the foreshore and into the sea on either side. There was more shoal rock there, but a landing might be possible for something the size of their dinghy. Beyond the shore there was an area of scrub and loose rock, then the first terraces of the plantation began and went on from there—row upon row of the strange rhizome plants, the distinctive Canary Isles dwarf variety, barely the height of a man, most of them heavily laden with green fruit.

"Bananas." Marta shaped a rude loud noise with her lips. "Paul will be up there somewhere, counting them like money. I hate bananas."

She swung the tiller hard over as she spoke. The dinghy lurched, a stray wave slapped its side, and a fine curtain of spray drenched over

everything. At the bow, Oro scrambled into a more secure position and shook himself dry.

"What's wrong with bananas?" asked Gaunt.

"They make me throw up," she said with a scowl. "I wouldn't go near his plantation, even if he allowed me in there."

"Why won't he?"

"How would I know? I'm not supposed to know anything." She slammed the throttle wide open, and the dinghy began slapping through the waves.

They were back in the marina, the dinghy tied to a mooring line and Oro already bounding along the pier, before he asked her anything else.

"Remember telling me last night about that storm?" Gaunt steadied the boat, let her scramble out, then followed. "Did Peter Fraser ever talk about it afterwards?"

"Sometimes, *sí*." Marta gave him a puzzled look.

"Did he promise you anything as a present, a way to remember what happened?"

She frowned at him in a way that was older than her years.

"Why?"

Gaunt shrugged. "People sometimes do, when they've shared something together—the way you did."

"He gave me a gold pendant, for my birthday." She hesitated.

"Nothing else?" asked Gaunt softly.

"It was to be a secret." She eyed him uncertainly. "Something for when I was older. But he only talked about it once, Señor Gaunt. Then I think he forgot; he didn't talk about it again."

"Do you know what it was going to be?"

She shook her head. "He didn't tell me."

"Maybe he forgot," agreed Gaunt, disappointed. He ruffled her hair. "Thanks for the trip, Marta."

She grinned, gave a chirping whistle which brought Oro running, and they went off together.

First, he paid a brief visit to the apartment block and left his brief-case in a drawer in the bedroom. Then, outside again, he waved down a taxi which had just dropped passengers at the Hotel Agosto and told the driver to take him to the old village.

It was a short ride. He paid off the driver with a tip almost as big as the fare and went into the Bar Tomás. The time was only a few minutes after noon and the little tin-roofed bar was deserted, buzzing with flies. Gaunt settled on one of the plain wooden stools at the bar counter and after a few moments the fat elderly figure of Tomás Reales emerged from behind a curtain at the rear.

"*Buenos tardes, señor.*" He waddled over, his round face empty of expression. "So you came back."

"I like your architecture," Gaunt reminded him. "And you look after your customers."

"Sometimes." Reales put a glass in front of him, produced a bottle from under the counter, and poured a measure of pale yellow liquid. "*Licor de banana*; my son thought you might like to try it."

Gaunt sipped. The banana-based liqueur was fiery but sweet.

"Is Miguel here?" he asked.

"*Sí.*" The bar owner frowned a little. "But I want him in no trouble with the law, señor."

"It'll be that way," Gaunt assured him.

Reales looked at him for a moment, then wiped the counter top with a cloth.

"We have a good bean soup, and chicken stew," he said.

Gaunt nodded, and the man ambled through to the kitchen area. He heard a low murmur of voices and a clash of dishes, then Miguel Reales appeared, grinning, wearing a fancy embroidered white shirt, and carrying two earthenware bowls and some basic cutlery.

"Yours, Señor Gaunt." He set the bowls down with a flourish, then leaned his elbows on the counter. "Do you need me for something special?"

"That's the general idea." Gaunt eyed the shirt. "How much was in that wallet last night?"

"Enough." Miguel winked. "But should you have come here like this? Suppose someone else is watching you."

"I told them where I'd be," said Gaunt. "Any salt?"

A salt-cellar was pushed towards him. Miguel waited patiently while he used it and took a first mouthful of soup.

"The Weber plantation," said Gaunt. "How do you feel about going back there, taking me with you?"

Miguel's grin faded. He eased back from the counter and stood fingering his gold ear-ring, saying nothing.

"We'd go in from the sea," Gaunt told him.

"The rocks—" began Miguel.

"If they worry you, maybe your father could do it," said Gaunt sarcastically.

Miguel swore under his breath.

"First, I would have to steal a boat; there are fewer questions that way," he said wearily. "When?"

"Tonight, late."

The young islander moistened his lips.

"It would give you a chance to get even for those stripes on your back," said Gaunt. He stirred the soup in front of him, conscious that Miguel was staring. "I'm here to do a job, Miguel—with or without you."

"Weber?"

He nodded.

"Are you *policía*?"

"No. But you'd be on the right side of the law—unless we were caught."

"Tonight then," said Miguel Reales softly. "There is an old jetty just along the shore from here. I'll be there from midnight."

"Not in that shirt," warned Gaunt.

"I'll wear my thieving clothes," promised Miguel.

He went off, chuckling.

A few customers had drifted in by the time Gaunt finished eating. Placing some money on the bar counter, he left and spent a little time exploring more of the old village. Going into a small hardware-shop, he bought a simple hand-fishing line with a wooden cross-piece, twin barbed hooks, and a heavy lead sinker. He had them in a plastic bag when he walked back to the tourist strip through the heat of the afternoon.

Most of the Hotel Agosto's guests seemed to have opted for a sun-tanning session. The pool area offered a display of flesh from partly cooked onward, and the smell of sun-tan oil hung like a cloud in the air. Chairs and loungers were filled, some late comers had to be content with a towel spread on the oven-like tiles.

Feeling overdressed, the plastic bag swinging at his side, Gaunt threaded his way through the sun-worshippers. He spotted Hannah North as she emerged from the pool beside a tall, deeply tanned man who had dark hair, a small moustache, and the physique of a lean fighting bull.

He knew he was staring, but Hannah was magnificent in a dark brown two piece swim-suit. From the way the fighting bull hovered, draping a towel around her shoulders, he thought the same.

Gaunt caught her eye, turned and went to a pool-side kiosk under a brightly coloured awning. He bought an iced lemonade and stood sipping it in the shade; after a minute Hannah came up to the counter.

"We have to talk," murmured Gaunt, the lemonade almost at his lips.

"That doesn't make my day." She opened her purse and paid for a pack of English cigarettes. "I'm Room 720. Go up now, I'll follow—and we'll have company."

Leaving, she brushed against him and Gaunt was left with her room key in his hand.

If he was still being followed it didn't seem to apply inside the hotel. But he was careful, left the elevator at the fifth floor, and walked up the remaining two floors. The corridor was empty as he used Hannah's key and slipped into her room.

The room had a view across the bay and a large double bed. Underwear was draped over a chair and any one of the perfumes on the dressing table would have cost a small ransom in any Edinburgh shop. He flopped down on the bed, lay back with his hands behind his head, and waited.

It was several minutes before the door swung open. Hannah came in, wearing a beach-robe. The fighting bull padded behind her looking healthier than ever, dressed in a towelling shirt and a pair of khaki shorts.

"Get off my bed," said Hannah coldly. She indicated her companion. "Captain Farise is from the Governor-General's office; he's our contact."

"Roberto Farise—Bobi to my friends, Señor Gaunt," said Farise. He spoke English with a faint American accent and, once Gaunt

was off the bed, he shook hands with a crushing enthusiasm. "Hannah has told me about you."

"That helps." Gaunt hoped it did. "How does the Governor-General's office fit in?"

"Simply." Farise broke off and fussed Hannah into a chair. She looked pleased and didn't object. "Originally I was police, in Spain, then Ministry of Justice. Now I am on staff out here to deal with problem situations."

"Like getting rid of a magistrate," murmured Hannah. She saw Gaunt's raised eyebrow and nodded. "Señor Martinez will be kept busy until late tomorrow; we can forget about him."

"Thanks." Gaunt sat on the edge of the bed again and ignored her glare. "How about you, Hannah? Did you do the apartment tour?"

"With your long-haired friend Bajadas, who has wandering hands," she said grimly. "The apartments are interesting, but I could have done without him. Are you still seeing Weber tonight?"

"Eating with him; he'll know by then about the sale postponement." Gaunt shrugged and looked at Captain Farise. "Are you keeping any kind of tag on me, Bobi?"

"Not yet," said Farise seriously. "I thought about it, till Hannah said to leave you on your own. But if you want—"

"No." Gaunt shook his head firmly. "And not tonight. Weber has a banana plantation where he doesn't like visitors. I'd like to find out why."

Farise sighed. "You realise this man has broken no law we know about, that he has prominent friends, is of good commercial standing?"

"Does that make a difference?" asked Gaunt.

"Hell, no." Farise looked shocked. "Just don't tell me too much."

Hannah's beach-robe had fallen open. She sat with one arm along the back of her chair, frowning.

"What about the child?" she asked.

"I tried again. No luck," said Gaunt shortly.

Hannah looked thoughtful.

"Suppose the original of that old Fraser company share certificate turns up, gifted to her? What happens?"

Gaunt shrugged. "The Mills of God may grind slow, but they're



like greased lightning compared with the law courts—and cost a lot less. If she was lucky, she might get some of the cash as an old-age pension.” He drew a deep breath. “Heard anything from Edinburgh yet?”

“Henry called before lunch.” Hannah North saw the question in his eyes and shook her head. “Nothing fresh, Jonny. Lorna Tabor’s condition hasn’t changed.”

“It could take time.” Gaunt wondered who he was trying to convince. Getting to his feet, he picked up the plastic bag. “Hannah, unless there’s another problem I’ll leave contacting you till after I’ve been in that plantation.” He turned to Farise. “Can you stay available?”

“Of course.” Farise gave a sideways glance at Hannah and rubbed a finger along his dark moustache. “You can rely on it.”

“What about right now?” asked Hannah, frowning. “What are you going to do? We should know.”

“I’m going fishing.” Gaunt gave them a lopsided grin. “It beats thinking any day.”

Finding some bait wasn’t difficult. There were half a dozen amateur fishermen already trying their luck at different locations along the marina breakwater, and he scrounged what he needed.

Gaunt sat in a patch of shade, his back against a concrete block, and let his line drift and swirl on a tiny, bobbing float.

He’d partly lied to Hannah and Captain Farise. He needed a chance to think, to attempt to weave possibilities across the gaps in the little he knew. He could look across the marina and see the *Black Bear* at her pontoon berth. Whatever her secret, there was nothing he could do about it, short of having her literally taken to bits in some boat-yard.

So it came back to Paul Weber and his Hispan Trading, and the real operation going on behind that flimsy screen. Drugs, gun-running—he tried to build up a mental list but knew he was fooling himself, making a pretence of doing something useful.

The float quivered and jerked. He hauled in a small, brightly striped fish, put fresh bait on the hook, and let the line drift out

again. He watched it pensively. Going to the banana plantation would be a different kind of fishing expedition.

The kind that could turn out to be nasty and dangerous.

He stayed out on the breakwater until after six, when the air began to cool. By then, he had caught a handful of the same small fish but he gave them to one of the other anglers as he left. On the way out, he discovered he had a new shadow. A young man with dark sun-glasses and a blue sports shirt stopped leaning against a wall and made a clumsy attempt to be inconspicuous as he trailed behind.

Back in the apartment, Gaunt helped himself to a beer and took it out on to the balcony. Blue Shirt and Sun-glasses was leaning against a parked car on the other side of the road, looking totally bored.

But he was there. Gaunt went inside again and closed the veranda window.

Paul Weber's dinner invitation had been for eight. The same white Mercedes with sheepskin seat-covers arrived outside the El Barco apartments a few minutes before eight and Milo Bajadas, immaculate in a red shirt and white linen suit, climbed the stairs to collect Gaunt.

Gaunt finished the knot in his tie and picked up his jacket. He had showered and wore a clean white shirt with his only suit. For some crazy, obtuse reason, the only time it had ever happened to him, he wanted to go along with the formalities, at least look the part of a British civil servant.

"You told Weber about the *Black Bear* situation?"

Bajadas nodded gloomily at the memory.

"He wasn't happy." His voice made it a sad understatement. "But he accepts you can't be blamed."

"A reasonable man," said Gaunt cheerfully.

The sarcasm was lost. Bajadas led the way down to the Mercedes and they set off on the short drive.

There were other cars, some big, all expensive, in the driveway outside the Villa Hispan. Gaunt glanced at Bajadas, and Weber's personal assistant gave a shrug.

"One or two of Paul's friends are looking in for a drink." He

produced a comb and gave his long, black hair a quick tidy. "It was meant to be a small celebration."

A maid answered the doorbell, then Bajadas led the way into a large reception room. It had red velvet curtains, silver glistened on the sideboards, and a dozen or so guests stood talking, glasses in their hands. Paul Weber left one couple and came over. He wore a light-weight dark blue stockbroker suit. His heavy features forced what was meant to be a smile.

"Sorry about today," said Gaunt.

"Bureaucracy." Weber made the word sound unclean. "I called Santa Cruz and got hold of Martínez—our magistrate. He's sitting around, twiddling his thumbs." For a moment the man's sharp eyes considered Gaunt with a degree of suspicion. "He'll be back tomorrow."

"And that'll be everything," said Gaunt. He faked a sigh. "It's going to cut into my plans. I'd hoped to squeeze enough free time to see more of the island."

"We'll manage something for you—after I've got the boat." Weber beckoned another maid, circulating with a drinks tray, and waited until Gaunt had a glass. "I'll introduce you around."

He did. Two were local landowners, each with an overdressed wife. Then came a politician, another man, grossly overweight, was an industrialist from Madrid who had a villa near the village. Names, smiles and handshakes round the room took a few minutes. Then Weber muttered an apology and abandoned him.

Gaunt sipped his drink, a rum-based cocktail, then felt a hand tug at his arm. He turned, then grinned.

"Hi, Marta."

"*Buenas tardes*, Jonny." The child smiled up at him. It was the first time he'd seen her wearing a dress, a dark green cotton print with a piping of white lace at the neck and sleeves. Her hair had been brushed back, and her eyes sparkled. "Do I look good?"

"Good enough to be a princess," he said positively. He noticed the gold pendant round her neck, on a narrow gold chain. "Your pendant—is that the one you told me about, the one you got from Peter Fraser?"

She nodded. "He said it came from New York."

"Can I see?" He took the pendant in his fingers. The face was a

small, cameo-like miniature of a sailing boat, and when he turned it over the other side was plain except for a hallmark and, beside it, in tiny letters, the one word "Tiffany." He pursed his lips appreciatively. "He was right: New York is where it came from."

"I think I'll go there when I'm older," said Marta seriously. "To see everything—not to live there."

"Do that." Gaunt frowned. "Where's your hairy monster?"

"Oro? He's locked in the kitchen."

"He probably wouldn't like it much here," said Gaunt. "No decent dog would. Where did you learn that way of whistling him in?"

She shrugged. "On Gomera. Oro was born over there. On Gomera—"

"People whistle," Gaunt agreed. "I was in a bar in the old village. The owner told me."

"Tomás Reales?" Marta laughed. "I know him, and his son." She looked around, as if to make sure Weber wasn't in sight. "Paul wouldn't like that."

"I won't tell him," promised Gaunt.

She grimaced. "I keep Oro away from Paul. He'd like to get rid of Oro, but my father gave me him—"

"So he can't do much about it," Gaunt nodded.

Someone else called Marta by name. She smiled and went away. Briefly, he was caught by one of the landowners. Then Weber returned—and Gaunt stared at the tall, thin figure, who was with his host.

"Hello, Gaunt," said John Cass. His small mouth shaped a smirking smile. "Paul thought you'd be surprised."

"It happens all the time," agreed Gaunt. "When did you get in?"

"To Tenerife?" The Hispan manager rubbed a finger down the side of his beaked nose, a gesture Gaunt remembered only too well. "This morning."

"Overnight from Paris," said Weber. "John had to go over there to chase an order."

"Which he didn't get." Cass gestured sadly with his hands. "But some other things look brighter; that's why I'm here." He frowned at Gaunt. "You know, I tried to see you again, back in Edinburgh—about that Anderson woman business. But you were out each time."

"Tidying it up," lied Gaunt convincingly. He grinned at Weber.

"Then tomorrow, when I get a last piece of paper sorted out, everyone will be happy."

Weber nodded, but was glaring just past him. Puzzled, Gaunt turned and saw Marta standing behind him.

"Marta." Weber's voice was low and angry. "I've told you before. Stop hanging around when I'm talking business."

"Paul, I wasn't." The child's face flushed with embarrassment. "I—"

"Don't argue," snapped Weber. "Get out of here."

"But Paul—" she protested.

Weber took one step forward and slapped her hard across the cheek. Marta stared at him but didn't utter a sound, and Weber's hand rose again. Gaunt froze, willing himself to do nothing, fighting down an urge to block what was coming.

But conversation had died all around, and Weber's guests were staring. The man swallowed, lowered his hand, turned his back on Marta, and walked over to the window. She looked after him for a moment, then slowly, defiantly, she left the room. Gradually, conversation picked up again.

"How'd you like to have to work for him, Gaunt?" murmured John Cass, his thin face showing a faint, cold amusement. "It can be rough. Think your nice, genteel government service training could cope?"

"We'd cope." Gaunt considered the thick-set figure, who had left the window and was mingling with his guests again, laughing at a joke one was telling. "All things nasty can come our way."

Cass stiffened and changed the subject.

The cocktail party dragged on for another half hour; then as dusk gave way to darkness the guests departed. Weber saw them off and returned in an affable mood as the last car drove away.

"It's time we ate." He touched Gaunt's arm. "Let's go through. Cass is joining us, but I promise neither of us will talk shop."

The villa's dining-room housed a vast mahogany table which could have held a dozen without being crowded. But a smaller table had been set beside it and a grey-haired manservant saw them seated, then, helped by one of the maids, served the meal.

Paul Weber's hospitality couldn't be faulted. A starter of shrimps was followed by thinly sliced tender pork, served with a hot pepper

sauce. That was followed in turn by a nougat sweet and goat's cheese. Only one wine, a dry muscatel, was served throughout.

Gaunt sipped it sparingly and was glad. Gradually, never seeming to push, Weber brought the conversation round first to the Remembrancer's Office and then from there, smoothly and naturally, to what had happened to Peter Fraser's estate.

As if on cue, John Cass took it up from there.

"You had Mrs. Anderson first—your Canadian connection," he said. "Then after she died, the other woman from Canada. I didn't meet her. What's she like?"

"Younger, pleasant." Gaunt thought of Lorna Tabor and what had happened to her.

"Genuine?"

"Probably."

"So by your rules, she may inherit—inheritor anything that belonged to Fraser?" asked Weber bluntly.

"It's not quite that simple." Deliberately, Gaunt launched into a long, droning account of the Queen's Bounty procedure and ignored Weber's gathering impatience. "We have to be thorough."

"It shows," said Weber with a thinly veiled sarcasm.

They tried him again, when the manservant brought brandy in fine crystal glasses. Each time an apparently innocent question led to another, a probing process when he could easily have said the wrong thing and exposed the turmoil back in Edinburgh. But Gaunt won through and, at last, Weber gave up. Wiping his mouth on his napkin, he looked at his wrist-watch.

"It's getting late. Cass and I have some business to sort out: he's flying back tomorrow." He gave a grunt and pushed back his chair. "As soon as the *Black Bear* papers are cleared—"

"I'll bring them to you," promised Gaunt, pushing back his chair.

Bajadas drove him back to the apartment, said goodnight as Gaunt got out, then drove off. There was a small Seat coupe parked further along the street and the man lounging behind the wheel shrank down as the Mercedes' headlights swept across it.

Gaunt climbed the stairs and went into the apartment. He locked the door, closed the curtains on the veranda window, and checked the time. He had almost an hour.

He waited another twenty minutes, then changed his suit for a

dark sweater and slacks. Unscrewing the ventilator in the shower-room, he brought out the cardboard box marked "Accessories," opened it, and hefted each of the two pear-shaped blast grenades. They had belt clips attached, but he put the grenades in the plastic bag beside the fishing-line. They were insurance, nothing more.

Switching off the apartment lights, he left by the rear window and made his way up to the top of the rocky slope. Then, keeping low, he looked down. The same Seat car was still parked below, without lights.

The top of the slope was unexplored territory but there was enough moonlight to guide his way. Once he had gone through the trees, there was a narrow track. From there, keeping well clear of the bright lights of the tourist strip, he made his way to the old village and struck down a lane to the shore.

The jetty lay ahead, a dilapidated timber walkway running out into the water. It looked deserted, but as he reached it Miguel Reales stepped out of the shadows.

"*Hola.*" Miguel grinned at him in the darkness. He was wearing a black sweater and dungaree trousers, and a knife was tucked into the broad leather belt at his waist. "We have your boat, Señor Gaunt."

"We?" Gaunt frowned at him.

Miguel beckoned.

The boat, a neat rubber inflatable, was floating under the jetty. Someone else was already aboard, holding it steady against the timbers. Miguel nodded and they scrambled down. Gaunt settled in the dinghy, then swore under his breath as he saw who he was facing.

"Tomás"—he stared at the fat, elderly bar owner, then swung round as Miguel joined them—"what the hell's he doing here?"

"My father is an old fool," said Miguel. "He wanted to come." Then he gave a mock sigh which held more than a hint of pride. "But the same old fool handles a boat better than I can. So—"

Gaunt nodded, leaned forward, and gripped Tomás's shoulder in a silent thanks. Father and son exchanged a wink, each took up a stubby, broad-bladed oar, and they pulled out into the low swell.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

A light swell was running, Tomás and Miguel Reales plied their oars in a measured, economical rhythm, and Jonathan Gaunt was content to leave them to it.

Initially, their course was out towards the middle of the bay while the lights of Puerto Tellas shrank behind them. Then Tomás grunted, the small, broad-bladed oars dipped in a different rhythm, and the inflatable swung round. They had begun the second half of a dogleg approach to the plantation shore line.

The land ahead was a stark black outline in the night, an outline edged by milky broken water churning in over shoal rock. They came nearer, the broken water became separate patterns of white surf, and the murmur of the sea began to grow.

Tomás grunted again. Suddenly the older man had shuffled round in the boat, facing the bow, now with both oars and using them sparingly.

They went in, and the inflatable was suddenly pitching in the lumping water. Her rubber hull grazed an unseen rock and she lurched briefly, began to spin, then steadied as Tomás hauled on one oar. Another line of white came up, they rounded it, then angled between two more while the bulky figure worked unemotionally at the oars.

Then, equally suddenly, they were through. The inflatable grounded on loose shingle, they stepped out into a few inches of foaming water, and another minute was enough to drag the little boat clear across dry shingle and into the shelter of an outcrop of rock.

A cricket was chirping above the sound of the sea, hidden somewhere near. A small unseen shape rustled off through the coarse, dry stunted grass where the shingle ended. Beyond the grass was a rising



maze of low scrubland and above that, Gaunt could see the first, dark solid rows of banana plants.

Miguel and his father were muttering behind him, their voices low. He waited, taking the two grenades from their plastic bag and clipping them to his belt, then turned and glanced round as the muttering kept on. It sounded angry on both sides, it lasted another few seconds, then Miguel came over, alone.

"What was that about?" asked Gaunt.

"The old fool wanted to come with us," scowled Miguel. "I told him he had agreed: he would stay with the boat."

"Is it settled?"

Nodding, Miguel reached into a pocket and produced two black cloth hoods. They had eye-slits cut in them.

"Wear this, *por favor*," he said, handing one to Gaunt.

As he did, he saw the grenades. His mouth opened, then he quickly closed it again, saying nothing. Gaunt pulled on the hood. The eye-slits were adequate, he ignored the rank, stale smell of the material.

"Ready, señor?" asked Miguel.

Gaunt glanced back at Tomás, standing scowling beside the boat, then nodded. Miguel in the lead, they set off.

A low drystone wall marked the plantation's boundary line but there was no other barrier. Once over the wall, they were in among chest-high, thick-stemmed banana plants, broad leaves brushing at their clothes, the heavy, close-packed stalk of bananas on each clearly visible.

"A good crop," murmured Miguel. He chuckled under his breath. "But you want to find what else grows here, eh?"

They plodded on through the rows, then reached a rutted track and turned left, following it up the slope but staying near the edge, close to cover.

The track took a bend and, suddenly, Miguel came to a halt, then pointed. The dark, low silhouette of the plantation office showed in a clearing ahead, a light behind one window, a Jeep parked outside. They moved closer. The single-storey brick structure was larger than Gaunt had expected. A power line ran on poles to a transformer box beside it, but Gaunt could only see one door, close to the lighted window.

"Any other way in and out?" he asked softly.

Miguel shook his head. "Only to a store-room, Señor Gaunt. I discovered that last time."

"Then we'd better find out the rest of it," said Gaunt.

They went forward again, moving silently, the last short distance the worst, with no possible cover. But then they were at the Jeep and from there Gaunt crept to the lighted window. Hugging the cool brick of the wall, he risked a quick glance inside, then pulled back quickly.

The two men in the room were burly and unshaven, both wearing denims and heavy boots. One had his feet up on a desk and was reading a magazine. The other was listening to a transistor radio, using an ear-piece. There were flasks of coffee and an opened pack of sandwiches beside them.

There was also a double-barrelled shotgun.

He eased back to where Miguel was waiting.

"How many?" hissed Miguel through the black hood.

"Two."

Squatting down for a moment, Gaunt considered the options. He felt a tap on his shoulder, and Miguel was pointing hopefully to the grenades.

"Don't be a damned fool," he murmured, and the young islander shrugged apologetically.

There was a less drastic way. He studied the Jeep, grinned to himself, then beckoned and led Miguel a few paces farther away to explain what he wanted. When he understood, Miguel fought down a snort of amusement and nodded enthusiastic agreement.

It meant wriggling into the Jeep, then working in the darkness, touch-tracing the wiring under the dash. The basic business of jumping the ignition leads was simple enough: the army bred some strange, unofficial skills. But the horn relay was chancier and took longer.

At last, Gaunt was ready. He checked that Miguel had melted into the darkness, the way they'd arranged, then he took a deep breath. Twisting his chosen two wires together, he dived out of the Jeep and rolled under as the horn began blaring.

Flattened against the dirt, Gaunt waited. He saw the door of the building swing open and both guards hurry out into the open. One

stood gripping the shotgun, the other ran over to the Jeep; then, his booted feet only inches from Gaunt's face, he leaned in and began thumping the horn button, trying to stop the blare. He gave up and shouted and the other man trotted over.

For a moment there were two pairs of booted feet close to his face while the men held a brief, shouted exchange. Then the shotgun was propped against the side of the Jeep, one of the men ambled round to the front of the vehicle, and the hood creaked open.

Gaunt catapulted out, going in a ground-level tackle for the guard still thumping the horn. Surprised, knocked off balance, the man fell hard—and Gaunt kicked the shotgun aside as he pounced on the sprawled, startled figure. There was a flurry of movement at the front of the Jeep, but he ignored it.

The man on the ground recovered fast, tried to struggle upright, and threw a wild punch. Gaunt blocked the blow, slammed an elbow into his opponent's stomach which sent him grunting back, then, both hands together, fingers locked, he landed a chopping blow just behind the guard's ear.

The man collapsed and didn't move. Rolling clear, Gaunt grabbed at the fallen shotgun.

But there was no need. Miguel Reales pocketed his leather cosh and gave a mock salute from the front of the Jeep. The second guard lay on the ground beside him, face-down.

The horn was still blaring. Gaunt broke the wiring connection, then, in the welcome silence, Miguel and Gaunt dragged the two unconscious men over to the office doorway. Miguel found a coil of thin rope in the rear of the Jeep and brought it over.

"Tie them and gag them," said Gaunt. He laid the shotgun against the wall. "Then keep an eye on things out here. Anyone likely to have heard that horn?"

"No one lives near, señor." Miguel shook his head, already using his knife to cut the rope into handy lengths.

Gaunt left him to it and went into the plantation office. The main area was shabby and ordinary with desks and a few filing cabinets. There were some progress charts on the walls. One area, partitioned off, was obviously used by the manager. But there was a door at the rear. It was solid wood, double-locked, and marked "Privado" in bold letters.

A ring of keys was lying on one of the desks the guards had used. He took the ring over, tried the keys one by one, and discovered none fitted. Standing back, he tried an experimental kick and the door didn't budge.

There was only one way left. He went outside, where Miguel had finished dealing with one guard and had started the other. Picking up the shotgun again, Gaunt went back to the double-locked door. Gauging the distance, sighting carefully, he fired one barrel at each lock.

The noise was almost deafening in the confined space. But as the smoke and dust cleared, both locks hung loose. Tossing the empty shotgun aside, he kicked at the door again—and it flew open.

There was a light switch just inside. He flicked it on; neon tubes sputtered to life overhead.

He stared. The room had plain, white-tiled walls and no windows. Down the middle, a small line of office computer equipment sat silent on a desk-height bench with two chairs for operators in front of them. Thick black cables snaked from the bench to a line of grey metal cabinets. A large metal safe was located at the end of the room, where a small table was occupied by an incongruously old-fashioned postal franking machine.

Whatever he'd expected he might find, it hadn't been this. He walked down the length of the bench, identifying a small IBM computer with a linked word processor and two separate printers. Blank v.d.u. screens mocked at him, the safe on the rear wall looked as though nothing short of a shaped explosive charge or a thermal lance would make any impression on it.

He tried one of the keyboards, but wherever the main power source was located, it was off. Swearing under his breath, he leaned his knuckles on the metal bench and looked around again.

This was the place that mattered. There had to be something, somewhere.

There was a waste bucket. He emptied it on the floor and salvaged a crumpled section of torn print-out paper, perhaps the start of a trial run. Smoothing it out, he saw it was an account form, made out to a London firm for an entry in a trade directory, the amount due—four hundred pounds sterling, payment requested by return.

But the letterhead address at the top was a publishing house in Barcelona, and payment was to be made direct to an English address in Liverpool.

He rummaged through the rest of the waste bucket's contents, then went from there to the franking machine. On some separate circuit, the machine worked when he switched on and he fed a scrap of paper through it.

The postal franking was Spanish, but the postmark was a hazy blur.

None of it made sense. None of it, unless—He stared at the scrap of franked paper in his one hand and the salvaged computer-printed invoice in the other, with a dawning understanding.

If he was right, Paul Weber certainly had something to hide, something to worry about—and if he had to buy the *Black Bear* to protect it, then the money involved probably rated as petty cash.

He went back to the bench, ripped away the plastic guards protecting the paper feed trays on both printers, and tore off a sample from each roll. They were totally different in layout and in letterhead addresses. But both were invoice forms for trade directories—dull, unexciting in appearance.

Yet if he was right, and he had to be right—

“Señor Gaunt—”

Miguel's agitated voice jerked him round. The islander was standing by the shattered door, his hood removed, his face tense.

“What's wrong?”

“My father says—”

“Your father—” Gaunt blinked.

“He followed us. He's watching the track—somewhere farther along, nearer the road.” Miguel moistened his lips. “He called to me, our way—whistling, you understand? A car is coming, is through the gates—”

“Heading here?” Cursing under his breath, Gaunt stuffed the sheets of paper into a pocket. “All right, I'm finished.” He stopped short and almost groaned at his own stupidity.

Close to where Miguel was standing a small box was set into the tiled wall. Another small, identical box was on the opposite wall. When he'd barged into the inner room, he'd broken an electronic beam alarm.

Paul Weber didn't rely totally on the human element.

"Señor—" pleaded Miguel.

He nodded and they hurried together through the main office area and out the main door, past where Weber's two guards were lying trussed. A chirping whistle sounded in the darkness. Miguel gave a short, shrill reply, then grabbed Gaunt's arm as a pair of headlights swept round a bend in the track, wavering, coming nearer as they watched.

"Move. Head back to the boat." Gaunt shoved him on his way, watching the headlights, hearing the car's engine bellow as the driver thrashed it along the rough track.

The headlights swept round a final bend, bathing the office block in light—and catching Miguel, almost at the start of the banana plants.

Blast grenades had a standard ten-second fuse. Praying they hadn't been altered, Gaunt grabbed one grenade from his belt, pulled the pin release, and lobbed the grenade into the front seat of the parked Jeep.

Sprinting away, heading for the plantation, not looking back, he heard the car behind him skid to a halt. Doors opened, a man shouted, a handgun barked.

Then the Jeep blew up as the grenade exploded. He felt the blast on his back and almost fell, his ears sang as he stumbled on, and a second explosion, the Jeep's fuel tank going up, followed a moment later.

He reached the start of the banana lines, dived into shelter, then glanced back. Flames rose from the shattered wreck of the Jeep, two men were helping another to his feet, a fourth was crawling towards the car, and old Seat station wagon.

It was no time to linger. Turning, Gaunt plunged deeper into the safety of the tall leafy stems.

Twice he heard shouts, then shots. Tripping, falling, losing his sense of direction more than once, the glow behind him which marked the burning Jeep fading and ending, he forced himself on.

At last, he reached the shore. No sounds of pursuit reached his ears and he finally located the rock where the rubber boat lay waiting. Weary, his back aching, a pain stabbing in his ribs to remind

him he was a fool, he pulled off the stinking black hood, slumped down against the rock and rested.

It was a long time before Miguel and his father appeared, walking slowly along the shingle. Miguel was half supporting Tomás Reales and when they reached Gaunt the older man was swaying, almost ready to collapse. His right arm was hanging limp, the faint moonlight showed his shoulder was sticky with blood.

"I found him," said Miguel tiredly. He anticipated Gaunt's question. "They were firing at shadows; he was just unlucky."

"I'm sorry." Gaunt chewed his lip. "Any of them coming this way?"

"None. They search back towards the road." Miguel paused as his father muttered to him, then twisted a grin. "He says it isn't a bad wound. He has been hurt more opening a bottle."

"Once he's fixed, I'll open a bottle for both of you, as a starter," promised Gaunt grimly.

They left Tomás propped against the rock and dragged the inflatable down to the water's edge. Then, going back, they collected the older man and helped him aboard. Wading out into the surf, they pushed the inflatable clear, then scrambled in and took the oars. The white hazards of the shoal reefs came up but, croaking instructions from the stern, gesturing furiously with his good arm, Tomás safely piloted them through.

Then, once they were clear, he was content to lie back and leave the long, dogleg pull across the bay to Gaunt and his son. He didn't stir until, nosing in through the darkness, they bumped the jetty at the old village.

The boat secured, Gaunt helped Miguel bring his father ashore.

"*Gracias*. I'll manage now." Miguel muttered an apology as he got an arm around his father and elbowed Gaunt in the process. "We have friends close by, we know a *médico*—"

"I'll stay with you," volunteered Gaunt.

"No, Señor Gaunt." Miguel was polite but firm. "Go your own way."

"*Si*, it would be better," said Tomás weakly, nodding. "Tell me one thing. Did—did you get what you wanted?"

"I think so," said Gaunt quietly.

Tomás forced a grin and grunted to his son, and, one supporting the other, they left him.

It was after 2 A.M., the narrow streets were dark and deserted, and even what Gaunt could see of the tourist strip had died till morning. But he needed his own kind of help now, and urgently.

There was a public telephone stand at the next street corner. He fed some coins into its slot, dialled the Hotel Agosto, and asked the night operator for Hannah North's room. When she answered and heard his voice, Hannah wasn't pleased.

"It's the middle of the damned night," she protested. "I was asleep. I"—she groaned—"all right, what's happened?"

"A lot, and I'm in trouble," said Gaunt. "I need you, and your Captain Bobi—presuming you've got him handy."

"I'm in bed and I'm alone." Hannah bridled. "If you're insinuating—"

"Hannah, right now I don't care," said Gaunt wearily. "Can you get him?"

"Yes. He's in the hotel; where are you?"

"Hold on." There was a street sign on the nearest house. "Avenida Blanco, in the old village."

"Wait there. He drives a Lancia coupe."

She hung up. Sighing, Gaunt replaced his own receiver, then moved along to a patch of shadow which was a shop doorway. Patting his pockets, he felt the slim outline of the computer prints and let himself relax a little. Then he frowned. Something was missing.

The second grenade; he cursed softly under his breath, knowing it had been clipped to his belt as they rowed back from the plantation, remembering the apparently clumsy way Miguel had collided with him as they came ashore at the jetty.

Miguel was a good thief, too good maybe. The idea of the Reales family having a blast grenade stowed away as a souvenir wasn't one that appealed to him.

But it could wait. Paul Weber was a more immediate concern and a lot more dangerous. By now Weber would know exactly what had happened in the plantation break-in and that the raiders had escaped.

What would Weber do about it, how quickly would he react? In theory, the Hispan boss might still assume he'd had his visitor bot-



bled up in the El Barco apartments. But theory and the way people reacted were two different things, and the name Jonathan Gaunt had to be at the top of Weber's list of suspects.

It was not a happy thought. Gaunt had known it would be that way from the start—and the night felt colder the more he considered it.

The Lancia coupe, big, blood-red and with purring twin exhausts, turned into the Avenida Blanco about ten minutes later. The passenger door swung open and Captain Roberto Farise beckoned impatiently.

"Get in the back," he said curtly. "There's a rug; stay down under it."

Gaunt clambered in behind the unshaven Spaniard, who wore a partly buttoned shirt flapping outside his trousers. As he burrowed under the rug the passenger door slammed shut and the Lancia was moving again.

"Thanks for coming," he said.

"Had I a choice?" asked Farise sarcastically. "Just keep down. I've got to get you into the Agosto and even my humble intelligence tells me you don't want an audience."

The Lancia purred on then, after what seemed only a couple of minutes Gaunt felt the car change gear. They turned and briefly bumped over pot-holes, then the Lancia stopped and the engine stopped.

"All clear," said Farise after a moment. "You can come out."

Gaunt emerged cautiously from the rug and found Farise grinning at him.

"What's so funny?" asked Gaunt.

"Two of us, trying to get into a woman's bedroom in the middle of the night." Farise chuckled. "There may be a few other people tiptoeing between rooms; we mustn't alarm them."

"Just get me there," Gaunt said stonily. "I don't care how."

They were in a lane behind the Agosto, close to the beach, and the hotel was no longer floodlit. Once they'd left the Lancia, they crossed a pitch-black patch of garden and emerged close to the pool area; Farise led the way to a side door.

"Locked from the inside, but I was going out," he murmured,

easing the door open. Once Gaunt had followed him into a dimly lit corridor, he carefully closed and locked the door again. "Now, *por favor*, we should use the service stairs."

They went up, Farise loping ahead up the stairway in a way that left Gaunt cursing. Once they had to stop, hearing voices whispering ahead. But that ended in a giggle and a door slamming, and Farise was off again.

The corridor to Hannah's room was deserted and she opened her door at the first tap. She was in a blouse and slacks, barefooted, but she'd found time and energy to brush her hair and smudge on some lipstick. Waving them in, she closed the door and looked Gaunt up and down.

"You need a drink." She led the way into the room, where the sheets on the bed were still thrown back. Three paper cups were waiting on the bedside table, already filled. "It's brandy—local rotgut."

"Don't despise it," murmured Farise. "What you can't drink is good for clearing drains."

They let Gaunt settle in a chair and watched him take a first gulp of the coarse, dark spirit, and then Farise sucked an edge of his thin moustache for a moment.

"Well?" he asked. "What have you got?"

"These." Gaunt dragged the invoice sheets from his pocket.

"*Gracias*." Farise took the sheets, raised an eyebrow more than once as he skimmed through their contents, then politely handed them on to Hannah. "And you got these—where?"

"At Weber's plantation."

"Where tonight there was some kind of explosion and some kind of fire. The Guardia Civil were advised it had been a small, unfortunate accident to an electricity transformer," said Farise drily. He gave a slight scowl. "Hannah said trouble; I checked before I came for you. Was anyone killed?"

"I don't think so," said Gaunt carefully.

"Hurt?" Farise sighed when he didn't get an answer. "Hannah was right. Trouble." He gave her one of his admiring, fighting-bull glances. "You should be glad she is here."

"Here for what?" Hannah had finished reading. She slapped the

invoice sheets down on her bed. "Suppose someone tells me what the hell is important about these?"

"They prove that Paul Weber is certainly a very rich man," said Farise softly. He paused and gave an odd, almost sympathetic smile. "They also prove that as far as you are concerned, he is a crook."

"How?"

"Ask your friend." Farise made it an invitation, glancing at Gaunt. "How many does he send out?"

"No idea." Gaunt took another anaesthetising swallow of brandy. "Ten thousand a mailing?"

"The last of these I came across was based on Madrid," said Farise. "They ran to one hundred thousand a mailing, expected a ten per cent success rate." He shrugged at Hannah. "That way, they cleared over one million pounds sterling—perhaps three times a year."

"Will both of you stop your damned smirking and tell me?" Her frustration broke through. "You show me a couple of printed invoices, then what? Am I supposed to turn cartwheels? What the hell is Weber doing?"

"It's called fraud," murmured Farise. "He tells a small army of companies that they owe him money; they believe him, and they pay by return."

"Try again," she said incredulously.

"He's right, Hannah," said Gaunt with a degree of sympathy. "The basics are simple. You invent a fake publishing operation, you make out you're going to publish some kind of international directory. Then you bill firms for the amount you say they owe you—"

"And the money rolls in," agreed Farise. He turned to Gaunt. "Have you met this before?"

Gaunt shook his head. "Only heard about it."

"Then you have been lucky, my friend." Farise's tanned handsome face twitched in a grimace. "Before I came to the islands, when I was in Madrid, my department at the Ministry of Justice was involved in one, with Interpol snapping at our heels." He went over to the bed, picked up one of the printed bills, and held it in front of Hannah. "What do you see? A normal, apparently respectable firm sending an account to a client, agreed?"

She nodded, reluctantly.

"Exactly." Farise spoke patiently, as if lecturing a backwards student. "Here we have the Annica International Telex Directory—to be published by Annica, Barcelona. They ask this English firm to pay three hundred and eighty pounds sterling to Annica's account with a branch of a very real English bank. Now, suppose you are the cashier of this English company. Suppose you have different bills and invoices and statements coming in every day—and this one, from Annica, is in a bundle of bills of all kinds. Its looks genuine." He paused and tapped part of the account with a finger. "Here we even have a warning that payment must be made within fifteen days to obtain benefit of a ten per cent discount. So, Hannah, what do you do?"

"I'd check it out," she said stubbornly.

"No." Farise shook his head firmly. "You might, if it was for a much larger sum. But this is small, almost petty cash; you don't want to run to your boss and annoy him."

"You pay it," agreed Gaunt wearily. "That's how it works, Hannah."

"All right." She went over to a cupboard, brought out the brandy bottle, and made a tight-lipped, still not totally convinced business of topping up their paper cups. "But how often?"

"Statistically?" Farise shrugged. "It's guesswork. Between ten and fifteen per cent is the accepted average—not bad, if you sent out a hundred thousand every few months. Then the smart operator makes a special file of the firms who have paid—and they are permanently on his lists. Lists, Hannah—because he operates more than one fake company, more than one nonexistent telex directory."

"And he brings out a new edition each year," said Gaunt. "His customers expect that."

Looking dazed, Hannah took a long swallow of brandy and sat on the edge of her bed.

"You're talking of a gold mine," she said, surrendering.

"How to be a millionaire, in any currency," said Farise. "Jonny, the one you heard about; where was he based?"

"New Zealand." And Scotland, Wales, and most of Ireland had been flooded with fake accounts. No directory operator ever risked working firms in his own country.

"Mine lived in Belgium. He had a cousin in the same business in

Spain, they had a working relationship with some friend in the United States."

"I want to know how it works," said Hannah.

Farise was the expert, but Gaunt could help with some of it, and wince in the process because he hadn't tumbled to it earlier.

Because it was simple. All a directory-fraud team needed was a small office, a good filing system, postage money—and names. That meant having a good, trusted field man who gathered technical journals, trade association lists, even genuine directories.

Then, as the harvest came in, the same field man travelled from his own safe base, moved the money fast from its bank account, shuffled it, lost it from sight.

They paused, and Hannah moistened her lips.

"Peter Fraser—"

"Was a damned good field man," said Gaunt gloomily.

Something else still troubled her. "Surely some firms complain, tell the police?"

"A few," said Farise and gestured his disgust. "Eventually—once they think about it. But by then the field man has his money and has moved on. Most companies who spot something wrong just tear up the evidence and throw it in a bucket. They've enough problems."

Gaunt sat silent for a moment. He was thinking of Peter Fraser, in Scotland, of the two hundred thousand pounds still in the Watermoor Milling bank account. The Watermoor account had to have been the end of the line, the last stage before the carefully laundered flow of money came home to Paul Weber.

But if Weber hadn't known exactly how Fraser operated, if Weber had been searching for that missing money for more than a year—yes, it could explain so much.

"*Por favor,*" said Roberto Farise softly. "There is just one thing now. I can do nothing about this, our police can do nothing about this, not directly."

Hannah and Gaunt stared at him. Embarrassed, he prowled the hotel room for a moment then sighed.

"There is one very small line in these printed accounts, buried on the reverse side, under 'Business Conditions.' Can I tell you what it says? I don't even need to look. It reads 'This is an offer only, there

is no obligation to pay.' It is enough—particularly when foreigners outside of Spain are the victims."

Gaunt swallowed. "That makes it legal?"

"Under Spanish law." Farise scowled. "No crime has been committed; the ruling comes from the highest authority."

"Then your 'highest authority' is an idiot," said Hannah.

"St." He went over, rested a hand on her shoulder, stroking gently and absently with his fingers. "I agree."

"Extradition?" Hannah frowned at his hand. "Bobi?"

"To Britain?" He shook his head. "You forget, Hannah. Your country and mine have no extradition agreement."

"So Weber has it made." Gaunt felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach, hard. "Then why all the secrecy here?"

"That?" Farise seemed to have an unwilling answer ready for everything. "There could be different reasons. The obvious one is to avoid paying tax on it all. In his place, I would do the same—down to having a courier take those accounts by the suitcase-load to the mainland, and post them there."

"Couldn't you nail him on the tax angle?"

"On what evidence?" Farise's hand was still busy around Hannah's shoulder and straying from there. She seemed to have decided she liked it. "Jonny, I'm sorry. But the only person I could legally arrest is you. Trespass, breaking and entering, malicious damage, wounding—"

"How about grievous bodily harm to a Ministry of Justice official?" suggested Gaunt.

"No, that might get you a medal." Farise sighed, released his grip on Hannah, stood back, and stifled a yawn. "I need time to think, to work something out—and I may need help. All of us need some sleep. But the first problem is what Weber may do." He glanced at Hannah. "Can he sleep here?"

She nodded.

"Good." He grinned at Gaunt. "You're safe in this room—and fortunate. But don't step outside before you hear from me."

"How long will it take?" asked Gaunt.

"Perhaps a few hours." Farise headed for the door, reached it, then chuckled. "You know, I've never done this before, leaving a

beautiful woman's bedroom in the middle of the night after asking her to let another man stay."

He opened the door and slipped out, and it closed gently. For a moment, Hannah sat where she was, a strange look in her eyes. Then she straightened, swallowed the last of the brandy in her paper cup, and set it down.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

Gaunt shook his head.

"Right." She became totally business-like. "The bed is big enough for two. You stay on your side, I'll stay on mine. One twitch in my direction and you'll wish you were dead."

"Hannah, I'm going to disappoint you," he said. "I'm damned tired. So climb back into your nightie: you're in no danger."

"I don't wear one," she said without thinking, then blushed. "Tell that when we get back to Edinburgh and—"

Gaunt grinned at her. She grinned back, flopped down as she was on the bed, and pointed at the other pillow.

"Go to hell, Jonny, but take your shoes off first."

She reached over and switched off the light.

They came at 4 A.M., so quietly that the first Gaunt knew was a hand over his mouth and the muzzle of a pistol against his ear. The bedside light clicked on and, hazily, he saw another figure leaning over Hannah, giving her the same treatment.

"*Lento . . .* slow and easy," murmured a voice he knew only too well.

The hand came away from his mouth, the muzzle of the pistol kept up its pressure. Gaunt sat upright, and Milo Bajadas gave him a mirthless grin.

"You and the woman." Bajadas didn't raise his voice. "You will get up, you will do exactly what you are told. You understand?"

Gaunt nodded. Reluctantly, Hannah did the same. The man holding the pistol to her head was a stranger. A third intruder was in the room, standing just inside the doorway, saying nothing, an hotel pass-key dangling in his left hand, the other deep in his pocket. The man took a step nearer the soft glow of the bedlight. It was John Cass, his long, thin face a stony mask, but a certain nervousness in the way he kept glancing around.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Hannah in a quiet, furious voice. "If this is some kind of a hold-up—" She stopped short as she received a back-handed cuff across the mouth from the man beside her.

"You and the woman will get up," repeated Bajadas patiently. "You will come with us. If either of you tries to escape then the other will be killed." The gun was removed from Gaunt's ear. "No more talking."

They were allowed to put on shoes. Then, dressed as they were, with pistols pressed against them, Gaunt and Hannah had to obey as they were led from the bedroom and along the dimly lit, deserted corridor to the elevators.

One elevator stood waiting, the door jammed open. Their three captors hustled them in, Cass unjammed the door, and Bajadas pressed the bottom button.

"We have a car in the garage," he said as the elevator door slid shut. "If you have any wild notions about the hotel staff, forget them. There is only the night porter at this hour, and he has—ah—decided to take a meal break."

"I like his timing," said Gaunt. He looked at Cass, who still seemed the most nervous of the three. "Getting in over your head, aren't you?"

"Shut up." Cass moistened his lips as the elevator rode down. "I wanted to finish you in Edinburgh—"

"You nearly did," said Gaunt unemotionally. "You may have crippled someone for life. Does that feel good?"

Cass stared at him. Then the elevator was sighing to a stop.

The door opened on the Agosto's basement garage. A grey Seat van was parked nearby, the rear door lying open.

"Wait," said Bajadas curtly. "Toni—"

They were pushed facing the side of the van and the man who had been Hannah's escort first tied her hands behind her back with some thin rope, then did the same with Gaunt. The rope was tight, and Bajadas grinned.

"Toni has a brother," he said curtly. "His brother was one of the plantation guards tonight. Remember that. Now get in."

They were shoved into the van, Cass and Bajadas following them.



The rear door closed, they heard the other man get behind the wheel, then the Seat's engine rumbled to life and they were moving.

"Where are you taking us?" asked Hannah wearily.

"Not far." Bajadas sat with his back against the metal panelling, the pistol in his hand held ready. "Then we can talk more comfortably, *si?*"

The van only seemed to travel for a couple of minutes, then it came to a halt and the engine was switched off. A moment later, the rear door opened and they were pushed out.

It was still dark, and they were at the marina basin, on the concrete pier beside the *Black Bear's* pontoon. There was no one else around, the only sounds were the creaking of mooring lines and the soft lapping of the water, but a chink of light showed in the sloop's cockpit.

"Go aboard," ordered Bajadas.

The pistol pressed against Gaunt's back jabbed him on. He reached the sloop's deck and stumbled awkwardly into the cockpit, and, as Hannah followed him, John Cass swung the cabin hatchway open. Down below, the cabin was brightly lit, the curtains were tightly closed—and Paul Weber stood waiting.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Unshaven, clad in a sweater and denim trousers, Paul Weber stood with his arms folded, his heavy face giving away little as Gaunt and Hannah were bundled down to join him. As John Cass and Bajadas followed, the man called Toni stayed in the cockpit and closed the hatch.

"Over there." Weber nodded towards the starboard couch, gave a slight, satisfied smile as his two prisoners were made to sit side by side, then glanced at Bajadas.

"Any trouble?"

Bajadas shook his head.

"Watch them."

Weber beckoned to Cass and led him over to the other end of the cabin; the two men talked briefly, their voices a murmur. Then Weber came back. His eyes were hard and angry, he held the crumpled account sheets from the plantation in one hand. He stuck them under Gaunt's nose.

"These were in her room." His voice was cold. "You took them of course?"

"Yes." There was no sense in denying it. He had left the sheets lying beside the bed. "But—"

"You're going to tell me she had nothing to do with it?" Weber sneered. "Don't. How do you think we found you so soon? She works with you, in the same office; Cass spotted her this morning, when she made that very convincing apartment inspection. He remembered seeing her when he came to visit you in Edinburgh." He turned to Hannah, eyeing her with reluctant admiration. "It was clever, sending a woman—but not clever enough. I can understand Cass remembering. Most men would."

"He doesn't look as though he'd be particularly interested," said Hannah sarcastically.

John Cass took an angry half-step towards her but Weber chuckled and waved him back, while Bajadas stifled a sly grin.

"Initial courtesies," said Weber, and switched his attention back to Gaunt. "I made some mistakes with your people. When you arrived in Tenerife, I still thought, hoped—" He shrugged. "I was wrong."

"It can happen." Gaunt chose his words carefully. Every instinct told him the only hope he and Hannah had left was to play for time, allow the Hispan boss to learn most of what he wanted, and cling to the thin chance that Captain Roberto Farise might still appear like some minor miracle. "It looks like we made our own mistakes."

"Si." Weber sucked his lips. "I want to know why your department became suspicious, why you came here."

"First, your hired help were clumsy—too much muscle, too little brain." Gaunt gave a scathing glance at John Cass, who said nothing. "Then—well, we got lucky. We tripped over a bank account we hadn't known about, a bank account with a lot of money." He shrugged. "Find that much money, and something has to be wrong."

"I see." Weber made it a sigh. Then he suddenly, sharply, demanded, "What do you know about this boat?"

"Nothing." Gaunt shaped a puzzled look. "What about it?"

"Milo," said Weber softly.

Casually, Bajadas hit Gaunt across the side of the head with the barrel of his pistol. The blow sent Gaunt reeling and he collided into Hannah. Dazed, he forced himself upright again and saw Bajadas bring the weapon back for another blow.

"He's telling the truth," said Hannah desperately. "You wanted to buy the damned thing, it gave us a reason to be here."

Weber looked at her, then at Bajadas. He shook his head slightly and the pistol lowered.

"Thank you." The courtesy was sardonic. "So you came here, then tonight—how did you get out of that apartment, Gaunt?"

"The back way. There's a window."

Weber winced. "I should have thought. You had help, apart from this woman?"

Gaunt shrugged. "A squad or two of police, that's all."

"He's lying," snapped Cass.

"He has a sense of humour," corrected Weber. He leaned back against the cabin's central pillar of mast. "You see, Gaunt, money buys most things: if the Guardia Civil had been asked for help, I think I would have heard." His manner hardened. "Two men were seen at the plantation. You were one, who was the other?"

"Did it have to be another man?" asked Hannah.

Weber blinked, then recovered.

"Two people, then," he corrected himself and gave a slight, mock bow. "*Gracias.*"

"But plenty of people know we're in Puerto Tellas," reminded Gaunt. The rope biting into his wrists seemed to be getting tighter and he tried to ease it. "You can't ignore that."

"True," admitted Weber. "But I have to gamble that until tonight, until your performance at the plantation, you didn't know what was happening here."

"We do now," said Gaunt.

"Sí, which is the problem." Weber was in no hurry. Hands stuffed in his trouser pockets, he frowned at the deck. "When Peter Fraser died, this trouble began. He was almost my partner, he could be trusted"—his eyes flickered briefly to Cass—"despite what some others thought. He took an occasional extra percentage for himself, but that was incidental. One of his few faults was a lack of trust in others."

Hannah sniffed. "Even you?"

"Even me."

"So you didn't know how his money laundry worked?" she pressed determinedly.

"Just that we'd had a successful operation in southern England and Holland—and that he had collected before he died. We tried to trace it, tried hard." Weber shook his head. "Every way."

"I know," said Gaunt sarcastically. "Very hard."

The interruption was ignored by Weber. Bajadas seemed bored by it all, John Cass was fidgeting, as if anxious to move on.

"I sat with Fraser on this boat the last time he came to Tenerife." Weber watched Gaunt closely. "He was drunk, we quarrelled—and he threatened that if anything happened to him I'd regret it. He mumbled something about the boat being the key." He paused and

pursed his lips. "Next day, everything was friendly again—but I didn't forget."

"I can't help. Maybe it was the brandy talking," said Gaunt wearily.

"I've searched, found nothing. Then I decided I had to get rid of the boat—but without fuss. Buying it was the easiest way." Weber looked around the cabin with distaste. "Now—I think I have a better idea."

"Fine, but leave us out of it," said Hannah aggressively. "British law can't touch you here; you know that. But what's the local law on kidnapping and assault?"

"Paul, I think she wants you to let them go," murmured Bajadas, and chuckled. "Señorita North, the problem is that you and your friend came at a bad time."

"Bad? It could get a lot worse." Hannah switched her glare to Cass, who was biting his lip. "You tell him. Or are you too scared?"

"Shut up." Cass took two nervous steps over, grabbed a handful of her hair, and twisted hard. "Just—shut up. Right?"

She kicked him, hard, in the stomach. Gasping, the man swung his fist and Gaunt jumped up, trying to get between them. He blocked the blow with his shoulder, then Hannah stared past him, eyes widening. Gaunt started to turn, then Bajadas's pistol barrel slammed against his head.

He felt an explosion of pain and heard Hannah cry out. Then the cabin blurred, whirled, and he plunged into a spinning darkness.

At first, it was as if he was still in a nightmare. He couldn't move, his head ached, he was only aware of a steady vibration going through his body and a low, background rumbling. He didn't know why, he wasn't sure that he cared.

But, gradually, his senses returned. He was in the cabin, he was alone, and he was lying on the cabin deck with his back propped against the mast pillar. His hands were still tied behind his back, but in addition several turns of rope round his chest now secured him to the mast.

The *Black Bear* was moving. The rumble and vibration came from her diesel, turning over at low revs. Powerless to do anything, he lay still and fought to clear his senses.

Where the hell was Hannah, what was happening to the sloop? As if in partial answer, the hull began a gentle, pitching roll which meant they were outside the marina breakwater and the engine note faded until it was barely ticking over.

Minutes later, the cockpit hatch grated open. He saw the grey light of early day, then Hannah was being pushed down to join him. Milo Bajadas was just behind her.

"Back with us?" Bajadas shoved Hannah aside, her hands still tied, then prodded Gaunt with his foot. "How's the head?"

Gaunt swore at him. Bajadas grinned, then turned his attention to Hannah. Handling her in a way which left her white-faced with anger, he forced her down on her knees, then shoved her over backwards. She landed heavily, stifled a gasp, and seemed beaten. She didn't struggle, didn't protest, as Bajadas, bending low, his long black hair brushing her legs, quickly tied her ankles together with a length of line, then tied a loose end round a metal stanchion.

"We do that with horses—anything that kicks," he said, rising again. "But I'll give you some light, make you more comfortable, eh?"

He went round the cabin, jerking the curtains open. More grey light flooded in, beginning to tinge with the first red glow of sunrise. Then, with a last glance around, he went back up the steps to the cockpit and the hatch slammed shut.

"Hannah," said Gaunt quietly.

She twisted round. Gaunt winced at the livid red mark which began just below her right eye and covered most of her cheek.

"Who did it?" he asked. "Cass?"

"No." She looked bitterly towards the cockpit. "That one. How about you?"

"I could use a new head." He waited, watching her squirm into a more comfortable position. The boat was still rolling gently and they were under way, but moving slowly. "What's happening? Where's Weber?"

"He left, with Cass." Hannah tried to inch nearer to him, but the line round her ankles brought her to a halt. "You were out for quite a while, Jonny. I thought you were dead—at first, anyway." She drew a deep breath and let it out as a sigh. "Right now we're sailing up and down off Puerto Tellas. They want an audience."

Puzzled, Gaunt stared at her.

"Why?"

"Because you and I have taken the *Black Bear* for a joy-ride." Hannah's voice was flat and tightly controlled. "That's after we spent a wild time in my room at the Agosto. You brought me down to the boat, we spent the rest of the night aboard it; why not? You represent the owners. Then we discover the engine works, and off we go." She saw Gaunt's incredulity. "It's going to look that way, Jonny. One or two people from the other boats saw us come out. There I was in the cockpit, with a smile on my face and a gun jammed in my navel."

Gaunt closed his eyes for a moment, his head thudding again.

"What's the rest of it?" he asked resignedly.

"The other one—the one they call Toni—can handle a boat. After a spell, we sail south down the coast. There's a cove, a bay of some kind, with deep water. Another boat will meet them there; the dinghy on this thing is in bad shape."

"Then they sink the *Black Bear*." Gaunt was surprised at how easy it was to be factual, unemotional. "What happens to us?"

"I wish I knew." Hannah said it softly. For a moment her eyes were on the view of the sunrise outside the spray-spattered glass. "I only heard some of it. But I do know about Weber—and Cass. We did hit them at a bad time. There's another directory mail-shot ready, a big one, and that's why Cass is here. He's shipping it out as personal luggage, scheduled service, on a midday flight to the mainland."

"And going with it?"

She nodded.

"Weber too?"

"At least to the airport." She grimaced and jerked her head towards the forepeak. "They heaved me in there. It wasn't too easy."

The cockpit hatch rasped open, Milo Bajadas stuck his head in and looked down at them. Satisfied, he vanished, the hatch slammed shut. The sloop made a slow, wallowing turn, then settled on a new course with the sunrise now to port instead of starboard.

"Grandstanding," said Hannah unemotionally.

Gaunt nodded.

He felt miserably helpless in a way that had nothing to do with

the way his head ached. There had to be something he could do, now or later, whenever the chance came.

If it came, he told himself grimly. When he moved, the rope round his chest scraped his damaged ribs. The way his wrists were tied, any attempt to free them was futile.

Hannah had begun a laborious attempt to sit upright. He watched her struggle, finally succeed, then lie back, exhausted, dishevelled, her clothing torn and in disorder, her head resting against the couch. Henry Falconer would have been proud of her.

He almost said it aloud, then changed his mind.

The rest came down to what Paul Weber intended to do with them. In the short term—yes, he and Hannah might be useful alive, a bargaining counter if anything went unexpectedly wrong. But after that—Gaunt pursed his lips at the thought. After that they would be a liability, nothing more. A liability to be eliminated.

Even that was looking on the bright side. He and Hannah had only one card left to play, and that was Captain Roberto Farise. Maybe they should have played Farise's existence earlier, maybe it was already too late.

"Hannah." He said her name softly and waited until she looked up. "We've still got Bobi, haven't we?"

"Yes." A faint hope flared in her eyes. "I nearly told them. I wanted to, but—"

She stopped. The *Black Bear's* diesel had begun to quicken, not in a rush but gradually, purposefully. Then she began to alter course again. Craning his neck, forcing himself as far upright as he could, Gaunt tried to keep the sun in sight. They were heading out of the bay, sailing almost due west.

For spectators ashore, the picture would be complete. The sloop, taken out on a stupid adventure by two foreigners, had last been seen heading out from land.

To disappear, as far as Puerto Tellas was concerned. Leaving the way clear to sneak back farther down the coast and rendezvous as Paul Weber had arranged.

The pitching motion grew worse, spray regularly drenching the cabin roof as the thirty-horsepower diesel plugged on at cruising speed. The next time Bajadas opened the hatch to check on his prisoners he looked grey and unhappy while, behind him, Gaunt had



a glimpse of white-topped waves and the other man lounging unperturbed at the wheel.

About an hour passed. Then the *Black Bear* changed course again and began a south-east heading, one that would take her back in towards the island.

Hannah had been sitting head bowed, legs doubled under her, jammed against the couch. For a while, Gaunt left her alone and heard her give an occasional mutter or a soft curse. But, at last, he felt it had gone on too long.

"Can anyone join in?" he asked.

She sighed, squirmed round, and showed him what she'd been doing. The small dress ring on the index finger of her right hand had a blue stone in a claw setting and she was using it like a blunt knife, fraying away at the ropes around her feet.

"It's better than doing nothing," she said and tried to smile. "I should have worn my diamonds."

"Next time," said Gaunt wryly.

She grimaced and looked around the cabin.

"Any other time, I'd have said this was a really nice boat," she said almost absently. "Her last trip anywhere; it's a waste."

"I suppose so." It was a thought Gaunt would have placed very low in his own priorities, but he sensed she meant it. "You know about boats?"

"A little. There was someone I knew, years ago." Whatever the memory, she banished it. "Back to work."

Wriggling round, she resumed her stubborn task.

Bajadas didn't look in on them again for some time. When he did, the sloop had already made another change of course and the sea seemed to have moderated. He came down, glanced at them, grunted, then returned to the cockpit. Soon after the hatch had closed, Gaunt had a glimpse of land as the sloop rolled. They were in the shelter of a long, rocky headland, apparently sailing parallel with it.

Suddenly, Hannah gave a soft gasp of triumph. He looked over, in time to see her elbow her way up from the deck, stand for a moment with the parted rope lying at her feet, then sit on the couch. He gave her a quick, warning frown.

"Careful."

She nodded, moving her feet with relief, getting the circulation back into them, wincing at what that did. After a couple of minutes she rose, balancing awkwardly with her wrists still tied behind her, and came over.

"Try," she invited, kneeling beside him.

Gaunt's fingers managed to touch the knotted rope around her wrists. But he had no real feeling in them, no strength he could use. He gave up, and Hannah tried in turn, working blindly at his knots, swearing under her breath with equal frustration.

"I can't." She shook her head, stopped to draw breath, then stiffened as the steady note of the diesel took a sudden change, slowing.

"Take a look," Gaunt told her.

Nodding, Hannah got up, peered out of the nearest cabin window, then dropped down beside him again.

"We're turning, going into some kind of bay." She grimaced. "There's damn all to see but cliffs and rock."

So they had arrived. Gaunt listened to the diesel as it continued to slow until it was doing little more than murmur. He could see the tops of cliffs on both sides of the boat, which was still creeping in.

"Try again," he suggested.

She did, stayed for a long moment just staring, then returned and crouched down, her voice low.

"It's the way they said. There's a small boat coming from the shore." Her eyes met his own and Gaunt knew the effort she was making to keep control. "Jonny, suppose I said I was scared?"

"I'd be glad of the company."

The diesel stopped, the sloop began drifting, and they could hear the faint putter of the other boat's engine as it came near. Bajadas shouted from the cockpit, a voice answered his hail, and Hannah was back on the deck, beside the couch again, as the hatchway opened.

Toni, not Bajadas, came down and paused for a moment. He was a small man, lightly built, swarthy, shabby, the kind of man who had hard eyes and showed no particular intelligence. He had a pistol stuck in his belt and hardly glanced at them as he headed aft, along the narrow companionway that led to the diesel compartment. Almost immediately there was the sound of hammering, metal against

metal. When it stopped, he returned, grinned deliberately in Hannah's direction, and went back up to the cockpit.

Another sound joined the mutter of the approaching boat engine and the soft slap of the sea against the sloop's hull, a gurgling, bubbling sound which made Gaunt's blood run cold. He glanced at Hannah and, from her face, she also understood. The sea water intake for the diesel's cooling jacket had been smashed, the sea was beginning to gush in.

It would take a few minutes for the *Black Bear* to sink, but nothing would stop that now.

The hatch had been left open, he could see empty blue sky as he strained again at the ropes which tied him. Then, unexpectedly, Milo Bajadas came clattering down into the cabin. He stopped, put his hands on his hips, and gave a chuckle.

"*Qué pasa?* Don't you want to come with us?" Still amused, he pulled a knife from his pocket, clicked open the spring blade, then cut the rope which secured Gaunt to the mast pillar. He approached Hannah with more caution, shaped a silent whistle of surprise as he saw her feet were free, and drew his gun. "Okay, out—both of you. The woman first."

Hannah went up, reached the cockpit, and was shoved out from there by Toni, pushed along the deck.

"Now you." Bajadas gave a nervous glance at a thin pool of water beginning to spread into the cabin from aft, kicked Gaunt to his feet, and pushed him towards the steps. "Move."

Gaunt obeyed, stumbled into the cockpit. The high, barren cliffs had the sea lapping at their base, the boat almost alongside was a small, battered fishing dinghy with an outboard engine.

He took another step clear of the hatchway, then realised Bajadas's swarthy companion was still out on the deck, frowning at the dinghy in a puzzled uncertain way. There were two aboard it, a man sitting near the bow with his back towards them, the other, handling the tiller, a small figure in baggy overalls and a floppy hat. An untidy hummock of old canvas lay between them in the centre thwarts.

"*Hola.*" Toni stiffened and shouted in alarm. "Wait—"

He started to fumble for his pistol.

Jammed open to full throttle, the outboard engine poured a burst

of blue exhaust and the dinghy crashed against the sloop's hull. As it happened, the man at the bow swung round and leapt across. It was Miguel Reales, and the shotgun he was gripping by the barrels swung in a short, vicious arc which smashed the butt down on his swarthy opponent's gun-arm. There was a snap of bone. Toni screamed.

The small figure at the dinghy's stern gave a short chirping whistle. The canvas hummock exploded to life and a lean, brown, four-legged shape took a single, standing jump to land snarling in the cockpit exactly as Bajadas came scrambling through the hatch.

Eyes wide with fear, Bajadas triggered the pistol in his hand. The shot clipped the big German shepherd dog's left ear, then the animal sprang, knocking him over, those great white-toothed jaws closing like a trap on the man's shoulder, shaking and worrying him like a rag doll.

A second chirping whistle came from the dinghy. Growling, Oro let go but stayed where he was, teeth bared and menacing only inches away from Bajadas's terrified face. His gun had fallen. Gaunt kicked it aside, then stared as the small figure in the dinghy tossed aside her hat and grinned up at him.

"Marta—" He swallowed hard, then glanced along the deck. The other man was cowering, his one good arm trembling in surrender above his head, and Miguel was using a knife to cut Hannah free.

Seconds later, it was his turn. As the ropes fell away, Miguel slapped him on the back and turned to the dinghy.

"Okay, little one?" he asked.

"Sí." She was using the engine to keep the dinghy against the sloop's hull. "*Hola, Jonny; are you all right?*"

"Fine—now." He found it hard to even think for a moment, then Hannah was beside him, looking equally dazed. He put an arm round her shoulders, hugged her, and felt her shudder with relief.

"Jonny." Marta called to him again from the dinghy. "You look like you're sinking. Better not waste time."

She was right. The *Black Bear* was already lower in the water and beginning to show a list to starboard.

Miguel had collected Bajadas's pistol. First they helped Hannah down into the dinghy, then made Toni follow and sit near the bow. Gaunt went next, then, moaning, crawling on hands and knees, his

mauled, torn shoulder oozing blood, Bajadas somehow followed with Miguel close behind.

Marta gave another of those shrill, chirping whistles and Oro barked once, then sprang down to join them. The girl moved the tiller and opened the outboard's throttle and they swung clear.

The *Black Bear* died slowly, reluctantly, settling gradually until her deck was awash. But the end was a bubbling gout of air and she slid under the surface, leaving a brief white disturbance which vanished within seconds in the light swell.

Gaunt saw something very close to tears in Marta's eyes. He reached over, squeezed her hand, then glanced at Miguel.

"Deep water?"

"Very deep." Miguel pantomimed a chasm with one hand. "We call this bay El Diablo Gris—the Grey Devil." He scowled at their two prisoners. Their only interest now seemed to be the big, dark brown dog watching them closely, growling deep in its throat. "They chose well: even fishermen avoid coming near." He saw the question shaping on Gaunt's lips. "Sí. We did. But suppose we get ashore first. Okay, little one?"

Marta opened the outboard's throttle again, and the dinghy's bow came round towards the shore.

There was a hidden gap in the cliffs farther up the narrow bay, and a small shingle beach. The dinghy grounded there, they splashed ashore, and Oro was more than enough of a guard for their two injured, openly terrified prisoners. A rough track began just above the shingle and a glinting Ford truck was parked among the rocks.

"Two more for the collection, Señor Gaunt." Miguel Reales thumbed casually at the underside of the truck. Trussed hand and foot, two men in fishing overalls lay there in the shade, on their backs, their faces resigned and gloomy. "First, of course, we let them unload the dinghy, get it down to the water. Then, the dog and I came along, said a simple *por favor*—and they obliged."

"That part I'll believe." Rubbing his wrists, getting the last of the circulation flowing again, Gaunt was just beginning to accept the reality of what had happened. "Where's your father? How is he now?"

"Our *médico* friend removed a bullet from his arm." Miguel smiled at the memory. "He roared like a bull, but it was only a flesh wound. I had to force him not to come with us; he needs rest."

"Make sure he gets it." Gaunt drew a deep breath. "Now, how did you know to be here?"

"Ask the little one." Miguel nodded in Marta's direction. "I just did what she asked."

Marta was perched on a long, flat rock and Hannah sat beside her. The bruise on Hannah's face was beginning to blacken, she looked tired and drained, but she smiled as they came over.

"Tell them about it, little one," invited Miguel. He took a casual glance towards the beach, where Oro had now hunkered down and was eyeing the former crew of the *Black Bear* balefully. "It's your story."

Marta frowned and looked troubled. She had got rid of the old overalls she'd worn over her shorts and shirt, and Gaunt saw she was still wearing the gold pendant and chain which had been Peter Fraser's gift.

"Tell me what will happen to Paul first." Her young face was earnest. "Jonny, I know what he might have done to you—and your friend. But—"

"He's family, your stepbrother," said Hannah softly. "But sometimes people have to choose, Marta. Life's like that."

Marta looked at Hannah gratefully and gave a slow nod.

"It was early this morning—very early, at sunrise. Oro wakened me; he sleeps in my room. He was growling, I heard voices, so I got up and dressed." She moistened her lips. "It was Paul and that man, Cass. They were talking, and Paul sounded angry."

"So you listened?" encouraged Gaunt.

"Si." She gave a slightly shamefaced nod. "They were talking about you, about sinking the *Black Bear*, and the story they would tell afterwards. Paul said two of his men could take a dinghy by road to El Diablo Gris, and that there was a lot he and Cass had to do before they went to the airport."

"Did he say what would happen to us?"

"I didn't hear." She avoided his eyes for a moment.

"It doesn't matter." Gaunt sensed she was lying, but it didn't matter. Gently, he prodded her on. "What did you do then?"

"I—I couldn't have gone to the Guardia Civil. But you'd said you knew Miguel and Tomás. So I went to the Bar Tomás and told them." Marta combed a hand through her long, dark hair, bit her lip, and for a moment looked very vulnerable. "I knew Paul wouldn't notice whether I'd gone or not."

Part in sympathy, part agreeing, Miguel made an awkward business of clearing his throat.

"Because it was Marta, we believed her," he said gruffly. "There was not time to be clever about anything, Señor Gaunt. My father told me to take his car, and we got out here. We"—he grinned—"she said she was coming, and with that monster she calls a dog beside her, who argues?"

"Nobody." Hannah impulsively hugged the small figure beside her. Then she glanced at Gaunt. "If they're still heading for the airport—"

He nodded. "Miguel, I want to borrow your car. Can you stay and look after things here?"

"Sí." Miguel brought a car key from his pocket and tossed it over. "We left it farther up the track. Just remember it belongs to my father."

"I will." Gaunt glanced at Hannah. "What about you?"

She shook her head. "I'll be more useful here. And I don't feel fit to be seen anywhere."

He grinned, winked at Marta, and set off up the track.

The car, an old, well-polished Ford, was parked in the shade of some stunted trees about a quarter of a mile up the track. The interior was spotless, a small vase filled with flowers was attached to the fascia, and the engine started at the first turn of the key.

Gaunt set it moving, the sheer, ordinary comfort of the driving seat feeling like luxury as the Ford jolted its way over the rough surface, leaving the cliffs of the Grey Devil behind.

He had to drive for a mile before the track joined a road, where he made a left turn towards Puerto Tellas.

The track had been bad, the road wasn't much better. It wound through a dark lava rock landscape where the only sign of life was the squashed body of a large grey lizard, killed on the road by some previous vehicle. Holding tight to the steering-wheel, keeping the

old Ford bouncing and rattling along, he thought grimly of the surprise in store for Paul Weber.

With a new blizzard of directory fraud mail-shot accounts ready to go, the Hispan boss had to feel he'd escaped. He was operating in an area where the returns came high, where crooked fortunes could be made overnight with unbelievable ease. It was the kind of crime which played the percentage game—the high percentage of business where routine was all that mattered.

The car bucked over a pot-hole. He swore to himself, still thinking about the directory operators, the stories he had heard.

One worked a variation, sending out a dummy cover with his fraudulent account. The cover showed an advertisement for one of the world's largest oil companies, one the oil company knew nothing about. Another, working out of South Africa, had expanded his net to include a police forces section and had driven one English police financial controller to the brink of a raging fury. It was a world where trickery reigned, the legal loopholes between countries were highways to riches, and the international postal and banking systems were unwitting allies.

Even just a few years history of directory mail-shots behind him would mean that Paul Weber was already a very rich man. One about to become richer.

The road ribboned on. Then, without warning, a small one-pump filling station, little more than a roadside shack, appeared ahead. Why it was there and whom it served didn't matter. It had a telephone pole and wires. Gaunt pulled in, and the old woman in charge put down her knitting, let him into a fly-infested back room, and allowed him to use her precious *teléfono*.

He dialled the Hotel Agosto's number, got through, and asked the switchboard for Roberto Farise's room, and a moment later the Ministry of Justice captain was on the line.

"You!" Farise sounded startled when he heard Gaunt's voice. "Where the hell are you, and where's Hannah? Both of you disappear, the sloop has gone—"

"Keep it till I get to you," Gaunt stopped him. "Hannah is on the beach at El Diablo Gris, south along the coast. She's sitting on four of Weber's people. Can you get help to her?"

"She's all right?"



"Yes."

"Wait," Farise spoke sharply to someone else in his room, then came back on the line. "And the boat?"

"Sank by arrangement."

"I understand." Farise said it bleakly. "I also understand a few other things now. Anything else?"

"Weber."

"Sí. We know where he is, and Tenerife is still an island."

"We?" asked Gaunt, brushing away some of the nearest flies.

"I brought in some of my own men." Farise broke off again to have another brief discussion with whoever was with him. "Two are leaving now for El Diablo Gris. If we have real charges against Weber—"

"They're real," said Gaunt sarcastically. "But I'd like to be there. Where will you be?"

"Not at the Agosto. Too many people would think you were a ghost." Farise chuckled. "The marina; make it there. You know my car."

Gaunt hung up, escaped from the flies, and thanked the old woman on the way out. She didn't look up from her knitting.

It was twenty minutes later when he reached Puerto Tellas and turned in at the marina. Roberto Farise's sleek Lancia was parked on its own in the sunlight and Gaunt stopped the Ford beside it, crossed over, and slid into the passenger seat beside Farise.

"This is Sergeant Pinar." Farise gestured towards the large wooden-faced man in civilian clothes who sat behind them, his head touching the roof. Then he looked Gaunt over. "A bad time?"

"It had its moments." Gaunt watched him start the car. "Where are we going?"

"The airport, I think." Farise set the Lancia moving as he spoke. "Weber and his friend Cass left the Villa Hispan about five minutes ago, by car. They had three large suitcases aboard. Before that, they were at the plantation and at the Hispan office in the Agosto." Driving unhurriedly, he gave Gaunt a sideways glance. "Don't worry. I have a car tailing them, and the airport has been warned."

"Then you were going to pull them in?"

"Maybe, for questioning." Farise shrugged. "But when you and Hannah disappeared—that made the difference."

"I'm glad," said Gaunt. "Hannah will feel that way too."

"You think so?" Farise gave him an anxious frown. "I'd like that. She is a splendid woman."

They left Puerto Tellas behind and gathered speed on the main road for the airport, Farise asking questions while he drove.

"I didn't think," he exploded at last, thumping a fist against the steering wheel. "I shouldn't have left you in that hotel room—"

"I'd have done it that way," Gaunt soothed, then realised Farise had stopped his outburst and was frowning ahead.

They were coming up to a road junction. The Aeropuerto sign pointed left, but the junction was a jam of halted traffic and a thin pillar of smoke climbed skywards just beyond the turn. People were out of the other vehicles, standing and staring, but doing nothing.

Tight-lipped, silent, Farise coasted the Lancia as near as he could and stopped, and they got out. A man in a grey suit hurried over to them, spoke quickly and quietly to Farise, then shrugged at Sergeant Pinar.

"Jonny." Farise swallowed hard and beckoned.

They walked to the junction. The edge of the road fell away to one side, a gentle slope ending in a patch of scrub.

Paul Weber's white Mercedes, or what was left of it, lay upside-down and smouldering at the bottom. Pieces of bodywork were strewn on the road and the slope, the car looked as though it had been torn apart, and everywhere the ground was littered with fragments of paper.

"They're still in it," said Farise dully. "It was a bomb of some kind, as they turned. At least we know who they were; it isn't easy now."

One of the fragments of papers fluttered against his feet. He stooped, glanced at it, then handed it to Gaunt. It was the singed remains of a telex directory account.

"Yours," said Farise. "And the rest is mine."

He turned and shouted for his men.

It was early evening before Gaunt got to Hannah in her hotel room. Part of the time he'd been with Farise, while the two shattered bodies were recovered from the wrecked Mercedes and police experts moved in. A Guardia Civil officer in uniform, a stranger, had

wanted statements but Farise had waved that aside. They had gone to the plantation, then the Villa Hispan. Between them, they'd uncovered enough evidence to show just how big Paul Weber's operation had been.

Though it was finished now . . . he thought.

A few more of Weber's team had been arrested and Milo Bajadas, his mauled shoulder swathed in bandages, was alternating between weeping and shouting for a lawyer.

At last, Farise had work of his own to do, police and other agitated officials to meet. Gaunt got a lift in a police car back to his apartment and, as he went in, noticed that the old Ford had gone from the marina parking-lot. He showered, freshened up, helped himself to a stiff brandy from the refrigerator's stock, then walked across to the Agosto and took the elevator up to Hannah's room.

She opened the door, looked at him silently for a moment, then nodded and beckoned him in.

"Marta's here," she said quietly. "She knows, and we've talked a lot."

He saw Hannah had almost totally hidden the bruise on her face with make-up. She had changed her clothes, her hair was brushed back; if he hadn't known, hadn't seen, it would have been hard to relate her to the woman who'd come ashore with him.

"You look good," he said, meaning it.

She smiled and led him through. Marta was out on the balcony, Oro dozing at her feet. She had been crying, her eyes were still red, but she was composed.

"I'm sorry, Marta," said Gaunt, bending over her.

"*Gracias*, Jonny." She looked up, took his face in her two small hands, and kissed him on the cheek. "Hannah explained. It wasn't your fault."

Oro gave a questioning growl. As Gaunt stood back, the dog rose and laid its large head on the child's lap.

"Jonny." Hannah beckoned him back into the room, away from the balcony. "You've seen this?"

She was holding Marta's gold pendant in her hand. He nodded.

"Fraser gave her it."

"You told me." She spoke quietly, but with a strange excitement.

"He got it in New York, at Tiffany's. That didn't mean anything to you?"

He shook his head.

"It wouldn't, I suppose—not to you." She almost laughed. "Remember what Weber told us, that Fraser made a threat?"

"About the boat—"

"He was wrong. Or at least, he had the wrong boat." Hannah shoved the pendant nearer. "This shows a boat, doesn't it? And you know what's on the back?"

"The Tiffany name, and a hallmark." He tried to understand her but was lost.

"This is a custom-made piece of jewellery," she said patiently. "And that's not just a hallmark; it's a design number."

"So?" Gaunt stared at her, with the faint beginnings of an idea.

"So one thing you should know about Tiffany's is that they keep a register. You can even get a gold tag from them, for a few dollars, and you're on that register—your name, any address you want to give, and wherever that piece of jewellery or even that tag comes up, they'll contact you."

Gaunt swallowed. "What kind of an address?"

"That's what I've spent half the afternoon trying to find out—through Edinburgh, because Henry has the contacts." She paused, swinging the pendant by its chain, looking out towards the balcony. "It's a Swiss bank account, numbered. Give them the pendant design number, and that's enough—and it's in the name of Peter Fraser or, failing, Marta Maria Weber."

"Legal?"

"Legal. They say there's about half a million Swiss francs and a safe deposit box." Hannah shook her head in near-disbelief. "And you know the Swiss: nobody will ever be able to prove where it came from."

"Who's going to try?" Gaunt drew a deep breath. "Will you?"

"Me?" She shook her head. "I'm just someone's private secretary. Will I tell Marta?"

"Later." Gaunt was thinking of Edinburgh, of someone else who mattered. "Hannah, when you talked to Henry—"

"The Canadian girl?" Hannah's smile faded a little and she hesitated. "Jonny, I asked. She's all right, she'll walk. But—"

"Well?"

Hannah shrugged. "I don't think she quite told you everything. There's—well, another friend. He flew in from Canada yesterday, he's talking about marrying her as soon as she's able to leave. You—Well, that's how it happens."

"That's how it happens," agreed Gaunt.

Then he found he was grinning. Hannah looked alarmed.

"I just thought of something," he said wryly. "You know what it means? I've just escaped the Fraser family tree."

He had a more difficult time later that evening at the local Guardia Civil post, across a wooden table from Roberto Farise.

"I have a story that is half a story," said Farise. "There are blanks even Hannah says she cannot fill—and I have to believe her."

"Blanks?" asked Gaunt.

"Blanks," repeated Farise. "First, there was what happened at Weber's plantation. An explosion—and his men swear two men were involved. But your story is you went alone, and there may have been some kind of fire. Correct?"

"That's the way I remember it," said Gaunt.

"And this man Miguel Reales, who rescued you both; you say you met him by chance?"

Gaunt nodded. "His father runs a bar."

"I know that!" Farise slapped the table hard, indignantly. "The same way I know a few other things—and guess more."

"Like what?"

"I'll stay with fact. The bomb aboard Weber's car was small, powerful, probably a military grenade of some kind. It was activated by a simple radio remote-control device, short-range, but effective.

"So someone could pick and choose his spot," murmured Gaunt. "Make sure no one else was hurt?"

"Nice and civilised," agreed Farise sarcastically. "And perhaps this same someone also knew Weber was going to the airport, would have to pass that way. Fortunately, I know exactly what you were doing—I think." He rested his head in his hands for a moment, then looked up. "Jonny, I intend to report that a man like Paul Weber had many enemies, many criminal rivals. That I believe one of these rivals was responsible, but there is no chance of tracing him. You understand?"

"I think so," said Gaunt cautiously.

"You damn well do." Farise sat back, folded his arms, and scowled. But there was a faint twinkle in his eyes. "In return, you do something for me—for both of us. You, were due to fly back tomorrow?"

Gaunt nodded.

"Then damned well be on that plane, before someone with slightly greater intelligence decides to ask you more questions."

"I think you can count on it, Bobi," said Gaunt.

He held out his hand. Farise grinned and gripped it.

The Guardia Civil post was in the old village. Although it was close to midnight when he left, the Bar Tomás was still open. There were only a few customers, and Miguel was behind the bar.

Gaunt sat at a table. After a couple of minutes Miguel came over with a bottle of brandy and a glass.

"A drink, señor?" Gravely, he filled the glass to the brim.

"Have one yourself," invited Gaunt.

"*Gracias*, maybe later." The young islander spoke loudly. "You see, my father had this accident to his arm—unimportant, but painful. So he stayed at home and I am on my own tonight."

"I'm leaving tomorrow," said Gaunt quietly. "I came to thank you—both of you."

"No need."

"And to ask a question." Gaunt sipped the brandy and watched Miguel over the rim. "How did he do it?"

"Do what, señor?" Miguel frowned at the table, produced a cloth, and rubbed at an imaginary spot. "My father will be off work for a few days, but he won't mind. It will give him some extra time for his hobby."

"His hobby?" Gaunt raised an eyebrow.

"Sí." Miguel tucked the cloth away. "He repairs old toys, then gives them to the Church for the poor—clockwork toys, mechanical toys, even sometimes the clever ones that work with batteries and little radios. He enjoys his hobby, Señor Gaunt."

"A man needs an interest." Gaunt finished his drink at a long, single gulp and rose. "Give your father my regards."

Hannah saw him off at Reina Sofia airport the next morning. So did Farise, who made a fierce mumble about coming along to make sure, then stayed in the background.

Hannah was staying on. Only for a few days, she'd told Falconer by phone. She needed time to recover, there were some small details she could tidy.

Or that was her story. She waved goodbye from the terminal building as Gaunt boarded the Iberia jet for the flight to London. Roberto Farise was at her elbow.

Gaunt settled back as the plane took off and climbed.

There was no need to tell Falconer too much about Farise. He had worries enough.

A stewardess came along with the previous day's British newspapers. Gaunt took one, ordered a whisky from the bar, and started to turn to the financial pages.

He needed a new car, it was going to cost money. Something was niggling at the back of his mind about tin shares.

And he couldn't afford gold.

The End















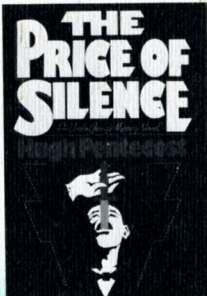






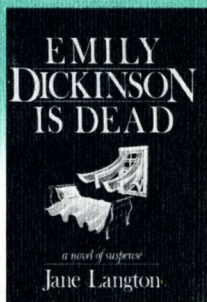






*The Price  
of Silence*  
BY HUGH PENTECOST

*Emily Dickinson  
is Dead*  
BY JANE LANGTON



*A Legacy  
From Tenerife*  
BY NOAH WEBSTER

