

Dean Koontz (Deanna Dwyer) – Demon child

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[Completely new scan]

COLD WELCOME

“What exactly was the curse?” asked Jenny. Her hands were so cold that they looked like white porcelain. ’

Her aunt spoke slowly. “Sarah pledged that every generation of the Brucker family would contain a child haunted—a child possessed. This child would seek the wolfbane, would howl at the full moon, and find a craving for blood.”

“A werewolf? That’s . . . silly.” But she did not feel much like laughing.

“That night Sarah’s father died . . . strangely. He grabbed at his own neck, as if struggling against someone . . . or something . . . invisible. He drew his own blood . . . but he died.”

Jenny’s eyes strayed to the red volumes of demonic lore. Was this really the answer to Freya’s strange spells? Impossible though it seemed . . . could the child really be a were-wolf?

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DEMON CHILD

Deanna Dwyer



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A LANCER BOOK

DEMON CHILD

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The sky was low and gray as masses of thick clouds scudded southward, pulling cold air down from the north as they went. Jenny huddled against the chill as she entered the quiet graveyard where it seemed ten degrees colder yet. That was her imagination, of course. Still, she hunched her shoulders and walked faster.

She stopped before three similar tombstones, one of which had only recently been set before an sodded grave. In the entire cemetery, she was the only mourner. She was thankful for that, for she preferred to be alone. Turning her eyes to the stones, she read the names cut in them: Lee Brighton, Sandra Brighton and Leona Pitt Brighton. Her father, mother and paternal grandmother. As always, reading the names together, she found it difficult to believe they were all gone and that she was alone without even a brother or sister to share the burdens she carried. She wiped at the tears in her eyes.

Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw someone. When she turned to look, there was no one there. But when she directed her gaze back to the stones, she saw him again, a large man, gray and indistinct, approaching her. She turned to stare at him.

He was gone. The cemetery was empty, but for the fog and the tombstones.

Suddenly, she could hear ghostly footsteps on the flagstone walk.

Run, Jenny! the voices of her dead loved ones cried. *Run, run! Look how suddenly and unexpectedly we died.*

A drunken driver ran a red light, killing Lee and Sandra in an instant. Grandmother Brighton died in seconds of a stroke.

Now you must run or the unexpected, the unknown, will catch you too!

She looked all around but still could not see anyone. Softly, the echo of footsteps grew closer.

“Who is it?” she asked.

The dead voices only answered, *Run!*

The footsteps were almost on top of her now. Any moment, a hand would reach out and touch her, a cold, wet hand.

“Who’s there?” she asked again.

It’s the unknown, the dead told her. *You can never anticipate what it will do, when it will take you. All you can do is run, Jenny. Hurry!*

She turned away from the stones and ran, her heels clicking on the walk. Despite the sounds of her own flight, the heavy panic in her harsh breathing, she could hear the gentle footsteps following her. She ran faster, dashed through the iron gates of the cemetery entrance.

To her right, a car horn blared. She looked up in time to see the automobile rushing the last few feet toward her! Behind the windshield, the driver’s face was a mask of terror. She threw up her hand for what little protection that would bring her, and—

There was a screech of brakes and a loud rattling noise which woke her from her troubled sleep.

She looked out of the bus window at the terminal, at the concrete veranda and the old wooden benches. For a moment, she was not able to remember where she was. The nightmare had seemed so real that the real world now seemed like a dream by comparison.

Around her, people struggled to their feet, took bags down from the overhead luggage racks and made their way up the aisle toward the door, joking with one another about the incredible heat.

Even as she got a better grasp on things, her fear remained. Just as in the dream, she was running, though not from some invisible, faceless force. At least she didn’t think she was running from anything but loneliness. Her nerves quieted somewhat by the time the bus was nearly deserted; she picked up her purse and went outside.

The bus driver, seeing she had no one to handle her two large suitcases for her, took them just inside the terminal door. In moments, everyone had been picked up by friends and relatives, leaving the terminal in a sleepy malaise again. Richard Brucker should have been waiting for her. She hoped that nothing was

wrong. She waited for him inside the air-conditioned old terminal, by a front window where she could command a complete view of the parking lot.

Dark clouds were shoving across the bright sky, as black as onyx, low and rain-filled. Such severe heat and humidity all day could only result in thunder-storms by evening. At least that was the general feeling on the bus where the air-conditioning had mal-functioned and the passengers had grown talkative in order to make the leaden minutes pass more swiftly.

Jagged, yellow lightning cracked down the back-drop of the clouds, followed almost instantly by hard, loud thunder that sounded like nothing so much as cannons, dozens of cannons firing simultaneously.

Jenny leaped back from the window, frightened by the violent display. She back-stepped a bit, even though there was no serious threat to her.

You are a big girl now, she chided herself. You kept a stiff upper lip when mom and dad died seven years ago. You handled grandma's funeral all by yourself, settled the old woman's estate without much help. You've worked your way through college, and you're twenty-one years old. Now stop being frightened by a little old flash of lightning!

Where on earth was her cousin? Richard Brucker was fifteen minutes late already. She wondered if he might have had an accident, for she thought of the rain-slicked pavement on which her mother and father had died. She felt guilty for even nourishing the start of impatience.

Just then, the storm broke over the terminal. Lightning struck down, seemed to smash into the surface of the parking lot, as if attracted by the aerials of the cars parked there.

Impulsively, Jenny turned away from the glass.

Rain hissed across the concrete veranda, driven by stiff gusts of wind. It darkened the veranda floor, spattered on the windows. It sounded like someone whispering a warning to her, over and over.

She left her two suitcases where the driver had put them, crossed the terminal building to the far wall where a waitress wiped the top of a small lunch counter. She took a stool and ordered a cup of coffee.

"Looks like it finally broke," the waitress said.

"Do you think it'll last all day?"

"Supposed to go on all night too!" The waitress put the coffee down. "Want a doughnut with that?"

"No thank you."

"Moving in or visiting?" the waitress asked. She did not seem to be a busybody, just friendly.

"Visiting," Jenny said. "I graduated from college last week. I used to live with my grandmother, but she passed on two months ago. I have an aunt here who wants to have me until my first teaching job starts in the fall."

"A teacher!" the waitress said. "I never was any good with books myself. That's why I'm just a waitress. Right now, though, I wish I was home in bed with a book. This place gets spooky when there ain't many people about."

Jenny looked at the open-beam ceiling, dark and mysterious, at the dim corners where old, hooded lights didn't cast much cheer. "I sure wouldn't want to work here!" She sipped her coffee. "But I guess you meet a good many different types of people."

The waitress nodded. "Some you'd like to know, others you'd give anything never to see again." She looked over Jenny's shoulder toward the front doors. "And here comes one I could do without. He's from that house where poor little Freya lives. If there's a curse, then he's the cause of it." Her voice fell as the man drew nearer the counter. "Half the child's troubles, if you ask me, stem from this one. No good at all; too quiet and too dark and too unwilling to talk with anyone."

Jenny looked at the man who, a moment later, stepped up to the counter. He was tall and slim, with very large hands that moved rapidly. They pressed at his lapels, searched his pockets, flicked at dirt on the countertop. He was a handsome man, scholarly in appearance except for his black, curly hair which he wore full and rather long. It was this last detail which kept her from recognizing him immediately. When he smiled at her, she saw that it was Richard.

"Hello, Jenny," he said.

She got up and hugged him. He had been four years her senior when her parents died, and, in the

midst of sympathetic adults, he had been the only one to whom she could communicate her grief. His own mother had died when Richard was two years old. And though he had been too young to remember it, he had learned the loneliness of the world in the years after. When she had needed consolation, it was Richard who, clumsily but earnestly, had given it to her.

The waitress moved off, disapproving, scowling at them when she thought they could not see.

“We can talk more in the car,” Richard said, hefting her suitcases. “After that, we have the whole summer.”

At the front door, she said, “You’ll get drenched!”

“Don’t worry about me. Pull your coat over your head and run for it. I left both doors slightly ajar, so you can get in quickly. It’s the maroon Corvette there. Ready?”

Lightning snapped across the low clouds, making the darkening afternoon momentarily brighter. Jenny jumped as the clap of thunder rattled the windows.

“Lightning always strikes the highest object in the area,” Richard said, sensing her fright. “I’m a good foot taller than you.”

“Don’t say that!” she snapped, gripping his arm.

He had meant it as a joke, was surprised she took him so earnestly. “The car’s only a dozen yards away. No trouble. Now?”

“Now,” she said, resigned to it.

He shouldered open the door, led her onto the veranda. Richard ran into the downpour. A moment later, her coat pulled over her head, slightly hunched to make herself a smaller target, she ran too.

The pavement lighted with a reflection of a wide, jagged run of lightning.

She almost slipped and fell on the slick macadam, regained her balance only by the sheerest luck. She found the passenger’s door, opened it and slid into the small, low-slung sportscar.

Again, yellow light shattered the even black glaze of the sky, but she felt safe from it now. She had heard that the four tires of an automobile grounded it in a storm. She was careful, though, not to touch any of the metal fixtures. She still remembered the nightmare she had had on the bus. That was an omen of some kind.

Richard was soaked by the time he had the luggage in the compartment behind the seat and had slipped behind the wheel.

“I feel awful, putting you through this,” Jenny said. She took a clean handkerchief out of her purse and wiped his face and neck.

“Why?” he asked, grinning broadly. “Were you the one who made it rain?”

She made a face at him. “Here,” she said, “let me dry your hair.” When he bent toward her, she towed it until her handkerchief was sopping.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “I’m as healthy as a horse— as two horses!” He started the car, raced the engine once or twice, then drove away.

“The waitress didn’t think much of you,” Jenny said to start a conversation beyond mere pleasantries. Besides, she was curious to know why the waitress seemed to fear a gentle man like Richard Brucker.

“Catherine? Really? I’ve noticed that she treats me coolly these days, though I haven’t bothered to find out why.” He drove off the main highway onto a second-ary, less well-paved road where Dutch elms grew on both sides and formed a canopy above them, making the way even darker. “What’d she say?”

“That you were responsible for some curse over a girl named Freya.”

Richard smiled, leaned forward and turned on the headlights. If lightning still cracked above, it did not penetrate these lush branches.

“You haven’t been involved in some public scandal, have you?” she asked, teasing him.

“Not woman troubles,” he said. “In this town, any-thing can make a scandal. Rural life is charming, except for its lack of privacy. In small towns, everyone’s business becomes public. Freya is my cousin, from my father’s side of the family. She’s seven years old, has a twin brother, Frank, and she’s presently having what I call psychiatric problems. Cora calls it a family curse.”

Jenny had been surprised the first time she had heard Richard refer to his mother by her Christian name, even though she understood it was a custom among some of the very wealthy. Still, it seemed to

lack respect. "A curse?"

"Psychiatric problems," he corrected. He sighed as if weary with the story. "The twins came from a bro-ken home. Lena Brucker, my father's sister, married a good-for-nothing who eventually ran off with half her money. She drinks too much, likes the jet-set life too well. When Cora found that Lena planned on board-ing the two seven-year-olds in separate schools, she asked Lena to leave them here. Lena didn't care one way or the other, as long as she had her freedom. That was a year ago; they've been with us since."

"Aunt Cora didn't say you had guests!" Jenny said. "I don't want to inconvenience anyone."

Richard laughed. "Jenny, sweets, the Brucker estate mansion has eighteen bedrooms."

"Eighteen!"

"Our ancestors were fond of parties that lasted whole weekends, especially around Thanksgiving and Christmas. People came from all over. These days, we're all too hurried to have such a leisurely celebra-tion."

"You still haven't told me about the curse," she re-minded him. "Excuse me—about the psychiatric problems."

Ahead of them, a great road construction truck, smeared with mud, jounced into view around a curve in the road. It was traveling at better than sixty miles an hour. Richard had barely enough time to climb part of the steep bank alongside the road as the mam-moth vehicle roared by, rattling and banging as each ripple in the macadam carried the length of it.

"What a fool way to drive!" Jenny said. She was re-mem-bering the nightmare, all the nightmares she had had since Grandmother Brighton had died. If Rich-ard's reflexes had been just a hair less sharp, or if the truck had been moving the slightest bit faster, they both might be badly hurt or dead.

Richard grumbled. "Foolish, but average for that lot."

"They use this road frequently?"

He backed off the embankment and drove ahead once more. "Ever since the superhighway construction began, fairly near the edge of Brucker property."

"All that dirt and noise," Jenny said. Then she re-mem-bered that Aunt Cora would surely have a maid.

"It's not so bad," Richard said. "The house sits well into the estate, away from the construction. It's the real-estate speculators and their constant offers for our land that drive us crazy."

They turned onto a narrower, better paved road, stopped before an iron gate that said: BRUCKER ES-TATE. PRIVATE, KEEP OUT. Richard tapped the car's horn in a rhythm Jenny didn't catch. The gates swung open, let them by, closed behind them.

She would have been delighted with such gadgetry if the iron gates had not reminded her of iron cemetery gates.

They passed neatly kept stables and riding rings fenced with white-washed boards. A small lake lay to the right, a coppice of pine trees by its far shore. Under the trees were picnic tables and children's swings. In the rain and fog, the swings looked like the skeletons of long-dead creatures.

"The house," Richard said as they rounded a small knoll.

The house had three floors plus a half attic whose windows were set in a black slate roof. Two wings formed an L with a courtyard and fountain in the nook of the arms. The stone cherubs in the fountain were not spouting any water at the moment.

Richard parked before the front steps, a leisurely flight of eight, wide marble risers that ended on a gran-ite stoop before tall, oaken main doors. Almost before the sound of the engine died, a rather elderly man in a raincoat came out of those doors. He was shielded by a black umbrella and was carrying a second umbrella which he gave Richard. He rushed around to Jenny's door, opened it and helped her under the protection of his own bumbershoot.

He was about sixty, lean and wizened with white hair and deep, blue eyes. "I'm Harold, the manservant. You must be Jenny, for you have the Brighton beauty, dark hair and eyes. Will you come with me out of this dreadful weather?"

"Yes!" she gasped as thunder rumbled in the ever-lowering clouds and the rain seemed to fall twice

as fast as it had. Her feet were soaked, and her legs were splattered with mud and water.

As they stepped onto the first of the marble stairs, someone moaned nearby, loud and prolonged, as if in some terrible sort of agony. It was not exactly the cry of a human being. It was too deep and too loud for that, touched with something that spoke of the super-natural.

“What is that?” she asked.

Abruptly, the moan rose to a shrill, wild shriek that cut off without reason in the middle of a note.

Jenny shivered. She could see no one about who could have made the weird call.

“Just the wind,” Harold told her. He pointed past the edge of the umbrella at the eaves of the mansion. “If the wind comes too fast from the south, it whistles in the eaves. It can keep you awake nights. Fortu-nately, the wind hardly ever blows this way.”

The explanation should have quieted her nerves, but it did not. That cry seemed too filled with emotion to be made by something inanimate. Suddenly, she re-membered things that she should have asked Richard. Why had he been late? Why did Catherine, the wait-ress, fear him so? What was this curse that Aunt Cora talked about and which he called a “psychiatric problem”?

Lightning threw the front of the house into strange shadows; thunder shook the many windows.

Again, the wind moaned horribly in the eaves.

That uncontrollable fear of the unknown and the unexpected rose in Jenny. She thought of her mother and father, of Grandmother Brighton. She wished, oh so very much, that she had found something else to oc-cupy her summer. But she realized there was no back-ing out now.

She went with Harold into that bleak and forebod-ing house . . .

If the exterior of the house had been foreboding, the interior made up for that. It was warm and comfort-able with an air of well-being that could very nearly be touched. The walls of the entry foyer were richly pa-pered in a gold and white antique print. The closet doors were heavy, dark oak. The few pieces of furni-ture were all heavy pine styled in a rustic, colonial mode that bespoke usefulness and sensibility. In such a house, one could feel protected, shielded, away from the cares of the rest of the world. The moan of the wind in the eaves was distant and un-frightening.

Yet, even as she gave less thought to the fears that had bothered her only moments ago, Jenny wondered if this were not a false sense of security that prevailed in the house. At times, you had to be careful, cautious. Just when you turned your back on some danger, smug in your certainty of safety, it might spring up anew and attack you when you least expected it.

A car on a rain-slicked highway . . .

A burst blood vessel in an old woman's brain . . .

She shivered.

“Cold?” Harold asked as he took her coat and hung it in the closet.

“A little.”

“A touch of brandy should clear that up,” he said. “Would you like a drop or two in your coffee?”

Under normal circumstances, Jenny did not ap-prove of liquor. She felt that it was a crutch against the burdens of the world. But at this moment, she could see little harm in giving in to Harold's suggestion. She really was quite cold and nervous. She nodded her consent.

“Good,” Harold said, slipping his own coat into the closet. “Your aunt should be in the drawing room. Straight down this corridor, on your left through the curtained arch. If you will excuse me, I'll take the back hall to the kitchen and get the coffee ready. You look positively chilled to the bone!”

He left her standing there, alone in the house for the first time. Abruptly, the front door opened behind her, admitting the throbbing moan of the wind in the eaves and the hiss of rain drumming the driveway. Richard fought inside with the umbrella and the suitcase, set the bag down.

“One more,” he said.

“I should have helped you with those!”

“I've got my bumbershoot,” he said.

“And it isn't doing you a bit of good.”

“You hurry along to Cora. She'll be waiting for vou”

He plunged back into the downpour. The rain slashed under the rim of his umbrella and soaked his clothes.

She supposed there was nothing she could do for him. She turned and followed the corridor, fascinated by the rich oil paintings hung against the polished ma-hogany paneling. The frames alone were more expen-sive than the framed lithographs she had been used to in her own home as a child.

Cora's family had warned her against the marriage. They had been as opposed to her marrying to a higher station in life as many families might have been against a girl marrying beneath herself. The Brightons had a fierce pride and a stubborn insistence that a Brighton should earn his way and not marry or inherit wealth. Fortunately, Aunt Cora had followed the dic-tates of her own heart and had ignored them all.

The marriage had been happy. Alex and Cora Brucker behaved like newlyweds throughout the years, right up until his death two years before. Money was never a problem. Neither was his business, for he had inherited it when it was running smoothly and needed to spend only one or two days a week attending to the larger details. Richard presented no source of conflict for his step-mother. Though not of Cora's blood, he was always polite to her, obedient, free with his love. He remained their only child, and the years passed un-marred.

Engaged in such thoughts, she came to the archway into the drawing room before she realized it. Aunt Cora was placing a silver tray of sandwiches and chips upon a low cocktail table, engrossed in

making the decorative garnish as well-placed as possible. Behind her, on a deep green sofa, two blonde-haired and blue-eyed children sat. Though one was a boy and one a girl, they were quite obviously twins. They saw her in the doorway and stared at her. They did not smile or speak, but watched her cautiously.

Like shy children, she told herself.

Yet she couldn't stop wondering if their silence and their inspection of her were more than that.

But what?

Neither Freya nor Frank looked like a child who was supposedly under the sinister influence of some mysterious family curse—nor like a child with deep psychological problems. They were healthy, tending toward chubbiness, with eyes that were quick and alert and almost too blue to be real. She smiled at them to show her own desire to make friends.

Neither child returned her smile.

In that instant, Cora caught sight of her and stood abruptly erect, startled. She was a lovely woman who looked a decade younger than her fifty-one years. Her dark hair was tinted with gray that she chose not to conceal with some artificial rinse. There were no wrinkles in her face, no weariness of age in her eyes. She took three quick steps from the table and embraced her niece.

For the first time in months, Jenny felt as if she were safe. Here were arms to encircle her and someone to love and be loved by. Since Grandmother Brighton's death, the world had seemed more and more inhospitable as time went by. She had the silly, impossible wish never to have to leave the Brucker Estate again.

Richard joined them when he had changed to dry clothes, and they had a delightful mid-afternoon tea with cucumber and cream cheese sandwiches, wedges of cheese, crackers and potato chips. Frank and Freya, the twins, seemed to come out of their cocoons somewhat, offered a few words of response to questions she asked them. They even smiled once or twice. She decided that their original coolness was more the result of their training in manners and behavior than it was any conscious effort to make her feel ill at ease.

At last, shortly after four o'clock, Cora said, "But we're being very rude to you, dear. You've had a long bus ride. You'll want a bath and a few hours of rest before supper. Harold serves us at seven-thirty in the small family room just a few steps further down the corridor." She turned to Richard. "Have you put her bags upstairs?"

"In the blue room, Cora," he said, finishing his tea.

"Come along then, Jenny," Cora said. "I'll show you where you'll be spending these summer nights."

As they walked up the long, central staircase from the entrance foyer, Jenny began to notice, for the first time, the barely checked case of bad nerves in her aunt. Cora played with her long, dark hair as she walked, winding strands of it in her fingers, releasing those strands, winding others. She spoke too quickly, with a nervous, forced gaiety that could no longer be attributed to her seeing her niece for the first time since Grandmother Brighton's funeral.

Too, for the first time since she had entered the house, Jenny was aware of the storm again. It banged on the slate roof. It pattered rain against the windows. Flickers of lightning played through the glass and danced on the dark steps for brief, unpleasant moments.

"We'll do some riding this summer," Cora said as they topped the stairs and left them for the second floor corridor. "Do you like horses?"

"I've ridden them once or twice," Jenny said. "But you'll make me look like a city slicker in the saddle."

"Richard is marvelous with horses," Cora said. "He can teach you what you don't know. He handles the family business, but it leaves him a great deal of spare time."

At the end of the corridor, Cora opened a heavy, dark-stained pecan door which had been hand-carved with the forms of dragons and elves. It might once have been destined to be a child's room. It was large, airy, with two windows curtained with umber velvet. The bed was large, spread over with a white satin quilt. There were two dressers, a full-length mirror, a night-stand and two bookcases half filled with various kinds of books, from classic to modern fiction.

Her bags waited on a bellboy stand, their tops open, their contents on display. Perhaps it had only been polite of Richard to open the cases so that they could air while waiting for her attention. Just the same, she did not like the idea of his taking such a liberty.

Cora did not seem to notice.

Am I being too stuffy? Jenny wondered. Why am I acting as if I have something to fear from my own loved ones?

She vowed, to herself, to try to be a little less suspicious of people who only wished to help her.

"You have a private bath there, through that door," Cora said. She was winding a coil of dark hair around her index finger, smiling but not smiling.

"It's all so wonderful!" Jenny said, meaning it. She was unaccustomed to such luxury.

Cora stopped fiddling with her hair and took both of Jenny's hands. The woman's grasp was dry and warm. "I'm so very happy that you came here, Jenny," she said.

"So am I, Aunt Cora."

"No, no, you don't understand," Cora said, her voice very earnest now. She led the young girl to the bed, and they both sat on the edge of the thick mattress, not letting go of each other's hands. "I'm not just making pleasant conversation," Cora said. "I *really* am glad you came. Richard and Harold and Anna, that's Harold's wife, are good company. I do a lot of charity work in town. I take vacations. But Alex has only been dead two years. There is still a lot of tune to fill in a day."

She stopped speaking, stared for a moment, as if looking beyond the veil of this reality into the spirit world where she might find some way to touch her dead husband.

Jenny waited.

At last, she said, "You really loved him, didn't you?"

Cora seemed reluctant to leave her trance, but she said, "Yes. I know the family was always doubtful about the marriage. But it was perfect." She came fully alive then. "I hope you are as lucky one day, Jenny. I hope you meet someone like Alex." She squeezed her niece's hands, let go of them. "But let's not get maudlin, huh?"

Jenny laughed. "I was prepared for anything. A waitress at the bus terminal warned me about the curse."

Cora stopped smiling altogether. Jenny fancied that the woman's face abruptly became an ashen gray, though such a rapid change in color could only be imaginary.

"You've heard, then. You know it all."

Jenny felt cold again. The effect of the brandy had worn off. "Not all, Aunt Cora. Just bits and pieces. Richard was starting to explain the situation to me on the way up, but he didn't get to finish it."

Cora rose from the bed and walked to the south window of the room, watched the rain sheeting across the green lawn, misting among the trees like tangled webs of hair. Her fingers played on the glass, drawing senseless patterns and leaving trails of quickly evaporating dampness. For a brief moment, it was as if she were a prisoner in her own home, longing for the freedom of the world beyond.

She turned back to Jenny. "Whatever Richard told you, it was colored by his optimism."

"It was?"

Cora nodded. "He told you the problem was a psychiatric one, didn't he? He told you that Freya needed psychiatric care?"

Jenny nodded. "And he said you disagree with him. You think it's some family curse."

"I don't think so. I *know* that it is."

Jenny said nothing. She could remember the dream on the bus, and she could hear voices, deep inside her, telling her to run, to escape that rambling, dark house for the lights of town.

A particularly vicious clap of thunder slammed against the house as if the mansion could be lifted from its foundation by the sheer volume of the storm.

Cora was silhouetted by the lightning, a yellow halo bursting from her hair, her face momentarily lost in the contrasting purple shadows. In her long, green lounging robe, standing there with the dominant blue color scheme of the room about her, she reminded Jenny of some dead-but-risen heroine in an Edgar Allan Poe story.

Then the lightning was gone, the booming thunder muted and the eerie effect lost. Aunt Cora was merely Aunt Cora and nothing more.

"I read a great deal," Cora said. She seemed to be talking to herself as much as to Jenny. "There were many books in the mansion when I came, and I devoured them, reading what classics I had never before had time for when I was a single, working girl. I read the non-fiction as well. Somewhere in the previous generations of Bruckers who lived in this house, some-one had more than a passing interest in witchcraft and demonology. There are many books on the subject, distributed on shelves throughout the house. Surely there are a few of them right there, in your own bookcase."

Jenny turned to look at the shelves.

Two blood-red bindings stood out. Embossed on each spine was the title of the two-volume set: **BLACK MAGIC IN AMERICA.**

"In my readings, I came across two volumes published locally in the middle of the last century. Publishing was a much different proposition then, and the economic situation made it feasible for regional publishers to sell and prosper on titles of little interest to anyone beyond a few hundred miles from their home plant. Both these volumes had been published in Philadelphia. One was entitled *Warlocks and Witches of Pennsylvania*; the other was *Cursed Be the Wealthy*"

She paused, and Jenny did not feel that it was her duty to urge the older woman on. Rain on the windows, thunder on the roof, lightning against the glass all filled the silent moments until Cora continued her story.

"According to those books, Sarah Maryanna Brucker, Alex's great-great-great-aunt, left home in 1849, at the age of seventeen, to travel with a band of gypsies who earned their living performing in a circus of moderate size. Her family did everything they could to trace her, to no avail. She was lost to them. Until 1860, eleven years later, when she returned home with a child. She wished to be taken back into the family, to give her baby the Brucker name. It was a swarthy, dark-eyed, sharp-featured child of four, obviously part European in its heritage. Sarah's mother had died in her absence. Her father, embittered by his daughter's foolishness eleven years before, blaming his wife's death on a broken heart caused by the daughter, refused to allow her in the house."

Thunder. Rain. The blood-red bindings of the books on the shelf directly across from the foot of the bed. The creak of floorboards.

Cora continued:

"That night, Sarah Brucker returned to the mansion, this house, and built a fire on the grounds. At that time, there were a few tenant-farming Negroes living in lesser houses among the trees. When Sarah began chanting gypsy phrases into the fire, her eyes never leaving the house, her father ordered the blacks to remove her. None of them dared. At last, as she finished her curse in English, her father could no longer tolerate the display. He physically removed her from his property, along with the frightened child that was his grandson."

"He sounds like a cruel man," Jenny said. "She made a mistake, of course. But she was still his daughter."

"The books say that he was eccentric and that neighbors considered him perhaps a little mad. He had always been a cold, aloof man. When his daughter ran away and his wife died shortly after, he became even colder, harsher, more withdrawn. His servants ran all his messages and did all his errands. He rarely left the house. When Sarah returned, toting a child born of a gypsy father, it was the ultimate disgrace, the ultimate tragedy, the straw that broke his back. He seems the sort of man who never learned much forgiveness, and he was not about to change his personality at that point."

"And what exactly was the curse?" Jenny asked. She felt as if she wanted to get in the bed she sat on, pull the covers over her head and make herself a warm nest. Her hands were so cold that they looked like white porcelain.

"Sarah pledged that every generation of the Brucker family would contain a child haunted, a child possessed, a demon child as she called it. This child would seek the wolfbane, would howl at the full moon and find a craving for blood."

"A werewolf? Why, that's silly!" But she did not feel much like laughing at her aunt.

“That night, after Sarah was permanently dis-patched from Brucker land, her father died.”

The air in the blue room seemed terribly stuffy. Jenny wanted to open one of the windows. But she knew that would only let the rain and the thunder in, and they were worse than stale air.

“How—how did he die?” Jenny asked.

“In those days, medicine was not as good as now. It is simply recorded that he could not get his breath. That he fell to the floor, gasping as if he could not fill his lungs. He grabbed at his own neck, as if seeking in-visible hands that were slowly strangling him, and he clawed his own flesh until he drew blood. But none of it helped him. His face mottled. His eyes bulged. And then he died.”

Voices drifted up from downstairs. It was the sound of the twins engaged in some game or other. They were laughing brightly.

“It could have been a heart attack,” Jenny said, “or a stroke.” She remembered Grandmother Brighton.

“Perhaps.”

“But you don't think so?”

“The doctor who examined the corpse described the dead man's neck by saying that it looked as if he had been attacked by some animal, though none of the wounds were deep enough to cause death.”

“He clawed himself, you said.”

“Perhaps he did.”

Jenny respected her aunt, loved the woman. Yet she worried for Cora's sanity now. This was so little to build a genuine fear upon. Wasn't it?

“In the past months,” Cora went on, “Freya has suffered from fainting spells. Almost always at night. Her sleep is so deep that she can't be shaken awake, like a coma or trance. We've had Dr. Malmont in at-tendance quite often. He had been treating her, previ-ously, for a vitamin deficiency. Now he believes, like Richard, that the comas are not connected to that, but to something else, some psychological cause.

“And they must be right,” Jenny said.

Cora seemed not to have heard her. “But when Freya sleeps like that, the wolf howls.”

Jenny's eyes strayed to the red volumes of demonic lore. She quickly shifted her eyes back to Cora. The older woman was plainly distraught now, her face paler than before, her cheeks shrunken. “Richard didn't say anything about a wolf.”

“He's heard it too. Nearby, sometimes distant. Every time when Freya is in a coma.”

“You've seen it?”

Cora shook her head negatively. “Even when it sounds quite close, it stays behind the screen of trees to the west, or over the hills on the north of the house. Sometimes, it bowls for half an hour or more, as if it is in some pain or possessed of great sadness. Other times, there is an ugly, murderous sound to it.”

“It could be coincidence.”

“That's what Richard says.”

“There! You see!”

Cora was still shaking her head back and forth. “But there is a point where coincidence becomes farci-cal. Coincidence can't explain the rabbits and the blood.”

“You're losing me,” Jenny said, smiling, trying to inject a bit of lightness into the gloomy conversation.

“In the last few weeks, we've found evidence of a wolf on the grounds. We find mangled rabbits by the stables. We found one on our front stoop, in fact. And twice, in the morning after one of Freya's comas, we've found blood smeared on one of the downstairs windows, as if the wolf had stood there at the glass, its bloodied jowls foaming, wondering if it should try to break in.”

The way Cora said all this, her demeanor in its pre-sentation, left no room for doubt. The events she had described were ones that had transpired. Whether their meaning was the one she ascribed to them, or whether there was some more natural explanation, Jenny could not guess.

Ordinarily, she would have pooh-poohed any suggestion of the supernatural, of demons and curses and souls departing bodies to take the form of wolves. But these days, she had come to respect the unex-pected, the unknown, to hold off disbelief and be pre-pared for any eventuality.

Cora seemed to shake off the mood that had pos-sessed her. She smiled, raised a hand to play with

her dark hair again. "I'm sorry if I upset you. I invited you here before the worst of these things started, before we found the rabbits and the blood. I want you to have a good summer. Your teaching position will require a fresh young lady with a summer of sun and riding behind her."

"I'm sure there's some explanation behind all this," Jenny said. "Neither Freya or Frank act like possessed children."

"They are wonderful, aren't they?" Cora asked. She laughed. "Maybe Richard is right. Maybe I am acting like a fool. I'll have to give it some more thought."

She hugged Jenny. "You try to rest now. There are fresh towels for your shower. The television and the radio work. There's a good FM station already set on the dial. We'll see you at seven-thirty."

She left, closing the door softly behind her.

Jenny went to the south window and untied the golden cords which held the umber drapes away from the glass. The heavy velvet panels fell into place, shutting out the cold, wet fury of the storm. She did the same at the other window, put the cords on top of her dresser.

The room was almost dark now.

She found the light switch, turned the lamps on.

She inspected the room more closely, determined to squeeze the story of the curse from her mind and to enjoy her first day in the Brucker mansion. Just when she had become engrossed in a study of the novel titles on the bookshelves, carefully avoiding the crimson volumes, her attention was brought abruptly back to the dark air that hung about the household. Outside, the wind shrieked in the eaves directly above her window, gibbered and howled, moaned and hissed like something trying to get in to her . . .

The atmosphere had not improved by dinnertime. Jenny was the last to enter the family dining room, but she could sense the tension in the air and the fact that Richard and Cora had recently had words about some-thing. Neither of them looked at each other, and both seemed relieved to have Jenny join them, as if her presence would keep either of them from taking up a subject that could only cause argument.

There were only three place settings. Richard and his mother sat at opposite ends of the small table, and Jenny took the place between them. "Aren't the twins eating with us?" she asked.

"They always have their meal at five-thirty. They have an eight-o'clock bedtime until they reach their eighth birthday. Then they can stay up until nine. If they earn the increase. I don't believe in letting children have privileges they don't earn."

The door between the dining room and the main kitchen swung outward, and a short, somewhat heavy but pleasantly attractive woman forced her way through, carrying a serving dish full of whipped pota-toes. "I'm ready for you, Richie," she said.

Richard smiled, obviously delighted with the new-comer, and rose from his place, disappearing through the swinging door.

"Jenny," Cora said, also smiling, "this is Anna, Harold's wife. She cooks like a dream, even though she is rather bossy."

"How do you do," Jenny said.

"I'm fine. I'm always fine," Anna said. "It's every-body else around here who's hard to get along with!"

Richard returned from the kitchen carrying a tray with four serving bowls on it. There was coleslaw, green beans sprinkled over with slivers of almonds, creamed corn and peas with onions in butter sauce. He put the tray on the table, to Anna's left, and went back to the kitchen while the maid quickly distributed the individual dishes along the center of the table.

"Everything looks delicious," Jenny said.

"You'll find that it tastes every bit as good as it looks," Anna said.

Richard had just returned with a ham set on a field of parsley. "That's our Anna," he said, chuckling. "She's so modest that you can rarely get a word out of her."

"Just don't make any smart remarks about the food," Anna said. "Or you'll be eating elsewhere. Did you get everything?"

"Yes, Anna," Richard said.

She surveyed the table. "You forgot the rolls."

She hurried into the kitchen, came back with the rolls, plunked them down next to Jenny. "If I don't serve correctly," she told Jenny, "it's because that's usually Harry's job. But nobody cooks better."

With that, she was gone.

"She's great, isn't she?" Richard asked.

"She sounds wonderful," Jenny agreed. Anna's bragging was not the outgrowth of some enlarged ego. She could cook well, and she knew it. Her bragging was based on accomplishment and a pride in tasks well done.

"She won't let me in the kitchen," Cora said. "But I'd look foolish trying to compete with her anyway."

"I hope Harold isn't ill," Jenny said. She remembered how he had brought the umbrella to her in the storm this afternoon. A man his age should not be about in such miserable weather.

"No, no," Cora said. "He's fine."

Richard watched his mother as he dished green beans onto his plate. When she was obviously not about to say anything more, he passed the serving bowl to Jenny and said, "Freya has had one of her attacks. Harold is upstairs sitting by her bedside. It's a precaution we try to take most times it happens. One or two nights a week, one of us loses a night's sleep."

Jenny said nothing. She knew, now, what the argument must have been about just before she came into the room. Richard had been trying to persuade Cora to let him take Freya to a psychiatrist, and Cora had been sticking to her guns, as before.

Aside from a few comments about the marvelous quality of the food, no one said much for the first fifteen minutes of the meal. Silverware clanked. Ice cubes rattled in glasses. They made chewing sounds. Gentle background music came from hidden speakers. Nothing else.

Then Richard spoke, as if there had not been a break in his argument with Cora, as if twenty minutes had not passed since Jenny had entered the room. His eyebrows were drawn close together, his brow wrinkled. "At least," he said to Cora, "let me take her into the city for a few days of tests."

Cora put her fork down, dismayed that the scene should be picked up again just when she thought the curtain had been rung down for the night. "I have already said no, Richard."

"But *why*? If there's something physically wrong with Freya, we must—"

"There isn't anything physically wrong," Cora said.

"How can you be sure?"

"Dr. Malmont assures us."

"He's only one doctor."

Cora sighed. "Richard, don't try to make me look like a villain in front of Jenny. You know perfectly well that we had Freya in the hospital for an entire week a month ago. They ran every test on her imaginable. She is in perfect health. There aren't even any allergies, obvious ones at least, to account for these things."

For a brief moment, he looked mollified. Then he said, "I should still take her to another doctor."

"You mean a psychiatrist," Cora said.

"Why not?"

"Because, I know how frightened Freya was in the hospital. The child cried when she came home and asked me not to send her back there again. I do not want her, in her present state, to have to face the ordeal of another session with a doctor."

"All children are frightened of doctors," Richard said. "But that doesn't mean they shouldn't be taken for their vaccinations just the same." His tone of voice had gotten progressively less respectful until it was now little more than a grumble of anger.

Jenny continued to eat, trying to remain out of this. She did not approve, in the least, of the way Richard was speaking to his mother.

"Love and understanding will help Freya," Cora said. "Good food and a good home. It's the life she remembers with her mother that still bothers her. You know how bad she had it with Lena."

"Love?" Richard asked. "Is that what it tells you in your books? Will love dissipate the age-old Brucker family curse, Cora?"

"That's quite enough," Cora said.

"I'm speaking for Freya's good," Richard insisted, dropping his spoon and leaning over his plate, staring intently over the serving dishes. His dark eyebrows met above his nose.

"And you're insinuating that I am not speaking for her best interests. Is that it?"

Jenny had never seen Cora angry before. She could tell that the woman was prepared to lash out, cuttingly, if this exchange should continue for much longer.

Richard sank back in his chair. "No, Cora," he said. "I realize you're as worried about Freya as I am. But don't you see— Don't you see that the best way is professional help?"

"What I see," Cora said, "is that we have embarrassed our guest and made her first regular meal with us—well, awkward."

"That's all right," Jenny said, cutting a piece of ham. The food was really quite good, though she had lost most of her appetite. She just wanted to rise and ask to be excused. Maybe she could lose herself in a good book tonight. Except that, by not eating she would embarrass both Richard and Cora—and infuriate dear Anna who was so proud of her culinary art.

Richard cleared the table while Anna brought dessert and coffee. She had made a special surprise to conclude the meal, an ice cream cake with four different flavors in eight different layers. It must have

taken most all afternoon for this dish alone. She was a woman who loved her work. And her love produced, especially in this instance, a dish that was wildly delicious, even though the argument and the constant gloomy expectancy that hung over the mansion had dulled Jenny's appetite.

"Well?" Anna asked once the dessert had been taken and the extra cups of coffee had been poured. She clasped her hands before her and smiled, vulnerable to a rejection but fairly certain that she would receive praise.

"It was marvelous, Anna," Jenny said. She did not have to stretch the truth to give the woman the reply she wanted. "I don't think I'll be able to move from this chair for a week!"

That pleased Anna. A murmured agreement from Cora and Richard finished her reward. She went back into the kitchen, smiling broadly and humming some vaguely familiar tune to herself.

Jenny exchanged amused glances with Cora and Richard. Anna was some cook, and some character!

"What do you think of the Brucker mansion?" Richard asked. He was watching her over the rim of his cup as he sipped his coffee.

Unexplainably, she remembered that he had opened her suitcases upon placing them in her room. She had still not been able to decide whether or not he had been snooping, whether such a gesture was only meant as a final courtesy. But this very direct gaze of his seemed to pry at her own eyes, to peel back her brain and seek for secrets. She didn't like that at all.

"My room is wonderful," she said. "I'm anxious to explore the grounds and do some riding. I can't thank both of you enough. This is just what I need to prepare me for teaching this fall."

She thought he looked surprised at her answer, as if he had expected some other reaction. As if, perhaps, he had been hoping that she would say that she did not like it here and that she wanted to leave.

Or that might be her overworked suspicion again. Why would he want her out of the house? He had always treated her well, hadn't he? She remembered, suddenly, that he had been half an hour late picking her up at the bus terminal. Before she could enquire about that, however, they were interrupted by the soft yet penetrating chimes of the front doorbell.

"That will be Dr. Malmont," Richard said, laying his napkin on the table and rising from his chair. "I'll show him here. Perhaps he'd like some coffee on a night like this."

When Richard had left the room, Cora smiled at Jenny and spoke conspiratorially. "You'll have to forgive Richard his temper. He is very concerned for Freya, as we all are. But there are no more medical tests to be administered. I won't send that frightened dear to another hospital—nor to a psychiatric clinic. I'm going to try my darndest to make love turn the trick with her. She got no love from her mother. I'm trying to make up for that. If I can't, maybe I'll finally let her see Richard's psychiatrist. But before I do—"

They were interrupted by Dr. Malmont who was mopping rain from his large, florid face. Richard came close behind him.

"The doctor almost drowned," Richard said, laughing.

"And I intend to go home straightaway after seeing Freya—and there I'm going to begin construction of an ark!"

He was so jolly in appearance, heavy, with pleasant jowls, quick and pudgy hands, too much belly and too much hip, that whatever amusing thing he said seemed twice as funny as it truly was. He was no more than forty-five, with just a touch of gray at his temples. Though a heavy man, he was dressed neatly and well in clothes tailored for his bulk.

"If it's an ark that's needed," Cora said, "you've got thirty-nine more days to build it. Surely you have time for a cup of coffee."

"Let me see Freya first," he said. "Then we can talk. You have been keeping up with her vitamins?"

"Yes," Cora said. "She had her tablet with her meal tonight. Just as usual."

"I'll be down shortly," Malmont said. "No, Richard, I don't need a guide. Just have coffee ready. And if Anna has extra dessert, I'll take some, no matter what it might be!" With that he exited the dining room. He moved with quiet grace unusual in a man his size.

He returned in less than ten minutes, took a seat across the table from Jenny where a plate had been

placed. "Is this the niece? It must be," he said without waiting for answer. "She has the same fairness as her aunt. The Brightens must all be lovely people."

"Thank you," Jenny said.

Then Anna entered with an extra dessert and coffee. The doctor's attention was directed at these until they were all but gone, the beauty of Cora's niece utterly forgotten.

"How was she?" Richard asked when Malmont was finished.

The doctor daubed at his lips with a napkin, rinsed the sweetness of dessert from his mouth with a swig of black coffee. "The same as the other times. I couldn't stir her. Breathing well, all life systems in good condition. I am more certain than ever that it has nothing to do with the vitamin deficiency. They are two separate problems."

"Do you think she needs to go to the hospital again?" Cora asked.

"Good Lord, no!" Malmont said. "That child is fragile, Cora. She isn't a tough number like her brother. They didn't find anything at the hospital before. They won't find anything again. As long as her condition remains stable, with one or two of these spells a week, I think we should be satisfied that the original diagnosis was correct: she is physically well."

"What about a psychiatrist?" Richard asked.

"I would tend—though I know this will upset you, Cora—to recommend a psychiatrist."

"You see!" Richard cried.

"Hold, hold!" Malmont said to Richard. "I was about to say that I would wait a while yet. The child has had a potentially damaging infancy, with a mother who was indifferent to her, moving from hotel to hotel, from one nanny and part-time governess to another. Much of that time, she was even in different countries where people spoke to her in constantly changing languages. That alone would be enough to disconcert her. I think we should give her a little more time in a stable environment such as this to see whether or not she requires actual professional analysis."

It was just the suggestion Cora wanted. She looked triumphant

Richard merely sulked.

"I trust I haven't stepped into a family argument," Malmont said.

"You have," Richard said. "But at least you haven't supported this crazy notion of a family curse dating from 1860! If Freya merely needs love and stability, it is to counteract what her mother did to her—it is not to exorcise some wicked demon that has possessed her."

"What does it matter?" Cora asked. "Whether it is psychological or a curse—or a little of both. If love cures it, what does it matter?"

"It matters a great deal!" Richard said. He dropped a fist on the table, made dishes rattle. "We will damage the child by helping her to nourish such superstitious folderol. There is no such thing as a Brucker family curse!"

Almost as if on cue, the conversation was interrupted by the long, mournful howl of a large wolf . . .

Jenny had come to the Brucker estate on Tuesday. Wednesday morning, the bad weather broke. The gray clouds tore apart and let the blue sky through around their jagged edges. By afternoon, the blue was dominant over the gray and the night's rain had mostly evaporated from the earth. The air was fresh. The gloom and the sense of impending disaster seemed to flee along with the storm.

She spent most of the afternoon riding and walking a mare named Hollycross from one end of the grounds to the other. She found every corner beautiful, save for the dozen or so acres near the north-east corner of the Brucker land where limestone sinkholes pocked the earth like scars, where the trees were scraggly and awful and the field grass barely managed to keep a toehold in the heavily-limed soil.

On Thursday, she rode Hollycross along the east border of the estate, watching the construction work on the superhighway which was not too distant. It displeased her to see nature ripped and destroyed, replaced with concrete and macadam.

Lunch that day was pleasant, taken on the veranda behind the house with Cora, the breezes crisp. They talked of inconsequential things. The problem of Freya's comas seemed to have receded until Jenny could barely remember the intensity of the fear she had felt on her first night in this place.

Near three o'clock, she took her nail kit down to the pond and perched upon an outgrowth of limestone near the shore from which she could watch the few, graceful ducks gliding across the placid waters. Her nails were a disgrace. They were chipped and cracked by her unaccustomed exercise of the past two days. She began to file them carefully, soon absorbed in the simple task.

"You'll just chip them again," a small voice said behind her.

It startled Jenny so that she let her bottles of polish fall from her lap to the ground. Fortunately, neither had been opened.

Frank appeared in the corner of her vision, rounding the rocks, Freya came close behind him. They were dressed in blue jeans and white teeshirts. They were perfectly beautiful children.

"You shouldn't scare old people like me," Jenny said. "I might have fainted on you. Then what would you have done?"

"Got some lake water to throw on you," Frank said. The idea seemed to appeal to the twins. They both smiled.

"Aunt Cora used to worry about her nails," Frank said. "But if you ride a horse, you can't worry about sissy stuff like that."

"It isn't sissy stuff," Freya said. It was the first time she had spoken. If there were to be a battle of the sexes here, she knew for certain which side she was on.

"When Freya grows up," Jenny said, "she'll take care of her nails, and all her boyfriends will be glad she looks so nice. It makes a girl prettier."

Jenny bent and retrieved the fallen bottles of polish, put them in her lap again. She was glad of the chance to talk to the twins. When she went before a class of twenty-five third graders this fall, she would have to be a little experienced in knowing how to talk with them.

"Freya takes care of her nails now," Frank said.

Freya held up her hands, smiling through the fingers. They were both such impishly charming children. Jenny smiled back through her own fingers, then saw that what Frank said was true. Each of Freya's small nails was free of excess cuticle and shaped, though they were rounded rather than elongated in the fashion of a grown woman's nails.

"She keeps them nice," Frank said, "because she's a werewolf." He watched Jenny solemnly, waiting.

She was not sure whether he was serious or whether she was being played with.

She decided to accept it as a joke, and she laughed. Somehow, the rumors had filtered down to the children themselves. She couldn't imagine who would have been so careless as to let such ugly ideas fall on such young ears, but she decided that joking about it was the best thing to do. "Freya isn't a werewolf," she said. "She's just a very pretty little girl with a brother who likes to scare people."

“No,” Freya said, speaking again, her soft voice barely audible. “He’s right. I am a werewolf.”

Neither of the children were smiling.

They looked at her, waiting.

Jenny would have liked to catch hold of the inconsiderate adult who had passed these rumors on to the children. Surely Richard wouldn’t have, especially since he believed werewolves were only superstitious folderol. Aunt Cora seemed to think there might be a grain of truth somewhere in the rumors, but even Cora would know that no good could come from feeding such frightening fantasies to children. That left Harold and Anna. She didn’t know them well, but she doubted that either was that irresponsible.

“How do you know you’re a werewolf?” Jenny asked. Perhaps she could make the suggestion seem as foolish as it really was.

“I go to sleep for long naps, and the wolves howl and kill things every time.”

“But if you’re asleep, you’re not the wolf,” Jenny pointed out.

Freya shook her head soberly. Her yellow curls bounced. “Yes I am. The ghost in me leaves when I sleep and takes the body of a wolf. Then it hunts.”

Frank put his arm around Freya in a brotherly display of camaraderie. “She won’t hurt *you*, Jenny. Will you Freya?”

Standing there, the sun gleaming off their hair, their jeans muddy at the knees, their faces freckled, they looked like nothing so much as two typical American children from some Norman Rockwell painting, healthy and alive and as cute as buttons.

“No,” Freya agreed. “I won’t hurt you. Just rabbits.”

Unaccountably, Jenny felt cold here on the sun-baked rock. Did she really believe this nonsense about curses and wolves? Could she, even for a moment, believe that part of this darling little girl went out at night and tore the throats out of rabbits? It was laugh-able, wasn’t it?

Yet, she remembered the warnings in those dreams: *Beware the unknown. Expect the unexpected*

...

“Who told you all of this?” Jenny asked.

“No one told us,” Freya said. “We just know.”

Jenny wasn’t to be sidetracked so easily. “Someone must have given you the idea,” she persisted.

“No.”

“You must have overheard Cora or Richard—”

With that impulsive energy and short attention span that only young children have, Frank grew bored with the matter at hand, took his sister’s arm and tugged at it. “Let’s race to the stables! Maybe the pony wants to go out!” He pulled Freya away from Jenny. Together, they ran around the rim of the pond, startling the ducks who made squawking protest. They grew smaller and smaller as they ran until, at last, the shadows around the stables swallowed them.

Her perfect mood had been destroyed. What *was* wrong with the child? What *would* a psychiatrist say if he were able to study her? Who in the Brucker mansion had been filling the twins’ minds with such ugly, primitive fears?

She finished her nails, trying to lose herself again in the monotony of the task at hand.

It didn’t work.

That night at dinner, Richard was late to the table. When he finally did arrive, he took his place without speaking or looking at anyone. He filled his dish almost mechanically.

Jenny could tell that he was angry, though it did not occur to her why. She focused her attention on her own plate and said nothing. She wished Richard had not lost the pleasantness she remembered from seven years ago.

When he had filled his platter with a helping of everything, he raised his head for the first time and stared down the length of the table at his stepmother. “Freya is having another spell, Cora. Harold ought to go up and sit with her. God knows, though, what good sitting up with her will do!”

Cora laid her fork down, took a drink of ice water from her goblet. “She had her vitamins at supper.

I made certain of that.”

“Cora,” he said, his tone not respectful in the least, full of scorn and anger, “Freya's comas are not connected with her vitamin deficiency. There's no escaping the fact that the girl requires psychiatric help!”

“We've already discussed that,” Cora said.

“I've discussed it,” Richard replied. “But I don't think you've even listened to one goddamned word of it!”

“Richard!” Cora said. “Please never speak to me that way again.”

He pushed his chair back, rose from the table and left the room without asking to be excused.

What have I gotten into? Jenny asked herself.

She felt things closing in, building to an explosion. She didn't want to be around when the fuse burnt clear down to the keg of powder. She could not control the rapidly deteriorating circumstances in this house, which meant that she was at the mercy of them.

Cora did not seem anxious to talk through the remainder of the dinner. Neither of them were really hungry any longer, either.

Later that night, Cora came to Jenny's room. She was dressed in a lovely yellow lounging robe which contrasted with her dark beauty and her cultured dignity to make both those qualities even more evident. Jenny secretly hoped that, when she was Cora's age, she would look as feminine and sophisticated as her aunt.

If I reach her age, she amended. And immediately, she wondered why she always had to have such negative thoughts.

“I'd like to talk to you about Freya,” Cora Brucker said. She sat on the edge of the bed, hands folded on the yellow robe. For the first time, Jenny noticed the weariness in her aunt's dark eyes, the dark circles below that indicated bad sleeping habits.

Jenny had been trying to interest herself in a mysterious novel, but she had been making very little headway. The print seemed to run together, and her mind wandered over the tragedies of the past. She put the book down on the covers and sat up straighter in bed. She said, “I feel so sorry for her. She's such a sweet little girl.”

Cora nodded. “And I think she'll be all right. We know that it isn't anything physically wrong. She's had the best doctors. She was in the city for a week with two of the best doctors on the staff there.”

Jenny realized that Cora wanted to justify her own reluctance to bring in a psychiatrist.

“If it's a psychological problem, love will handle it. I *know* it will, Jenny. That's what neither of the twins ever had before they came here. Lena was—well, not much of a mother for them.”

Jenny just nodded agreement. She sensed that Cora did not expect her to reply yet. She only wanted a sympathetic ear to which she could talk for a while. It might seem odd, to some people, that an older and more sophisticated woman would wish to confide to a sympathetic, unexperienced girl. But, darn it, they were both women. And there were certain times, certain feelings that a woman could only explain to another woman, regardless of their respective ages.

“They were shunted around like furniture,” Cora went on. “They weren't given affection except, maybe, by passing governesses who changed as fast as Lena got angry with them. And Lena is always getting angry with someone.”

“You give them plenty of love,” Jenny said. “They'll be far happier here. From what I understand, there's little chance of Lena wanting to take them back full time.”

“Very little,” Cora agreed. She stared out the one uncurtained window at the darkness beyond. After a few minutes of silence, she said, “Do you think Freya should see a psychiatrist?”

“I could hardly say,” Jenny said. “I haven't been around long enough to tell.”

“She's such a fragile child. She cried every night in that hospital. I don't think it would be best to have a stranger probing at her, trying to tear down her defenses.”

“She's very quiet, sort of shy,” Jenny said, remembering that Frank had done most of the talking that afternoon while the little girl had watched and listened like an outsider.

“Exactly,” Cora said. “She opens up with me. But it has taken nearly a year to get her to. If I can have a few more months to love her and make her feel wanted, I think the fainting spells will pass. I think this is what she needs—love.”

Jenny smiled and took one of the older woman's hands. “Then it really isn't a curse?” she asked, trying to inject a bit of humor into this, to lift some of the gloom.

But the question had exactly the opposite effect. Cora paled and shivered all over. “I've long been in-terested in the occult,” Cora said. “I would never re-fute any possibility. Even a curse. It's possible. And if you could have seen the dead rabbit that was found on the front porch—and the blood on the window where the thing must have stood, looking in . . .”

“Just because there was a wolf lose on the grounds doesn't mean it was anything supernatural. There must be lots of wolves in woods like these when—”

“That's just it,” Cora interrupted. “There haven't been wolves in this part of Pennsylvania for almost twenty years. They've been killed off by bounty hun-ters, just like most of the mountain lions.”

Run, run, run, Jenny . . .

Cora shook herself, squeezed her niece's hand and let go of it. “Never mind me. I just wanted to let you know that I do care about Freya. And I wanted to tell you not to hold Richard's ways against him. He has only been so surly because he, too, is concerned. He loves the twins. He wants the best for them. We just disagree on what is best, that's all. He's a fine boy.”

She stood. “Even if it is a curse,” she said, “my plan should work best. I've read a great deal on the subject. Before— Before this happened to Freya, and since. And I know that many curses can be broken by love, by a great deal of love.” Then she smiled vacantly and left the room.

Jenny had trouble sleeping that night, thinking of poor Freya in her coma, fighting off real or imagined demons. Twice, on the verge of sleep, with restful blackness closing around her, she was awakened by what sounded like the distant, mournful howling of a lone wolf. But she could not be sure . . .

When she finally did sleep, she had bad dreams. She was in the cemetery again, before the tombstones. Again, her dead parents and Grandmother Brighton warned her to run, to escape. Again she heard foot-steps on the flagstone walk. The only difference was that she could see her pursuer this time. It was a great, black wolf with red eyes like hot coals, a slavering tongue that flicked across the sharpest, whitest teeth she had ever seen . . .

She woke from that dream, muttering deep in her throat. Even when the dream had left her, she sat in bed, heart thumping, short of breath. Beyond the win-dow, the Friday morning sky was mostly covered with flat, gray clouds, though the sun managed to burn its way through the covering most of the time. She opened the other curtain which had remained closed since her first night in this room, letting as much light as possible into the room.

She showered, brushed her hair dry, dressed for rid-ing and went downstairs.

There was no routine for breakfast. Though the oth-ers had been up and around for some time, Anna wanted to make her eggs and bacon. She managed to talk Anna into letting her have just a roll and orange juice, and the cook lectured her on the importance of a good breakfast while she ate her meager one.

Outside, though the sky was overcast, she felt better. It was as if the nightmares were locked in the house and only her optimism was permitted to come outside with her.

She took her time on the long walk down to the stables, absorbing the fine country morning. Birds wheeled across the sky, settled into trees, chirped loudly from their hidden perches behind clusters of leaves. A squirrel paused on the rough bark of a syca-more tree, something held tightly in its jaws so that its furry face was swollen. It pretended to be a statue until she had passed by.

When she finally did reach the stables, she saw that Hollycross' door was wide open. It was a latching half-door, and the lock was stiff. She always made certain it was properly latched, but it looked as if she might have forgotten to double-check it yesterday.

She hurried forward, afraid that the animal had bro-ken loose during the night. Richard had told her what a rugged game it was to catch a runaway horse, even when it could not go beyond the fenced grounds of the estate. She didn't want to be responsible for putting him through an ordeal of that nature.

When she reached Hollycross' stall in the line, she stepped through the open half-door, calling the horse's name.

The animal lay in its straw.

For a moment, Jenny thought it was ill.

Then she saw the blood.

In the dim light of the stables, with the smell of crisp straw in her nostrils and with birds singing some-where behind her, she saw the ruined throat of the once-proud mare. It had been clawed and chewed open. Blood had dried in the chestnut coat.

The eyes were open and staring.

There were other signs of violence. All of them had been made by teeth and claws. It looked much as if a large and cunning wolf had trapped the mare and had worked its evil temper on her.

Before she could realize what she was doing, Jenny had back-stepped out of the stall and was screaming at the top of her voice . . .

Aunt Cora had wanted her to try to nap until they could reach Dr. Malmont and fetch him to the house, but Jenny would not take the sleeping tablet offered her. In sleep, there were nightmares. She would not even drink the drollop of brandy which Harold wanted to give her, for fear that she would grow drowsy under its influence. It was just not the proper moment for sleep.

Not after seeing Hollycross crumpled in the straw in the dimly lighted stall.

She would not permit the room to be darkened, but kept both windows uncurtained and kept the reading lamp burning as well. She never again wanted to be anywhere that there wasn't enough light. She hoped she would not ever again have to go out at night or sleep without a lamp burning.

In darkness, things could creep up on you without your knowledge, surprise you unpleasantly.

Anna sat across the room, preparing next week's menu. She seemed almost unaffected by what had hap-pened. Yet, now and again, Jenny caught the old woman staring into space, her attention diverted from steaks, vegetables and desserts. The incidents at the Brucker house had finally come between the cook and her profession, and that meant the situation had grown serious.

Jenny's eye fell on the red spines of the witchcraft books. She looked quickly away.

Could there really be a curse? And if there could be, she thought, is it possible that *I* am the one who is cursed? It seemed like everyone or everything she loved met with grief or death before long. First her parents. Then Grandmother Brighton, just as Jenny was growing old enough to truly appreciate the depths of that old woman. Then, when she was beginning to grow fond of Hollycross and of their daily rambles about the estate, the horse had died. And, again, the death had been a violent one. Perhaps Freya was not the possessed soul. Perhaps it was Jenny Brighton who drew disaster like a lightning rod.

These and other terrible thoughts fled across her mind. She knew they were doing her no good, but she could not ignore them.

At that moment, the door opened. Cora came in, closed it gently behind her. "Are you feeling better, Jenny?" she asked. She looked very haggard herself.

"A little," Jenny lied.

Cora sat on the foot of the bed, patted her niece's knee where it rested beneath the blanket. "We've gotten in touch with Dr. Malmont. He'll be along in about fifteen minutes now."

The woman sounded so achingly exhausted that Jenny felt a little guilty about adding to her aunt's concerns. She sat up a little straighter in the bed and brushed her dark hair back from her face. She tried a smile, then opted for a bland expression when she real-ized the smile must look very forced.

"You look tired," she told Cora. "You should have Dr. Malmont give you something."

"I'll be all right. But, I swear, if any more of those real estate brokers come around, I'm going to beat them off with a broom!" She wiped a hand across tired eyes, smiled. "I guess they're only trying to do their job. But we've told them again and again that we don't want to sell the estate. Can you picture all this lovely woodland built up with motels and gas stations to serv-ice that ugly superhighway of theirs? That picture, on top of our present troubles, is enough to make me sick!"

"What has Richard done about—about Holly-cross?" Jenny asked.

"He called a veterinarian in town. They just got finished putting her in the vet's truck. Richard's acting quite mysterious about it, won't let anyone enter the stable, won't let Harold clean it out. In fact he gave Harold express orders to leave everything as it is."

That seemed odd. The sooner the blood was cleaned up and fresh straw put down, the sooner the stables would lose the aura of horror that it now held for all of them.

"We're having top halves put on the other three stall doors. Richard plans to chain lock them tonight and keep the keys in his room. He believes someone had to open the door for the—wolf, or whatever."

"Not if it was a—well *that* kind of a wolf," Jenny said. "Then no one would have had to open the door for it, would they?"

"But Richard doesn't believe in curses," Cora said.

Anna did not join in the conversation at all, but kept her head tilted, busily juggling the following

week's menu again.

"But you still do," Jenny said.

"Yes. I believe."

Jenny couldn't say for certain what she herself believed. There were too many conflicting terrors loose in her mind to be able to pick one that was dominant.

"For one thing," Cora said, staring out the window at the noon sun, "we didn't hear anything last night. In all that terrible battle between Hollycross and the—the thing, we heard nothing. Hollycross seems not even to have whinnied. And if she tried to return the attack, there's no sign of it. Her hooves did not deal any damage out there."

Jenny had just long enough to contemplate the meaning of these details before Dr. Malmont arrived, huffing and puffing, cursing the number of steps from one floor of the Brucker mansion to another.

"People must have been healthier in the previous century," he said, his face scarlet as he dropped his bag on a chair beside Jenny's bed. "You'd have to have the constitution of an ox to go up and down those stairs every day of the week!"

He was such a comical character—perhaps intentionally—that he helped to take Jenny's mind off the dark and unexplainable affairs of the household. His tie was askew, his shirt collar slightly open.

She said, "Maybe people in the last century didn't ride everywhere in a car and didn't drink too many martinis or eat too many high calorie foods. Did they have potato chips back then, for instance?"

Malmont looked down at his bulging paunch, then up at Jenny with mock consternation on his face. "Young lady, are you inferring that I have not kept myself physically fit?"

"Oh, no!" Jenny said, exaggerating her response.

Malmont shrugged. "Well, perhaps I haven't followed my advice to the letter. But I make certain my patient's do!"

He took her temperature, blood pressure. He checked the size of her pupils, listened to her heart, took her pulse. He was swift and economical in his movements, handling the instruments of his profession as if they were somehow outgrowths of his own body.

"Perhaps a little shock," he said. "But you're fine. My recommendations are a big, hot meal for supper, a little earlier than is the Brucker norm. Have it in bed. Will that be too much of an inconvenience, Anna?"

The cook looked up, surprised that she had been addressed. "No trouble at all, doctor."

"Fine. Then, some light television or light reading. No melodrama. And early to bed after two of these." He took a small bottle of sleeping capsules from his case.

"Do I have to take pills?" Jenny asked.

"You're too old to be stubborn," he said, writing the directions on the white packet.

"I don't want to sleep," she said. "I'll have all sorts of terrible nightmares. I know I will!"

"Not with these," Malmont said. "They put you so far under that you wouldn't wake up for the end of the world."

She didn't argue any further. As long as she didn't dream, she preferred sleep to being awake. Awake, she had too much time to think . . .

When Malmont left, Cora went with him.

That afternoon, Jenny and Anna played 500 rummy, at Anna's insistence, to help to pass the time. The old woman was clever enough to build a rivalry between them for the best of three games. Jenny saw what she was doing, how she was trying to divert her young charge's mind from uglier things, but she didn't mind. If Anna could divert her, that was fine. Heaven knew, she didn't *want* to continually think of Hollycross, her parents, her grandmother, and of things that howled and crept about after dark.

She was left alone while Anna went to prepare an early supper, but she filled the two hours with an old comedy that was playing on the late afternoon movie. She supposed it was a senseless and time-wasting film, but it distracted her.

Anna brought a tray around six, lavishly set with a number of dishes and two thick slices of a cream-filled chocolate cake for dessert. Watching news, she ate everything that had been put before her. She had not thought she could take a bite, but it seemed that her fear and the day's excitement had taken

more out of her than she had thought.

It was shortly before seven o'clock when she heard Richard and Cora arguing. She used her remote control to turn down the volume on the television set, listened closely. She could not make out many individual words, but she could gather the general drift of the fight. Richard was pressing, harder than ever, for a psychiatrist for Freya. Cora was resisting.

Twice, she could make out loud, undisciplined cursing, and she felt herself grow hot with anger that Richard should subject his mother to such things.

In a short while, the shouted conversation stopped with the abruptness of a slammed door.

Then a door really did slam somewhere in the house.

Feet pattered hurriedly across an uncarpeted floor.

Distantly, she could hear Cora crying.

What on earth was happening in this house?

She started to climb out of bed and then thought better of that idea. She could not do anything to help. She might only walk in on something which was none of her business. Instead of moving from the comfort of the warm bed, she snuggled even deeper into the heavy covers that were draped across her.

She turned the television back up and tried to get interested in whatever was on. In twenty minutes, she had flipped to all the channels on the cable and was still unsatisfied. It was growing more and more difficult to shut out of her mind all the strange events that transpired in this house and on the grounds surrounding it.

The red bindings on the bookshelf caught her eye. She stared at them for a long while, then finally got out of bed and took the witchcraft volumes down from the shelf. Back in bed, she opened them, skimmed through them, and finally began reading in earnest.

There was only one way to abolish fear—and that was through knowledge. It was difficult to be frightened of anything that you understood. She checked the subject index of the volumes and began absorbing everything they had to say about curses and were-wolves.

At eight-thirty, Harold came to collect her tray and to ask if she would be wanting anything to snack on later. The commotion downstairs seemed not to have interested or bothered him in the least. He was the same dignified old man as he had been before.

Twice, she gave him openings to talk about the ruckus between Cora and Richard.

Twice, he pretended not to catch what she was hinting at, as if the argument had been of little note, even though the volume of it had suggested some degree of bitterness.

At last, she realized that the only way to find out what she wanted was to bluntly ask him.

"The fight," she said. "What were they arguing about?"

"Fight?" Harold asked, raising snowy eyebrows.

"I heard parts of it," Jenny told him.

"Oh," Harold said, "you mean the discussion between Mrs. Brucker and young Richard?"

He was too much the gentleman to admit that his employers had been engaged in the next thing to a donnybrook.

"That's it," Jenny agreed, smiling to herself.

"It was over Miss Freya," Harold said.

He picked up her tray, looked about for a misplaced glass or napkin, found nothing.

"And?" Jenny asked.

"Mrs. Brucker has agreed to allow a psychiatrist to come live here in the mansion and treat the child. Richard has been busy, since, arranging that with Dr. Malmont."

She sensed that the old man did not want to speak about things of this nature, that he considered it some minor betrayal of confidence, even though Cora and Richard's argument had been so loud. When he ascertained that she was not wanting anything, he departed with the dinner tray.

For a time, Jenny lay there wondering about the wisdom of subjecting a child so young to the grueling experience of psychotherapy. She tended to side with Cora. Love alone might do the job, with much less of a drain on the little girl than cold, professional treatment might be.

She told herself there was nothing she could do about it.

She returned to the books she had been reading. These disturbed her more than they helped. If she had been pre-disposed to laugh off the idea of werewolves and the supernatural, the book gave her material for second thoughts. It was unsettling to discover that the Church in Europe did not laugh off such suggestions, but that it actually contained rituals for the exorcism of such evil spirits. Modern day Rumanians, Russians, Poles, Yugoslavs—all these believed, to one degree or another, in such unlikely things as men who walked as wolves at night, in vampires and ghouls. Indeed, she discovered that many Rumanians slept with dried gar-lic leaves nailed above each window and door of their houses, to ward off things with fangs that sought vic-tims after the sun had set.

If such beliefs survived so strongly, even into this industrial age, who was to say they were any less true than the beliefs of, say, the Christian church?

She read until very late, and she closed the drapes that hung aside the windows, so that the darkness could not watch her through the thin glass.

The legends of those European countries—and not, incidentally, the stories that originated in them as late as the middle 1960s—were so fascinating that she read on until she fell asleep over the books.

She slept fitfully. Many times, she half rose from bed, her heart beating furiously, only to drop quickly into troubled slumber again. She whimpered unintelli-gibly to no one and often kicked out at the covers that seemed to hold her down like heavy wings.

In the morning, she felt more on edge than ever before, as if she were standing before a monumentally huge jack-in-the-box, waiting tensely for the unex-pected moment when it would leap out on a heavy spring, leering at her . . .

By the following morning, after she had showered and dressed and lightly perfumed herself, Jenny knew that she wanted to leave the Brucker estate, wanted it more than anything she had ever wanted before. If the unexpected were to be sprung upon her, there was no more likely place for it than this curse-ridden house. The dream-voices of her dead family seemed to return to her, even when she was awake, urging her to flee.

She had come here, in the first place, in hopes that she could be with people whom she loved and who would return her love and make her feel a part of their lives. All those whose affections had sustained her in the past—all those were dead. Only Cora and Richard remained as links to the brighter parts of life, to love and understanding and gentleness. But now they had problems of their own: Freya's illness, the bickering between mother and son, Richard's increasing impotency, the heckling of the real estate speculators who made Cora so nervous—and the unremitting air of the unknown which hung over the house and those within it. There was no time for the simple pleasures of life. It was, suddenly, as if she were a boarder in a house of strangers.

The frustrated longing for stability and routine and love which had possessed her ever since Grandmother Brighton's death could not be resolved here. There was no stability in a place of werewolves and curses. Routine was shattered by howls in the night, by badly mutilated horses, by children in unexplained comas. And the air contained an evil expectancy that stifled love. All Jenny could gain here was sorrow and a sharper edge to her fear.

But how could she ever explain all of this to Cora?

She did not want to hurt her aunt's feelings or add to the older woman's current list of miseries. Though she might not like being here, Cora might actually need her. She remembered the several times Cora had come to her room to talk about things, as if confiding, just a little, in the niece. Perhaps, unknowingly, she offered Cora the woman's only emotional outlet at the moment.

Yet she wanted out.

Desperately.

She thought around all sides of her problem as she descended the wide main staircase Saturday morning. She was not dressed for riding, since she did not want to go near the stables, at least until the memory of Hollycross' corpse was not so sharp in her mind. She still wore her bedroom slippers which made little or no noise on the steps.

Perhaps that was why Richard did not hear her and look up, even though she had not been consciously trying to sneak up on him. He spoke urgently, his voice a stage whisper, into the black receiver of the main hall telephone on its stand by the foot of the last flight of steps.

"What should we do with her?" Richard asked the unknown party on the other end of the line.

For some reason, Jenny stopped at the last landing on the length of stairs, her hand on the polished wood bannister, waiting. Ordinarily, she would never have considered eavesdropping on someone's private conversation. Yet, these were strange times. His whispered voice had an odd excitement to it. And there was something about the way he had spoken that question which made Jenny's blood run colder . . .

He listened for a time, intense, breathing heavily.

Then he said, "I don't know if we can get away with it without arousing some suspicions."

He was quiet again.

Get away with what? Jenny wondered. What sort of conversation had she stumbled into? Whatever it was, it made her more wary than ever. The voices of the dead began urging her to flee, their pleading more urgent now.

"Yes, I agree. The drug itself won't be a clue; too many people could get hold of it to make it unique. The killer would find himself pretty much untraceable."

More silence.

Imperceptibly, at the mention of a killer, Jenny shifted her weight nervously. A board creaked under

her, the noise piercing the unnatural morning silence of the house as thoroughly as the explosion of a stick of dynamite might have done.

He was too engrossed in his conversation to hear. He did not look up or appear startled.

She waited, afraid now to retreat—aware that she could not possibly go ahead and let him know that she had been listening.

Please, please, don't let him see me, she begged— not quite certain toward whom she was directing this short and anxious prayer.

“Let me think about it,” Richard said. “Since you'll not be available until day after tomorrow, there's no rush.”

He listened, nodded,

“Goodbye,” he said.

He hung up, careful to cradle the phone as quietly as possible, then walked back the corridor and entered the distant kitchen through the swinging white door there. The squeak of that door's hinges echoed in the still hall for long seconds before complete silence re-turned.

Only then did Jenny allow herself to go down to breakfast.

Richard was having a cup of coffee at the long, gleaming kitchen worktable where Anna made most of her culinary masterpieces. Neither the cook nor her husband were about. Cora had probably not gotten to sleep until late and was still in her room. The twins would be out playing somewhere on the large estate grounds.

She and Richard were alone.

“Good morning,” she said. She tried to sound bright and cheerful, but she was afraid that her uneasiness showed through.

“Big day today,” he said.

She poured herself coffee from the automatic perco-lator. “Oh?”

“Dr. William Hobarth is arriving by car, sometime after noon. He's going to treat Freya.”

“I heard Cora agreed to a psychiatrist,” she said carefully.

“You did?” He looked at her across the rim of his cup. She could not help but feel that his eyes contained a cunning calculation that was adding her up to see what she equaled in his plans.

“Harold told me last night, when I asked,” she said.

“I see.”

She wanted to ask him who he had been talking to on the phone moments earlier. What the conversation about killers and drugs had been all about. But she sensed that such an inquiry might be a deadly one . . .

“Not riding today?”

“No. Not today.”

“Just prowling the house, eh?”

She felt uneasy, as if he were leading her to some question he especially wanted to ask. “Reading, I think,” she said.

“I'm so used to hearing the cleats of riding boots that you managed to sneak up on me this morning.” He smiled. “I didn't hear you until you were in the kitchen.”

She knew he was wondering whether she had missed his phone conversation by moments—or whether, per-haps she had heard it while waiting on the stairs. What would he do to her if he knew the truth? Anything? Or was she misinterpreting all this?

“You didn't hear me nearly break my neck on the stairs?” she asked. It surprised her how swiftly a lie had formed itself in her mind.

“You hurt yourself?” he asked, though he did not seem as concerned as he might have.

“Oh,” she said, “now I know you're putting me on. You heard, and you're teasing me about it. These darn slippers have extra toe room. One of them bent under and nearly pitched me down the last five steps. I kept my feet, but not without some clattering.”

He relaxed visibly. “Get yourself a new pair. Or borrow another pair from Cora if your feet match. Those stairs are steep enough to make an accident per-manent if you tripped near the top of them.”

"I'll ask her what size she wears," Jenny said.

He finished his coffee, rose. "If you'll excuse me, I have some affairs to attend to in town, before Dr. Hobarth's arrival. If he gets here before I'm back, he gets the walnut-paneled room on the east wing."

"He's staying then?" Jenny asked.

"That's one of the benefits of Brucker wealth. We can have the head-shrinker come to our couch instead of going to his." He smiled. It was a winning, boyish smile, but she could not be assured by it. "Seriously, though, we expect two or three weeks here ought to do it. He's one of these modern psychiatrists who use hypnosis to make the subject recall things he wouldn't ordinarily want to. With a child Freya's age, it won't take him very long to examine her past memories. Especially under the intensive daily sessions he plans. Besides, Cora was adamant. She won't send Freya away from the house again. The doctor had to come to us, or there wasn't going to be any doctor. Fortunately, Malmont persuaded Dr. Hobarth that the case was unique enough to warrant such an expenditure of his time. I think the fee we offered had something to do with it as well."

"Do you think that a psychiatrist is what Freya needs? Do you think she'll be helped?"

He watched her a moment, his expression clouding from a rather forced good humor to a dark uncertainty. But he spoke with stern assurance. "Of course she'll be helped. Of course it's psychological, Jenny. What on earth— Do you mean you're beginning to swallow some of this supernatural drivel that Cora dotes on?"

"No, no," she said.

But she was not sure whether she had accepted the existence of curses and werewolves or whether she believed more in modern psychiatric medicine.

"You've been reading some of Cora's books, I gather," he said.

"A couple of them yes"

"My stepmother is a wonderful woman," he said. "But she was always one for simple explanations. The occult, spooks and spirits, always appealed to her. If you believe in the supernatural, then the complex workings of the world can be made to look simple. You can say evil is the result of the work of bad spirits and ignore the complex nature of evil in men. When father died, she got stuck on such things even more. I try to dissuade her. It's not very healthy to believe a thousand different silly superstitions."

"I guess not," she said.

"No guessing about it."

She did not respond. She felt as if he were trying to bait her into some sort of argument. She could see his temper flaring a little, though she could not understand his constant readiness to argue. Was such edginess a more important sign of psychological instability than even Freya's long and unexplained comas?

"Even the twins have heard the rumors," Richard said. He swayed a little on the balls of his feet, as if he had laced even his early morning coffee with a touch of brandy.

"Do you know who told them?"

"I wish to the devil I did!" He smacked one fist into the open palm of his other hand.

"They say no one told them. They say that they just know that Freya is a werewolf, possessed."

Why was she holding him here, prying at him with statements and questions, when all she really wanted was to be away from him? Did she think she could learn something from his reactions? What? And if he made a slip or reacted to something in a strange way, how would she interpret it? How could any of this shed light on his phone conversation which she had overheard?

"That is nonsense," he said. "But it shows you just how unhealthy such stuff is for young children. If Freya has actually come to believe this simple-minded sort of explanation for her comas, then Dr. Hobarth's work is going to be a dozen times more difficult."

With that, he turned and left the house through the rear door. He walked to the garage where he kept the maroon Corvette, and a moment later he drove away, his foot rather heavy on the accelerator.

She longed to say: "I know one thing which was not superstition, Richard. That talk on the telephone, just minutes ago, about killing and about drugs. That was real. That was not my over-worked imagination or a bunch of silly superstitions I've gotten from Cora. That was real. But how would you explain its

mean-ing, Richard? What would you say? Huh?"

But she dared not speak any such thing, no matter how much she might wish to.

Dr. Walter Hobarth was tall, dark and handsome— just the sort of man that every gypsy fortune-teller spoke of when making promises to her female custom-ers. Slightly more than six feet tall, he weighed near a hundred and ninety pounds. His sedentary profession had not caused him to fatten at the waist or to lose the agility and grace of youth. He was, perhaps, thirty-one or thirty-two, an intriguing combination of the distin-guished doctor and the easily-amused youth with some adventure still left in his soul. His eyes were blue in startling contrast to his dark complexion and his brown hair. He spoke softly but clearly and with con-viction. And when he smiled, his cheeks dimpled.

Jenny first met him at dinner that Saturday evening and was impressed immediately. The general air about the table had been magically transformed and was far more pleasant than it had been on any previous occa-sion since she had arrived. Partially, that was attribut-able to the suspension of the argument between Cora and Richard. Partly, too, they all felt better with the knowledge that at least something concrete was being done about Freya's condition; even Cora, who did not hold much with psychiatrists, seemed relieved—as if she could not be blamed for something that had been taken out of her hands. But the friendliness and good cheer were not, Jenny thought, merely the result of the altered circumstances. Walter Hobarth had more than a little to do with the fine humor that infected them all.

Hobarth was witty and amusing, and he seemed to have an interesting anecdote for every topic of discus-sion that arose, entertaining them without seeming to dominate the conversation. He would have made, she thought, the perfect guest on one of those late-night television talk shows. Even if he had not been so inter-esting to listen to, he could have held an audience with those cool, bright blue eyes.

From time to time, she remembered the things Richard had said on the phone this morning, the things she had overheard from the stairs. That talk had been about killing and drugs. Or had seemed to be. It was always difficult to judge the import of a conversa-tion only half heard, and she had no idea what the per-son on the other end of the line had said. And now, sit-ting at this heavily-laden table, listening to Hobarth recount a story from his college days, Richard seemed nothing more than the quiet, charming cousin who had reassured her during that time of crisis seven years ago —the same rather dashing figure who had escorted her from the bus terminal only a few days earlier.

When she caught her attention wandering in this way, she forced herself to listen to Hobarth. Whatever Richard was involved in, she wasn't going to let him spoil this evening, the brightest spot in her life for many weeks.

Later, alone in her room, mulling over the evening, she felt that the good doctor had paid special attention to her. If his manners had been good with the others, they were excellent with her. If his eyes had gleamed when he spoke to Cora and Richard, they positively glowed when he addressed her. If his quiet apprecia-tion of Cora's beauty had been genuine, his regard for Jenny had been enthusiastic.

Or was she fantasizing?

She frowned, looking down at her nails, her mind drifting in a thin haze. A gun might have been fired next to her ear, now, without engaging her attention.

She did not approve of women who faced the world with a false optimism. It was never good to pretend that things were better than they actually were. A woman should be a realist. The romanticists were the ones who turned around, smiling, and discovered dis-aster creeping up on them. But if you always expected disaster, you were not disappointed when it came to you. And if you got a better break than you thought, it seemed like the most marvelous of blessings.

So what about Dr. Walter Hobarth?

Any woman, she thought, would be somewhat over-whelmed by such a gentleman, a man who combined good looks with an education, wit and charm. Aunt Cora must have felt that Hobarth had paid *her* special attention. Even Anna surely would forget her kitchen long enough to sigh at the sight of Walter Hobarth. Whether he was aware of it or not, he could hardly affect a woman negatively.

Still, on the chance that he had been paying special attention to her, she would have to take better care of her fingernails and pay more attention to the way she dressed.

She laughed, breaking the odd trance that had settled over her. As long as Dr. Hobarth was around, the women of the Brucker estate were going to be uncommonly well-groomed and graceful!

She spent half an hour on her nails.

She gave her hair a hundred strokes with her brush, a beauty habit she had gotten out of lately.

She slept well that night.

She did not dream.

She saw Hobarth three times on Sunday. Every time, she felt herself losing hold of that hard-headed common sense she had acquired in the past. She felt warm when she spoke with him, and she was filled with an unexplainable giddiness that was not like her.

The first encounter was in the kitchen, Sunday morning. He was sitting at the large worktable with an enormous breakfast spread out before him. His platter had three fried eggs, half a dozen strips of bacon, and three slices of buttered toast. There was a pot of steaming coffee on his right, a plate of danish pastries on his left, and a serving plate of buttermilk hotcakes directly before him.

"So Anna has gotten hold of you!" Jenny said, laughing.

Hobarth grinned, dimpled his cheeks. "Fortunately, I don't have to lie about the quality. It's all excellent."

"And you sit down right here," Anna said. "I never can get you to eat a decent breakfast. But that doesn't mean I've given up trying!"

Jenny took the chair to Hobarth's left while the older woman hurried back to the stove and the refrigerator and embarked upon a second cooking spree. She was humming a currently popular song, eager to whip up more hotcakes and eggs. She absolutely delighted in her skill with food.

"Will you start today?" Jenny asked. "With Freya?"

"One o'clock," he said. "I talked to her last night before supper. Tucked her in and told Frank and her a bedtime story. We seemed to hit it off very well."

"I would imagine so," Jenny said. She knew he would be wonderful with all children. But on top of that, Freya was after all a female. And Hobarth was the sort to enchant girls and women from one to one hundred.

"Oh?"

She blushed and felt stupid for it. "You were so entertaining last night," she explained. "I imagine you tell a children's bedtime story as well as you tell dinner-time anecdotes."

"Did I talk too much?" he asked, cutting his eggs with the edge of his fork.

"No, no! Last night was one of the most enjoyable dinners we've had here since I came."

By the time Anna had brought Jenny's breakfast, Hobarth was finished with his own. He had another cup of coffee and talked with her while she ate, a courtesy that pleased her.

Or was it just a courtesy? Was he paying her special attention?

Think negatively, she told herself. There's much less room to be hurt that way.

She saw him, late in the afternoon, after his first session with Freya. She was down by the woodline, behind the house, watching the squirrels that skittered from tree to tree. He came up and sat beside her with such stealth that he startled her, but not the squirrels.

"How did it go?" she asked after they had watched the squirrels for a time.

"She's tight, like a drum. Very keyed up little girl. I think it was very wise to get professional help for her now, before her condition could deteriorate."

"Cora thought love and attention could make the difference."

Hobarth frowned, shook his head. "It's more complicated than that. Her fears, her neuroses, if you wish, are too deeply ingrained. I had her hypnotized today, for almost an hour and a half. It was only a preliminary probe, of course. Still, I couldn't find even a chink in her armour; she actually believes this curse business."

"How do you mean?" Jenny asked, though she felt pretty certain that she knew exactly what he meant.

"Even under hypnosis," Hobarth said, "she sticks to the story of the werewolf."

Jenny turned to look directly at him. "Isn't that un-usual—to hold up while hypnotized like that?"

"Rather," he said. "Of course, I didn't expect a cure immediately, nothing like that. But I hoped to see at least a little doubt in her. But she is very positive about her supernatural powers. She leaves her body, certain nights, she says, and prowls as a wolf."

They said nothing for a while.

The squirrels scampered from tree to tree, played tag in these early days of summer while there was yet leisure time before the business of storing food for winter took their full attention.

At last, Jenny said, "You've heard about the wolf loose on the estate, have you?"

"Some of it."

"And about the horse? Hollycross?"

"Just snatches of it," he said. "I gather it was grisly. Was it you who found her?"

"Yes," she said, shivering in the moment of recollection. Briefly, she told him about it, though she did not detail the hideous condition of the mare's corpse.

"Most interesting," Hobarth said.

"Then you don't think there's—"

"What?" he asked.

"Any connection?"

A bird chirped in a tree nearby, held its note deep in its throat, warbling to its mate.

"Between the wolf and Freya's delusion?" he asked. He smiled, though not patronizingly. "There's an indirect relationship, of course. Purely coincidental, true. But since the child already had the seeds of this silly superstition in mind, the presence of a real wolf roaming the property only served to strengthen her beliefs. It was a most unfortunate coincidence."

"Richard says that a wolf, alone, couldn't have opened Hollycross' door," Jenny said. She mentioned Richard reluctantly. She did not know what Hobarth's opinion of the young man was, and she didn't want him to think she approved of Richard's more impulsive traits.

"Then the door wasn't closed properly," Hobarth said, shrugging.

She bit her lip and looked down at the ground. There were brown pine needles scattered there, residue of a previous autumn.

The doctor chuckled. "I see," he said. "You rode her last—before she was killed." He waited until she nodded agreement. "Well, then," he said with mock gusto, "the door *must* have been locked properly! I would never believe otherwise of you. Even if it meant accepting a wolf with hands!"

She smiled. "But it's not really funny—not if it was my fault and Hollycross died because I—"

He patted her shoulder with a warm, dry hand, his humor suddenly a brotherly sympathy. "You're worrying too much, Jenny. Hollycross is gone. There is only a slight possibility it was your fault—only slight. And even if it was your fault, self-recrimination will do no good. You strike me as the sort of girl who does everything properly, rarely makes mistakes. But we've all got to be allowed mistakes, and we've all got to be able to deal with our guilt afterward."

"You can't make mistakes," she said, a little too hastily, a little too forcefully. "If you make mistakes, if you aren't careful, it will sneak up on you while you aren't looking."

She looked into his ice blue eyes.

He matched her gaze, said, "What will sneak up on you, Jenny?"

"I don't know," she said. "Something. Anything. Whatever you least expect. Death, maybe."

"But we can't go through life with our back raised like a cat, sniffing for trouble."

His voice was low, soft, almost hypnotic.

"I have to!" she said. "Mom, dad, grandma—they all failed to keep a good watch. And I have to." She blinked, looked away from those deep, sparkling eyes.

"Yes?" he asked, urging her to go on.

"We're acting like psychiatrist and patient," she said.

"We are?"

She looked back at his eyes, smiled. "You know we are. And you weren't brought here to listen to a flighty girl."

"Uh-huh," he said. "You're not a flighty girl."

"Just the same," she said, "let's not talk about it."

"Okay," he said. He was a good psychiatrist. He knew when to stop pressuring, when to let a subject drop.

As they turned their attention back to the frisky squirrels, there was a low, animal moan far back in the forest. Whether it was a wolf or not, Jenny could not discern. But whatever it was, it was large and sounded disagreeable.

Hobarth seemed most surprised, starting slightly where he sat by her side.

"Maybe we'd better go inside," Jenny said.

He recovered his calm in short order. "Not necessary. If there is a wolf about, it won't come out in the daylight, not where we can see it, at least. Like any animal, the wolf is basically a coward. It only attacks what it knows it can defeat. And if it's been around these parts long enough, it's learned enough about men to know it can't defeat them."

"Just the same," she said, "I think I'll go inside. I want to freshen up for dinner, and I don't want to miss the news."

"Do you mind if I don't escort you back?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Please enjoy yourself; the woods are beautiful. And the squirrels can be hysterically funny at times."

She stood and turned, brushing pine needles from her jeans, and she saw Richard Brucker standing on the rear veranda of the mansion. He was staring along the four-hundred yards of lawn to the spot where they sat by the trees. When he realized that she was watching him in turn, he left the patio with a sharpness of manner that might either have indicated anger or haste, and he disappeared into the large house.

When she reached the rear door, she could not see her cousin anywhere nearby.

She turned and looked back at Walter Hobarth. He sat in the same place, staring intently into the forest, his head cocked as if he were listening for something. She thought that he was not watching the squirrels but searching deeper into those leafy shadows, trying to catch a glimpse of something else altogether.

At supper, the doctor gave them a far more detailed report on his first session with Freya. Jenny found it fascinating to listen to the techniques he used and planned to develop in this case. His grasp of the human mind, of what made people what they were, was somehow reassuring. People were so much more understandable once he explained them to you. Human actions seemed so much less mysterious, exceedingly more rational than she had come to believe they were.

She wished he could explain Richard to her, though. All through the meal, snatches of the young man's brooding nature returned, though the doctor's good humor kept Richard from growing as surly as he had been on previous occasions. Often, as they ate, she caught Richard watching her with an odd, mystified expression on his face.

What, she wondered, was on his mind?

Hobarth excused himself around a quarter of ten by explaining that he wished to tape-record his impression of this morning's session so that he would not lose his early viewpoint as he continued the study. Cora went into the kitchen, shortly afterward, to speak with Anna about something. That left Jenny alone with her cousin.

He spoke almost immediately, as if he had been waiting for such an opportunity at privacy all evening. "Did you hear a wolf this afternoon when you were down by the woods?" he asked.

She did not think that he really wanted to ask that. It appeared as if it was only some bit to break the ice with.

"I don't know if it was a wolf or not," she said. She tried to force the pleasant tone that she had once used naturally with him, but she could not manage it very well. She hoped that he did not see how ill at ease she was with him.

"Lee Symington is coming around tomorrow," he said. "That's the veterinarian to whom I took

Holly-cross.”

She saw that she was expected to carry on this ex-change. “What on earth for?” she asked. “What could he find here?”

“I don't know. But anything would help. Maybe he could find clues as to what sort of wolf it is.”

“What good would knowing the species do?”

He frowned. “It might do a great deal of good. But I can't tell you what I mean yet. I just—just wanted you to know Lee would be around. No one else knows. Not even Cora. I want to keep it that way, if at all possible.”

Then why tell me? she wondered. Why confide in me all of a sudden?

It was a bit of the unexpected. A small fragment, to be sure, but enough to make her wary.

“Do you like Hobarth?” he asked.

She nodded. “He's very nice. When he gets in a story-telling mood at dinner, he's marvelous.”

“I think he'll do Freya some good,” he said. But the tone of his voice was somber, not hopeful.

“He seems to think he can break through her shell,” she agreed.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

The sounds of pots and pans echoed from the kitchen. Upstairs, a water tap was run, reverberating the pipes throughout the house.

“Listen, Jenny—” he began, leaning forward on his chair in a conspiratorial manner.

But Cora returned, interrupting him.

Shortly after that, Jenny excused herself and went upstairs to her room where, as was becoming custom-ary with her, she sifted through the events of the day, totaling the debits and credits.

There were a lot of credits under Hobarth's name. The more she saw of the man, the more she respected him. She had not been so attracted to another human being in her life, so pleased to be in the same room with him, pleased to hear him talk and explain.

Explain . . .

Yes, that was what she liked the most about him. He could so simply and concisely explain another human being's motivations. He was so secure in his hold on the world and his relationship to the rest of so-ciety that he was like a rock, a post that could not be budged. When he was around, she had a sense of security that she experienced at no other time. She intuitively sensed that she could not be surprised by any disaster so long as she was near him.

She could not have put any of this into such uncom-plicated sentences. She only felt it all as an undefinea-ble but comforting force that simmered at the back of her mind and eluded description.

And how did Hobarth feel about her?

She was almost certain that there was a special ten-derness in his regard for her. He had waited with her while she finished breakfast. He had come to sit with her and watch the squirrels. Surely, that meant some-thing.

But she wouldn't hope. She wouldn't want anything. Because, when you wanted something and hoped for something, you never got it.

When she was nearly prepared for sleep, someone knocked softly on her door. She knew it wasn't Cora when the knock came the third time, for Cora would have let herself in after a second knock.

Slipping on a robe over her pajamas, she opened the portal just a crack and looked at Walter Hobarth. He was smoking a pipe; the tobacco smelled like cherries, pleasant and not at all as obnoxious as most kinds of smoke were.

“I didn't wake you?” he asked solicitously.

“No. Not at all,” she said.

“I saw how interested you were in psychiatric tech-niques at dinner,” he said. “It just occurred to me that you might enjoy sitting in on tomorrow's session with Freya.”

“Really?” she asked. The prospect excited her, partly because it showed he trusted her.

“Really,” he said, smiling.

“Won't that put Freya off—to have an outsider there?”

“Not at all. She'll be hypnotized for the main part of the session.”

“Well, if you're sure—”

“I'm sure,” he said. “One o'clock, in the library to-morrow? I find the library better suited than a bed-room, because it has less the connotation of sickness. Scares the child less.”

“One o'clock,” she said. “I'll be there.”

“Good,” he said. “Pleasant dreams.”

Then he turned and walked down the corridor towards his own room.

She closed the door and threw the lock on it, out of habit, feeling as if she had just had some of Harold's brandy. Add one more credit to the day's list. This was a definite sign that Walter was more interested in her than mere good manners said he should be.

She sat on the bed, not at all ready for sleep now. She had more thinking to do. It was time, she supposed, to face her feelings about the young psychiatrist.

She had heard and read a great deal about love, of course. It was everyone's favorite subject. Great love stories made the bestseller list. Love songs were always in the top ten. But she had never, before this moment, experienced anything that she thought might be the equivalent of what those novelists wrote about, of what those musicians composed.

Oh, yes, she had loved her parents and Grand-mother Brighton. To a smaller degree, she loved Cora and Richard. But that was another sort of love from this one. Not a lesser love, merely a different kind.

Then, like the stab of a dagger, she remembered where those other loves had ended. In death. And just because this was a different sort of love did not mean it would be terminated any differently.

She refused to indulge herself in more romanticism.

She finished preparing for bed, cooling her enthusiasm with a list of things that might possibly happen to shatter any dreams she had started to build. Pessimism had always been her byword. Now was not the time to change.

Still, the invitation to tomorrow's session was a credit.

She could not deny that.

Before she turned off the lights (all but the tiny nightlight which glowed until morning) she went to the windows to draw the drapes tight across the glass. Harold always pulled them back in the morning and replaced the restraining golden cord. She made a note to tell him that was unnecessary.

As she let the first panel of velvet down, she froze, her heart beating quicker in her breast, her palms suddenly cold and damp. Out there, on the late night lawn, a man was sneaking along a row of hedges leading from the house to the stables, trying his best to conceal himself.

She eased herself behind the unfurled drape so that she could watch without being seen.

He was moving away from the house, not toward it. He took his time passing through the deepest areas of shadow, but he scurried quickly through those patches where the estate's pole lights cast some illumination. Just ahead of him, there was a wide expanse of rather brilliantly lighted ground. When he came to that, he walked briskly across it, his shoulders hunched, his head hung between them.

It was Richard.

She watched him steal to the stables until he was out of sight. She stood there for fifteen minutes, hoping she would see him return and perhaps shed some clue on his strange behavior. But he did not come back.

Why had he been so furtive? The stables belonged to him. He could certainly walk openly to them if he wished.

She waited another twenty minutes.

Still, there was no sign of him.

At last, she closed the rest of the drapes, turned out the lights and crawled into bed. She added another debit to the events of the day.

She wished Walter had seen this. He would have been able to make it all seem ordinary and un-frightening.

No wolves howled the first half of the long night. She was positive of that, for it took her half the night to finally fall asleep.

The following morning, as Jenny was again taking breakfast in the company of Walter Hobarth, Richard entered the kitchen, looking agitated, the car keys jingling in his hand. Hobarth broke off a long and de-lightful tale about his experiences as an army psychia-trist in North Carolina and said good morning to the young Brucker heir.

Richard replied tersely, as if he did not have enough energy to give a completely civil answer. It was not that he was being consciously rude, but as if he had too much pressing on him to concern himself with minor things of life like etiquette.

He turned to Jenny. "I'd like to ask a favor of you," he said. He chose his words carefully, as if he wished he did not have to speak with her in front of Anna and Hobarth, though neither appeared to be trying to eavesdrop.

"What's that?" she asked.

Was this the confidence he had been about to impart the previous evening when Cora had returned from the kitchen, interrupting them?

"My friend's coming around at eleven," Richard said.

She looked blankly at him.

"The one I mentioned last evening, remember?"

She remembered something about the veterinarian and nodded.

He smiled nervously. "Most likely, he won't need to leave his work area. But if he should need anything, I've told him to ask for you. Would that be all right?"

"What could I possibly do to help him?" she asked, somewhat bewildered by all this.

Richard jingled the keys in his hand. "Like I said, he probably won't need any help. But if he should, I'd like you to assist him. I would myself, but I've got to be in town for lunch with the family banker. Today's one of those investment counseling sessions. Will you?"

She could not understand the reason for the veter-inarian in the first place, but she said, "Yes. I guess so."

"Thanks very much, Jenny," he said. He nodded to Hobarth who was finishing his eggs. "Sorry to disturb you, doctor."

"That's okay," Hobarth said to Richard's back as the younger man turned and left the room.

Jenny drank some coffee to settle her nerves. Rich-ard seemed able to destroy a pleasant mood and put her on edge every time he showed up.

"Strange young man," Hobarth observed.

She nodded. She did not want to say anything against her own cousin, no matter how much she might agree with the doctor.

Hobarth chuckled. "His friend sounds like some cloak and dagger agent with the FBI!"

She laughed too. In a way, Richard's actions were rather comical, melodramatic and silly. "Just a veterinarian," she said.

"Oh?"

She remembered that Richard wanted to keep the vet's visit a secret. Perhaps she should have kept her lips sealed with Hobarth. Yet what harm could be done by sharing the joke? She told him about Rich-ard's effort to search the stall where Hollycross died for a clue that might show what species of wolf had at-tacked the horse.

"I wish we could just forget about that terrible scene," Anna said, shivering. "Every time I think of that poor mare's throat—"

She didn't have to finish.

"Richard's emotionally upset over these recent events," Hobarth said. "It's easily understandable. I think, perhaps, he genuinely cares for the twins—cares for them a great deal. But, perhaps, mixed with that love, there is a bit of jealousy."

"Jealousy?" Anna asked.

“With his own mother dead at an early age, he may have come to feel more strongly about Cora than either he or she realizes. Now that new children are in the house and now that his father has gone, he may feel as if his own place of affection has been usurped.”

“That doesn't sound like Richard!” Anna said, as ready to defend him as if he were her own.

Jenny was not so sure. She thought she saw a good deal of sense in what Hobarth had said.

“Oh, don't misunderstand me!” the doctor said, suddenly more diplomatic than professional. “I don't think Richard consciously feels jealous about the twins. Unconsciously, yes. And it's no slur to his character, Anna. The same feelings would rise in anyone in similar circumstances. He's just going through a difficult period, that's all.”

Now that it seemed the doctor was sympathizing with Richard, Anna was all in agreement.

At one o'clock, Jenny rapped on the library door where Freya and Walter Hobarth waited for her. Lee Symington, the veterinarian, had not come to the house; if he was even at the stables, he had arrived there in a very covert manner. She had all but forgot-ten about him and about Richard. She was anxiously looking forward to the experience at hand, watching Walter work his psychiatric charms on Freya.

“Ah,” Hobarth said, “just on time. That's what I would have expected of you, Jenny.”

“Are you analyzing me, doctor?”

He smiled. “Forgive me if I seem to be. It's an occupational hazard. We keep prying at everyone we know, friends and relatives and casual acquaintances alike. And, please call me Walt.”

She thought, perhaps, she was blushing, though she was trying very hard to look cool and collected. But being asked to use his first name was, she decided, a credit on the day's list worth being at least a little excited about.

“Come in,” he said, ushering her into the library and closing the door behind her. “Take that seat, behind the couch.”

“Hello, Freya,” Jenny said.

“Lo,” the child answered. She was lying on a black leather couch, trying not to look frightened. But her posture was stiff and unnatural, evidence of her underlying fear.

Walter took a chair directly beside the couch and talked to Freya for a while, mostly about inconsequential things. He wanted to know what her favorite television show was, what kind of music she liked, what games she preferred to play, what foods she most enjoyed eating. When she said that she liked spaghetti, he told a very funny story about the first time he had tried to cook the Italian dish. He had not realized how the spaghetti swelled when it was cooked, and he had ended up with enough food for sixteen people. When he had finished, Freya was giggling and at ease.

“Now,” Walter said, picking up some odd piece of equipment from his open satchel beside his chair, “Let's play the game we played yesterday.”

“Okay,” she said.

Jenny could see, now, that the thing he held was a foot square piece of thick pasteboard. On one side, there was a geometric design that tempted the eye to follow it. It made Jenny's eyes cross just looking at it for a brief moment. On the other side of the paste-board square, there was a handle by which he could hold and maneuver the thing.

As he talked to Freya, he began to slowly move the square in and out, pushing it toward her face, drawing it away, pushing it toward. The geometric design seemed to move, to whirl faster and faster as he began to move the device at a more rapid speed. The black and green lines spun around one another, whipped and whirled, lead the eye deeper and deeper into the ink maze . . .

Jenny realized that she was beginning to grow very sleepy. The movement of the card had begun to hypnotize her!

She looked away from it, shook herself, finally re-gained her full awareness.

Walter talked smoothly, slowly, deeply, lulling the child into a trance.

Finally, the psychiatrist stopped moving the square of cardboard, stopped speaking altogether. The sudden silence in the room seemed to have a weight all its own. He placed the device in his satchel, took

a moment to look up at Jenny and smile. When she had returned his smile, he looked at Freya once more. In a gentle, quiet voice, he said, "Are you asleep, Freya?"

"Yes," she said.

"Are you happy?"

"I am."

"You can't hear anything but my voice. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"Soon, I will want you to be able to go to sleep whenever I ask you to. Do you think you'll be able to do that?"

"I'll try."

"Sure you will. You're a good girl, aren't you?"

"No," she said.

That startled Jenny, but it seemed not to upset Walt in the least, as if he had been expecting just such a response.

"You aren't a good girl?"

"No."

"I find that hard to believe."

Freya said nothing.

"Can you explain to me why you're not a good girl?"

"I'm a demon child," Freya said.

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Do you trust me, Freya?"

The small girl squirmed just the slightest on the couch, as if she wished, for the first time, she could wake up. "Yes," she said.

"If I could prove to you that you aren't a werewolf, would you believe my proof?"

There was a long pause.

Feet clacked by the library door in the corridor beyond.

At last, Freya said, "Yes."

"Remember when the wolf killed Hollycross?" Hobarth asked. "Do you remember what night that was?"

"Friday night," Freya said.

"Very good. What were you doing then?"

"I was in a coma," Freya said. Her voice sounded much more mature than the voice of a seven-year-old. "I went out while I was in a coma—and I killed Holly-cross."

"No," Walt said. "And I'll show you you're wrong." He did not speak hostilely, but with warmth and Mend-ship.

"You can't show me that," Freya said. "Because it's true. I really did tear out Hollycross' throat."

She said it dryly, coolly, matter-of-factly. Her tone made Jenny unconsciously hug herself against the chill that had invaded the library in the last few minutes.

"You wait," Walt said. "I'll show you that you're wrong." He paused a moment, collecting thoughts. "What day is today?" he asked Freya.

"Monday."

"Let's go backwards through time," Hobarth said. "Let's just melt back and back through the hours. See, it's Monday morning now, and you're just getting up. What color pajamas are you wearing?"

"Yellow," Freya said. "With blue buttons."

"You're yawning and stretching," Walt said, putting a yawn into his voice. "You rub your eyes and get out of bed. You look at the clock. What time does the clock say?"

Freya's voice had grown sleepy, as if she indeed had just climbed out of bed. "Ten minutes until nine."

Hobarth continued swiftly. "That reminds you of when you went to bed Sunday night, doesn't it? You

were really tired, weren't you? What time is it Sunday night when you go to bed?"

"Aunt Cora puts us to bed at eight-fifteen."

"How do the covers feel?"

"Warm. The middle cover is scratchy, though. It's made of wool, and I don't like it."

"You're talking to Frank in the dark, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"What are you saying to him?"

And that easily, he had taken her back to the previous night. With great care, he worked her back to super time Friday evening, to the point where she passed out on the upstairs hallway floor.

"What was it like?" he asked.

"Dark," she said.

"You were asleep?"

"Yes. Waiting."

Walt frowned. "Waiting for what?"

"For the spirit to congeal inside me."

"What spirit?" he asked.

"The demon."

"There is no demon," he said softly.

"The wolf demon."

Hobarth looked at Jenny, shook his head. It seemed that he had not been expecting this either. He pulled at his nose with the fingers of his left hand, trying to think. A few moments later, he said, "There wasn't any such thing. You were asleep. There was nothing more than darkness, was there? Don't fib to me, Freya? There wasn't any wolf spirit, was there?"

"Yes," Freya said.

Again, he collected his thoughts, decided to play along with the child to see where she was taking him. "Tell me about this wolf spirit, Freya. What was it like?"

"It was inside me," she said. "It was all wound up in me. But when I was sleeping, it unwound. It crawled out of me. You couldn't see it if you were there. It went out of the house, and part of me went with it."

"Where did you go?"

"The woods. In the woods, in the darkness, it grew a coat and a face and feet to run on."

"Grew them? Out of what?"

"Out of the fog," Freya said. Her voice was tiny, desperate, echoing from deep inside her.

"That's silly, isn't it?" Walt asked. He chuckled to set the mood he wanted.

Jenny thought he was positively marvelous. He was able to handle anything, no matter how eerie and un-explainable it appeared. She wished she were sitting closer to him. She would not have felt so cold and frightened then.

"It isn't silly," Freya said.

"But how could it make flesh and blood out of fog?"

"It's a demon," Freya replied. She seemed utterly certain of herself. Her eyes were closed, but her eye-balls jerked in agitation behind her thin, white lids.

"What does it do now?" he asked.

"It runs through the woods. It likes to run and be free. It scents rabbits and squirrels, and it chases the scents. It finds a nest and flushes a rabbit from it. It chases the rabbit through the trees, the branches whipping it as it runs. It feels good. It corners the rabbit. The rabbit's eyes are bright red. Its eyes are bright red too. It leaps at the rabbit. It catches the rabbit under its paws, listens to the rabbit squeal. It tears the rabbit apart. The blood tastes good."

The room was dimly lighted. The shadows crawled closer, fell about them like black cloaks.

"Look at the wolf," Walt said.

"It's eating the rabbit," Freya answered.

"No it isn't. It's turning back into fog. It's turning into mist again, isn't it?"

Jenny could see that he was trying to break the child loose of her delusion. But Freya was steadfast.

“No,” Freya said. “It is *not* turning into fog again. It's got black fur and big teeth with blood running out its mouth. Lots of blood. It likes the blood and wants more.”

“It's fading away,” he insisted.

“No.”

“And it doesn't want to kill anything more. It's get-ting very tired with all this running and hunting. It's a tired old wolf. It wants only to curl up somewhere and sleep.”

“No. It wants more blood. It wants Hollycross, and it leaves the woods to get her. It runs across the lawn behind the house, down the drive next to the hedges. It's a very fast runner.”

Hobarth was about to try another tact to get her away from her fantasy, but she spoke before he could. Her voice was higher now, the words spoken faster until, at times, they seemed to run together. It was al-most the voice of hysteria.

“The wolf is at the barn,” Freya said. “It sniffs along the doors, looking for Hollycross. It especially wants Hollycross because it knows that Hollycross will be ridden the next day. Jenny will find the horse and everyone will know the wolf is loose. It wants every-one to know that. It wants to let everyone know, al-most as much as it wants to rip out the mare's throat.”

“The wolf couldn't know that Jenny rode Holly-cross every morning,” Hobarth said.

But Freya continued as if she had not been inter-rupted, her tiny hands clenched at her sides, her chest rising and falling as her breathing grew deeper and faster.

“The wolf stands on its hind feet by Hollycross' halfdoor. Its paws work the latch, 'cause a werewolf can have fingers when it wants them. It goes into the stall . . . it sees Hollycross. Hollycross whinnies. She's scared! She has big eyes, and her lips are drawn back from her teeth. She wants help! But she isn't going to get it. The wolf knows that. It leaps on her neck and sinks its teeth into her muscles. Blood is there. It loves the blood. It wants all the blood it can get. It tears at Hollycross and drags her down. She kicks at it! It avoids her hooves!”

“That's enough,” Walter said.

Jenny agreed.

But Freya continued, her voice frantic now:

“Hollycross' heart bursts. Blood runs out her mouth. She has died of fright! But the wolf keeps rip-ping at her, snarling, using its teeth and its claws to get the blood!” She was grumbling now, whimpering and hissing, snarling just as a wolf might have. Spittle showed on her lips. She was digging at the black leather couch with her well-manicured nails.

“Wake up, Freya,” Walt said.

She continued to snarl. “The wolf chews Hollycross' hip. He worries at her leg a while, seeing what he can taste there.”

“Enough!” Hobarth said. In a gentler tone, he said, “You know who this is, Freya? It's Dr. Hobarth. I am telling you to wake up. You will wake up slowly, care-fully, and open your eyes. Slowly and carefully—”

“The wolf howls! There is blood on its face, all over its face, all over the fur on its neck, running off its lips, on its nose—”

“Freya, wake up!”

“It would like to attack a person now. It is tired of rabbits. A person's blood would be different, taste dif-ferent, smell better and cleaner and feel smoother—”

“FREYA, WAKE UP!” he commanded.

The child sat straight up on the couch, her eyes wide. She tried to say something but could not break the sudden block on her vocal cords.

“Are you awake,” Hobarth asked, taking her small, trembling hands in his large, dry hands.

She did not reply.

“Are you awake, Freya?” he repeated.

She nodded that she was. Then, without warning, she broke into a long wailing sob. Tears burst from her beautiful eyes and ran down her freckled cheeks.

“I’m sc-scared,” she said.

Walt pulled her onto his lap and cradled her as if she were his own child, murmuring to her, trying to allay the terrors that filled her. He held her trembling body to his chest, looked at Jenny. “Maybe you better go,” he said.

Jenny nodded and got out of there. In the corridor, the door shut between her and the little girl, she nearly collapsed. Her legs trembled; the backs of her knees felt as if they had turned to jelly. She leaned against the wall to regain her strength.

Distantly, Freya sobbed.

Run, Jenny, run, run . . .

Control yourself, she thought. Don’t let panic take you, no matter how nice it might be to stop thinking rationally about all these irrational goings-on. If you panic, you’re finished. You make mistakes when you panic, and then disaster gets you.

But the voices of her dead loved ones still spoke to her with fierce urgency: *run, run, run, get away . . .*

She lay on the bed in her room, staring at the ceiling as the leaden minutes passed and the antique clock be-side her bed ticked and locked like a mallet slammed repeatedly against a slab of iron. It was twenty min-utes past four o'clock. In the hours since she had fled the library, she had had an opportunity to consider Freya's cold, demonic visions. She had attempted to analyze them, to break them down with logic just as Walt might have done. She admired his rationalization of the world and the people around him. But she did not have the talent. Her fear remained. She continued to look at the ceiling, for it was white and neutral and could help her forget, to a degree, exactly where she was.

Did other people find life so hard, so full of chal-enge and possible catastrophe? If so, how did they manage to go on with it? How did they face the world every day, knowing that the only certain thing was un-certainty?

Weren't they aware of the danger?

That had to be it. If they weren't aware of all the snares along the paths of day-to-day existence, then life wouldn't seem so difficult for them. They would go on living, happy, unaware of the things that might be-fall them at any moment.

Did that mean they were more sensible than she? Was it better not to think about all that might happen? Maybe, if you were ignorant, you were better off. When disaster came, it would be hard, of course, but then you would have had all the enjoyment, before the disaster, to balance your present heartache.

But she could not be like that. She had learned the truth of life the hard way, through grief and loneliness, and she was constantly alert for the unexpected. Her wariness was as second-nature to her as the process of digestion or drawing breath.

Therefore, she could not remain in this house, pre-tending that the events in this great mansion were nothing out of the ordinary. Every unidentified sound, every set of footsteps in the corridor, every shadow which was too deep to let the eye penetrate it—each of these was a thing to be feared. Every minute was the minute before trouble, every hour the calm before the storm. If she remained here, her nerves would soon be worn down to their raw ends, until she would find it easier and more tolerable to flee reality and sanity than to remain.

Wolves. Curses. Possessed children. She could not live with those things and carry on normally.

And yet it would be more dangerous to run.

Running from a problem never solved that problem. Grandmother Brighton had been a level-headed, cou-rageous woman, and she had passed on some of her level-headedness to her granddaughter. One had to stay and face up to adversity if one were ever to con-quer it.

Too, Jenny remembered the dream she had had on the bus only the previous week. She had, in that dream, fled from the cemetery as her invisible pursuer ran after her—and she had run directly into the path of a fast-moving automobile. That might have been an omen, a warning. If she tried to run away from her fear, she would run into destruction.

But how did you stand up and fight a curse? How did you wage war against demon spirits encased in a young and frightened child?

Would Walter know? Would he be able to explain a battle plan in that nice, well-modulated voice of his? Would he be able to lead her in the fight and act as a shield when she needed him?

He would. She somehow was certain of that. Walter would never back down from such an engagement, never even contemplate running away. It would al-ways be best to stay by Walter, a haven in bad weather, the eye of the hurricane which was calm while all else roiled furiously.

Am I going mad? she wondered. Am I crazy for lying here thinking thoughts like this, for even believ-ing in a curse and werewolves for a single minute?

No. She wasn't going mad, she decided. She had read somewhere that the madman is always certain of his sanity. When you question your sanity, you're gen-uinely sane.

There was an abrupt knock at her door.

She jumped nearly a foot off the mattress. The little bit of calm which had come back to her was now pushed out of her mind and replaced with the underlying fear that had been there, waiting, all along.

“Yes?” she called out.

“Harold, Miss Jenny.”

“What is it, Harold?”

“Would you please come downstairs, to the drawing room?”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“Whatever for?”

“The police are here,” Harold said. He said it matter-of-factly, as if the announcement were quite ordinary.

“Police?”

“Yes, Jenny.”

“They want to talk to me?”

“I was told to ask you to come down, that Detective Maybray would like to talk with you.” He hesitated, then finished with, “He says immediately, without delay.”

“What does he want to see me for? What’s happened?”

“I can’t say,” Harold said.

“You don’t know?”

“I know. But he told me I can’t say.”

“Harold—”

But she did not finish, because she heard the man-servant’s footsteps as he retreated down the corridor and down the main stairwell.

She was sitting up now, tense, her hands fisted just as Freya’s hands had been fisted while the child had been recounting her nightmare under hypnosis. The veins of her temple stood out. The veins in her delicate, pale neck throbbed.

It’s coming to a head now, she thought. The whole storm has been building and building toward this one point. If lightning strikes, I know that it is going to strike me.

She slipped her shoes on, went to the mirror to comb her hair. She noticed crow’s feet of exhaustion in the corners of her eyes, the only lines to mar her beautiful face. She didn’t have time to worry about that, however. She left her room and went downstairs.

Twice, as she made her way down the steep risers of the main stairwell, she stopped, clinging to the polished mahogany railing. Her feet seemed to metamorphose into concrete. She just could not go down. She didn’t want to go back to her room, though, for that would be cowardly flight. If she could just remain here, poised on the brink of disaster but never having to take the final leap across the threshold, all would be fine. She could stand here, examining the gold print in the expensive wallpaper, the run of the wood’s grain under her slim hand. Days, weeks, months and years would pass, and she would be well . . .

She shook off the unhealthy fantasies and continued downward . . .

She walked the main hall to the curtained arch of the drawing room where she had first had coffee and sandwiches with Cora and Richard and the twins just a week ago. At the archway, she seemed to gain extra strength from some source and stepped through without hesitation.

There were four people in the room. Harold stood in a far corner, stiff and gentlemanly, his eyes darting quickly around the room, from one of the other three to the next—and finally to Jenny herself. Richard sat in the heavy brown armchair. There were great, dark circles under his eyes. His arms, at first, appeared to be lying relaxedly on the arms of the chair—but then she saw how his fingers gripped the fabric so tightly that his knuckles were white. Sitting on the long, dark green sofa was a man in suit and tie, balding, perhaps a little overweight, no more than forty-five years old. His legs were crossed, and he held a notebook and pencil in his lap. The last person was Detective Maybray. She knew that instinctively. He was tall, more than six feet, broad-shouldered, well-muscled. His face was all sharp planes with a Roman nose, a square chin, very dark eyes and heavy eyebrows.

He stepped forward and smiled at her.

It was an awful smile, the sort of smile the crocodile gave its victim before it skittered forward and chomped all those teeth through flesh and blood.

She wished Walter were here.

“Miss Brighton?” Maybray asked.

“I am,” she said.

He smiled again.

Then the smile flicked away.

“Who killed Lee Symington?” he asked her. “Was it you or someone you telephoned?”

“Now wait just a damn minute, Detective—” Richard began, rising from his easy chair. His face had gone scarlet in anger, and there was a look of menace in his eyes.

“Sit down,” Maybray said without taking his eyes away from Jenny. His voice was cold, almost a mono-tone. It had a sense of command in it, however, which indicated that this man was not accustomed to being disobeyed.

“I never meant that you should—”

“Shut up!”

The room reverberated with the harsh command.

Richard looked furious. But the iciness in the larger man's voice got the message across. He sat back down, not looking at Jenny or at anyone else in that room. He only stared at the carpet as if he were seeing it for the first time, and he continued to gouge the easy chair's upholstery with his fingers.

Maybray smiled and returned his attention to the young woman before him. “I asked you a question Miss Brighton. And when I ask people questions, I usually expect answers.”

“I—I didn't understand the question,” she said. She felt dizzy, but she was determined to show as little weakness as possible. This gorilla would enjoy watching her quake. She didn't want to give him any pleasure.

The crocodile smile came and went.

“I asked you whether you murdered Lee Symington or whether it was someone you phoned for the job.”

“You're crazy!” she gasped as the full import of what he had said struck her like a hammer blow. She put a hand to her breast and felt her heart thumping like the heart of a small animal or bird. “You aren't making any sense at all!”

“Aren't I?” He kept a careful watch of her face, as if he expected to see guilt written there. “A veterinarian by the name of Lee Symington was employed on this estate this morning. This afternoon, he was found dead in the stables just down the lane, on these grounds. You were the only one, besides Richard Brucker, who knew the vet was going to be here today. And Mr. Brucker's alibi is flawless.”

There was silence.

She realized they were all waiting for her to speak. But she could not think of anything to say. It was as if an icy hand had slipped over her mind to slowly freeze it shut.

She trembled all over. She could not help that.

“Who'd you tell, Jenny?” Richard asked in a more even, friendlier tone of voice.

She looked at him.

Maybray continued to stare at her.

“Dr. Hobarth,” she said at last. “I told him at breakfast.”

“Hobarth!” Richard exploded, edging forward on his chair.

“Anyone else?” Maybray asked.

“Anna,” Jenny said. “She was in the kitchen when I told Dr. Hobarth. She overheard us.”

“Well?” Maybray asked, turning to Richard.

“If Anna knew, she told Harold.” He turned to the old man. “You knew, didn't you?”

Harold nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Why didn't you speak up?” Maybray asked.

“I didn't know Jenny was to be put to such punishment,” Harold said. “You hadn't explained your rather unorthodox operating procedure when you asked me to bring her downstairs.”

“You told Cora, didn't you?” Richard asked.

“Yes,” Harold said.

“Harold is one of those old-fashioned male servants who feels his primary duty in all matters is to the man or woman of the house.”

“That blows everything,” the plainclothes police-man on the couch said. He slapped his notebook

shut.

“Not yet,” Maybray said. “Everyone will have to give us an alibi that checks out for the time of the murder. If nothing comes of that, *then* everything is blown.”

“When was it?” Jenny asked.

Maybray said, “Between twelve-thirty and two o'clock, the coroner says.” She realized that the detective was still watching her intently.

“I ate a light snack at about a quarter past twelve,” Jenny said. “I ate in the kitchen and talked with Anna until one.”

“Then?”

“Then I went to the library and sat with Dr. Ho-barth until just a few minutes before two o'clock. He had invited me to sit through a session of his analysis of Freya. The session went badly. I was upset and went directly to my room afterwards.”

“She was in her room at two, like she says,” Harold verified.

“Is that so?” Maybray asked in a tone of voice that said he was not to be convinced without facts.

“Yes,” Harold said, unruffled by the policeman's gruff ways, “I came out of Cora's room after delivering a late lunch tray. I saw Jenny going in her own room and closing the door. She didn't come back downstairs in the next half hour, at least, for I was polishing the stair railings during that time.”

“Am I—clear?” Jenny asked.

“As spring water,” Maybray said.

“It was a wolf, then,” the second officer said. “I said right from the beginning that it wasn't murder.”

Detective Maybray turned to Richard. “Do you still believe it was something other than a wild wolf?”

Richard sighed and relaxed against the well-cushioned back of the easy chair. “I don't know. I've been so very sure— There have been so many strange things happening. But maybe the wolf is real. Maybe it is a coincidence that makes the rest of these things seem phony when they aren't. I just can't say any more.”

“Well,” Maybray said, “we'll get the cook and Mrs. Brucker in here and see if they're vouched for.”

“I can vouch for Anna,” Harold said. “And if you take a look at all she's cooked today, you'll see she couldn't have left the house for a moment.”

In a short while, Maybray had interviewed Cora and Walter and had ascertained that they were solidly alibied as everyone else. His manner with them was as cool and probing as it had been with Jenny. It was as if he hoped to frighten someone into saying something they otherwise would have kept to themselves.

“The first thing to be done,” Maybray said, speaking more civilly now that he knew everyone in the room was trustworthy, “is to organize a hunting party for the wolf. Heaven knows what has driven it down into more civilized parts. But it must be caught. I'll de-tail two troopers to be here in the morning, along with their academy mounts. If you could put together some of the area people, your neighbors, to augment a search party, the beast should be routed in a day.”

“It can be done,” Richard said.

“I'd ask you, also, to contact Gabe Atchison and see about getting him and his hounds here. You know him?”

“Yes,” Richard said. “I've been to the yearly country club fox hunt once or twice.”

“In the morning, then,” Maybray said. He nodded politely to everyone seated around and stalked out of the room.

Richard and the second, still unnamed policeman, followed on his heels.

“I'll get some coffee,” Anna said. “And some rolls.”

She left the room with her husband trailing after her.

“It's just horrible,” Cora said. “That poor Mr. Symington, torn apart like that.”

“It always seems,” Walter mused, “that the right things are never done until a tragedy points the way. There should have been a hunt for the wolf when the dead rabbits began showing up. And surely there should have been one after Hollycross was killed. Anyway, all this will be better after tomorrow. If we have a dead wolf to show Freya, it's going to take some of the drive out of her ingrained fantasies.”

"I'm not so sure," Jenny said. She had just had a dreadful thought, one that left her more shaken than ever.

"But she can't have killed Symington while the demon possessed her," Hobarth said, amused at such concepts. "For one thing, she wasn't in a coma this afternoon. For another, the wolf has never prowled by day before."

"If the coroner was right about the time of death," Jenny said, "then the wolf was prowling the stables about the same time Freya was hypnotized. About the same time that she was having that horrible nightmare. Remember, Walt, how she said that the wolf was anxious to taste the blood of a human being now?"

He looked at her. He looked away. "That's silly," he said.

But it was the first time she had seen him even a little bit disturbed about any of this curse nonsense.

She wished he would take her hand and hold it tightly. She wished that he would tell her how foolish her fear was. She wished he would use that great pool of his logic to reason away all the hideous specters of doubt that had risen to consume her.

But he said nothing.

After coffee, she left that tense room where the conversation had taken on a forced gaiety. She climbed the steps to her room, no better or worse than when she had come down them an hour or so ago.

As she opened the door to her room, Richard stepped out of the room across the corridor and called her name. She turned and watched him approach her. He must have been waiting for her, she reasoned.

"Why did you tell Hobarth?" he asked. He was wringing his hands as he spoke.

"Tell him what?" she asked. She felt uncomfortable around him, as if he might spring at her.

"About Lee's coming here, of course."

"You don't have to be so nasty," she said. He had spoken to her as if she was worthy only of disdain.

"I have a right, perhaps. I asked you to tell no one that Lee was coming up here. But you did. And now he's dead."

"I didn't tell the wolf," she assured him, trying to adopt his own petulant tone. "And if you're trying to make me feel guilty about something, forget it."

"Look, Jenny—" he began, grabbing her arm, holding her so tightly that he hurt her.

She tried to pull loose and could not. "*You* look," she said, her fear of him only making her anger twice as sharp. "You're the one who has a lot to answer for."

"Me?"

He was really hurting her arm. He seemed not to be aware of it, but pressed harder now.

"Yes, you!" It felt good to act, to attack rather than wait to *be* attacked. "You were half an hour late picking me up at the terminal last week. You opened my luggage and snooped through it that first day. You treated your stepmother awfully this past week. And who were you talking to on the telephone Saturday morning—when you talked about drugs and killers?"

"You *did* eavesdrop!" he snarled.

"I accidentally overheard," she defended herself. Before he could make anything of that, she said, "And where were you sneaking to last night when you crept away from the house toward the stable? Why didn't you want to be seen then?"

He looked crushed.

She felt his grip lessen, in shock. At that precise moment, she pulled herself loose, whirled, slammed her bedroom door shut between them and threw the latch in the same, swift movement.

She leaned against the door, whimpering. She listened to the noise for a moment, wondering what it was. Then she realized it was her, and she clamped down on the sounds, forcing herself to be strong.

Her heart ached. Her face was flushed with excitement. It was all out in the open now. What would Richard do about it?

For a moment, he did nothing but wait, too stunned to think or to move. Then he stepped forward and knocked on her door. It was not a polite knock, but strong and loud.

"Go away," Jenny said.

He knocked again.

The door shook slightly in its frame, almost as if he must be using both fists instead of one.

“Go away,” she said.

He tried the handle, found that she had locked it. He rattled it for a long moment, as if he thought the lock might slip if he tried hard enough.

Should she scream? Or was it not that dire a situation?

“Open up,” he said.

“No.”

“Open this door.”

“Go away.”

He was silent a while, but he did not move. She could hear him drawing breath; heavy, rapid breath which indicated his state of agitation.

Again, she wondered if she should call for help. But what would she tell them when they charged up the stairs and found only Richard menacing her? He was her cousin, after all. He couldn't seriously harm her, could he? Surely, he was just angry that she had been spying on him. Both times—when she had heard him on the telephone and when she had seen him sneaking along the hedgerow last night—it had been accidental spying, of course. But he would not understand that.

“Please let me explain, Jenny,” he said.

“Go away,” she said reflexively.

Should she give him a chance? If she opened the door, what more could he do than explain? It was silly to think of her own cousin attempting to harm her.

He suddenly tried the door again.

That decided her against opening for him.

“I can explain it all to you in ten minutes,” he said. His voice was weary, tired, pleading. He sounded, now, like nothing more than a lost and lonely child. But he could be putting that voice on for her benefit.

“I won't talk to you now, Richard,” she said firmly. Richard was the unknown. His moods, his secret schemes and strange behavior made him suspect. With Walter, she knew she was safe, knew that all was steady and sure. With Richard, anything might happen, any disaster might strike.

He waited outside her door for several minutes, but when he saw that she wasn't going to open it to him, he finally turned and walked off. She listened to his footsteps going down the corridor and then down the stairs. When there was nothing to be heard but silence, she left the door and went to her bed where she curled up against the headboard like a child in its mother's lap.

She had no mother, though. And for the first time in nearly a year, the pain of that knowledge made itself felt. She began to cry. She rolled over and buried her face in her pillow and cried until her stomach hurt and until there were no more tears.

She went into the bathroom and washed her face, daubing her eyes with cool water to make them less bloodshot. She combed her hair, then gave it a hundred strokes with a brush. The shimmering beauty of her dark mane made her think of Walter Hobarth and how much she wanted to look nice for him. Thinking of Walter made her less gloomy.

After all, she thought. I am safe now, locked in my room. No one can get in that door. It's a thick and sturdy door. And no wolf could ever climb those stone walls outside to reach a second floor window. As long as I don't go out alone or let myself alone with Richard, I'm safe.

And as long as Walter Hobarth was here, she intended to stick it out. Nothing could happen to her as long as the man she loved was close by.

Loved?

Did she truly love him, then? If she could have a thought like that, so casually, then it must be true. Now it was up to her to do her best to make him feel the same thing toward her.

She smiled at the mirror.

I am pretty, she thought. And intelligent. I would make a fine wife for a psychiatrist.

She went to the wardrobe and picked out the prettiest dress she had brought. She would wear that, along with lemon-scented perfume, and she would be fresh and bright and attractive at supper this

evening. He would notice; he always did.

Suddenly, a spider ran across the top of the dresser, eight legs pistoning furiously, and it seemed like a sign, a warning of things that were to come . . .

Jenny was awakened early the following Tuesday morning by a soft knock at her door. She yawned, rolled over and looked at the alarm clock. The time was five minutes before eight. She had slept late most every morning this past week, a luxury she had never allowed herself before coming to the Brucker estate. No one had urged her to earlier rising, so who could this be?

“Yes?” she asked.

“It's me, Walter,” Dr. Hobarth said. “The hunt forms at nine. I thought you'd like to use the spare horse to come along.”

“Just a minute,” she said. She put her robe on and went to the door, opened it. “They don't want a woman along, do they?” she asked.

He was dressed in jeans, boots and a short-sleeved workshirt. The inevitable pipe was with him, smelling of cherries. “Oh, there's no danger,” he assured her. “What with the hounds ready to tear it up and most of the men armed. We'll stay in groups to cut the chance of danger even further.”

“I don't know whether I should.”

“Oh, come on, Jenny! It'll be exciting!”

She did not fancy coming face-to-face with the murderous animal no matter how safe the confrontation might be. But it was obvious that he wanted her to come along. This was another sign of his interest in her that she would be foolish to ignore.

“I'll have to shower,” she said.

“Time for all that if you hurry,” he said. “Nine o'clock at the stables. I'll have a horse saddled for you.”

When she reached the stables, dressed comfortably in jeans, a blue sweater and brown riding boots, the others were already mounting for the hunt. Eight men from neighboring farms had volunteered for the chore. Though Jenny would have called it a chore, the others seemed more favorably disposed. Most men, of course, enjoyed a hunt no matter how civilized and urbane they might be. It was a primitive bloodlust that ran beneath the skin of all men—and women—no matter how much they might deny it. But on top of that natural drive, most of those present also looked upon the day's venture as a mark of acceptance. These were all gentleman farmers, lawyers and businessmen who maintained farms not for living so much as for the status such ownership implied. To have been asked to join a Brucker family hunt was a sign of some minor aristocratic standing in the area. They had all accepted, surely, with the same smugness and self-assurance that the *nouveau riche* exhibited in accepting a party invitation from an old-line family like the Vanderbilts or Rockefellers.

The two state patrolmen wore simple blue riding uniforms with black rank patches on their sleeves. They were large men, but agile, and they had the most beautiful chestnut stallions Jenny had ever seen, enormous animals with powerful shoulders, thick necks and haunches. Horse and master, here, made a splendid single unit, as if the two were parts of the same organism, some centaurlike being.

Richard was here, sitting on a black mare, talking to one of the neighbors who had joined the hunt, a fellow who looked—with his gray hair, mustache and full sideburns—like an English baron.

There was a wiry little man on a spotted mare who kept a pack of hounds around him with nothing but his soft commands. This, she supposed, was Gabe Atchison.

Walter sat on a mottled black-brown stallion behind the others, holding the tether of a second saddled but unmounted mare which Jenny recognized as a horse called Tulip which was kept next to the stall where Hollycross had died.

“Here. Hurry!” Walter called. “We're about to begin.”

She ran the last few yards, got her foot in the stirrup and swung onto Tulip's back. The horse snuffled, shivered all over but made no attempt to test the girl's horsemanship.

“It's the first time I ever saw state policemen riding horses instead of prowl cars,” she said.

“I understand Pennsylvania's state police are supposed to be the best-trained force in the world. They learn how to do nearly everything that might come in handy. That chap there, name's Halliwell, told

me that they even have a championship horse team that does nothing but go all over the world from one international show to another. And they win medals more often than not.”

Both of the officers were checking saddle-slung car-bines before starting the day's activities. They looked like capable men, and they made her feel safer by their presence.

“Are you worried?” Walt asked.

“A little.”

“Don't be. With so many guns about, the beast will be in tatters before he could finish half a charge at us.” She saw that not only the police carried rifles. In-deed, only she and Walter were weaponless.

Jenny looked at the sky and wished it were a better day. Low, flat clouds scudded from horizon to horizon, an even gray color that did not threaten rain but promised no sun either. The morning seemed just a bit chilly for a June day. She supposed it would get hot enough shortly. Then they would all be cursing the humidity.

“What are you doing here?” Richard asked, trotting his stallion toward them. He was dressed in black slacks and a black, short-sleeved shirt. “Did anyone tell you to come along?”

It was a rhetorical question. He was not expecting any answer.

“Yes,” she said.

That surprised him. “Who?”

“I did,” Hobarth told Richard before the young man could say anything. “I didn't see that it was dangerous. If we trap the critter, she and I will stay well back from the action.”

“I don't think it's a woman's place,” Richard said.

“And where is my place?” she asked.

He did not reply.

“Oh, look here, Richard,” Hobarth said. “It's mostly a game. You look around at these stalwart men of yours and tell me differently. They're all out for sport. If a single man here is expecting danger, I'd be surprised.”

“I'm expecting danger,” Richard replied.

“Are you really?” Hobarth asked.

Richard looked at Jenny, appeared to be ready to say something, then shrugged. “She might as well stay,” he said. He reined his horse to the right and went back to the front of the column.

Walter leaned across and patted her right hand which gripped the pommel of the saddle.

“He frightens me,” she said, though she had not intended to confide in Walter—or in anyone. Not just yet, at least. She did not want to make a fool out of herself if Richard's rudeness proved to be nothing more sinister than mere bad manners.

“Who? Richard?”

“Yes.”

Hobarth looked after the Brucker heir. “He's very self-contained, I think. Too self-contained. We all need to open ourselves to other people now and again.”

Richard swiveled a quarter turn in his saddle and addressed the mounted men behind him. “We follow the dogs. We stay in a single group unless the dogs split up. Then, Trooper Halliwell, Gabe, Rudy, Sam-son and I will form one party. The rest of you will form the other. Both Dr. Hobarth and Jenny will be in the second group. Neither has a gun or is more than an observer, so look after them if the need arises.”

Everyone gave Jenny and the doctor a covert but still obvious inspection.

Richard turned to Gabe Atchison. “Are they ready?”

“They're more than,” Gabe said.

Richard turned back to his fellow hunters. “And re-member: no indiscriminate shooting. If we spot it, the dogs will run it down and corner it. We'll shoot it like a pig in a pen.”

Several of the men nodded agreement.

Richard looked back at Gabe Atchison. “Okay,” he said. “Turn them loose.”

Atchison yelped something that sounded like it was in a foreign language. The dogs replied. A cater-wauling mass of tails and legs and snouts stumbled over each other and were off—all in the same

direction, across the open fields to the north of the stables, toward the dense woods.

“None of the woods is too thick for single-file horse-manship,” Richard said.

Then they were off.

The thunder of horse's hooves made Jenny's teeth vibrate in her jaw. The ground bounced around them as her mare galloped to keep up with the others.

Walter waved at her and bent toward his own stallion's neck. He was obviously enjoying all this.

She decided she would too. She hugged her mare and let it go full steam toward the shadowy forest at the top of the long, rising field.

The hounds reached the woods and ran parallel to the trees, their noses to the ground, ears flapping, barely managing to keep out from under one another. They might have been a comic sight if their purpose and their prey had not been so grisly. Several times, they stopped to regain the scent, backtracked a few feet, turned and hurried confidently forward, whining and snuffling, now and then pausing to bay in anticipation as they inclosed on their quarry.

For those on horseback, it was alternately exciting and trying. One moment, they would be urging their mounts forward at top speed in order not to lose the hounds. The next moment, the hounds had stopped, forcing the hunters to rein in and mark time until the next frantic burst of forward movement.

Jenny didn't mind the breaks as much as the others, for she was not accustomed to such a furious pace and needed the short moments of rest to regain her breath and reposition herself in the saddle. Too, the pauses gave her and Walter time to talk, exchange brief observations on the hunt and the land. She valued these especially. Every time they spoke and shared a joke, she was less apprehensive about the day ahead and where it might lead them.

After they had run along beside the fringes of the forest for more than five-hundred yards, the hounds surprised the men following them by abruptly taking to the trees and the brush. They were almost instantly gone from sight, leaving mountain laurel trembling in their wake. Howling more excitedly than ever, slaver-ing and yelping, falling over one another in their haste to make contact with their quarry, they somehow still managed not to lose sight of their objective.

The scent had grown stronger; the wolf was nearer!

The state trooper named Halliwell led the procession along a narrow, beaten trail between the elms and the pines. Far ahead, in the dark tunnel of foliage, the last of the hounds was in sight. Halliwell spurred his mount forward. Behind him, the rest of the hunting party followed in single-file as many of the men began unsnapping the flaps of the rifle cases strapped to their saddles.

"It looks as if it might not be a long affair, after all," Walter said in the short moment before it was Jenny's turn to goad her horse into the woods. "Those brutes are yapping right on the heels of something. It might be only minutes now."

Then the horse before her had gone forward, and she had to follow it into the shade of the trees where the sunlight came through in thumb-sized patches and dappled everything beneath the branches. Behind her, Walter Hobarth followed, enjoying himself.

But he had been mistaken. The hunt was not about to be concluded at all. They followed the noisy dogs for another hour, twisting through dangerously narrow forest paths, urging their horses around low-hanging branches, sometimes crossing blessedly open fields only to enter the trees once again at some other point.

Shortly before ten-thirty, they found the cave.

"What is it?" Hobarth asked as he drew his mount even with Jenny's mare, wiping at perspiration that beaded on his broad forehead.

They had come out into a mid-forest clearing some two-hundred yards across and roughly circular in shape. On three sides, there were trees, a few meandering animal trails like the one they had just left. On the third side, to their right, there was a stone wall approximately forty-feet high. Set into this was a wide-mouthed cave that wound backwards into the land, into purple darkness.

"It's a lair of some sort," Jenny said.

"Why are the hounds holding back?"

Jenny pointed at Gabe Atchison who had dis-mounted to talk to his dogs. "He's holding them back, preparing them, I guess."

Atchison ruffled the heads of the dogs, scratched their ears. It was an indication of the enormous control he had over them. They desired nothing more than to invade that cave that stank of their enemy, but they fought down their instincts and listened to their human master. Their eyes rolled in a comic manner. Their tongues lolled, and they pawed the earth desperately. But until Gabe Atchison told them to

go inside and flush the beast out, they would remain here.

Atchison hunkered down.

The two state troopers had their rifles ready. Every-one slowly fanned out in a semi-circle around the cave mouth. Only Jenny and Hobarth hung back, weapon-less.

"It's impossible to know whether or not it's rabid," Trooper Halliwell told them. "But we are going to proceed as if we were certain that it is."

Men nodded.

The gray clouds crowded more tightly into the sky than before, and the land seemed to take on a cape of shadow.

"Okay," Halliwell said to Richard.

"Gabe," Richard said, passing on the permission.

Gabe snapped some brutal, high-pitched command to his dogs and returned, quickly, to his saddle.

The hounds dashed forward, disappeared into the confines of that dank, stone tunnel.

"They don't have any fear at all," Jenny said admir-ingly.

"Oh, yes they do!" Hobarth said. "But with a dog, he never thinks that fear means he should run. Fear makes him attack. If he gets hurt badly, suddenly, then he runs. Dogs are natural optimists. They never seem to see that something bad might happen to them."

She wished she had some of that quality herself, she decided. Of course, the dogs only leaped into trouble because of their optimism. They never learned to avoid trouble altogether by being wary.

Any moment now, they would come roiling out, pursued by or pursuing the wolf.

She gripped the reins tighter.

The ungodly racket inside the cave had all of them on edge. The hounds were no longer mewling in excitement, but were growling with deep, fierce hatred. The scent of their adversary was so strong now that it probably burned their nostrils.

Five minutes after the pack had entered the cave, the sound of fury dropped noticeably, to less than half of what it had been. A minute after that, the first of the dogs came outside, snuffling at the ground, look-ing so unconcerned about the taunt, expectant men on horseback that all of them felt a little embarrassed.

The other dogs came out, one by one.

"What does it mean?" one of the neighbor men asked.

"The wolf's gone," Halliwell said. "A smart bugger if there ever was one. Scooted out of here when it heard us—instead of cooping up and trying to hold us off."

The men began reslinging rifles in cases. They looked like a group of children just arrived at the movie theater on a Saturday afternoon to see a sign in-forming them there would be no matinee this week.

The dogs were reset after they picked up the trail on the other side of the clearing, and the party set out once more.

"Well, maybe it'll be fun after all," Walter said.

Jenny was not sure of that. She guessed she had a different concept of "fun" than men had. But she was determined to stick with it, simply because Walt was staying on and she didn't want to cop out and look like a quitter in front of him.

But later, when they halted the hunt long enough to take lunch on the lawn behind the Brucker mansion, she opted out of the afternoon's trek. She said she had some things planned, some necessary chores, and that she had hoped they would catch the wolf in the morn-ing and she could finish her business in the afternoon. But since they had thus far failed, she would have to forgo the actual moment of triumph.

Walter understood, which was a relief.

Richard seemed delighted that she was staying home and his delight was the one thing that almost forced her to change her mind and continue the hunt.

Later, when the party returned to the main house at seven in the evening, she was grateful that she had not given in to that impulse, for they had found nothing, absolutely nothing, in all those hours.

Despite their lack of success, most of the men were in a very jolly mood, as if they felt the fact of the

hunt was far more important than the outcome of it. They chatted, complained good-naturedly of their riding bruises and sores. And they consumed a frightening amount of Anna's cooking, again, on the tables that had been set up on the lawn. Much speculation concerned the elusive quarry, but none of them seemed impressed by the fact that a killer wolf, possibly rabid, was loose so near their own homes.

The two police officers behaved somewhat differently, more like men who have done a hard day's work without seeing any reward for their labors. They ate quickly, drank sparingly, and left the estate with their horses in a government van, long before the others had even finished eating.

Walter was full of stories concerned with the after-noon's hunt, all of them touched with his special wit and with his perfect sense of comic exaggeration. He kept both Jenny and Cora laughing as he described the antics of the party of hunters. It was far better, Jenny thought, listening to Walt's account of the day than to really have gone along and experienced it.

As usual, Richard spoiled the mood of good humor that had come to prevail. He stepped up beside Hobarth and interrupted one of the doctor's tales. "I fail to find much to laugh at," he said.

They turned and looked at him, saw a weary man with a tight jaw, anger barely controlled. He seemed to have aged ten years in this past week, with dark circles beneath his eyes, his cheeks sunken and his color a rather unhealthy yellow-white.

"We have to laugh at the world," Walt observed, cradling his pipe in the palm of his right hand. "If we don't laugh, it will break all of us."

"There's still a wolf loose," Richard said.

"Perhaps," Hobarth said. "Or, perhaps, all the mucking around with dogs and horses drove it back where it came from, further up into the mountains."

"Wishful thinking," Richard snapped.

"What would you have us do," Walt asked. "We are but two women and a psychiatrist, after all. Shall we go out and challenge the beast to hand-to-hand combat?"

Richard glared at the older man, then stalked into the house. They watched the door close behind him. And as they were ready to look away, he opened the door and stepped onto the veranda.

"Traps," Richard said. "I'll use a thousand traps, if I have to, before I'll give up on it."

With that, he went back into the house and slammed the door so hard that the windows adjacent to it rattled in their frames.

By now, the hunters had been an hour and a half at their meal. The sun was beginning to pull down the traces of light that it had left behind when it had first set earlier. Darkness stained the eastern horizon like spilled ink on a tablecloth. A few of the men were already preparing to leave, making the rounds with goodbyes.

At this moment, with the scene so pastoral and Richard's recent unpleasantness beginning to fade from their minds, everything changed in the instant. They were all, quite suddenly, transfixed, rooted to the earth by one, impossible, cold and maddening sound that swept down on them like the first icy wind of winter.

It was the howl of an angry wolf . . .

That same Tuesday night, Freya slipped quietly into another of her comas. She had entered it, in fact, only minutes before the lone wolf had cried in the deeps of the forest and startled everyone on the lawn. On Wednesday afternoon, according to Walter, Freya again recounted her experiences as a werewolf. Walt made no attempt to use the situation for the sake of humor. This most recent gruesome account had dealt with the murder of Lee Symington rather than with the demise of Hollycross.

Freya remembered—or pretended that she did—at-tacking the veterinarian, going for his throat, tasting him . . .

That evening, Cora returned from a trip to town in her old Cadillac. She brought back to the house all the books on the occult which were carried by the local bookstore and which she did not already own. Immediately after supper, she secluded herself in her room. Light seeped under the door, sent grasping fingers across the dimly lighted upstairs hallway. It burned until the early hours of the morning as she perused the books.

Thursday morning, she was hollow-eyed, gaunt. She moved with a strange, manic hurriedness. Her hands trembled; her eyes seemed never to come to rest on any single object for long.

She harangued them with anecdote after anecdote that she had gleaned from the new books. She told them about Jennie Soriee, the French girl who had been mauled by an invisible beast, before witnesses, time and again, taking bloody wounds without ever seeing her attacker. She told them about Robert Lundquist, the British civil servant of the early 1950s who had been caught robbing graves to taste the flesh of the newly buried. These were stories, Jenny felt, best left unpublished—and certainly best left un-spoken at the breakfast table!

It was terrible to watch Cora growing more and more agitated through the day. It was inevitable, Jenny supposed, that the older woman's nerves would get the best of her in such a hideous atmosphere as this. But, though she loved Cora, she felt a bit ashamed for the woman. It was obvious that not much of Grandmother Leona Brighton's courage had rubbed off on this daughter.

When Cora collapsed of nervous exhaustion immediately after dinner that evening, Jenny was not surprised. Dr. Malmont was sent for, arrived, and se-dated the woman. He ordered Anna to take the occult volumes from Cora's room and dispose of them be-fore morning.

"I don't mind what anyone reads or believes," he said in way of explanation. "But when your beliefs begin to interfere with your good health, it's tune to draw the line."

He and Walter conferred in the library for some fifteen minutes. When Malmont had gone, Walter told her what they had discussed.

"I'm going to persuade Cora to talk with me tomor-row. Before the session with Freya."

"You're going to treat her?" Jenny asked. "She's going to argue about that. She won't believe she needs a psychiatrist. I'm not sure she does, in fact."

"Everyone needs a psychiatrist," Hobarth said.

"Everyone?"

"Yes."

"Even you?"

Walter laughed, took her hand and squeezed it affectionately. "Yes, in fact, even me. None of us es-cape societal pressures as we grow up. And it's some of those pressures which lead to various neuroses."

He was explaining again, rationalizing again. She felt safe and oddly complete, just listening to him.

"But when someone goes to a psychiatrist, it doesn't mean that they are insane or bordering on insanity, you know. Generally speaking, it means they are saner than most—because they have seen they need help and are willing to go obtain it."

"I guess so," she said.

"But I'm not actually going to analyze Cora," Walter said. "That would take a great deal of time, and it should really only be embarked upon later, when she is feeling less pressed to the wall."

“Then I don't understand what you can do for her.”

“Hypnosis,” Walt said, making big eyes and waving fingers before her eyes. “I can delve at least a little into her confusion and use some post-hypnotic suggestions to help her cope with things.” He let go her hand and sat back in his chair. “If I suggest to her that there are easily explained natural causes for all this and that nothing supernaturally evil will happen to her, she can get over some of this fear.”

Could you help me get over mine? Jenny wondered. And are you really sure that all of this business with the wolf is truly not supernatural? If it were not super-natural, wouldn't your hypnosis work better on Freya than it has?

But she did not vocalize any of her doubts. She did not want him to be unsure, pessimistic. She wanted him to maintain his cool, logical approach to life. If he had to ignore some of the questions which had arisen from these strange events, if that was the only way he could maintain his iron grip on the world, then she preferred to let him ignore them.

He must never grow indecisive.

He was a post.

He was a rock.

He was all the things that she, so often, was not, and he was at least one point in existence where the un-known and the unexpected could exert no influence.

He was her haven.

The next day, Friday, Cora had her first session with Hobarth, and Freya's treatment continued. Cora did not seem much better after her hour with the doctor, but Walter assured Jenny it would take a day or two.

Richard was seldom in evidence around the house, rushing here and there on errands of his own concern. When he was about, he sulked and watched Jenny silently. He knew better than to try to corner her again. She had made it quite clear that she wanted no part of him. There had been a nasty scene Wednesday morning which had established a brick wall between them.

Saturday, both Freya and Cora were treated again. And Sunday. But after Freya's turn on the couch in the library, Dr. Hobarth made it plain that he had reached some conclusions which he would like to discuss at supper that evening.

By the time dessert had been taken and second cups of coffee were begun, there was an air of expectancy about the table.

“Well, Walter,” Cora said, “what have you got to tell us?” She seemed tense, prepared for the worst. Despite the treatment Hobarth had given her, she was drawn tight.

Hobarth leaned back, away from the table, got his pipe and tobacco pouch out of a jacket pocket. “She's a very confused child,” he said. “And from what I've learned of her past, her life with her mother, I'd say it's a wonder she isn't worse. Perhaps you're to be congratulated for taking on these children when you did, Cora.”

She nodded.

“Then you've discounted any idea of the supernatural,” Richard said, smiling. It was the first smile, Jenny thought, that he had allowed himself in several days.

“Absolutely,” Walter said.

“But—” Cora began.

“Now, Cora,” Walter said, “you know that I'm right. It's all perfectly logical, all these recent events. The presence of a real wolf, at this time, is a very unfortunate circumstance, nothing more. Certainly, nothing supernatural.”

This time, Cora did not argue, though it was obvious that she required an effort to restrain herself.

“But the curse still enters into our problem,” Walter said. He tamped tobacco into the bowl of the pipe, folded the aluminum-foil pouch and returned it to his pocket. He fished for matches, found them. “Freya believes in the curse, implicitly, and uses it to maintain a fantasy against the world.”

He lit his pipe, drawing quick breaths through the black stem, smoke leaking around his lips, smelling of cherries.

“What do you mean?” Richard asked.

“Freya, because of the years with her mother, views the world as unstable, as fluid, about to change unexpectedly at any moment, often for the worse. Her time here, in this stable home atmosphere, has done a bit to alleviate this neurosis of hers, though certainly not enough. It will take two or three more years, at least, before she'll begin to comprehend that not everyone's life is subject to the jet-set conditions.”

He drew on his pipe a moment, gathering the words he wanted.

Jenny shifted in her chair. It was dark beyond the window. No wolf howled. Irrationally, she thought that once Walter had explained Freya's illness, she would never hear a wolf again.

“Now,” Hobarth continued, “when such a young child tries to cope with a changing world and is defeated by shifting conditions, that child will begin to seek a fantasy to shield him against reality. Schizo-phrenia, it's called. That child will begin to live his fantasy and to consider it every bit as real as actual re-ality. If the fantasy is not taken from him early, he will be institutionalized by adulthood, if not by adoles-cence.”

“But Freya never had this fantasy before she came here,” Cora said. “When she lived with her mother, she was normal. She didn't sleep so deeply, in these comas. All that started here, when she came to the Brucker land, and then only a few months ago.”

“That doesn't discount what I'm telling you,” Wal-ter said. He held his pipe in one hand, stirred his coffee with a spoon in the other hand.

Explain, Walt, Jenny thought. Explain everything to us. Already, she felt silly for ever having believed in the curse.

“The first six or eight months that Freya lived with you, Cora, was the longest period of stability in her life. Before, she had been moved every two or three months, sometimes every two or three *weeks*, jaunting from hotel penthouse to hotel penthouse, from one European capital to another. Her first three months here, she expected to be uprooted at any moment, day or night. But the longer she remained, the more she came to love you and this estate and the stability it offered her. But, too, the more attached she became to this place, the greater her fear. Now, it would be more cruel than ever to be plucked up and deposited else-where. Daily, she expected Lena to arrive for her. The tension built—every bit of it bottled up inside of her. Eventually, she had just been wound too tight. She came across the legend of the family curse, somehow, and absorbed it. It offered an out, a fantasy. In the fantasy, she was a deadly, powerful wolf, a predator that no one could order about. In the fantasy, she was her own master, and Lena could do nothing to her.”

They were all quiet a while.

“The comas?” Richard asked.

“A way to make the fantasy seem real. Closer to ca-tatonia than true coma.”

“And you can make her better, get rid of these delu-sions?” Jenny asked.

“I should hope so!” Walter said. “That's my profes-sion, after all!”

“How?” Richard asked.

Cora said nothing. Though she did not seem as tense as she was a few minutes before, she was still not relaxed.

Hobarth hesitated, drew on his pipe, exhaled the rich smoke. “I have to preface my suggestion with a small explanation of my thoughts on this matter, why they ran the direction they did. I want to make it clear that I am making the recommendations that I am be-cause I am aware of your family's financial holdings. Ordinarily, expensive solutions would be out and a chance for definite improvement in Freya's condition would be almost nil. What I am going to suggest may cost you money, but it will obtain the desired results with the child.”

“Money doesn't matter,” Cora said. “We have more than we know what to do with, and the business and our other stocks are always increasing the family wealth geometrically. Whatever it costs, it can't be too much.”

For once, Richard agreed with his stepmother.

“Freya's case is a difficult one,” Walter said. “I have never seen a patient cling so steadfastly to a delusion, even under hypnosis, as the child clings to hers.” He nodded at Jenny. “You sat in on my

second session with her. Can you explain it to them, what she was like?"

Everyone turned to look at Jenny, making her feel uneasy. But, as succinctly as she could, she told them what she had witnessed in the library that previous Monday afternoon. She tried to convey the horrible conviction with which Freya had spoken of the hours that her soul had inhabited a large, black wolf.

"And it has been like that every session since," Walter told them. "Now and then, I find a chink in her facade that I manage to delve into a little ways. But I am very far behind schedule with her. She's the toughest patient I've had, bar none."

"Do you want to call in other psychiatrists?" Richard asked.

"I don't believe that is necessary or that it would help," Walter said. "Too many cooks spoil the soup, you know, and the same goes for headshrinkers." He was amused at his own use of the slang.

"Whatever you think is best," Cora said.

"I'm not ruling out other doctors. If you would feel better having a second man on the case, it's all right by me. I'm no prima donna who's going to throw a temper tantrum on you. If you know of someone whose opinion you would respect, call him in. Or, I can recommend three or four excellent men in the field who would be willing to consult with me on the case."

"That's not necessary," Cora said.

"Very well," Hobarth said. "Then on to my advice—and I hope you don't find it too bitter a medicine."

A puff at the pipe again.

Smoke exhaled.

He continued: "In the curse, as I have read and understood it, there is mention made that the spell can only be broken if and when this estate and house pass out of Brucker hands. It is said that Sarah Maryanna's father was too jealous of his property and that it was Sarah's special way of punishing him—letting him know that the curse would reign until that precious land was separated from the Bruckers."

Cora nodded in agreement with his interpretation of the story in the old books he had read.

"But how does this have bearing on anything?" Richard asked. "We said the curse was silly; we agreed on that."

"Just this. Freya has heard or read that part of it too, and she sincerely believes that she will be cursed so long as house and land are in the family name. It will be the hardest block of her delusion to break down, since it is one, if not *the*, major underpinning of her developing schizoid personality."

"Sell the house and land?" Richard asked. "That's absolutely preposterous!"

"No, no, you misunderstand me!" Walter said, laying his pipe on a breadplate which was now empty of bread.

Richard had come forward in his chair, as if he would seize the table and overturn it in his anger. His previous dark, glowering mood had returned. Now, he settled back a bit, though he did not relax completely, his entire manner one of a man wary for surprises.

"What *did* you mean, then?" he asked.

"It would help Freya's case enormously if Cora were to take a house in town and move there with the children. A permanent residence could be established, and the children could be told that the estate had been sold. You would keep the estate, of course. Then, if Freya holds true to her delusion, she must realize the curse is broken. She'll lose a grip on her fantasies, and give me room to sneak in and carry them away in further analysis."

"How long would Cora have to live away from the estate?" Richard asked.

"A year. Perhaps two. Then we'll let the child become slowly aware of the fact that the family has never sold the land at all. By then, her hold on the world should be confident enough to let her accept the fact without a trauma."

Richard looked at his stepmother. "What do you think?" he asked. "Would you do it if it's necessary?"

"I don't like the idea of lying to the child," Cora said. "In two years, when she finds out we've lied,

she'll not trust us again."

"She'll understand that we did it for her health," Richard said. "Isn't that so, doctor?"

"Essentially, yes. She shouldn't be too upset with you."

"She will be," Cora said flatly.

"Cora—" Richard began.

"I know children. She'll not trust us after that. And what chance, Walter, is there of a relapse if she discovers we've lied to her?"

He hemmed and hawed, obviously reluctant to answer.

"Is there a chance?" she insisted.

"A very small one."

"How small?"

"One in a hundred that she'd relapse after two years of intense analysis."

"That's too great a chance," Cora said. "If she had a relapse, she'd never trust us, and we'd never get through to her a second time."

"But what else can we do?" Richard asked.

"I'm going to sell the house and the land," Cora said. She spoke firmly, though her lips trembled.

"NO!" Richard shouted it.

"I said that we will, and I am the owner of the estate, Richard. What matters more to you? The child's health or the land?"

"That's unfair!"

"Is it?"

"Cora, this land has been in our family for one and a quarter centuries. More than that. It was my father's house, the house in which I was born. I do not want it sold!"

"I'm sorry if I've caused some bitterness here. That wasn't my intent."

Jenny felt sorry for Walt, for she could see that he felt terrible about the row going on before him, one that he had indirectly instigated while only trying to say what was best for Freya. He was such a gentleman, and he looked aghast at the vehemence building in Richard.

"Richard, don't embarrass our guest. For once." It was a spark of anger that Cora had never shown before.

"I did not recommend sale of the land and house," Walter said. "I urge you to reconsider, Cora. All I asked was that you give the pretense of having—"

"I *will* sell," Cora said. "I had some happy moments with my husband in this house. But, lately, its connotations are far different than they once were. I'll never be able to go into the riding stables without thinking of Hollycross and of Lee Symington."

Walter tried to reason with her, to spell out the less drastic plan in more detail. But her resolve seemed to be strengthened rather than whittled away. Some of her color returned. She looked fresher than she had in the last couple of weeks. Perhaps, Jenny thought, it would be as well for Cora to get out of the house as it would be for Freya.

In the end, the argument flared up between Richard and his stepmother, more violent than before. He grew red-faced, slammed his fist into the table again and again, emphasizing his disagreement. At last, cursing mildly but fiercely, he pushed his chair back from the table and said, "I'll take you to court. I'll try to get them to protect the land and the house for my inheritance. There's little chance, but maybe I can get a temporary restraining order against you."

With that, he turned, bumping the table with his hip. A serving dish, a third full of scalloped potatoes, fell from the table, bounced on the thick carpet and spilled its milky contents over the plush nylon pile. He did not stop to examine the damage he had done, but stalked out of the room.

Cora looked shaken. "Perhaps I'd better give it a little more consideration," Cora said. "A day or two, anyway."

"Oh? I thought you were determined a moment ago."

"Not now."

"Do what you wish, Cora. Don't let me or anyone influence you."

“Two days. Then I’ll make a decision.”

“Your own peace of mind is as important as anything else we’re dealing with here.”

“Two days,” Cora said.

Upstairs, Richard slammed the door to his room. Hard.

The following evening, Freya disappeared.

By mid-afternoon of that day, thunderclouds possessed the sky, great black masses of shifting water vapor that hung low on the mountains and sent thinner fingers of gray fog down to thread the land and wrap it up. Now and then, big water droplets spattered the parched earth, slapped the windows and drummed like countless pairs of tiny feet on the slate roof. But the downpour itself held back, like a seasoned performer waiting for the best moment of the evening to make his entrance on the stage.

Jenny spent the day in her room, reading, except for two excursions into the kitchen to talk with Anna and to run minor raids on the refrigerator. She did her nails, pleased that most of the damage she had done to them was now hardly noticeable.

At half past five o'clock, the storm was imminent, the clouds rolling and very low, the distant rumble of thunder always growing closer. The leaves of the trees whipped back from the branches, undersides showing a lighter green.

Walter went into town to attend to some private business of his own a few minutes after six. He said he would take his dinner in a restaurant. The house seemed lonelier when he was gone, vacant and hollow. Jenny was in a much better temper when he was here, even if she did not encounter him. Just to *know* he was close at hand was sufficient.

At twenty minutes past six, Harold prepared to serve dinner to the twins and went to knock on their door to tell them to come downstairs. It was then that he discovered Freya was not in the bedroom where she should have been cleaning up for dinner. Frank had not seen her since he had gone to take his own shower at a quarter to six.

At six thirty, Harold had finished looking in all the other rooms on the second floor, disturbing both Jenny and Cora, though he did not tell them what the matter was. He had served too many years in domestic situations to be so flighty as to frighten everyone before he had checked everything out himself.

At six-thirty-five, he had checked the third floor rooms, the unused and cobwebbed chambers now turned over to dust and spiders. Freya was nowhere about, and when he came down he took care to lock the door that went up there, for it had not been locked when he had first tried it.

At six-forty-one, he had looked into all the ground floor rooms, had asked Anna if she had seen the child, and went to the front of the house to survey the grounds. Anna had not seen her.

At six-fifty, he was on his way back from the stables. He had still not found any sign of her, and all of the horses were there, including the pony which the children rode.

It was four minutes before seven when he rapped on Cora's door, winced at her exhausted expression when she answered it.

"Yes, Harold?"

"Bad news, Ma'am."

"And that is?"

"Freya's missing."

Shortly thereafter, all six of them were combing the house for places that Harold might have overlooked, closets and pantries. And even though the basement entrance was always kept locked, they went down there, in that place of fruit cellars and cold storage chambers, much of it hewn out of massive blocks of limestone upon which the foundation rested.

They called for her.

She did not answer.

They made Frank list the places on the grounds where the two of them most enjoyed playing together.

She was not to be found in any of these places.

Jenny fervently wished that Walter had not gone to town, that he could be here with them now, offering his intelligent suggestions and making the disappearance seem like nothing more extraordinary than the sun rising in the morning. She needed the aura of stability that he projected. Especially when she

was forced, again and again during the course of the search, into Richard's company.

When they met back at the house after exploring the immediate grounds, thunder filled the sky and the first bolts of white lightning tore open the clouds and stabbed at the earth. It had not yet begun to rain, but the full force of the storm would smash down upon them at any moment.

"Where could she be?" Cora asked. She wrung her hands together, twisting white knuckles through white knuckles.

"The woods," Richard said.

"How do you know?"

"It's the only place left. If she isn't in the woods, then she's off the property somewhere. I can't picture her climbing the fence or the main gate. She's got to be on the estate somewhere."

"But why?" Cora asked. "It makes no sense. Why would she want to run away from us?"

"We'll know when we find her," Richard said. He turned to Harold. "Get my raincoat, boots, and a hat of some sort that will keep the rain off me. I'll start with the woods behind the house."

"Can I help?" Jenny volunteered. Truthfully, she did not want to leave the warmth and safety of the house—especially not in a thunderstorm and especially not to search the dim forests for a child that claimed she was demon-possessed. But, again, Leona Pitt Brighton's teaching got the upper hand of the young woman's fear. Trouble only grew worse if you ran away from it—and only receded when you faced it down.

"We'll see," Richard said. "I'll check out the nearest woods. If she isn't there, if she has run farther than that, we're going to need all the help we can get."

"The police?" Cora asked.

"Very possibly," Richard said. "But let me check near the house, first."

Harold returned with the rain clothes, which Richard quickly put on. He went to the kitchen, with the rest of them following, and out the back door. As he started down the long lawn, the storm broke with much lightning, much thunder, and sheets of rain that nearly obscured him.

They watched him as he skirted the copse of pines. He poked in the clumps of milkweed and mountain laurel, rhododendron and snake vine. Now and then, they could hear the wind-drowned wail of his voice as he called the girl's name. When he was satisfied that she was not to be found along the periphery, he entered the shadows there and was lost to sight.

Lightning struck down and illuminated the lawn. The grass was changed from summer green to a dull gray under that intense glare. The pines threw impossibly long shadows that arced halfway up the lawn, advancing in the instant, gone as the lightning died.

Should she have gone with Richard? Jenny wondered. Should she have insisted? She did not think it was altogether safe for him to go after the child alone. She remembered the telephone conversation, the talk of drugs and killers. Since so much of this ordeal centered around Freya, wasn't it likely that Richard's schemes also revolved around her? If so, would he harm her to achieve his goals, whatever they were?

Why hadn't she told the police about his odd behavior these last couple of weeks? Why had she waited until now, when Freya needed all the friends she could get, to even consider such a thing?

Thunder exploded above the house.

A terrible thought took form in her mind, an idea so evil and unthinkable that it terrified her, galvanized her to the spot so that she could not have taken a step if the roof had been falling in on her.

What if Richard was responsible for Freya's disappearance? What if his nebulous schemes involved harming the child—and she had already suffered that harm?

He might be out there in a great show of concern, getting drenched and cutting himself on the thorned blackberry bushes that grew among the trees—and all the while, it would be a show he was putting on for their benefit. Later, he would point to how concerned he had been, to how he had been first to plunge into the woods in search of the lost child.

She wanted to tell the others, but she didn't dare. She felt, now, more in a house of strangers than at any other point in this visit.

Time passed interminably slowly. Every minute was an hour. She found herself looking at her watch

again and again, every three and four minutes, sure that an eternity had passed, hopeful that it was a reasonable time to expect to see Richard and Freya walking back from the woods. But every time she glanced up from the numerals on the face of that watch, there was no one on the lawn, nothing moving out there but the rain.

They had been at the kitchen windows and door, straining their eyes, for fifteen minutes, when Walter Hobarth entered the kitchen from the front of the house. It was only shortly after eight o'clock.

"The gentleman I went to see wasn't home," he explained as they turned to stare at him, still a little dazed from the events of the last two hours. "I had supper at a restaurant since I had said I was going to. That's a miserable storm!"

"Freya's missing," Harold said.

The rest of them just stared. We look like a bunch of zombies, Jenny thought. And she tried to smile and look more human for him.

"Missing?"

"I went to tell the children supper was ready," Harold explained, "and she was gone."

"What time was that?"

"Twenty after six. I remember it perfectly."

"You've checked the house, of course."

"Right away," Cora said. Her voice trembled, and her eyes were watery. "We should have moved before this, Walter. We should have gotten out of this house this morning, like you said. If anything happens to her, it's all my fault. All mine!"

"Nonsense!" Walter snapped. His tone of voice was so unnaturally sharp and loud for him that he stopped her completely. She looked dazed. "That fault lies entirely with me for not having a solid enough understanding of the child. If I had been on my toes, I might have seen this coming."

"But I'm the one—" Cora began.

"Oh, be quiet, Cora!" he said, pretending to be distracted. "If it were your fault, I'd gladly let you take the blame. I never have believed in babying people."

Jenny saw that he was making a conscious effort to be sharp with Cora and that he had not truly lost his temper. He realized what a state the older woman was in, and he took the surest path to calming her.

"Did you check the stables?" he asked Harold.

Harold said that he had, explained the steps of the search in detail. As he was finishing, Richard returned, having crossed the lawn without being noticed now that their attention was directed elsewhere.

"Not a sign of her," he told them.

"What can we do now?" Cora asked.

"Call the police," Richard said. "And a few of the neighbors. It will be a second boost to their status to be invited here twice in a week's time. The buffoons will get a kick out of it, even if we find her too late."

"Too late?" Jenny asked. She heard her questions as if someone else had asked it, distant and doubtful.

"There's a wolf out there, remember," Richard said.

"Oh, my God!" Cora gasped.

"We haven't heard it for several days," Walter pointed out. "Not since the night of the hunt. It's probably been scared off."

"Do you want to take that chance?" Richard asked. Water pooled on the kitchen tile at his feet.

"Of course not!" Walter replied. "I'm for mounting a search right away. But I don't think we should raise all these unnecessary fears in the women. No purpose served by it."

Richard did not reply to that. Instead, he turned to Harold and rattled off the names of men he wanted called to comprise the search party. Just as he finished the list, Walter said, "Wait a minute! I might have something. Damn stupid of me not to think of it sooner."

"What's that?" Richard asked.

"From the sessions in the library, when Freya's hypnotized. She talks about the limestone sinkholes up in the northeast part of the estate. She says that is where the wolf drags some of its prey and eats it

and where, one day, it'll drag a man and devour him. It's all very gory and unpleasant, but she believes it."

"She never told *me*."

It was a small voice, piped up from the corner next to the ultraviolet wall oven. Frank stood there, small and frightened.

"What did you say, darling?" Cora asked.

"She never told me about the sinkholes, about the wolf liking to go there."

"Maybe she forgot, dear," Cora said. She crossed the room to him, stooped and hugged him to her.

"She told me everything. She wouldn't have forgot-ten to tell me that," he said, starting to bawl now.

"More than likely, she didn't forget," Walter said. "You see, this came out under hypnosis. It was probably a subconscious fragment of her systematic delusions, one she was not consciously aware of to any extent. Therefore, she couldn't have told him."

"I'll go up on horse," Richard said. "It's half an hour walking, less than a third of that on horseback."

"I'll go with you," Hobarth said. "It'll take two of us to search all those holes and cavelets."

"Me too," Jenny said.

"Definitely not," Walter said. "It's pneumonia weather. "Richard and I can manage it alone."

"Come on then," Richard said.

"I'll call Malmont and have him out here to treat the child," Walter said. "I'll explain the situation so he knows what we'll need. Then I'll run upstairs and get my boots. You go ahead, and I'll follow you."

Richard stepped outside, closed the door and went around the house toward the stables.

Walter telephoned Dr. Malmont and briefly explained the nature of the excitement. He hung up, took the stairs two at a time, found his boots after a minute or two of searching for them in all the wrong places, and came back down, buttoning his raincoat.

"Harold, do you know if Richard had a gun with him?"

"What will you need a gun for?" Cora asked, hugging Frank to her skirts as they all stood in the front hallway.

"Just in case," Walter said.

"The wolf isn't—"

"I didn't say it was."

"He doesn't have one on him now," Harold said. "But he keeps a rifle in the stable, in a case beside Tulip's stall. He'll more than likely think of it. If he doesn't, take it for him when you follow. The shells are in a box in the metal drawer below the case."

"Good enough." He turned and walked to the front door, opened it and let in the whipping, booming, lightning-shot storm.

Without thinking, without concern for propriety, Jenny dashed forward and hugged the doctor. "Be careful, please. Oh, please be as careful as you can out there!"

"I will," he said. He did not seem surprised at her show of affection. "And I'll be back, don't worry."

He pulled himself free of her arms, stepped through the door into the ram, closed the door and hurried down the drive toward the stables.

It was only then that she realized what she had felt, pressed against her body, when she had hugged Walter. In the right pocket of his plastic raincoat. Hard and deadly. A pistol . . .

For a long while, Jenny pondered the significance of her accidental discovery. She stood by the windows of the front room, watching the rain and the driveway which receded into darkness and mist. The others waited in the kitchen, drinking coffee and offering each other consolation. She chose to be here rather than with the others, for she needed time and quiet to think.

When they had gone on the organized hunt for the wolf the previous Tuesday, Walter had not been carrying a gun. He said that he would not own one, that he detested violence.

But now he had a gun.

Where had it come from? Had he kept it here these past two weeks, in a suitcase, ready if he needed it? If so, why?

Through the billowing layers of rain, a squirrel scampered over the lawn at the edge of the front drive, found its way up an elm tree. Its fur was wet and plastered to it.

She could not imagine why Walter would lie about such a thing. And she doubted, very much, that he would be able to lie about anything at all. He was just not that sort of man.

Then he must have gotten the gun this evening, when he was in town. That was it, of course. He had brought it back with him because—

—Because he too had reason to distrust Richard!

That had to be it! It was not her overworked imagination which ascribed unpleasant motives to her cousin. Walter had watched and listened for two weeks, and he, too, had begun to suspect something dangerous in the young Brucker heir's personality.

But what had he seen or heard that had led him to such a drastic step as the purchase of a gun? The decision to arm himself could not have come easily, for it went against all his basic beliefs and moral attitudes. To have gone against the gentleness in his own character, he would have had to be quite frightened of Richard—and he would have to know something ugly that was all but conclusive proof against her cousin. He was not the sort to act on a whim or a hunch.

The more she thought about the new edges put on this situation, the more frightened she became. Why on earth, if he so mistrusted Richard, had Walter gone out there, in this storm? He had asked Harold if Richard had taken a gun. He obviously was worried that Richard might have the nerve to use it against a human being.

Did Richard realize that Walter had caught him in something, knew what his role in these strange events was? And would he really commit murder to prevent Hobarth from spreading the word?

It seemed impossible to conceive of that. Yet there had already been one death. Though Richard had seemed to consider Lee Symington on his side, who was to say that he had not had something to do with that? And where murder had already been committed, what man would stop at adding to a crime that was as great as it could be to begin with?

That thought decided her. She left the front room, and took the main stairs three at a time, hurried along the upstairs hallway and into her room. Two minutes later, she came down the steps again, struggling into a raincoat, knee-high black vinyl boots on her feet, a plastic rainscarf covering most of her head and tied under her chin. At the front door, she paused, thought of telling the others what she was doing and why. But she worried that they might detain her and actually forbid her to go. She opened the door and stepped onto the front stoop.

Rain stung her face, pinged at her hands like countless thousands of shot pellets.

The wind was warm and made her perspire under the heavy raincoat. It curled the water under her collar, dampened the neck of her blouse.

She ran along the macadam drive, wondering if she could get to the limestone sinkholes quickly enough—and, incidentally, wondering just what she could do when she *did* get there. She didn't have a gun, and she knew she couldn't use one even if her pockets were full of them. All she could do was hope to reach the sinkholes before Walter. With two of them there, Richard would have a much slimmer chance of pulling anything and getting away with it.

The stables loomed ahead, to the left.

Lightning shattered the velvet blackness.

The rain refracted, for a split second, the unearthly brilliance.

She shivered, but kept moving. Leona Brighton would not have condoned cowardly behavior.

Be careful, Jenny. Be careful . . . the dead voices seemed to be telling her.

She reached the stables a moment later and ran through the open arch into the musty, dry interior where a single electric bulb burned in the center of the narrow aisle. She was breathing very hard, and she took a moment to rest and wipe the beaded rain from her face.

The place smelled of hay and grain, sweet and pleasant, especially on such a night as this.

First, she went to the rifle case next to the second stall on the right, opened the plyboard door. There wasn't a gun there. There were no bullets in the drawer beneath it.

Perhaps Walter had taken the weapon, though she doubted that. If he already had a pistol of his own, that would be sufficient. He had only asked Harold about guns in order to know whether Richard was armed. And Richard more than likely was . . .

The two stallions were gone. Only Tulip was still in the barn. She swung her pretty head over the halfdoor of her stall and looked beseechingly at Jenny, as if she too wanted to go on this late-night excursion which oc-cupied everyone else so suddenly. Or, conversely, per-haps that pleading expression meant that she did not want to be ridden in such foul weather. Whatever it meant, Jenny did not waste any more time in saddling the mare and slipping the reins and bit on her.

Tulip snuffled.

A deafening boom of thunder swept in from out-side.

Tulip whinnied and danced slightly onto her hind feet

Jenny patted her shoulder and spoke softly, reassur-ingly. Tulip slowly calmed, and Jenny mounted her, took the reins, and urged the horse down the aisle and out the door of the stables.

The horse started at the heavy rain which pum-meled them, but came under the rein fairly easily. Jenny sat low, bent along the mare's neck, all but hug-ging her so that she could whisper reassurances if the thunder should again frighten the animal.

And they were off.

Tulip sensed her master's fear. She maintained a stiff, awkward gallop which was tainted with reluctance. Jenny might know *where* she was going, but she had no idea what she might find when she got there . . .

Since Walter had ridden over the Brucker estate only once and had not explored it in detail on horse-back as Jenny had, he would take the route to the limestone caves which he would remember having taken with the others during the previous Tuesday's wolf hunt. It was the longest way about. She felt that she had a very good chance of heading him off by as much as five minutes—even considering the several minutes he had gained on her by his earlier departure from the stables.

She whipped the reins lightly, continually, spurring the horse on. She slapped at Tulip's sides and encour-aged her mount to run faster.

She did not worry about her nails. Not at all.

Fortunately, the route she had in mind was not sprinkled with trees as was so much of the Brucker land. If it had been, she could not have maintained this furious pace. The clouds obscured the summer moon and placed the land under a heavy blanket of darkness that was all but impenetrable. She could see only a hundred or a hundred-and-fifty feet ahead. That gave her too little safety margin if a willow should loom up in their path.

Tulip whuffed and snorted.

Jenny snapped the reins again.

She was almost two-thirds of the way to the sink-holes, certain of reaching them before Walter, when the sky split open under the prying wedge of a lightning bolt. A clap of horrendous thunder seemed to lift the earth and throw it down.

Tulip bellowed.

“Whoa!”

The mare bucked, came to a full stop and leaped into the air, rising until she stood only on her hind feet; her great bulk was almost perpendicular to the earth.

“No!” Jenny shouted.

She hung on.

A second explosion of thunder hammered across the open land while lightning spasmed through the clouds.

Tulip came down—only to go up once more. This time, she was quicker and more violent than before, wrenching her broad shoulders. She snuffled and whinnied, tossed her proud head back and forth as her terror swelled beyond reasonable bounds.

Jenny lost her grip.

She felt one foot tear loose of the stirrup. Franti-cally, she wrenched her other foot free as well, lest she be trapped by it and dragged over the rugged terrain. She felt herself slipping off the saddle and could not manage to maintain a hold on the horn. She went over Tulip's flank and came down hard against the earth, the wind knocked out of her, pain flashing for a mo-ment in her left thigh.

Somehow, she managed to roll in order to avoid the viciously stamping hooves that tore up the sod only inches from her head. Dirt and grass sprayed over her as Tulip punished the earth for what the sky had done to her.

Then there was no more lightning or thunder. There was only a very black sky and the hissing curtain of the rain.

Tulip galloped ahead, still frightened and searching for shelter, though some of her temper seemed to have improved. Two hundred feet ahead, she ambled to a halt and looked around, perplexed, as if she could not remember what she had been running from. She whin-nied loudly, shook her head, flopping her mane from side to side. Then she examined the earth and began chewing at the long, fresh sprouts of grass.

Carefully, Jenny got to her feet. She gasped for breath until the pain in her stomach was gone, then straightened up. She tested the sore spot on her thigh and decided that nothing had been broken. She walked about in a circle, swinging her arms, flexing her legs until circulation had returned everywhere and until she no longer felt the pain very much.

Don't mount the horse again, the voice warned her.

But she had to.

It could have killed you.

But Richard might kill Walter before she could get there. And though Tulip was an unknown factor now, and though Jenny always tried to avoid the unknown, she had to go on. Walter was the post, the haven, the fixed point against which the unknown and the unexpected had no power. Without him, she would be cast back into a world of chaos and continuous fear.

She walked forward, speaking softly and sweetly to the mare. She smiled and felt foolish coaxing a horse as she might a child, but she did her best to make the animal feel at ease with her. She had to recover Tulip no matter what the cost.

The mare watched her out of wide, white-rimmed eyes. The beast had a mouthful of grass and was slowly, methodically, grinding it down. Her lower jaw moved sideways against her upper in a comical sort of way.

Jenny did not feel like laughing, however. She approached warily, praying there would be no more violent displays of nature to spook the mare. She continued to talk, meaningless phrases, all spoken in a tone of reassurance and warmth. Every minute that passed like this, Walter was closer to a confrontation with Richard Brucker.

When Jenny was within fifteen feet of her, the mare turned and trotted a dozen yards farther along, watched the girl a moment, then bent her head to the task of pulling up more grass and grinding it with her large, square teeth.

Jenny was angry, but kept her temper under wraps. A show of fury would only serve to scare the horse away again. She continued her approach, talking softly, quietly, softly, quietly . . .

This time, Tulip remained still, watching.

She touched the mare's neck. The horse shuddered but did not pull away. For a full minute, Jenny continued petting her and nuzzling her, digging fingers behind the animal's ears and scratching there.

Slyly, she worked her way to the mounting side, stroked the animal's flanks, then carefully climbed into the saddle.

Tulip made no move to throw her off.

She gathered up the reins, pulled the horse around and set off in the direction of the sinkholes. She continued murmuring to the horse and soothing it lest another clap of thunder should undo her again.

The last leg of the journey was through a forested area where they were forced to maintain a less strenuous pace. At least, Jenny thought, the heavy canopy of elms would cut down on the sound of thunder and would all but eliminate the bright lightning.

As they covered this last quarter of a mile, she had time to think, and she thought—of course—about Walter Hobarth. She realized that, while he had been giving her hints, these past couple weeks, that he was more than a little interested in her, she had done nothing to show him that the affection was reciprocal. She had gone to her room each night, adding up the debits and the credits of the day, wishing against reason that he would come to feel about her as she felt about him—but she had done nothing to show him that she felt the way she did! How stupid!

Fortunately, this evening when he had been ready to leave the house to follow Richard to the limestone caves, her natural reticence had broken down and she had hugged him. She had been afraid that he was not going to return, and that fear had forced her feelings into the open. Thank God for that much! If she had not hugged him, she would not have felt that pistol in his pocket, and she would never have realized that something unpleasant was going to happen before the night ended.

They broke out of the trees in the next moment and felt the renewed lash of the rain which had been momentarily softened by the branches of the elms. Ahead was the nightmarish landscape of the sinkholes. Only a few scrub brush and locust trees managed to root and survive in the forbidding terrain. Even they were unhealthy looking, scraggly, their twisted limbs like grasping claws, undecorated by any form of blossom and with a low leaf yield. Masses of smooth, round limestone thrust up in pillars and domes. At other places, the land fell abruptly away into black caverns. There was little grass, and what there was of it was gray-green and wiry.

A good fifty yards to her left, a stallion was tethered to the low limb of an elm tree which edged the barren land. She did not know whether it was the horse that Richard had ridden or whether Walt had already arrived. But, seeing no other horse about, she preferred to think that she had somehow still managed to arrive before the doctor, though that seemed impossible after the long delay when Tulip had thrown her.

She dismounted and tied Tulip's reins to the trunk of a young tree nearby, then walked forward into the foreboding limestone miasma ahead. She had gone only a hundred feet when Richard appeared around the bulk of a gray stone pedestal some ten feet wide and eight high.

"Jenny?" he asked, stopping to look at her more closely.

Her heart beat faster. She could not see a rifle, but she knew he might have disposed of it if he had already used it.

"Where's Walter?" she asked.

"Haven't seen him."

"You're sure?"

"I assure you," he said, "I'd remember if I saw him or not." His tone was sarcastic. Then he took command of the situation away from her. "Just what are you doing out there?" he asked.

For a moment, she did not answer. She could not answer, for her fear was great enough to interfere with the quickness of her wits.

In a moment, he closed the space between them and stood before her, the rain running from his pale face, droplets of water beaded on the dark lashes above his dark eyes.

"You shouldn't be out on a night like this. Did any-one come with you?"

"No," she said. "Why are you here?"

Perhaps it was the gloomy atmosphere of the storm or the positively hellish landscape in which they stood.

Perhaps it was his eyes, seeming to glint from within, boring at her, demanding. Perhaps the accident with Tulip had affected her more than she had realized, had undermined her self-control. Whatever she felt, it drove her to say things to him which she had dared not say earlier, even in the warmth and relative safety of the mansion.

"I don't trust you," she said.

"What?"

"I don't think anyone should trust you. I think you or someone you hired is behind these things. I think it was you or someone you hired who killed Lee Symington." There! The worst was out. If he was going to try to protect himself now, she would have to try to run.

"You're crazy!" he said. "I had a solid alibi. You heard the police say so themselves!"

"An alibi can be built beforehand," she said. "Who were you talking to on the telephone that day I overheard you? Who was the killer you were talking about? The person on the other end of that line—or you yourself, Richard?"

"So this is why you've been acting so strangely!"

She backed a step. "I think I have reason to act strangely, if that's what you want to call caution. I don't think it's the least bit strange to be wary of you, Richard."

He laughed. He actually broke out laughing!

It was worse, in a way, to see his face crinkle in mirth than to see rage and hatred there. She had been expecting the former, counting on it, in fact. This was completely unexpected. But, then, Richard exemplified the unexpected, the abrupt and the unknown. Could he possibly be mad? Why else would he react to such accusations with laughter?

"Stop it!" she said.

He continued to laugh, though he was not laughing as hard now. He wiped tears off his cheeks. Some of his color had returned to the deathly pallor of his cheeks.

"Please, Richard," she said.

"I can explain all those things," he told her. "I can explain them easily. You told me before that you overheard me on the telephone and saw me sneaking to the stables. But I never once thought you'd

jump to the conclusion that I was the villain in all of this!"

"What other conclusion was there?" she asked. She felt foolish now, though still wary. What on earth did he mean?

"And I made stupid assumptions too," he said, no longer laughing, but smiling at her as he had that first day when he had picked her up at the terminal. "I thought you were mixed up with whoever's behind all this. I thought you were part of it. What other reason would you have for eavesdropping on my phone conversation—or for watching me from your window when I was trying to sneak to the stable?"

"That was accidental."

"But listening to me on the phone wasn't."

"By then I thought you were mixed up in some-thing," she said, trying to justify herself, though she couldn't see why she should have to. He still had to explain *himself!*

"The only thing I'm mixed up in is an effort to pre-serve this land and the house which has been in my family for more than one and a quarter centuries. I don't want it all leveled to serve as a complex of res-taurants and motels and gas stations for some lousy super-highway interchange!"

She said nothing. She felt as if the earth had heaved up beneath her. The old feeling of instability returned, as bad as it had been before she had ever met Walter Hobarth and gained solace from the sweet reason of his carefully applied logic.

"Do you want me to explain away all these things you saw and heard?" Richard asked. His gentle, concerned manner was there again. He was the Richard she had not seen in more than two weeks.

"Yes," she said quietly.

Behind them, the horses whinnied.

Richard looked stunned.

Jenny turned to see what he was staring at.

Walter Hobarth stood at the edge of the trees, sev-enty feet away. He held a pistol in his right hand, and he appeared ready to use it. Slung carelessly under his other arm was the rifle he had taken from the stables. Yet, it was neither of these formidable weapons which electrified Jenny, nailed her down with terror. It was, instead, the huge wolf that sat docilely by Walt's side which filled her with dread.

Its eyes were yellow-red and gleamed brightly. It watched Richard and her with morbid fascination, gauging the strength of its potential victims.

Walter Hobarth patted the wolf's head with his gun hand, then stood erect again and laughed. It was a much nastier laugh than Richard's . . .

Fool, fool, fool! she cried silently. She had been such a fool, directing her affection toward the wrong person, turning with suspicion on the only one who was innocent of any wrongdoing. And what made it all worse was that Hobarth had used her, had played on her sympathies with a calculated ruthlessness. Fool, fool! She was so angry she wanted nothing more than to scream and kick and bite and tear at things with her hands.

Yet, despite this inwardly directed fury, despite the certainty of her blindness and of Walter's guilt, she did not want to believe that she had been so misled. Surely Walter couldn't be responsible for all this. Surely he could not cold-bloodedly murder a man, as he had Lee Symington. He was gentle and sweet and so very, very reasonable!

"You," Richard said. He was unable to believe it himself, as dumbfounded as Jenny was.

"Looks that way," Hobarth said. "But I thought you were beginning to suspect me, Richard. I'm disappointed that you were so completely fooled. Of course, that says a lot for my acting abilities. And I thank you for the indirect compliment."

"It's your wolf?"

"Not a wolf," Hobarth said. He was pointing the pistol at them now, though the beast at his feet was enough to keep them from fleeing.

"But it is the killer," Richard said.

"Oh, yes, of course it is. But it's only part wolf, a very small part—and mostly German shepherd. It makes a fine combination that submits well to the proper training."

"Training to kill?" Richard asked. He had pulled Jenny to his side where he could thrust her behind him if necessary. She had come meekly, still confused by this abrupt alteration in circumstances.

"What else would the United States Army want with such an animal?" Hobarth asked.

"Army?"

"I was in Vietnam," Hobarth said. "Eighteen months." He reached down and patted the dog's head. He was not finished speaking yet. He clearly enjoyed telling them everything they wanted to know. And that could only mean that he never expected them to be able to pass on the information to anyone else. Their only chance was that his egotism, his need to in-form them about how clever he had been, would give them time to trip him up somehow.

But how?

Hobarth looked back at them. "I wasn't out in the field, of course. I was a psychiatrist in a second-line hospital. I treated shell-shock, paranoia, all the mental hazards of war. One day, a soldier brought Brutus, here, into the hospital. The dog had taken shrapnel in its shoulder and flank on the left side. The soldier was attached to it and wanted us to save the dog. But it came in when forty-eight wounded men did, and the doctors preferred to let it die and treat the men in-stead. Since I couldn't touch the men, I had time on my hands, and I used my medical knowledge to patch Brutus up."

Brutus growled, as if in approval of the story.

"I kept him in my own quarters. Ordinarily, that would be dangerous with such an animal, trained to obey one master. But he was so weak from his wound and from loss of blood that he couldn't have harmed a mouse. I had to feed him with a baby bottle for the first three days before he could even lap up meat pap on his own. It was two weeks before he was limping around regularly and two weeks after that before he would have been up to sinking teeth in anyone. Fortu-nately, as it turns out now, his master, the soldier who brought him in, was killed two days after the dog was wounded. Brutus never saw him again and, perhaps, thought his master abandoned him. But I was handy, easing his pain and feeding him, and he began to look to me as his only friend. By the time he was healthy enough to return to battle, he wouldn't leave me. He had been trained to obey one master, and when his al-legiances had to be changed, he switched them to a single man, me. I brought him home with me after I untangled the red tape. He makes a fine watchdog. And, as of late, he has made a fine business asset."

Hobarth smiled.

It was that same, unpleasant smile.

“But why?” Richard asked. “For God's sake, man—”

Hobarth interrupted. “Several reasons why. First, Dr. Malmont knew that Cora was an occultist, reading all those books about the supernatural and reincarnation—that whole bit. He—”

“Wait,” Richard said, shocked again. “Malmont is in this with you?” Before Hobarth could reply, he answered his own question. “But of course he is! He recommended you!”

“Please allow me to finish,” Hobarth said.

“Go on.”

“Malmont told me that there was a family curse and that the quickest way to reach Cora would be through that. Brutus, here, would work out nicely as the mysterious, deadly wolf roaming the estate grounds. Malmont was certain Cora would eventually gladly sell the land at the slightest suggestion that it would solve her problems. And but for you, that prediction would have held true.”

“But how did you use the dog to kill Symington?” Richard asked, curious but also stalling for time. “You were not in the stables.”

“True enough. But when I learned Symington was here, I knew you had found something interesting about the horse's corpse. I went up to the cave where I was keeping Brutus and brought him around to the main gate where Malmont was waiting as instructed. I had called him, told him Symington was coming here. He had gone to Symington's house on some pretense and managed to come away with the man's hat. I let Brutus take the scent and spent some time instructing him so that he would know he was to kill the owner. Then I left him with Malmont. He wouldn't obey the doctor, but he knows him too well to attack him or openly disobey him. After that, I returned to the house and established an alibi. Malmont waited until Symington had been in the stables some fifteen minutes, then popped in to visit. He found that Symington had found dog hairs while combing Hollycross' stall and that he might be able to build the species from laboratory analysis. He went outside and let Brutus out of his car. Brutus did the rest and came back to the car. Later, I collected him from the good doctor.”

“Very neat.”

“Thank you.”

Jenny felt as if she were losing her mind. Things like this did not happen in a sane world. People were not put into such horrible positions by people as devils and cunning as Walter Hobarth. She must be imagining all of it. At the same time, she knew that she wasn't imagining a second of it, that—unfortunately—such things did happen to people and happened to them all the time. Wasn't Leona Brighton dead? Weren't her parents dead as well? Wasn't that enough proof of the world's brutality?

“Were you responsible for—for Freya's condition?” she asked him. She hoped he would say no, that he would not compound his already heinous crimes by admitting to the ruthless use of a child to obtain whatever it was that he was after.

But he said yes.

“Yes. Though that was Malmont's side of the game.”

“But how could you insure her coma at the proper time?” Richard wanted to know.

“Malmont diagnosed a vitamin deficiency in the child,” Hobarth said. “He prescribed packets of vitamins which he supplied. Each vitamin was nestled in a plastic slot in a card that held thirty, and each day was marked below the pill. Certain tablets contained a strong sedative. The only times the system did not work was when, rarely, Harold or Anna forgot to give Freya the pill. Always, they gave it to her the next morning—thus her mid-morning comas that broke the usual pattern.”

“That's cruel!” Jenny said.

Hobarth laughed. “The stakes are too high, in all this, to allow sentiment to intrude, my dear.”

“Where is Freya now?” Jenny asked.

“It's a shame we had to go to such extravagant lengths,” Hobarth said. “But we needed to have her disappear, so that Cora would finally be pushed to the point of selling. As I treated her for her nervous condition, I used post-hypnotic suggestions to insure that she would favor selling the house and grounds. But when she saw how strongly you disliked the idea of selling the homestead, Richard, she shook off some of the demand those post-hypnotic suggestions made on her. She must love you a great deal. Only

strong emotion could have helped her stave off the desires I helped nourish in her.”

“And Freya?” Richard asked.

“I had reached the point, in our daily sessions, where I could instantly hypnotize her. I went to her room, shortly before six, found her alone, spoke the triggering words, and put her in a trance. It took her out of the house, unseen, to my car. She is with Dr. Malmont. He knows the phrase that will bring her around, and he will use it just as he reaches the house. He'll tell everyone he found her outside the main gate, delirious. For good measure, he has a small bottle of blood, rabbit's blood, which he'll smear her with.”

“You're mad!” Jenny shouted.

Hobarth frowned for the first time. “Mad? I fail to see that. I have an important goal to reach, a sensible goal. If my means of attaining it are unconventional, that doesn't mean I am insane.”

“You want that land,” Richard said.

“Every inch of it,” Hobarth affirmed.

“But why, man?” Richard asked. “Whatever you could gain on it—none of that would pay for murder, for all the other things you've done. We'd ask a stiff price, knowing this will be developed land soon, worth a good bit. Your eventual profit would not be that great.”

Hobarth laughed. “Again, I am more clever than you think.” It seemed that he had to prove to them that he was a formidable man, a man of wit and great cunning. “We would never have embarked on so complicated and potentially a dangerous plan if we expected only moderate profits. But it seems that a friend of Malmont's, a business executive in Boston, called the good doctor some months ago and asked him to look around for a small farm near the new interstate exchange and to negotiate purchase of it. When Malmont found a farm for sale, he thought the price exorbitant. He phoned his Boston friend and told him that the going price was too high to allow a profit, even considering how land values would soar once the road was completed. But his friend snapped the land up, just the same. This made Malmont suspicious. In time, he forced his friend to tell him that a major resort-center hotel chain has been cautiously negotiating purchase of the Briaryoke Mountain and surrounding foothills since late last year. They plan to install a luxury ski resort with mineral water facilities, a lake and beach to permit year-round operation. This area will become one of the largest resort centers in the United States. Land tripled in value when the exchange was announced. But when this news breaks, shortly, it will skyrocket. If land is worth five thousand an acre now, it will be worth thirty thousand an acre then, along access roadways, at least. Malmont and I, buying through a third party—the man constantly bothering Cora with offers, by the way—stand to realize anywhere from one and half to two million profit inside of a year.”

Richard whistled. Whether it was an involuntary reaction or whether he had planned to make it as part of some plan to put Walter off balance, Jenny did not know.

“Yes,” Hobarth said. “Not as large as the Brucker fortune, perhaps, but not a bad second to it, I suppose.”

“But what about that horrible session I sat through, when Freya told you in detail about what it was like to be a werewolf and what the wolf wanted to do next?” Jenny still felt as if she must prove that Hobarth was not the only evil afoot—and that, therefore, he might be somehow good as well as bad. Desperate reasoning, but all she was capable of at the moment.

He laughed, enjoying himself. “I implanted all those notions in her head the day before, when she was tranced.”

“That's disgusting!” she hissed.

“You're letting sentiment creep in again,” Hobarth said. “You'd never make a good businessman.”

“Or madman.”

Again, the smile disappeared. For a moment, he looked at her with deadly intent. Then he shrugged his shoulders. “Think what you wish,” he said.

How could she have thought that she loved him? How could she ever have been fooled by a man such as this? She saw that his gentility, his surface good humor, was only a thin veneer. Below all that crust, he was evil as a man could be. What had distracted her from those qualities and had lead her to believe that he was so saintly?

Lightning cracked across the sky.

The horses stamped the ground, restless.

To think that she had worried what he would think of her, that she would not look pretty enough to suit him or talk intelligently enough to engage his interest. She had worried that he would notice her chipped nails. And all the time, she had not seen that he was far worse; he was a cold, cruel operator intent only on his own benefit. Where had her danger alarm been all that while? Why hadn't the voices of the dead warned her about him with the same clarity they used when telling her to be cautious of Richard?

"I see that you are wrestling with yourself," Ho-barth said, watching Jenny closely. "May I analyze you?"

"Why? What's the point? We're going to be chewed up by that wolf of yours or shot with your gun, aren't we?"

"With Richard's gun," he said. "I'd prefer to use that if I have to. Make the police less suspicious. But I doubt Brutus will leave anything alive for the gun to handle." He petted the dog again. "But I would derive great pleasure from analyzing you."

Jenny looked at Richard.

Richard said, "Go on, then."

Hobarth smacked his lips. He looked as if he wanted his pipe, but he didn't want to put down either gun to get it. He advanced across the open space, the dog hanging close at his side, never taking its eyes from them. They were absolutely deadly eyes, the bloodlust visible in them. Thirty feet from them, he stopped, brought the dog to heel.

"I know very little of your background," Hobarth went on. "Just that your parents died in an automobile accident when you were young and that your grand-mother died suddenly less than four months ago. But, watching you and knowing that little bit, I think I can see some classic patterns of mental behavior in you."

He waited for her to respond.

"And?" she asked. Now she was more frightened than ever. She did not think she wanted to know about herself, to peek into her own mind and see how it worked. But she had to buy time for them.

"You are desperate for stability—in much the way Freya was. And she was. I didn't lie about that part of my analysis. I just used the truth to bolster the places where I had to stretch the truth. Anyway, you crave stability, security, safety. You verge on mild paranoia, always looking for some evil force that is about to do you in."

"And you're that evil force," she said.

"But only because your paranoia and your need for security helped things work out that way. You see, you were afraid of Richard because you couldn't understand him. It is the same reason why you are afraid, to one degree or another, of everyone about you. And until you realize the source of your problem, you'll always be that way. Because intelligent, thinking men and women are always impossible to completely understand. You could know Richard a lifetime and still be surprised by him. The only people you will make friends with are dense people, people with so little intelligence and wit that you can understand everything about them and feel safe. Or . . ."

"Or?" Jenny prompted.

"Or you'll make friends with people who wish to deceive you. If someone plays a role, puts on a simple facade and becomes a stereotype, you'll think you know them, and you'll be friends with them. I am the perfect example of that. You thought I was the nice, understanding, omniscient psychiatrist right off the television tube. You befriended me. I think you even fell in love with me. Just a bit? I thought so! I was playing a role that offered you security and contentment. You accepted me quickly."

"That's the complete analysis?" Jenny asked. She had been shaken by what he had said, right down to the last cell in her body. All of it had been so painfully true.

"Pretty much, yes. You should always remember that the unexpected is only unexpected because it manages to sneak up on us in some familiar and reassuring guise. When you think you know someone perfectly—that's when you should begin to suspect that they aren't being completely honest with you."

“Too bad she won't have a chance to use your advice, Hobarth,” Richard said.

He still held Jenny under his left arm. He felt warm and solid beside her. She was humiliated to know that she had thought so wrongly of such a good man as he—but at least, before the end, she stood corrected.

“Yes, isn't it?” Hobarth asked. He knelt beside the dog and hugged its burly head.

“Look,” Richard said, “you know you won't get away with this. Two more bodies will have the police in here again.”

“And all they'll find are two corpses badly mauled by a wolf. The same wolf who has already given the area so much trouble.”

Brutus was licking his chops and nuzzling his mas-ter with all the cuddly affection one might expect in a house dog. Nevertheless, he would tear them apart when the time came.

“There's going to be a hunt,” Richard said. He squeezed Jenny more tightly, reassuringly.

“I expect so,” Hobarth said. He was growing bored with them. He was preparing to give the dog its com-mand.

“You don't get my point,” Richard said.

The doctor looked up. “And what is your point?”

“They won't find a wolf.”

“Why should that upset them? They didn't find a wolf the first time, either.”

“Three will be dead now. They'll make an all-out effort, over the entire area, until they have a dead wolf. And if they don't find a wolf, they're going to start thinking about the possibilities—and someone will remember that dogs sometimes are trained to kill.”

“It's academic anyway,” Hobarth said. “Because they will find a wolf when they have the next hunt.”

Richard looked surprised. “They will?”

“Of course. We've already considered this. Malmont has access to laboratory animals. He has already obtained a wolf for us. Yesterday, in fact. We only need turn it loose on the grounds tomorrow before the hunt. Once it's been killed and there are no more maulings, everyone will be happy.”

The inhumanly methodical planning was almost too much for Jenny to bear. They were going to die here, and they had no hope of escaping or even of leaving a clue to avenge their own deaths.

Hobarth began speaking to the dog.

It turned its glare on them, bared its teeth, snarled deep in its throat as it considered them.

Richard began pulling her backwards across the rough terrain. But they had only put another fifty feet between them and Hobarth when the doctor gave the dog its final command.

“Kill,” Hobarth said quietly.

The horses sensed the evil that was loose in the darkness and reacted to it from their posts by the woods. They snorted and whinnied, crying like children, scuffed their hooves on the earth and tested the leather which held them to the elm trees. Tulip rose on her hind hooves, danced in place, kicked her forefeet in the air as if slapping at some invisible opponent. She struck the ground hard when she came down, making sparks on stone, and rose almost immediately into the air again.

Hobarth still knelt on the ground, smiling that wicked smile that Jenny did not believe could appear on his handsome face. He petted the dog one last time.

Brutus was on his feet.

His yellow-red eyes, the color of fire and blood, glared malevolently at them. He was a huge animal, approximately sixty or sixty-five pounds of sinew, teeth and claws. No man could hope to stand, for long, against his natural grace and power.

Tulip continued her dance, rattled her reins against the small tree to which she was tethered.

The hair on the back of Brutus' neck raised like wire bristles. Its head was held low between its shoulders as if it were brooding, and it swung its head slowly back and forth like a pendulum as it searched for the best way to get at them.

It threw its head back.

It howled.

Many nights, they had listened to that forlorn wail and had quakingly envisioned what manner of monster might have made it. But in all of those conjured pictures, they had never imagined any beast more vile or more terrifying than this Vietnamese guard dog transferred from his natural environment.

"Kill them," Hobarth said.

Jenny refused to believe he was saying such a thing, that he could repeat it with such obvious enjoyment.

But Brutus did not need further encouragement. This was not a task to the beast, not a chore to be done as swiftly as possible, but a distinct pleasure, the reason for his existence. Brutus must have looked forward to the feel of flesh between his teeth and the smell of spilled blood in his nostrils the same way an ordinary household pet might look forward to being scratched behind the ears.

His head still held low, his eyes still fixed on them, he trotted forward, moving faster as he came.

"Call him off!" Richard shouted.

Hobarth only laughed.

Lightning and thunder filled the sky behind the ever-falling rain. The wind whipped against their faces, made their raincoats flap out behind them, and Brutus came on as if it were the wind which drove him inevitably onward.

Jenny screamed.

It did not sound like her own voice, but like the cry of another woman far away in the forest. She was detached, floating above this nightmare rather than a part of it.

The horses stamped, whinnied, danced nervously as death approached with the wind's pace.

Jenny wanted to run, but Richard's arm imprisoned her and would not let her go. He stood his own ground, watching the beast rush at them, as if he were too horror-stricken to move, to run and save himself.

"Let me go!" she shouted.

"Wait!"

"No, no, no!"

He held her more tightly than ever as she tried to kick her way loose of him.

"It'll kill us!" she shouted.

Richard didn't seem to care or believe.

More lightning flashed, bursting across the sky on the bright trail of the previous bolt.

The dog was almost on top of them. She could see his large, sharp, yellow teeth and the saliva foam

which flecked his dark lips and gathered in bubbles in the bristled hair that sprouted around his mouth. If Sarah Maryanna Brucker's curse had been effective, this was indeed the sort of creature she would have liked to see haunt her father's estate.

When Brutus was only twelve or fifteen feet away, he leaped at Richard, correctly identifying his most difficult victim. As he came on, his claws caught what little light there was, glinted.

Then a gun fired.

Brutus seemed to stop in mid-flight as if he had rammed against an invisible brick partition. His face never lost the fierce, bared-fang snarl even as he died. He slammed into the earth, rolled like a sack of pelts without life in them. When he came to rest on his side, he kicked at the air for a full minute, gnashing his teeth at the darkness.

And he died.

It had all come as such a surprise to Jenny that she did not comprehend it. For several long seconds, she still prepared herself to be torn apart like a rabbit. Even as the blood rushed out of the killer hound's twisted, open mouth, even as it kicked spasmodically, one last time, and finally lay still, she cringed in expectation of the sharp pain of its teeth and its claws,

Richard had been carrying a pistol in the right hand pocket of his raincoat and had kept his right hand on it all the while Hobarth had been gloating over the success of his escapades. He had known that the last advantage lay with them, and he had given no clue of his knowledge. Now, he directed the barrel at Hobarth and fired a warning shot over the psychiatrist's head.

Hobarth panicked. He might still have won if he had kept his wits about him. He could have returned the fire, aiming to do more damage to them than Richard wished to do him. He was ruthless where Richard was not. But the sight of the dead hound seemed to electrify him, as if he never thought Brutus could be taken out by anyone. He had leaped to his feet when the dog struck the earth mortally wounded, and he had dropped both his handgun and Richard's rifle which he had taken from the stables. When the warning shot whistled over his head, he turned, stumbled, and ran toward Tulip, confused for one of the few times in his life.

"Hobarth!" Richard called.

But Walter Hobarth, the paragon of reason and logic, the man who so carefully planned his every move and who had not lost a single point in this game to date, this cunningly thorough man could not bear to consider that everything had been lost in one, short moment—just when everything had seemed like an unqualified success. He ran, panicked at the sudden intrusion of the unexpected into his well-planned cosmos.

Jenny sympathized with him. It was never pleasant to see your world crashing down around you, lying at your feet in useless splinters. She knew. It had happened to her.

"Hobarth, wait!" Richard called again. He pointed the gun at the doctor, but he could not bring himself to pull the trigger for a direct shot. A warning shot, clearly, would do no good.

Hobarth's fifth running step was his last. It took him over the rounded edge of a large, limestone sinkhole which he could not have easily seen in the darkness. His scream was cut short by a sickening thud and the rattle of breath in a damaged throat . . .

Gingerly, Richard worked his way down the tiered edge of the sinkhole, from ledge to fragmented ledge, until he found a way to the narrow, smooth shelf where Walter Hobarth lay in a black heap. The rain pelted him and made the limestone slippery. He felt chilled to the bone, whether by the rain or by the events of the evening, he could not say.

Above, Jenny knelt in the mud and the grass by the edge of the pit, staring into the gloom. Richard's flash-light did little to dispel the shadows for its bulb was very weak and the night was exceedingly deep. It served only to make Richard look like some dark spirit moving along the walkways of some nightmarish vi-sion of purgatory.

For the first time in years, Jenny felt utterly at ease and completely self-reliant. She did not fear the night close around her or the arrival of the unexpected, and she did not need artificial havens and shallow "friends" to reassure herself. Before, she had looked to other people to serve as her fixed point in a changing universe. Leona Pitt Brighton, her grandmother, had been such a point after her parents' deaths. Then she had floundered until she found Walter. But now, she had seen the foolishness of her outlook on the world, and she knew that the only stability was what one built for oneself.

She intended to start building tonight.

Richard crept along the stone shelf toward Ho-barth's slumped form, hands pressed against the ragged, sloping wall of the pit

The rain seemed to slack, though it was only the wind dropping off. The droplets began striking the earth perpendicularly rather than driven by the mild gale into a viciously angled descent.

Richard reached the doctor and knelt on the thin path beside him.

"Is he all right?" Jenny asked.

Richard looked up and shook his head slowly back and forth. "He's dead," Richard said.

She felt her stomach flop over. She was miserably weary of death. She hoped she would not have to see anyone die or hear about anyone dying for the next twenty years. But, at least, this time when she was faced with death, she did not want to run, and she did not feel an unnaturally strong fear for her own safety. She had come to terms with the world this night.

"How?" she asked. "Are you certain?"

"I'm certain. He broke his neck in the fall."

They looked at the corpse a while, neither of them speaking, the rain providing the only sound.

"What can we do?" she asked at last.

"We'll contact the police. Send some people up for him and the dog."

"But we can't just leave him there, lying in the rain like that," Jenny said.

"We'll have to. I'd kill myself trying to carry him out along these ledges," Richard said. He turned and felt his way back along the wall, looking for the steps by which he had descended. In five minutes, he had found them and had retraced his path to the surface.

"Why were you carrying a pistol?" Jenny asked at last, turning reluctantly but relievedly away from the sinkhole where the body lay in an unnatural position.

"You still mistrust me?" he wanted to know.

"No, no. It's just that—that it was such a shock. It was as if you expected something. Did you know he was the one?"

"No," Richard said. "But I knew someone was doing something that was outside the bounds of legal-ity. And the murder of Lee Symington was only a part of it. So I have been carrying a pistol."

"How did you know? What did I miss that was so obvious?"

"A number of things. But I'm not being fair. I knew a few things that you couldn't know. For instance, when I had Lee Symington examine Hollycross' corpse, he found some very interesting things. The horse had been put to sleep with a massive injection of sodium pentathol before it had been attacked by the wolf. That was to keep us from hearing Hollycross' outcry. And such a drug is too easily obtainable. It could never be traced to a killer."

Shocked, Jenny said, "That was Symington you were talking to on the telephone that morning, when I overheard you mention drugs and killers!"

"Yes."

"I've been utterly stupid!"

"Not at all, Jenny."

"No. I have been."

He shook his head adamantly. "You've been con-fused, true enough. That was obvious from the first moment I picked you up at the bus terminal. But I think that, tonight, you've managed to come to terms with your fear of life. Am I right?"

She nodded, somewhat embarrassed.

"But let me continue, Jenny." He wiped rain from his face. "Besides the drug, Symington found that not all of the claw marks on Hollycross had come from some wolf-like animal. Others had been inflicted with what he suspected might be a carefully sharpened, hand-sized garden rake. The gauge of the slashes matched those that such an implement would make—and there were flecks of green paint, microscopic, lodged in a number of these wounds."

The rain was no longer falling as heavily as it had been throughout the night. Overhead, the thick clouds parted for a short moment, let through a spear of white moonlight.

Richard continued. "Apparently, Hobarth couldn't get Brutus to do a thorough enough job on a sleeping horse. The dog probably wanted a live adversary, one that would provide some challenge, that would scream and kick a little. Hobarth anticipated this and brought the hand-sized rake along with which he finished the job on Hollycross."

Jenny shuddered. "How ghastly!"

Richard put his arm about her.

She accepted it, gladly.

"It is especially ghastly," Richard said, "if you con-sider how pointless Symington's murder was. They knew he had found Brutus' hairs in the stall and that the hairs might lead him to them somehow. But nei-ther Hobarth nor Malmont could be aware how much Symington *already* knew—how much *I* knew as well. The hairs would have helped us trace the killer dog sooner, that's all. But without them, knowing what we did, we would eventually have gotten around to the guilty parties."

"When you sneaked to the stables that night—when I saw you from my window—?"

"It occurred to me that whoever was involved might try another bit of terror tactics that night. Cora would probably have snapped if another horse had died like the first. So I went down there to wait. But no one ever showed up."

Neither of them spoke for a time.

The rain had all but stopped.

The clouds were parting more than before.

It was a large moon that shone on them, three-quarters full, its corona lengthened by all the moisture in the night air.

"Do I pass inspection, Miss Jenny?" he asked. That boyish smile had returned after being kept under wraps for so long. "Have I explained myself thor-oughly enough?"

She thought a moment, recalling his actions of the past weeks. She said, "No. You haven't."

He looked surprised. "What did I leave out?"

"You've been acting strangely otherwise," she said. She wondered why she had to bring these things up now. She knew that he was not the one she should fear. He was the one who had saved her life, who had saved the Brucker land, Freya, Cora, all of them. Yet there was some small voice that urged her to go on.

"If you mean the way I've acted with Cora, I'll admit it was not proper. But you can see the pressure I was under. I knew someone was so interested in the land that they would go to almost any lengths to ob-tain it. I never knew for sure what they might do next, to what extremes they were willing to press us." He paused. "I'm not offering this as an excuse, you under-stand. My behavior was, at times, inexcusable. But I want you to see that I wasn't a *complete* beast."

“That's not it either.”

He looked worried. “What, then?”

“Do you remember when Walter and I were sitting on the lawn, down by the woods, watching the squirrels? And you were standing behind the house, watching us?”

He seemed to blush.

“Yes,” he said.

“I wondered why you were looking at us that way. And later that same day, after dinner, you cornered me in the drawing room, when Hobarth went to bed and Cora was in the kitchen. I thought you were starting to confide something in me. But Cora returned, and you didn't have the chance. Anyway, your behavior was quite odd.”

There was a moment of awkward silence in which Richard could not bring himself to look directly at her. Then he shook himself and raised his head to stare into her eyes.

“When a man begins to realize that his feelings for a woman go beyond mere friendship—and when he sees that woman is more attracted to someone else than she is to him, he has every right in the world to act strangely, I believe.” He smiled at her. “Don't you agree?”

Her head seemed to balloon, and she felt dizzy. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I thought I'd made it clear.”

“Make it clearer,” she said.

He laughed. “Well, I suspect that I have either fallen or am falling in love with you, Jenny.”

“You don't know which?”

“Wait until we get this incredible mess straightened out. Then I'll be better able to know exactly what is going on inside my head—and inside my heart.”

“You're my cousin,” she said.

“Not blood cousins. We're only related through my father's second marriage.” He stopped speaking abruptly, as if he had just thought of something that he would rather have ignored.

The horses whinnied, though not in terror now.

“What is it?” Jenny asked.

“I just thought—that perhaps I've been standing here making a fool out of myself,” Richard said. “But I don't want you to be afraid of hurting my feelings.” His gaze became especially intense now. “I shouldn't have told you how I feel until I knew what your own feelings were.”

It was only raining lightly now. The wind was only a breeze. The storm clouds were beginning to scatter as the moon and the stars burned their way through.

What *do* I feel? Jenny wondered. At one time, I thought Richard was dashing and handsome. I thought he was attractive in a scholarly way. He meant so much to me once, when I needed consolation.

But what did she feel now? Did she love him? No. She didn't love anyone, really. She didn't love anyone because she had always been too anxious for security to open herself to deeper emotions. But she could love him, in time. She was sure of that. After all this ugliness had passed and she was able to handle her new relationship to the world, after things were normal again, she knew that she could feel that special affection for him. It wouldn't be a false love, based on a need for security, but a genuine love. She could feel the first stirrings of that now. They had been there a long time.

All the same, she did not want to make a commitment so quickly. She had spent these last few years training to be a teacher and not to be a wife. As Richard Brucker's wife, there would be no time or need to enter a classroom every morning. Whether that would be a relief or a disappointment, she could not yet decide. It would take a while to reconsider a future she had planned in such detail.

“Well?”

“It's too soon,” she told him.

“When?”

“Give me the summer.”

“That's a long time.”

“Until August, at least. Until all of this nightmare has had time to fade from our memories. I need time to think and re-evaluate things, Richard. I can't adjust this quickly.”

“August?”

“August,” she affirmed.

“Fair enough.”

He bent toward her and kissed her on the lips while his arms went lightly around her. It was a nice, brief kiss that said many things. It made her positively exuberant. As the rain pattered over them, she asked him to kiss her once again, just once, in that very same way.

He did.

“Now,” he said, “we've got to get to the house and wrap up this awful business. Dr. Malmont will be there, and we've got a surprise for him. As nice as it might be, we can't remain here all night, kissing in the rain.”

She giggled and felt younger than she had felt since she was fourteen. There might yet be problems in life. Everything wouldn't go smoothly all the time. But she felt that she was ready to face the rough spots. It was time that she collected the happiness in life that God sets aside for everyone.

By the time they reached the great house, the rain had stopped completely. The clouds were scattered thinly across the night sky, and the moon shone through, brilliant and huge. If she still believed in omens, in forewarnings of good and bad luck, she would have known that this sudden clearing of the sky meant that the future could *only* be a happy one.