

Dean Koontz – Legacy of terror

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THE SEASON OF EVIL

Once Elaine was dressed for bed, she chose a book and settled down. Her eyes soon grew heavy, so she marked her place and turned out the light, exhausted from the day of arrival.

It seemed impossible that this was her first day in the Matherly house.

She was soon dreaming, a rare dream: it was the night before Christmas. She no longer believed in Santa Claus, so why wait? One of the presents was a large red and green box. She wondered what anyone could have gotten her that was so big, and chose it first. She pried the lid off, peered inside . . . and tried to look away. She could not move. She opened her mouth and sucked air and finally screamed . . .

She woke, perspiring.

But the scream continued.

It was not her scream any longer, and not the scream of a nightmare. It was real; a woman's voice; the cry of a woman in the most terrible agony . . .

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Deanna Dwyer
*Legacy
of
Terror*

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A LANCER BOOK

LEGACY OF TERROR

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Chapter 1

Elaine Sherred was ill-at-ease from the first moment she caught sight of the Matherly house, and she would later remember this doubt, and wonder if it had been a premonition of disaster.

The house stood on the brow of the hill, partially shielded from her by several huge Dutch elm trees, and it was sprawling, immense. That in itself was not what bothered Elaine, however; all of the houses in this exclusive suburb of Pittsburgh were extraordinarily large, and all of them stood on four and five acre estates which were carefully tended by the most professional of gardeners. What made the Matherly house different, and therefore disconcerting, was its rococo stonework. Beneath the deep eaves, under the thrusting, flat, black slate roof, a band of hand-carved story-stone ran across the entire facade and continued down the west wall as well. Indeed, those stone angels and stone satyrs, frozen nymphs and bas-relief urns, trees and flowers and planets and stars probably en-circled the entire house, like a ribbon. The windows were set deep in thick stone walls and flanked by fretted black and silver shutters which contrasted starkly with the light stone of the walls. The main entrance was a door twice as large as any man could require, like the entrance to a cathedral, at least twelve feet high and five wide. Heavy brass handles adorned it, gleaming against the oak as did the brass hinges. The windows on either side of the door, unlike the other windows that she could see, were stained glass, in no particular pattern, the individual fragments worked together with lead. In the circle of the driveway, directly before the entrance, a white stone fountain, complete with three winsome cherubs whose wings were gloriously spread, sizzled and hissed like a griddle with oil spilled on it. The pavement immediately adjacent the fountain had been torn up and rich earth placed in its stead, banked by a second marble curb as white as the fountain itself. In this dark earth, a dozen varieties of flowers sprouted, blossoming in purples, reds, yellows and oranges. This dazzling splash was vaguely reflected on the white base of the fountain, giving the illusion that the marble itself shimmered and was somehow transparent so that you were looking through it to the flowers which bloomed on the other side.

It was all too fancy. It seemed more like a real estate office than like a private residence, constructed for display and not to be lived in and used.

Again, the uneasiness surfaced, an alarm that she could not place or define. Somehow, she knew, this place would be bad for her.

A house, Elaine was convinced, should be down-to-earth, as common and as serviceable as possible. Even if that house were the dwelling place of the wealthy. No one should throw away money on useless baubles like a story-stone and a marble fountain.

Besides, anything ornate generated an air of falseness. This elaborately bedecked house, Elaine thought, looked more like a carefully arranged array of cardboard stage flats nailed to wooden braces than like a sound structure. The lawn might have been a stage floor overlaid with a green felt cloth.

Elaine Sherred distrusted anything which was not simple and clean. The functional pleased her; the frivolous drew her scorn.

Such an attitude in a twenty-three-year-old girl might seem out of place. At least, nearly everyone she knew *told* her it was. In high school, she had not had many friends, for she had preferred not to engage in the games and pastimes of her generation. At the hospital, during her nurse's training, her fellow students and even a few of her instructors had chided her for her somewhat straight-laced ways. Elaine disagreed. Her view of life seemed the only correct one to her, not an aberrant one.

Elaine pulled her Volkswagen to the side of the quiet lane that wound up the hill to the Matherly house and parked it. She had been disconcerted by the magiloquent structure, and she wanted time to accept it. If she were going to work there—indeed, even live there as the full-time nurse to Jacob Matherly—she was going to have to suppress the instant dislike she had generated on first seeing the place.

How could anyone have paid architects to come up with such a fancy mess of jutting angles and shadowed nooks, fountains and ornate shutters? It was like spending a fortune on several tons of

marshmallow sauce to feed a hungry man who would have preferred steak and potatoes.

She did not once think that her overreaction to the house might lie within her own character. She had lost her parents when she was four years old and had been raised in an unloving, uncaring institution thereafter. The defense mechanism against life which she had evolved was a stolid, no-nonsense outlook.

And the Matherly house was nonsense.

Still and all, it was a good-paying job. And if the people inside it were not as grandiose as their dwell-ing, she supposed she could put up with so much marshmallow.

She let off the footbrake and shifted gears as smoothly as a veteran driver—though she had only bought the car a month ago. She had trained herself in the use of a standard shift—having been used to an automatic—with the same devotion of purpose that she applied to everything she did. Two minutes later, she had parked in front of the fountain, by the im-mense oak door with its brass fixtures.

As she was getting out of the small car, the low, purple clouds which had been threatening rain all morning suddenly broke open with lightning. A brief moment later, the ear-splitting crack of thunder fol-lowed, slamming against the high walls of the mansion and rebounding like something tangible.

Elaine did not flinch. She was not frightened of thun-der. She knew all about storms, their cause and effect, and no deeply imbedded superstition hampered her dealing with them.

At the door, she lifted the heavy knocker, which she now saw was shaped like a wolfs head and nearly half the size of the real article. It dropped with a loud, hol-low booming that could hardly fail to bring an answer. She did not use it again.

A few droplets of rain spattered the flagstone pro-menade upon which she stood, but she didn't try to shelter herself.

A minute passed before someone turned the knob on the inside of the door and drew the thick portal open. In the dimly lighted foyer stood an elderly man, stoop shouldered and white-haired, his face wizened by a heavy tracery of lines that radiated from the corners of his eyes, nose and lips. His face looked like aged vellum.

“Yes?” he inquired.

“Elaine Shered to see Lee Matherly,” she said.

“Our new nurse,” the man said, nodding his head. He had a slightly obsequious manner which marked him as a family servant, though—Elaine felt—he had very likely been in the Matherly employ-ee for a great many years, perhaps since he had been as young as she.

He said, “Won't you come in? Mr. Matherly the younger is now in the den; he's expecting you.”

She stepped out of the rain which had just begun to fall in earnest and shook her mane of long, black hair. It spread out, over the collar of the tan, linen coat she wore, framing her like a dark halo.

“I trust you had no trouble finding our place,” the old man said. The “our” seemed to clinch her certainty that he had been here for many years. He looked upon the frothy mansion as being as much his home as his master's.

“None at all,” she said. “Mr. Matherly gave me di-rections which were easy to follow.”

“I'm Jerry Hoffman,” the old man said. “I'm the butler and the Mr. Fix-It, the general, all-around man Friday of the house. My wife, Bess, cooks for us.”

“I'm pleased to meet you,” she said. It was a mere pleasantry, that response. Although she had hardly met Jerry Hoffman, she thought she was not going to like him a great deal. There was something in his man-ner which suggested he was a gossip, or a man whose interests were so varied as to be useless in any one area. He seemed nervous, quick, and too eager to smile.

He led her down the long, paneled corridor, through the main drawing room to the den where he announced her and left her with Lee Matherly.

She had met the man before, of course. He had come to the Presbyterian University Hospital in the city, shortly before graduation, and had interviewed a number of girls for this post. He was tall and thin, yet a powerful man whose sportcoats needed no shoulder padding. He looked more like a trim lumberjack than like the restaurateur he actually was. At forty-five, he might have passed as ten years younger, handsome in a rugged sort of way, blue-eyed but with dark hair graying at the temples. He was a very canny business-man. He had not wasted time when he had interviewed her, and he did not waste

time now—a character trait she admired.

“A room has been prepared for you,” Matherly said. “If you give your car keys to Jerry when we’re finished here, he’ll see that your bags are moved from the car.”

“He seems somewhat frail—” she began.

“He isn’t, believe me,” Matherly said. “That old goat will probably last longer than I will—and he was butler here when I was barely able to walk! But, if it suits you better, you can help him. My sons are out this morning, or I would have one of them help you. Paul is home, my dead wife’s brother, and he might be will-ing to offer a hand.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage.”

“I am also sure,” he said. He tore a check out of the book on his desk, one which he had filled out in expec-tation of her arrival. “I imagine you’ll be rather low on funds. I’ve written out four weeks pay in advance to help you get started. A hundred a week, plus room and board, as agreed.”

She accepted the check, thanked him, folded it and put it in the flat, utilitarian purse she carried.

“Now,” Lee Matherly said, rising, smiling perfuncto-rily, “shall we go see your patient?”

“I’m looking forward to meeting him,” Elaine said.

“You must understand that he is not the man he was. The stroke took quite a toll.” The expression on his handsome face said that his father’s illness had also taken a heavy toll on Lee Matherly.

At the top of the stairs, they entered the first room on the right. It was, Elaine thought, more like a study than a bedroom. The walls and ceiling were paneled in rich, dark wood that smelled ever so slightly of lemon polish. Two walls contained built-in bookcases which were stuffed full of cloth-bound volumes. A mammoth desk was the main piece of furniture, dominating even the hospital bed along the far wall. A globe stood by the desk on a brass stand. Two easy chairs were posi-tioned so that one might sit in them and drink brandy and talk, just like in the movies or novels by Conan Doyle. Beside the bed was another chair: a wheel-chair.

As they entered, the old man in the bed turned his head towards them and watched them with bright, blue eyes as clear as his son’s.

“Father, this is Elaine Sherred, the girl I told you about. She’ll be your nurse from now on.”

The old man did not smile, nor speak. The right side of his face was drawn tight, as if he were grimac-ing, while the other half appeared normal. There were other signs of the stroke. His right arm was drawn up, cradled against his chest, strangely twisted. His leg, be-neath the thin sheet, appeared normal, though it most likely was not, judging from the wheelchair. Perhaps the entire right side of his body was paralyzed.

“His medicines are kept here,” Lee said, taking her to a cabinet beside the bed. “Glycerine pills for his an-gina if it should act up. And if they don’t relieve the pain well enough—we’ve a dozen ampoules of mor-phine here—and here, the syringe and alcohol and gauze. It will be your duty to keep Dr. Reece aware of our supply and to be certain we never run low on any-thing that Father might require.”

“I understand,” she said.

Matherly seemed to forget about her as he ap-proached the bed. He leaned over and kissed the old man on the cheek, the ruined cheek. Old Jacob Math-erly smiled now—a distorted and ugly expression on his ruined face—and took his son’s hand.

“I’m sure you’ll like Miss Sherred, Father.”

The old man did not take his eyes from his son’s face. He nodded affirmatively.

“Good enough,” Lee said. “Then I’ll leave you two to get acquainted.” He walked to the door, turned. “I’ll see, Miss Sherred, that your bags are moved. I’m sure Paul will help Jerry with the chore. Your room is at the end of the hall, on the right. Dinner is at seven this evening. You will be able to meet the rest of the household then.” And he was gone.

“He’s a good boy,” Jacob said.

His voice startled her. For one thing, she had sup-posed that he was unable to speak, since he had been so quiet up till this moment. For another, his voice was weak, whispered, the croak of a frog who parroted En-glish. It sent a chill through her for reasons she could not define.

“He’s very efficient,” she said.

“And he ... loves his father,” the old man added.

She stood beside his bed, looking down at him, aware that he had once been as formidable a man as Lee, though illness had wasted him now.

She said, wearing a professional smile that was not completely automatic, for she liked this old man al-ready, “I could see that he does.”

“He does well with the restaurants.”

“More than one?” she asked.

“Four,” he said. “And three of them . . . are the best in the city.”

“I’ll have to try them out,” she said.

He took her hand, as he had grasped his son’s. His flesh was hot and dry, like leather well-tanned and left in the sun.

He said, “Do you think I’m crazy?”

She was a bit confused by the abrupt change in the topic of conversation, but she tried not to let it show. “Whyever should I think that?”

“I’m not crazy.”

“Of course not.”

“I had a cerebral hemorrhage, you know. And I have a bad heart. But besides some muscular control . . . I haven’t been hurt. My mind—my mind is per-fect yet.”

He had worn himself out speaking so hurriedly and insistently. His dry, dusty voice faded in the last few words until she could barely hear it, like the call of a dream, unreal.

“Many people recover completely from cerebral hemorrhaging.”

“Lee doesn’t think so.”

“Excuse me?”

He said, “Lee thinks I’m crazy.”

“Oh, I’m sure he doesn’t!”

“He does. He won’t believe me when I tell him things.”

She smiled more brightly, concerned for him, and patted his hand which still lay in hers. “Surely, if your son felt that way, he would have told me when he hired me. I can assure you that he didn’t mention it.”

He looked at her closely, probing her with his eyes, as if he might be able to read her mind, satisfied him-self that she was telling the truth. There was nothing crazy about this old man; he was cunning and quite observant.

“But he won’t believe me about the knife,” he said.

Outside, the storm descended on the house with the full measure of its ferocity, exploding with thunder-claps, ripping open the darkness with sharp-edged lightning that made the windows milky for an instant. The rain came twice as hard, a veritable deluge that made her feel, for a fleeting instant, as if she were in an ark, preparing for the worst.

“What knife is that?” she asked.

He looked at her for a long time, without speaking, and she was almost ready to repeat the question or— better yet—change the subject, when he said, “I don’t want to be pitied again. If I tell you and you don’t be-lieve it, I’ll have to face that same expression that Lee gave me. Pity. It sickens me!”

“I don’t think anyone could genuinely pity you,” she said, meaning it. “You’re fighting back admirably well against a biological infirmity that you had no con-trol over.”

“Not a mental infirmity?” he asked.

“It certainly doesn’t appear to be,” she said.

He seemed to decide he could trust her, for he nod-ded his head affirmatively and said, “Someone tried to stab me with a kitchen knife.”

She said, “When was that?”

“Only three weeks ago.”

She wondered why Lee Matherly had not told her. It was plainly still weighing upon the patient’s mind, and it would have too be taken into consideration when treating him.

She said, "Where did this take place?"

"Here, of course."

"In this house?"

"Yes."

She began to feel uneasy as she considered the possibility that the old man might actually be experiencing illusions.

She said, "Perhaps it was a dream."

He was adamant that it could not have been. "I saw the serrated edge of it. I screamed. I don't have much volume, and I had only been back from the hospital for about two weeks. I frightened the killer, whoever he was. He ran . . . but I saw . . . saw that serrated edge of the knife in a glimmer of moonlight from the windows."

He had exhausted himself again.

"It was at night?"

"Yes," he said. "I couldn't sleep, despite the sedative I take every evening." He wrinkled his face in disgust. "I absolutely *hate* taking medicine to make me sleep."

She decided that cool, careful logic was the best way to handle the old man's accusations against the household. "But you haven't got any enemies here," she said. She had been in contact with the victims of strokes before, and she knew that disagreeing with them only caused them to be more nervous and more positive in their delusions. But why hadn't the younger Matherly told her about this? She was a competent medical nurse, but she could not be expected to recognize minor mental impairment so quickly. If Jacob Matherly had not told her what Lee thought about the story of a knife, she might have even placed a bit of trust in the notion.

"No enemies," he agreed. "But there are those who don't require a reason to kill." He said it with such a flat tone of voice that he had bled most of the preposterousness from the idea.

"Living here?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"You'll meet everyone at the supper table," Jacob said. "Watch all of them closely."

He went abruptly uncommunicative, for he had recognized the tone of disbelief in her voice, no matter how cultivated was her professional good cheer and comradeship.

She did not know what to say to re-engage him in pleasant conversation. She could not continue to humor him as she might a child, for he was old enough to be her grandfather. Yet she was so rattled by his fantasy of madness and murder that she could not think how to rechannel him into more acceptable topics of conversation.

A patient who lived in illusions, misinterpreting reality, was not her favorite sort. So closely linked to reality herself, she could not cope with someone who attempted to escape from life through daydreams and night dreams, sleeping and awake. She rarely had dreams herself. Or, if she did, she rarely remembered what they had been about.

"Well," she said, "if you won't be needing me for a while, I think I'll go freshen up and unpack." She nodded to the bell cord attached to the head of the bed. "Is that linked to my room?"

"Yes," he said.

"Then you can call me if you need me."

"Wait a moment, Elaine."

She had turned and taken a few steps towards the door, but she stopped now and turned back to him. She cocked her head inquisitively, waiting for him to speak.

"Do you know about Christmas Eve?" he asked.

It was the sort of nonsensical question she had feared, and she felt uncomfortable standing here. She said, "What about it?"

"You don't know anything about what happened in this house on that Christmas Eve?"

He had risen off his pillows a few inches. His body trembled, his neck was strained so that the veins all bulged and the pulse in the main artery was clearly visible.

“I’m afraid I don’t know,” she said.

“Until you’ve heard of it—and you will, soon enough—don’t judge me. Don’t count me off as a bab-bling old man . . . old man with brain damage. Don’t count me off like Lee has . . . not until you know what happened that night before Christmas.”

“What happened?” she asked, intrigued despite her-self.

But he had spoken more than he wanted to, and he was perturbed by her reluctance to believe him. He would not respond. She left the room and walked down the corridor to her room, listening to the storm scream across the roof of the mansion and wondering, uneasily, what sort of storm was brewing within the lives of these people.

By the time she had reached the end of the hall, she had shrugged it off. Jacob was only an old man, se-riously ill. It was not wise to give credence to his ram-blings, even for a moment. There was nothing at all brewing. Inside her purse was a check for four hundred dollars. This was a new life, her first truly in-dependent existence, away from orphanage officials and nursing-college instructors and deans with their rules and regulations. If she faced this squarely and did her job, nothing could go wrong.

Chapter 2

She wore a sensible blue skirt and a white blouse to dinner, a cool green band through her long hair to hold it away from her face. She had successfully rationalized away the strange conversation which she had had with Jacob Matherly, and she was prepared to enjoy herself,

Jacob did not come to the table but took his supper in his room. He was somewhat clumsy with eating utensils, Lee explained, and did not like to be seen while trying to manage for himself. At the same time, he rejected any suggestion that someone else feed him. He was a fiercely independent old man and intended to remain that way.

Without the master of the house, there were six of them at the long table in the dining room: Lee, his sons Dennis and Gordon, Paul Honneker the brother of Lee's deceased wife, Celia Tamlin who was an interior decorator whom Dennis had brought to look at the house, and Elaine herself. The major topic of the evening was the architecture of the mansion and the ways Celia felt its furnishings could be changed to compliment, rather than detract from, that unique flavor.

Elaine would have called the ornate structure a great many things, but she would never have said it had a "unique flavor". Since everyone else seemed to actually enjoy the way the place was built, she kept her mouth shut except to give them the answers she thought they would most appreciate when they asked for her opinion.

"Seriously, Elaine," Dennis Matherly asked, "don't you think that grandfather's taste was much too stuffy for this marvelous house?"

She said, "I haven't seen most of it. But I do like my room and the den I saw."

"Of course, certain rooms are perfect," Dennis agreed. "But I'm speaking of the over-all feel of it. The drawing room is damned Victorian—and not taste-fully Victorian either. Clumpy furniture, everything overstuffed, bad wallpaper. Ugh!"

Dennis, at twenty-five, was the older of the Matherly brothers, though Elaine thought he acted like the younger. He was always talking with a queer excitement that kept her on edge. He found everything interesting and tried to show the others how fascinating this alcove was or that attic room could be if properly finished. He was a terribly good-looking man, muscular as his father was. But there was something spoiled about his face, something too heavy in the line of his mouth. He had always had money, and he had been spoiled by it. He dressed a bit too loud. He wore dark blue corduroy bellbottoms, along with a deep wine colored shirt with too many buttons and useless epaulets on the shoulders. His hair fell over his collar and was brushed over his ears so that only the lobes were visible.

Elaine did not care much for him.

On the other hand, she found Gordon Matherly, Dennis' brother, quite charming. He was as quiet as she was, rarely speaking unless directly addressed. He was not so flamboyantly handsome as his older brother nor so muscular as his father. He was lean and intense and very serious. All Elaine knew of him was that he had graduated with a B.A. in business from Pitt and was just beginning studies aimed at his Master's degree. He was, in other words, a man who accomplished things.

Dennis, as far as she could see, accomplished very little. He had studied painting and maintained a studio in the finished half of the attic. He had not made a financial success of his work. Elaine doubted that he ever would.

"Of course," Celia Tamlin said, "I have only first impressions to go on so far. But I really do think you would gain the most out of a change if you opted for a generous use of ultra-modern California grouping for your main rooms. Plastics and laminated woods, chrome and specially treated leathers. A light wall perhaps, changing patterns and colors. The contrast between the positively gothic look of this house and the far-out furniture would create an entirely new aesthetic whole."

Lee Matherly was as skeptical as Elaine, though he vocalized his skepticism. "I've always sort of liked the house. It's quiet and restful, the furniture so dark."

"I agree with Celia," Paul Honneker said. "I suppose it's really none of my business, since I'm not of the family, but I think the dreary place could use a— light wall." He was a large, ruddy-faced man with hands nearly as big as the dinner plates. His hair was in disarray, and he looked as if he had slept in his clothes. Despite this sign of a disorderly mind, Elaine rather liked him. He was a painfully honest man, she realized, as he had proved several times during the meal by stating his disagreement with some particularly empty-headed notion the interior decorator had proposed. If he agreed with her now, he was not merely trying to make amends, but presenting a genuine opinion.

"Well," Dennis said, finishing with his food, "I've asked Celia to stay overnight, at least, to get the live-in feel of the place."

"Good idea," Lee said, as if he were hopeful that she would come to love the clumsy, dark furniture as much as he did.

Even if she did not learn to love the place, Lee would give Dennis the okay for major changes without much protest. Elaine was sure of that. Already, she could see that Lee favored his gaudier son. She could not say why.

"Better yet," Lee said, "why not stay the weekend, Celia. If you have no other plans, we'd welcome you here." This was Thursday evening, with a full day left of the work week, but Celia said she could manage it. "Well," Dennis said, "you'd better get started back to town to pack a bag or two. Should I come along?"

Celia said, "No, no. I can be into the city and back here by eleven, if that's not too late. I don't need an escort. And I know how much you've been wanting to finish the oil you're working on."

"I have been a bit restless to get on with it," Dennis admitted.

"Another landscape?" Gordon asked. It was one of the few times he had spoken on his own initiative.

"No, something special," Dennis said, ignoring the tone of sarcasm in his younger brother's voice.

"A portrait of Celia, then?"

Dennis laughed. "You know that I gave up portraits when dad didn't even recognize the one I did of him. My talent doesn't lay in that direction."

The jolliness with which the older brother admitted his limitations would ordinarily have pleased Elaine. But now it seemed just another part of his irresponsible nature. He knew that he did not have a broad talent as an artist, and yet he persisted in wasting his time at it. She knew that Gordon was thinking the same thing.

"You're both excused, then," Lee said.

"What about me?" Paul asked.

Lee grinned. "You won't want to be excused until dessert comes."

"True enough."

Bess, Jerry's wife, a heavy woman who embodied all the stereotypical virtues of motherhood (good humor, affection, gentleness and a fantastic cooking ability), brought the peach shortcake which she had proudly announced as the final dish before she had ever served the first. It was delicious; everyone told her so. Garlanded with praise, she retired to her kitchen, beaming and content.

After dinner, Elaine intended to check in on her patient but was side-tracked by Gordon Matherly who met her at the bottom of the stairs.

"At dinner, you said you'd not seen much of the house. Would you like a tour?"

"I thought it time I looked in on your grandfather," she said.

"The buzzer will sound if he needs you. And he doesn't go to bed as early as the doctor would like. He'll be up, reading or frittering away at something until ten or eleven."

"I guess it wouldn't hurt, then," she said.

"Good," he said. He took her arm in a most gallant way which was not at all affected.

All of the eight downstairs rooms were furnished like the parlor, with heavy mahogany pieces and darkly leafed and flowered wallpaper—except for the study which was richly paneled and for the kitchen which was bright and equipped with all the latest machinery that Bess could desire. Even the game room, with its pool table and sports equipment racks, was like an antique sitting room into which these

evi-dences of modernity had been dropped like bricks through tissue paper.

"I like the house the way it is," Gordon said when they leaned against the billiards table to rest a moment.

"I believe I do too," Elaine agreed.

"This modern stuff she's promoting will become ob-solete and unstylish in a year. But this furniture we have—it's never dated. It's solid and dependable."

"Your father seems to agree with you."

"But he'll let Denny have his way. He always lets Denny have his way." If there was bitterness in his tone, it was none like she had ever heard. He seemed only to be stating a fact.

"Your brother seems rather taken with Celia," she said. She said it as a way of finding out whether Gordon was smitten with the blonde as well. She hoped that he was not.

"Denny is not smitten with anyone, particularly, but himself. All his girls are awed by him. He likes that."

"She's very pretty," Elaine said.

"Celia?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I suppose."

"All that blonde hair, and that lovely rosy complex-ion of hers." Unconsciously, she touched her olive co-located skin, drew a circle on her cheek, as if she could feel the hue of herself.

"She doesn't appeal to me," he said.

He was very final about it, but she sensed that there really was a bit of envy in him. Envy for Denny's girl. Denny had probably always gotten the better-looking girls, for so many women, especially the rather silly kind like Celia Tamlin, were more enchanted with a man's looks than with his inner fiber.

She found Gordon easy to speak to, and she sensed that he was opening to her as he rarely did. Their low-key personalities, their somewhat guarded rela-tions with the rest of the world made them soulmates of a sort. By the time they had explored most of the second floor, including the sun room, she felt on sound enough terms with him to ask him the question that had been bothering her all evening.

"I understand—or believe I do—that the family ex-perienced a tragedy of some kind last Christmas Eve."

His face changed in the instant. His brow wrinkled. His lips tightened until they were bloodless against his teeth.

He said, "Then the neighbors have already gotten to you."

"What?"

"They can't get done talking about it, though it's fifteen years ago that it happened."

"I thought last Christmas Eve was—"

"Fifteen years ago. And if they've been at you, you know the story in all its awful detail, don't you?" He had grown accusatory, as if she were to blame for some unimaginable crime.

"I didn't talk to your neighbors, Gordon," she said. She felt, paradoxically, as if she had to defend herself. "Your grandfather mentioned it, but didn't tell me what had happened then. And I thought, from talking to him, that it was only this past Christmas."

His face softened a little, though he was still a long way from the talkative and charming man who had es-corted her about the house.

He said, "You must excuse grandfather. He be-comes confused easily since his stroke."

"I've begun to suspect as much."

"What exactly did he tell you?"

She recounted the eerie conversation.

"Someone trying to murder him?" Gordon asked, incredulous.

"So he says."

"It's the first I've heard of it."

"Evidently, he has told your father."

Gordon frowned. "And dad didn't want the rest of us to know how far gone the old fellow is."

“Your father seems genuinely concerned about him.”

“They’re close. Closer than dad and I.” The last was said with plain dissatisfaction.

“What did happen?” she asked, interested enough to pursue the point still.

“I choose not to talk about it.”

“I’m sorry if I’ve pried—”

“You better check on grandfather now,” he said. He turned away from her and went down the stairs.

Whatever had transpired on that Christmas Eve fifteen years ago had been an indeed unpleasant event. The old man couldn’t summon up the will to tell her, and Gordon was clearly afraid to. But why was he afraid? Was it something that would so disgust her or scare her that she might decide not to work here after all?

She clamped her imagination into a can and sealed it away. She best do what Gordon had suggested and see that Jacob was all right.

The old man was sitting in one of the easy chairs, his tray of food mostly eaten and pushed to one side. A book lay open in his lap, though he did not seem to have been reading it.

“Come here and sit down,” he said. His voice was a file drawn over sandpaper, delicate as sugar lace and ready to shatter into countless pieces.

She sat in the other easy chair, across from him, and she felt as if she were being devoured by the huge arms, high back and extra-thick padding. The chair was so comfortable that it was almost uncomfortable.

“You’ve met them all?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Bess is a magnificent cook.”

“I hired Jerry and Bess when I was a young man— and they were younger. But that is neither here nor there. I want to tell you about the others.”

“Tell me what?” she asked. She was finding it easier to maintain her calm before the old man’s pitiable condition. She supposed that, in a short while, a few days, she would be able to listen to his rambled tales of attempted murder without giving away her disbelief.

“First of all, let’s take Paul. He is—was—whatever tense we need for this situation—the younger brother of Amelia, Lee’s wife. He is the exact same blood as she was, and we should therefore pay closer attention to him than to either of the boys.” He coughed a dry cough and said, “What did you think of him?”

She told him what little she could of her opinion of Paul Honneker from this first meeting.

“When you know him better,” Jacob said, “you’ll see more than his jolly side. The poor boy can’t hold a job. He is thirty-seven years old and chronically unemployed. It’s in his nature. He can’t tolerate bosses. The same as Amelia. She loathed taking orders or even responding to any request that wasn’t suffixed with a ‘please’. He lives here because Amelia’s will provided him a place here as long as he lives. She knew how shiftless he was. She also left him one third of the stock and bond fortune Lee had built for her with what inheritance she had received from her mother’s estate.”

She said, “You say these uncomplimentary things about Paul, but you seem to like him.”

“I do. It’s not the boy’s fault that he has that Hon-neker blood, the same blood that was Amelia’s downfall. I pity him. I want the best for him. But the fact remains that he was her brother and must be watched.”

The soft chair seemed to be growing softer as she listened to the old man’s directionless paranoia and tried to think of some way to change the subject.

“Denny,” the old man said, “has a great deal of talent. He is an artist of some merit. He plays piano and guitar, and he writes a little.”

“He seemed frivolous to me,” she said.

Jacob raised his eyebrows, then chuckled. “He is that. He certainly is frivolous. He spends his monthly check from his mother’s estate as if the entire concept of money had been scheduled for the ash can the following day. He enjoys escorting pretty girls here and there—and pretty girls also require money. He drives too fast and drinks a bit too much. But, in the end, what is there to say against any of that?”

“He is still young,” she said. “But when he's forty or fifty and still hasn't accomplished anything, what will he think of himself?”

“Perhaps you judge him too harshly. But that is good. Be wary of him, for half his blood is Honneker blood. As is half of Gordon's.”

“I like him.”

“Gordon is anything but frivolous,” Jacob noted. “He'll run the family investments and eventually the restaurants. Sometimes, I wish he would gad about a bit more than he does.”

She slid forward in her chair, “I'm confused, Mr. Matherly.”

“About what?”

“Why it matters that half their blood is Honneker— or that all of Paul's blood is.”

“Amelia and Paul's parents were first cousins. As a nurse, you must know that such a close marriage between relatives can often result in the transference of undesirable genes to future generations.”

“Hemophilia for one.”

“Worse things,” Jacob said darkly.

He was trying to frighten her, as he had frightened her before, but he was not going to succeed. Fear of an unknown quantity was senseless. One could only fear something concrete, something tangible whose threat was plain to see. Thus far, whatever Jacob feared seemed to be an unknown.

“Such as?”

“You haven't yet learned about Christmas Eve?”

“Just that, whatever happened, it was done with fifteen years ago.” She smiled and leaned towards him. “You shouldn't be worried, still, about something so long forgotten, Mr. Matherly.”

“You don't know. You weren't here.”

“Tell me.”

“It was the worst thing in my life,” he said. “It was the worst thing I had ever seen. And I had been to war, you know. I'd seen so much, but all of it was pale next to what happened that night.”

He was speaking very rapidly, breathlessly now.

“Don't excite yourself,” she said, suddenly concerned with his welfare, afraid that she might have generated some of his hypertension.

His hand strayed to his chest. He was slightly bent, as if he were trying to encircle the pain with his body and smother it. His face, the half of it which was not perpetually grimaced, was twisted in agony.

She rose quickly and went to the medicine cabinet where she found the glycerine pills. She took two of these back to the old man and fed him one with a sip of water from the glass on his food tray.

He remained in an agonized hunch for another few minutes.

When she gave him the second pill, he soon leaned back and breathed more easily. The tiny, whimpering sounds that had been caught in his throat were now gone.

“Angina,” he wheezed. The word caused as much pain as the symptoms it described. He disliked the idea of being ill, dependent. “It's much better now.”

“You'd better get into bed,” she said.

“Perhaps I had.”

“And to sleep.”

“It's so early yet!” he protested, like a child.

“Nevertheless, I think you ought to take a sedative and try to sleep.”

He did as she asked. In twenty minutes, he was soundly asleep. She tucked the covers around him, turned out the light, turned on the tiny night light, and left his room, closing the door quietly behind her.

It was too bad that the attack had come when it had, for she had been on the verge of learning what it was that Jacob Matherly feared in the Honneker blood —and what had happened on that mysterious Christmas Eve more than fifteen years ago.

In her own room, once she had dressed for bed, she chose a book from the half dozen paperbacks she had brought with her and settled down under the canopy of the large bed. When she had finished only a chapter, her eyes were heavy. She marked her place and turned out the light. She had not intended to fall asleep so early, but she was exhausted from packing and driving and unpacking and

meeting so many new people. It seemed impossible that this could be her first day in the Matherly house. Certainly, she had been here for years. At least months. At the very least, weeks. Sleep came instantly.

In her dream, a rare dream, it was the night before Christmas, and she was opening her gifts early. She no longer believed in Santa Claus, so what was the use in waiting for the sunrise? One of the presents was a large, red and green box with a bow as thick with ribbon as a head was with hair. She wondered what any-one could have gotten her that was so big, and she wanted to open it first. She pried the lid off and leaned forward, peered inside and swallowed hard and tried to look away and could not and opened her mouth and sucked breath and finally screamed—

She woke, perspiring.

But the scream continued.

It was not her scream any longer, and certainly not the scream of a nightmare. It was real, and it was a woman's voice, the cry of a woman in the most terrible agony. It wailed on, rising and falling, cutting across the bones of anyone who listened, like an icicle across plate glass. And then it was over with.

Elaine thought she had recognized the voice as Celia Tamlin's, even though no words had been spoken in that horrid ululation of terror.

The clock on the nightstand read 11:30.

She slid out of bed, put on her slippers. She hesitated, as she took her robe from its hanger, not certain it was wise to become involved with whatever was going on. She could see Jacob Matherly's twisted face, the intensely blue eyes, and she could almost hear him warning her . . .

Enough! From the sound of that scream, the girl might very likely need a nurse. Already, several long minutes had passed in which she might need help. She put on her robe and started for the door.

Chapter 3

Before she could button her robe and reach the door, someone knocked on it and called her name. She took the last few steps and opened it. Gordon Matherly stood in the corridor, his face creased by anxiety, breathing rather heavily.

“Did you scream?” he asked.

“No. I thought it was Celia.”

“What room did Dennis give her? Do you know?”

She didn't and said so.

Dennis appeared at the head of the stairs. “Is every-one all right up here?”

“It wasn't Elaine,” Gordon said.

Lee Matherly's door opened. He had been in bed but had taken the time to dress now. He said, “It sounded as if it came from outside the house. I can see Celia's car halfway down the drive.”

Dennis turned and went down the steps two at a time.

When Elaine made to follow, Gordon said, “Maybe you had better wait here until we know what's happened.”

“If she's had an accident, she might need my help.” She smiled at him, pleased with his concern for her. “And don't worry—I'm used to helping victims of accidents.”

She followed the boys' father, Lee, down the steps, with Gordon thumping close behind her. They walked down the darkened main hall and through the open front door. The air was chilly for June; she was glad she wore a quilted robe.

As they hurried toward the Buick which Celia had been driving, they could see Dennis standing by the front fender, looking alongside the car. He was so still that he might have been a statue. When they were almost upon him, he turned around, trembling like a man with the ague. His face was chalky, and his eyes were very wide. He looked, to Elaine, as if he were suffering from mild shock.

He said, “Don't look.”

Lee Matherly grabbed his shoulders. “What?”

“Don't look at her.”

“Who?”

“Celia.”

His father released him and stepped around the car. He halted as if a brick wall had been placed in front of him, and his entire body jerked with the blow. Gordon went to his side and said, just loud enough to be heard: “Oh, Christ, Christ, Christ.”

“What happened to her?” she asked Dennis.

“Someone—someone stabbed her.” The words were thick in his mouth, as if he had been drinking. She knew that could not be the case, for even if he had been drunk he would have been shocked into sobriety.

Before anyone could stop her, she went and looked at the body. Celia was lying on her side, one hand clutching her stomach, the other thrown out by her head, as if she were grasping for some handhold on life. The ground around her was thick with blood, so much blood that she could hardly have been alive.

“Get away from her, Miss Sherred,” Lee ordered.

“She may be alive.”

“She isn't,” Dennis said, his voice weak. “She couldn't be.”

“Have any of you checked?”

“No,” Lee said. He seemed resigned, as if none of this were very unexpected, as if he had been preparing himself to face a similar scene at some future date, had been preparing himself for years.

“You should have. Maybe there's something I can do.”

She stepped between them, to the body, and knelt beside the girl. Careful not to disturb the one or two wounds she could see, she rolled Celia onto her back.

Two other wounds were centered in her abdomen. But when Elaine felt for a heartbeat, she discovered there was one. Feeble, but regular.

“Someone call an ambulance,” she said.

No one moved. The rain had stopped, now sprinkled them with fat droplets, a new prelude.

“Hurry!” Elaine snapped.

“You mean she's alive?” Dennis asked.

“Yes.”

Gordon turned and ran for the house to call the hospital.

Although she was a trained nurse and supposedly accustomed to grisly scenes, as she had told them, she wanted to get away from this place, this body, this spreading crimson puddle. She had encountered bloody illnesses while in training; she had even dealt with beating victims and gunshot wounds. But this was something else again. This was the work of a sadist, not the violence of heated passions. The wounds—five, she now saw—had been carefully placed where they would do the most damage. Too, Elaine could see that Celia had not screamed when the first one or two thrusts of the blade had been delivered; she must have stood dumbly while the murderer worked on her, too surprised to scream as soon as she should have. Her assailant had, therefore, gotten in a few more blows.

The ambulance arrived in less than ten minutes. The attendants were efficient and gentle. In two more minutes, they had bundled her inside the white van and lurched back down the drive with Dennis accompanying them in the patient area in the back of the vehicle.

“You'd better see about my father,” Lee Matherly said. He appeared to have aged ten years in less than an hour. His face was lined, his eyes weary, his complexion sallow and unhealthy.

“Of course,” she said. Anything to get away from that red puddle and the memory of Celia's wounds.

It was as if the house lay miles and miles away rather than just a few hundred yards. All the shadows had assumed sinister proportions. Each wind-shaken branch of a tree or shrub was like a thrusting hand that made her jump and then walk faster. She tried to shame herself out of her fear, but she could not. Perhaps that was because the source of the terror was irrationality, a murder of whim. And whims were things which she had never developed an understanding of. You could lump them under the term “insanity,” but that did not explain them.

Old Jacob Matherly was awake, sitting up in his bed; he had turned the lights on. He looked at her with evident relief and said, “I was afraid it was your scream.”

“It was Celia,” she said.

Then she realized that she should not have said anything. What had come over her? She was losing control of her common sense and bothering her patient with bad news when it would have been best to pass the incident off as meaningless for as long as possible. Until he could be prepared for it, anyway.

“Is she dead?” he asked. Clearly, he expected that she would be.

Elaine stammered over her answer. “Not yet,” she said at last.

“Chances don't look good, eh?”

She made her way to the nearest chair, by the bed, and sat down.

“How often was she stabbed?”

She said, “How could you know she had been stabbed?”

He made an impatient gesture with his good hand. “I told you that someone was in my room with a knife three weeks ago. I told you and Lee, and neither one of you would believe me. Besides, there's Christmas Eve. I can never forget knives after that.”

His voice had suddenly become tight, stretched like a rubber band. Although she wanted to know, more than ever, what the Christmas tragedy was all about, she knew it would be a mistake to broach the subject now. Even hinting at it, before the excitement tonight, he had suffered an attack of angina. Her duty was to keep him calm.

“I think,” he continued, “you should pay especially close attention to those three I mentioned earlier.”

“You think it was someone in this house? Couldn't it have been a prowler, or a hitchhiker or—”

He smiled, but it was an awful smile, even though she could not see the frozen half of his face. “My dear Elaine, it could hardly be anyone else.”

“Someone lurking in the drive,” Elaine offered. “Someone who saw her go out and thought she might be back.”

“But she did not live here,” he said. “Why should she return? Only the people in this house knew she was to spend the weekend.”

Elaine said, “A madman, seeing her leave, wouldn’t have had to know that she was a stranger. He might have thought she lived here, waited, and struck it lucky—or unlucky.”

“Simpler answers are better,” Jacob said.

It was one of her own axioms too, but she did not see that it applied to this. She told him as much. “It is far more complicated to ever imagine that one of the people in this house did it. None of them are capable of such a thing!”

“Several are,” he said.

She was suddenly angered by his pessimism and paranoia. The events of the night had broken down her defenses to the point where she could forget her training and speak rather harshly to him. “I don’t see how you can say that about your own people!”

“It isn’t easy,” he agreed. “Elaine, I grieve terribly at the thought of it, but I cannot let emotion overrule what I *know*.”

“You can’t know. Did you see who did it?” “No.”

“Then—”

He said, “One cannot evade the truth for very long. Life makes certain that it comes home again and again. And if you choose to ignore it, it only hurts you worse in the end. I’ve been expecting this for a decade and a half.”

“Neither Dennis nor Gordon—and not Paul, for that matter—is capable of murder. And, certainly, none of them is capable of such an awful, bloody murder like this.” She corrected herself, superstitiously. Celia Tamlin was not yet dead; it wasn’t right to speak of her like that. Thus far, the crime was only *intended* murder.

“It is all part of their legacy, Elaine.” Jacob had managed to pull himself up against the headboard, sitting as straight as he could manage, rigid as iron, the feather pillows jammed down between the headboard and the mattress.

“Legacy?”

“The Honneker legacy, the one I tried to tell you about earlier in the day.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

And that was true. And, being true, it frightened her, because she was accustomed to understanding things. Confusion and doubt were always to be cast out as quickly as possible.

“Madness,” Jacob Matherly said. “Their mother’s grandfather, their own great-grandfather, went out of his mind when he was only thirty-four and was thereafter institutionalized for the remainder of his life. And, more recently, their mother was affected.”

“Lee’s wife?”

“Amelia,” he affirmed.

“You can’t mean that she was mad,” Elaine said. But she knew quite well what he meant.

“Oh, yes,” Jacob said. “Mad. Very mad. She was a beautiful woman, tall and stately with a face like a goddess. Lee thought that her flights of fancy and her sometimes hot temperament were intriguing, spice to her otherwise steady personality. At first, he thought that. Later, he learned they were symptoms of a deeper and more dangerous malady.”

“Are you all right?” she asked. His color was bad, and he was trembling.

“I’m fine,” he croaked. But he had begun, ever so silently, to weep, tears glistening on his leathery cheeks . . .

Chapter 4

Although grief-stricken by the memory of that long-ago tragedy, Jacob Matherly did not seem in danger of becoming overexcited by it as he had earlier in the day. She felt there was little chance that he would aggravate his angina, and she decided to let him go on with it, in his good time, until she had—at last, at last! —heard the story of Christmas Eve, the story which seemed to bind this entire household under a black and unbreakable spell.

Just when he was beginning to find an end to the store of tears in himself, just when Elaine thought that he might now continue and unburden himself, thereby enlightening her, a knock came at the door. She answered it, reluctantly, and found Jerry standing there, like a bird in human clothes, sharp and frail, quivering slightly.

“What is it?” she asked.

“The police,” Jerry said.

She supposed they had had to be called, though she had never given it a thought until now.

“They would like to talk with you, downstairs,” Jerry said.

“I don't know anything about it,” she said.

“They're talking to everyone.”

She sighed. “Very well. I'll put Mr. Matherly back to bed and be down in a few moments.”

Jerry nodded and hurried down the corridor towards the stairs, his spindly legs like the legs of a crab or insect

“I guess you heard,” she said, closing the door and turning back to old Jacob Matherly.

The tears were gone altogether, and his stony composure had taken over once more. He said, “If they want to talk to me, they'll have to come up here.”

“We'll fix it so that you don't have to talk to them,” she said. She got another sedative from the medicine chest, poured a glass of cold water from the ice-filled pitcher next to his bed, and watched him take the tablet.

“Thank you,” he said. “I had enough of policemen the last time, enough of their snide remarks, their brutal questioning. I think, sometimes, that the police can be nastier with the rich than with the poor. They let their envy push them a little further than it should.”

“You sleep now,” she said.

“I'll try.”

He closed his eyes and folded his hands across his chest as she turned out the lights. She looked quickly away from him, for he had looked, in that instant, like a corpse in the casket, ready for the funeral.

In the hall, she found that someone had turned the light out. A blanket of shadows had been thrown over the length of the corridor until, by the head of the stairs, thin light filtered up from below. And voices. Voices wafted to her as well, distant and rumbling, the words they spoke indistinguishable. They could have been ghosts, moaning in the walls as easily as people engaged in normal conversation.

She went down the steps, making a conscious effort to slow the beat of her heart. Foolish fears. Childish fears. “Elaine,” she chided herself, “you're becoming as rococo as this house, as silly as Dennis Matherly.”

Nevertheless, when she reached the bottom of the stairs and old Jerry stepped out of an alcove to escort her to the police, she was so startled that she leaped and gave a tiny yelp of fear. He took her hand and patted it and told her he knew how she felt and that he was sorry to have frightened her.

She followed him to the den, through the door into a bright pool of yellow light, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the change. She saw that they were all there: Lee, Dennis and Gordon, Paul Honneker. There were also two policemen, a tall, broad-shouldered man about forty years old who was introduced as Captain Rand—and a shorter, darker, quicker detective named Holcombe who looked—if one were

used to old movies on television—more like a villain than the upholder of justice.

“Please sit down, Miss Sherred,” Captain Rand said. He smiled, showing perfect white teeth. Elaine recognized it as a professional, not a genuine smile, a relative of the smile she learned to produce when she needed it in her job. She supposed there were times that a policeman, just like a nurse, had absolutely no-thing to smile about but was forced to for the benefit of those around him. It was difficult to smile and be cheerful to a man dying of cancer when he was ignorant of his deterioration, but it was necessary. For Captain Rand, it must have been unpleasant to smile in the face of blood and a badly wounded girl and knives and darkness and unexplained madness. But it was expected of him, and he smiled.

She sat on the couch, next to Gordon Matherly. It was an unconscious move that she could not have explained. There were other chairs available. She just felt *safer* beside Gordon.

“Miss Sherred,” Captain Rand said, “we’ve heard everyone’s account of what happened this evening, except yours. We’d like you to tell us what you remember of the—uh, the incident.”

“There’s really little to tell,” she said.

“Nevertheless, we’d like to hear,” he said. He smiled again. Smiled with his lips. His eyes were hard, perhaps hardened by too many years of this sort of thing. “It’s always possible that one witness will have noticed something none of the others did, some bit of a thing which will make all the pieces fit together.” But his tone of voice, the infinite weariness behind that smile, said he didn’t hope for any such miracle.

She told him the story, up to the point where she left the scene to check on Jacob Matherly. She did not feel it was her place to add Jacob’s story of family madness, partly because she was not of the family and did not have the right to talk about them and partly because she did not yet know how much of the old man’s tales to believe.

When she finished, Rand said, “When you heard the scream, did you think there were words to it?”

“It was just a scream,” she replied.

“Think hard, Miss Sherred.”

“Just a scream,” she repeated.

“Often,” Rand said, pacing back and forth before the assembled witnesses, “a victim will pronounce the name of his attacker at the last moment. Could the scream have been a drawn out name, a Christian name or perhaps a surname?”

She thought about it for a moment. “No. Definitely not.”

Rand seemed disappointed. For a moment, his calm expression and the gentle, professional smile slipped away.

In the pause, she asked, “Is Celia still alive?”

“She’s comatose,” Rand said. “She lost a great deal of blood and suffered severe shock. The lining of her stomach has been twice punctured, though no other organs received the blade. A vein in her thigh was severed. They’ve already begun work on that and on the abdominal wounds. She’s still in surgery and will be, I’d say, for some time yet.”

In the easy chair next to the desk, Lee Matherly leaned forward and cupped his face in his hands. He did not say anything.

“Did you see a knife anywhere near the body, Miss Sherred?” Captain Rand asked.

“Not that I remember.”

“Anything like a knife—a letter opener, a garden-ing tool?”

“No.”

“I believe you were the one who elevated the girl’s legs and tried to staunch the blood flow from her abdomen.”

“I’m a nurse.”

He nodded, aware of that. “Did she, while you were attending her, ever regain consciousness?”

“She was too weak,” Elaine said.

“She did not speak even a word?”

“Nothing.”

“You would have noticed if she had opened her eyes? You were not too distraught to fail to notice a

moment of sensibility in her?"

"I'm a nurse," she said. "I do not become distraught over illness or injury or death." She was beginning to dislike the way Captain Rand was questioning her, forcing each point again and again, as if she were a child who could not be expected to remember properly, except with prodding. She supposed that it was necessary for him to be this way and that he was only doing his job, but she didn't like it and wanted to tell him so.

Fortunately, her reference to her professionalism seemed to appeal to him, and he nodded what she took for apology and respect. He said, "I am sorry that I forgot to consider that, Miss Sherrred."

She smiled her acceptance of his apology.

Then, abruptly, she discovered that her hand was enclosed by Gordon's hand. His warm, dry fingers enfolded her own and held them with a gentle pressure. She was surprised, because she could not remember having reached for him—or feeling him reach for her. But, sometime during the questioning, they had sought comfort and had found it together.

Elaine blushed, but she did not withdraw her hand. It was nice having her hand held, being accepted by Gordon as something more than the family's latest domestic servant.

"Well," Rand said, "let's look into some other aspects of this thing." He withdrew a notebook from his hip pocket and thumbed it open. Pages rustled abnormally loud in that silent room. "Celia Tamlin was an interior decorator looking over your house prior to making suggestions for renovation. Is that correct, Mr. Matherly?"

Lee lifted his face from his hands and looked down at his palms, as if he felt he had left his soul in them. "Yes," he said. "She was such an enthusiastic girl, so pretty and quick . . ."

Rand turned away from Lee Matherly and faced Dennis. "And you, I believe, were the only member of the family to know Celia Tamlin before tonight. Is this correct?"

"Yes," Dennis said.

"How did you meet the young lady?"

Dennis said, "I am a painter. Originally, I met Celia at an art show at Kauffman's. She had come to scout for paintings that she might want to purchase for her company's gallery. For use in interior decoration."

"Did she purchase any of your work?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. That's how we became friends."

"Did you date Celia Tamlin?"

Dennis looked worried, for he could see where the questioning might lead if the detective wished to take it that route. "I did," he said. "Half a dozen times, perhaps."

"What kind of girl was she?"

Dennis licked his lips and looked around the room for support. Elaine looked away from him, suddenly frightened. Of what? Did she suspect he had some hand in the night's events? She gripped Gordon's hand more tightly.

Dennis said, "She was a fine girl. Always interested in things, very bright, a good conversationalist, sensitive. I can't think of an enemy for Celia. She was friends with everyone!"

"Not everyone."

Dennis looked suddenly stricken. Elaine thought he was about to burst into tears. She disliked such emotions in men, except for old men like Jacob who had earned the right to cry. She distrusted emotional men.

"And you were upstairs, in the attic, painting at the time of the stabbing?" Rand was perched on the edge of the desk now, tapping the open notebook against his knee.

"I had been, earlier," Dennis said. "But when the scream came, I was in the kitchen, having a glass of milk."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

Elaine expected Rand to pursue it further, but he did not. Instead, he turned to Gordon. "And where were you, again?"

"In my room, reading," Gordon said.

"What were you reading?"

"A suspense novel."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone."

Rand turned to Paul Honneker. "You?"

Paul was as disheveled as he had been at supper, perhaps more so. The clothes hung on him as if he were nothing more than a chair they had been thrown across. His collar was open an extra button. His beard had darkened and prickled his face like black wire. There were bags under his eyes and a drawn look to his normally jolly face.

"I was sleeping," Honneker said.

"You slept through the entire incident," Rand said. "Through the scream as well?"

"I didn't hear any scream," Paul said.

"When was the first you knew what had happened?"

"When Lee came to tell me. Just before you arrived."

"You must be a heavy sleeper."

Hesitantly, sadly, Paul Honneker said, "I'd had a drink or two."

"Just that?"

"Maybe a few more," he said.

Rand looked at him a while, abruptly dismissed him. He saw the same, sorry lack of initiative and aimlessness in Paul which everyone else came to see eventually.

The probing questions continued, with little else of interest developing. The only moment when Rand seemed intrigued was when Dennis mentioned the fact that Celia often picked up hitchhikers. "She trusted everyone," he had told Rand. "Often, she lent money to the most untrustworthy borrowers and never saw it again. That never dissuaded her. She continued to lend money like a bank." At last, sometime after one in the morning, they were excused. Rand, apparently, was going to push a search for any hitchhiker who may have been seen in the area before or after the murder.

Before she went to bed, Elaine stopped by to see how Jacob was reacting. She found him as she had left him, in the funeral pose, breathing lightly, sound asleep.

Jacob would not believe the hitchhiker story.

But then Jacob was old and ill.

For something to do, she took his pulse.

It was normal.

Ought to go to bed, she thought.

She opened the medicine cabinet and took out one of Jacob's sedatives. It was the first time in her life she had ever had need of such a thing.

She went to her room, and she locked the door this time.

Her second floor window was a good distance above the ground, but she locked that as well.

She did not feel the least bit foolish. There was something quite concrete to fear now. This was no longer a fantasy of a dear but doddering old man. One must take precautions.

She said a prayer for Celia Tamlin, then took the sedative. She did not sleep entirely in the dark, but let one bedside lamp burn throughout the long, uneasy night.

Chapter 5

Elaine slept later than she had in years, but woke feeling as if she had just put in a hard days work. She showered, applied what little makeup she needed, dressed and went to check on Jacob. He had already had breakfast and was sitting in one of the easy chairs in his room, reading a popular novel.

“You look very pretty this morning,” he said.

She was dressed in a lemon skirt, brown blouse, lemon hairband, and she wore a simple brown bead choker at her neck. Lee Matherly had made a point of the fact that he did not wish her to wear uniforms, for that would only depress his father.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Were I, say, forty years younger, I should surely be courting you, young lady.”

She laughed as she got the instruments to take his blood pressure, temperature and heartbeat. She pulled a chair next to his, rolled up his pajama sleeve, and wrapped the pressure cloth around his withered biceps.

“Indeed,” Jacob said, grinning at her with the good side of his face, “it’s a miracle you aren’t married already!”

“Marriage isn’t for me,” she said. “At least not for a long while.”

“Don’t bet on it,” he said, patting her hand.

She said, “Have you heard anything about Celia yet?”

He frowned. “Lee says she made it through the op-eration. She’s still in a coma and still on the critical list, however.”

“If she makes it, she can tell us who it was,” Elaine said. “Then this terrible expectancy will be over.”

His face was stony now. “Captain Rand believes it was a hitchhiker. He says only Dennis knew the girl, and therefore only Dennis would have a motive. But Dennis doesn’t have one that anyone can see. So it must have been a hitchhiker who forced her into the drive without getting out and then tried to kill her.”

Elaine remembered his adamancy that one of the family was the guilty party, and she wondered at this sudden switch. Could it be attributed to his stroke-weakened mind? Or was it something utterly different than that—was it wishful thinking? Rand had offered a good out. The faceless hitchhiker. If we could believe in that, she thought, how much easier.

“What I recommend for you, my dear,” Jacob con-tinued, suddenly having recovered his composure and good humor, “is a walk about the grounds, a bit of sunshine and clean air—as clean as we can get this close to a city.”

“Look who’s the nurse now,” she said.

But when she had finished her morning duties with him, she decided that his suggestion was not to be laughed off. She did feel as if she needed to get out, to shake off the clinging oppressiveness of the old house.

Five acres of grounds can be, she discovered, a great deal of land, especially if it is broken up by shifts in geographic contour and by stands of pines and willows which give it the illusion of a forest. All of it was well tended and crossed by flagstone walkways which wound even through the trees, through the cool, heavy shadows that did not seem ominous as the shadows in the house had. She had wandered about for nearly an hour before she came to the low, stone wall which sep-arated the Matherly estate from their wealthy neigh-bors.

As she followed the wall, watching the birds wheel across the early summer sky and feeling somehow re-born in the glow of sunshine and the fresh air, she eventually noticed the neighboring house. It was not quite so large as the Matherly place, but a formidable dwelling in its own right. It was in the colonial mode, of red brick with many large windows and white shut-ters, high balconies and white pillars. The grounds were well landscaped, though smaller than the Math-erly estate. She liked it, she thought, more

than the house in which she now lived, for it was a terribly functional home. It was squared and simple, as colonial houses had always been, and not larded over with fancy pieces of stonework and gables and multi-leveled, multi-angled roofs.

As she walked further, she saw the patio, a simple brick affair which was surrounded by a knee-high brick wall. A man and a woman were lying on cots, sunbathing. They were, Elaine supposed, in their middle forties. The wife was still trim and attractive, while the husband had allowed himself the luxury of an expanded middle. She looked away from them, not wanting to be nosy, and had gone another twenty paces before they called out to her.

When she turned, she saw that the woman was sitting up on her cot and waving.

She waved back.

"Come over for a drink," the woman said.

"Is there a gate?"

"Another fifty feet along," the woman said. Her husband had sat up by this time, and he was nodding agreement.

She found the gate, crossed through, and went over to the patio.

The neighbors were Mr. and Mrs. Bradshaw, Syd and Shiela. Before she could even introduce herself, they had to get the subject of the drink settled. They were surprised that she only wanted a coke, but let it rest when they couldn't persuade her to have Scotch or a gin and tonic. The Bradshaw butler, a young, rather handsome man named William, delivered the drinks on a silver tray, along with a variety of prepared snacks. When that was done, Shiela and Syd were ready to settle down to some conversation.

If she had realized what the nature of the conversation was going to be, she would never have crossed through the gate in the stone wall.

"You're Jacob's new nurse, I believe," Shiela said. She was a brown-haired, dark-eyed woman, with a lot of freckles on her face which somehow added to her pixie beauty rather than detracting from it.

"That's right," Shiela said.

"Poor Jake," Syd put in. "He was so active, so *vital* before his stroke. Too much cholesterol. That's what leads to circulatory problems, you know. Blood clots, heart attacks, the whole works."

"He still is vital," Elaine said, possessed of a strange urge to defend the old man before this somewhat loud couple.

"You'll have to excuse Syd," Shiela said. "He's a nut on the cholesterol subject"

Elaine looked at his overweight problem and decided it was mostly the result of liquor. Far better, she thought, to have achieved the added pounds through extra steaks, extra bread, extra potatoes.

Shiela said, "How do you like your job?"

"Fine," Elaine said. "It's the first time I've really been on my own."

From there, the conversation drifted into harmless channels, light banter that Elaine found enjoyable, with but a few exceptions. She told them about nurse's training and about the orphanage. This last brought forth a gush of sympathy from them which she neither wanted nor respected. She had no use for sympathy. Life was what it was, and you only got bogged down if you began to lament what Fate had given you. She discovered that Syd Bradshaw had made his modest fortune through the motion picture industry; he owned a chain of full-sized and mini-theaters within the Pittsburgh area. This would have been a fascinating topic if the Bradshaws had not continued to lace their anecdotes with anti-Matherly epithets with which she could hardly sympathize, being a Matherly employee. It seemed that Syd was jealous of Lee Matherly's greater wealth. Heaven knew, he had more money than he could use himself. Still, he envied Lee the larger Matherly fortune. Both Syd and Shiela often referred to Lee's having been "born to wealth without having to work for a penny of it." When Elaine ventured the suggestion that Lee had been successfully managing the family affairs for some years now, Syd said, "And who couldn't make money if he had a fortune to begin with. If you have money, you can make more, even if you have no talent for it."

The sun seemed to grow hotter, stiflingly warm, pouring down over Elaine like honey, burning honey. She was perspiring and itchy.

The chair under her, a plastic-thatch lounge, seemed to have grown harder and more uncomfortable

by the moment.

When the summer birds swooped low overhead and called out to each other, their voices seemed magnified by the heat, converted into banshee wails that set her teeth on edge.

Eventually, she learned that Syd Bradshaw and Lee Matherly had been in the same high school class, had been to the same college. Bradshaw had come from a far less well-to-do family, and he felt that the entire purpose of his life was to “show-up” Lee Matherly, to prove the value of once having lived in poverty. He ex-pounded the virtue of a poor childhood as loudly as he warned against the danger of eating foods too high in cholesterol. Because he had not made the fortune the Matherlys controlled and now knew that he never would, he was discontent. He could not enjoy his own achievements, his own wealth. Instead, he had to achieve his longed for dominance over the Matherlys by speaking against them and trying to lessen them in the eyes of others. It was all very sad—and silly. A childhood rivalry had ruined the adult life of Syd Bradshaw.

“Tell me,” Shiela said, as Elaine was trying to think of some excuse to take leave of them, “doesn't it frighten you, living in the same house where Amelia Matherly once lived?”

“Why should it?”

Syd said, “You mean no one has told you?”

“About Christmas Eve?” Shiela expanded.

Her boredom and discontent with these people was sluiced away as if by a fresh rain. She said, “Jacob has hinted at some tragedy or other, but I don't know the full story.”

“With this latest murder, you shouldn't be kept ignorant,” Shiela said. Her eyes sparkled now. She licked her lips, anxious to impart the story of the scandal. She had been infected with her husband's disease: incurable envy.

“Did you live here then—fifteen years ago?” Elaine asked.

“No,” Syd Bradshaw said. “We weren't *born* into a house like this. We had to work into it. *Work!* We've been here ten years now. I was not yet thirty-six when we contracted to have the house built.” He was proud of his early success.

“Then how do you know about Christmas Eve and—”

“Everyone in the city knew about it,” Shiela explained. “Maybe everyone in the state and country. It was big news!” She shuddered, but the expression came off as pre-planned and false.

“Could you—tell me about it?” Elaine asked. She knew that the story would somehow throw a discreditable light upon the Matherly name, but she could not resist learning, at last, what had happened so long ago.

“It was Amelia Matherly,” Shiela said. Her voice had dropped to a heavy whisper, as if she were speaking in the presence of the dead or within the walls of a cathedral. “No one ever thought she was *normal*. She was known for her drastic fits of temper. Not a merchant in town—and this suburb was a small town then, so that everyone knew of her—had escaped her temper. Her neighbors found her impossible to get along with, like decent people. She was a snob—and worse.”

“It's the worse that ended in that Christmas Eve horror,” Syd said. He performed the same staged shudder and sipped at his drink.

Shiela continued, “Dennis was ten years old, then. His brother, Gordon, was seven. Two little children, unaware of what evil lay within their own house.” She shook her head, in apparent sympathy for the little children, then went on. “Lee and Amelia had two other children then, the twins. Their names were Lana and Laura. Two darling little girls, about ten months old.”

Elaine thought she knew exactly what was coming.

She didn't want to hear it

Yet she made no attempt to stop Shiela's tale, mesmerized by the intense heat, the chatter of the birds, the humidity that was like a blanket, and the droning story of deep, lasting horror that this envious, sun-browned but unhappy woman was unfolding for her perusal.

Shiela said, “She was alone in the house with the twins when her mind snapped.”

The birds swooped overhead.

The birds cawed to each other.

The sun burned down hard, like the crimsoned coil of an oven burner.

Shiela said, “Lee was away with the boys, Christmas shopping. Jerry and Bess had the day off and were at Bess' sister's house in Mount Carmel. Paul didn't live with them then. I think he was teaching at some uni-versity in Texas—it was his fifth or sixth job. He was fired shortly after that. He never has been able to hold onto anything, that one. Anyway, Amelia was at home with Lana and Laura, by themselves.”

Oppressive heat.

The birds.

The ice in her glass had melted.

Leave, she told herself.

But she had to know.

“Anyone could have seen that the woman was not right,” Syd put in. “Anyone with common sense would have known better than to leave her at home, alone, with those two defenseless babies.”

Shiela cast a let-me-tell-the-story glance at her hus-band, and he closed his mouth over the rim of his glass.

She said, “Jacob was downtown, seeing to the res-taurants' store of goods for the holiday dinners they expected to serve. He got home at a little after five in the afternoon, and he found her—and what she'd done.”

Shiela took a drink.

Tell it, Elaine subvocally urged the woman. She disliked the way Shiela was drawing it out for the best effect. The story of any tragedy should be told quickly, simply, to carry the least pain with it.

“She had taken a—taken a knife to the twins where they lay in their cribs,” Shiela said. She finished her drink. “She had slashed at them over and over, until there was little left of them.”

Uncontrollably, unconsciously, Elaine bent forward in her chair, as if giving way to some pain in her stom-ach.

“She had murdered them,” Shiela said. “And she tried to murder Jacob Matherly when he came upon her where she knelt in the blood by the cribs. He was cut badly in the shoulder, but wrested the knife out of her grasp. She ran, then, and tripped on the carpeting at the end of the stairs. She fell the length of them to the ground floor. When Jacob found her, she was quite dead.”

Chapter 6

When Elaine returned to the Matherly house, she looked in on Jacob and found the old man asleep, resting comfortably by the look of him, taking a late-afternoon nap to prepare him for the rigors of suppertime and the long evening ahead. In sleep, the stroke-affected half of his countenance was far less imposing and ugly than it appeared when he was awake. She did not interrupt his sleep, but closed the door quietly and walked down the hall to her own bedroom.

She locked her door.

She undressed and showered, letting the hot water pour over her for long, long, exquisite minutes. She did not know which of the two things she was trying to wash from herself: the Bradshaws' envy and the hatred of the Matherly household which they so clearly, even fanatically, evidenced—or the gruesome account of the Christmas Eve murder of the Matherly twins. She felt numbed, terribly old and maybe paralyzed as Jacob was. She neglected the soap, neglected every-thing as the steaming water cascaded over her and drove out some of the evil that seemed to have seeped into her.

She slipped into her pajamas and flopped upon the bed, drew the sheets up to her chin. She found that the ordeal of the afternoon had thoroughly exhausted her. She had done little but go for a walk and listen to the story of Amelia Matherly's madness. It was not the walk which had exhausted her, but the listening. She wanted only to sleep, sleep until she could wake up and find a world as simple and uncomplicated as she desired.

She did not dream, so deep was her rest.

Paul Honneker came to the supper table ten minutes late, while the others were beginning the main course. His hair was tousled, his eyes quite bloodshot. His face had lost nearly all its color, except for a bruised and ugly bluish cast beneath his eyes. He stopped in the dining room archway and stared at each of the diners, one at a time, moving around the table, and he seemed somewhat incredulous to have found them here. He wiped at his face with a large hand and made his way round the table to his chair. He did not sit down, but fell into it, hunching forward over his plate as if he might not be able to retain consciousness.

Elaine looked down at her plate and tried not to see. But with the absolute silence from the others, she could not help but look again.

Paul was sitting straight now, though he had made no effort to spoon food onto his plate from the serving dishes. It was almost as if he did not want any supper but could not bring himself to break the ritual by not showing up at all.

"You've been drinking again," Lee Matherly said. His face was hard, stern lines tracing across the un-healthy pallor he had had ever since Celia's scream.

"What if I have?" Paul asked. It was meant to be a belligerent response, but there was no anger in the man, only defeat.

"You know what it leads to."

"I can hold my liquor," Paul said, suddenly defensive. He did not seem any older than fourteen, his mouth drawn up in a pout, his face sullen and unre-sponsive.

"You can't," Lee said.

"What makes you think you—"

Lee said, "Did you break your mirror yet?" When Paul didn't reply, he said, "You can't hold your liquor, Paul. You break mirrors and windows and dishes, any-thing that might cast a reflection."

Paul sulked.

Lee watched him for a moment, undecided, then allowed his face to soften. "Paul," he said in an utterly different tone of voice, an almost fatherly voice, "please do me a favor; please do not start drinking heavily now, not now, not at a time like this."

Paul looked at his plate, as if something were writ-ten in the white china, something important.

He said, "This is the best time to drink. I can't think of a better time, in fact."

"It can't help Celia," Lee said. "And it certainly doesn't do the rest of us any good, worrying about you."

Paul gained fire from some unseen source. He raised his head and stiffened his backbone. His words were still heavy with drink, but they came with more power and assurance now. "Do you know what they're saying in town?"

"Who cares?" Lee asked.

"I do."

"People will always talk, Paul. We've all grown used to that, we've all learned to cope."

"I haven't," Paul said. "They're connecting Celia's stabbing to—to the other—to Amelia." His dead sister's name required effort; it lay before him, spoken but leaden and still.

Lee winced, as if someone had struck him. "We'll be above that sort of silliness and—"

Paul interrupted and said, "Everyone stares at me. People I thought were friends of mine—they weren't. Lee, they think maybe I stabbed Celia!"

"Nonsense."

"You haven't heard the talk. They're saying the Honneker blood is tainted, that Celia's attacker lives here, in this house."

"Ignore them."

"I hate suburbs and small towns," Paul said. "I hate living where everyone knows everybody else's business and the women go around looking for topics of gossip."

"Still and all," Lee said, "drink won't help."

"It helps *me!*"

Everyone was silent for a long moment. Only the clink of silverware against the plates was audible.

"Aren't you eating?" Lee asked Paul Honneker.

"I can't eat."

"Paul, the doctor thinks her chances are fifty-fifty. The longer she holds on, the better it looks."

Paul said nothing.

"I talked to Captain Rand just a while ago," Lee said. He had shoved his own food aside, as if he too had lost what little appetite he had brought with him to the table.

"Oh?" Paul looked so mournfully hopeful that Elaine had to look away from him. She realized, sud-denly, that Paul Honneker half believed the rumors he had heard in town, half wondered if he hadn't been the one to take a knife to Celia. The mad often encompassed periods of amnesia, after all, in which anything could be done and later go unremembered . . .

"Rand says that they had several reports about a hitchhiker on the highway, just down from here, shortly after the murder. Three people have come for-ward since the newspaper story broke, and two of them collaborate well. A large man, perhaps twenty-five or twenty-six, dressed in jeans and work-shirt, carrying one suitcase."

"But they can't be sure," Paul said.

"Not until they find him."

Paul said, "If they ever do."

Elaine wanted out of there, but she did not know how to graciously depart. She did not want to hurt any-one's feelings, but she could not take this self-recrimination of Paul Honneker's much longer. Could not take it, chiefly, because she did not know whether or not to believe it was based in truth.

"If you can't eat, Paul, you don't have to remain," Lee said. He spoke gently, calmly, soothingly, as if he had had a great deal of experience with the other man's moods.

"Come on, Uncle Paul," Dennis said, wiping his mouth with a napkin and shoving back from the table. "I'll show you the painting I just finished. It's my best so far, I think."

Paul Honneker accepted the invitation with the first expression of pleasure he had shown since he had ar-rived at the table. He seemed to like the older Math-erly son. Elaine supposed that the irresponsible people of this world attracted one another.

When she had checked Jacob Matherly's blood pressure, temperature, and heartbeat for the evening and had duly recorded her findings in the note folder which the doctor had provided, the old man said, "So someone has told you about Christmas Eve."

She said, "Have they?"

"It shows in your face."

Unconsciously, she raised a hand to her cheek, as if she might feel the change.

"You're still quite pretty," Jacob said. "But there's a weariness there, a coldness. It happens to anyone when they have to face a story like that one."

He did not seem to be excited over the memory any longer. The events of the last several hours had forced him to dredge it up and examine it from every angle, and it no longer frightened him.

She said, "The Bradshaws told me."

"Those vampires!"

Despite herself, she laughed. "Aren't they just?"

"Money will never do them any good, because they'll never be satisfied that they have enough of it to be happy."

She agreed.

He said, "Sit down, Elaine. I want you to hear it from me."

"Christmas Eve?"

He said, "Yes."

"Do you feel you should talk about it?"

"The memory hurt me for a while," Jacob admitted. "But that was only because I'd tried to force it out of my mind. I hadn't fully succeeded, of course, but over the years I had managed to dull the memory. Now, it is back, sharp and clear, and I've learned to accept it again. It'll help if I tell you; it'll unburden me a bit. Besides, I want to be sure that you hear it the way it was, not embroidered by the Bradshaws."

Chapter 7

Christmas Eve, 1957.

Snow. It had begun to snow early in the day, lightly at first, like a fine dusting of powdered sugar spilled across the streets and lawns. As the afternoon wore on, the cloud masses hung lower and became a more leaden gray, evenly colored so that one could not tell where the sun lay behind the sky's shroud. By four o'clock, the road crews were plowing and cindering. Those who had dared the city streets to complete last minute shopping were finding it rough going; cars were angled oddly across the pavement as more inexperienced drivers gritted their teeth and cursed themselves for ignoring the weather reports.

Everything at the restaurants checked out as it should. They would be able to serve a record number of Christmas dinners to those who chose not to eat at home as most people did—the elderly whose children no longer thought of them, young lovers not interested in sharing a magic time with parents, single people without family and afraid to remain alone on such a quiet, bleak day. Jacob left the Brass Lantern Inn, the last of the Matherly eateries to be checked out, got his car from the garage and started the weary drive home.

At twenty minutes of six, he pulled into the garage and shut the engine off. No other cars were there. Lee and the boys were shopping. Jerry and Bess had the day off and wouldn't get back until nine or ten, early enough for Bess to start making a few preparations for tomorrow's traditional feast.

When he stepped through the front door, he sensed something was wrong, though everything looked to be in order. For a moment, he remained on the threshold where a backward step would return him to the crisp snow and the cold December wind. Then he swung the door shut and walked to the drawing room where, at that hour, he expected to find Amelia.

She was not there.

“Amelia?”

She did not answer.

In the upstairs back room, the grandfather clock chimed the quarter hour. No one had set the seven day time mechanism in motion for more than five years. Who had started it now?

“Amelia!” he called.

Silence.

He looked through the downstairs and found it un-inhabited.

He went upstairs.

At the top landing, he was again possessed of that semi-clairvoyance that had forced him to halt just within the front door. Something was very, very wrong.

He wanted to go to the back room to see why the grandfather clock had been started, but he looked, first, into the nursery where the twins, Lana and Laura, lay in their cribs.

Cribs, then.

And the blood.

He did not know what the blood was. From across the room, it looked colorless, a dark substance running along the slats and legs of the cribs, staining the rug under them.

Hesitantly, he walked toward the children. They lay very still in the shadows, far too still.

He called softly, using the names which they could not yet recognize as their own, but names which he cherished.

The children did not whimper, did not move.

Then he was close enough to see the blood for what it was and to stare, morbidly, into the deep gashes of their awful wounds. Time passed. How much time, he was never later able to ascertain. Indeed, it was as if the laws of the universe, the mechanisms of physical Nature, had stopped altogether. He might have been trapped within a bubble of non-time, staring out through the fragile walls of his prison at a frozen landscape. Whenever time began to flow again and the bubble dissolved around him, he let

out a low, wild moan that swiftly escalated into a scream.

He turned and stumbled to the corridor.

The floor seemed to shift like the hinged base of a funhouse in a carnival, and it forced him to lean against the wall as he walked, lest he be pitched forward and lose his balance.

He found the room with the grandfather clock. The glass front of the case stood open, smeared with blood. The brassy pendulum was tarnished by years of neglect and by similar crimson stains.

"Amelia!" He thought he called her name. But when he listened to himself, he heard a wordless cry, a scream forced through a dry, cracked throat.

He turned and went back down the corridor, looking into each room, not certain what he would do when he found her. And then he came upon her; she had returned to the nursery and knelt by the cribs, her knees in red puddles.

She did not look at him.

She stared through the bars of Lana's crib, at the lifeless form curled there.

Her hair was in disarray, dangling along her cheeks, frizzled out over her collar as if charged with static electricity. Her clothes were stained and wrinkled, marked with huge patches of perspiration. Whatever long afternoon of madness had possessed her, it had taken quite a toll before culminating in the murders of the twins.

"Amelia," he said softly, standing in the middle of the room, halfway between the cribs and the door. This time, he did not imagine the call, but truly spoke to her. He was finished screaming. For now.

She looked up. "They wouldn't stop crying," she said.

The worst of it was her voice. It was perfectly normal. It had not the slightest touch of insanity in it. It was cool, throaty and sensuous, as always. Before, it had been one of her finest characteristics. Now, it was obscene and disgusting.

"You've killed them," he said.

"If they wouldn't have cried so much," she said.

He could not think what to say.

"I started the grandfather clock," she said. "Did you see?" She wiped at a strand of hair with a red-tinted hand. She said, "When the clock was working, we didn't have any twins. Now it's running again, but the twins are still here. I wish they'd go away. I wish things would be like they once were."

"The clock hasn't run in five years," he said. It made no sense. He was beginning to sound as deranged as she.

"It's running now," Amelia said. "And it will be fine in just a little while. Everything will be fine. The twins will be gone and, I'll be happy again, and Lee and I can go places like we used to. Two children are plenty, Jake. Lee will agree. All I did was turn the clock back."

He had walked the rest of the way to her, though he avoided looking at the dead twins. He said, "You killed them!"

"Turned the clock back," she countered.

Despite her disarranged hair and the wilted look of her clothes, her face was triumphantly beautiful.

That, too, seemed wrong to him. He wanted to make her understand all this and then watch her grow old and ugly within the instant.

"You stabbed your own children, over and over and over. You're a murderer, Amelia."

"Didn't you see the clock?"

For some reason beyond his understanding, he had to hurt her and knew that the clock was the avenue of attack through which she was most vulnerable. He said, "The clock isn't running."

"It is!"

"I was just in to see it," he said. "It's stopped again."

"No."

"Rusted workings."

"No!"

"The clock won't ever work again."

She leaped to her feet, her face suddenly contorted. Her lips were drawn back from her teeth in a

wild, wide leer of a smile. Her nostrils were flared. Her eyes were wide and shocked, staring into the distance.

He reached for her.

She stepped back, raised the knife and swung it at him.

He had forgotten the knife or had thought she had dropped it. She had been holding it at her side, half concealed in her hand and by the folds of her dress. He tried to back up, failed to avoid the blow. The blade scored his shoulder and brought an intense pain that dredged up the abandoned scream.

He fell, clutching his arm, feeling blood rush through his fingers. Unconsciousness swooped over him like a great, dark bird. He knew that he must avoid it, or Amelia would murder him while he lay dazed. But the bird was too heavy and too insistent. It settled on his face and blanked out the world.

When he woke, he had lost a cup or more of blood, though the wound only dribbled now. He was alone in the nursery with the corpses, but he was desperate to escape from there, even if it meant summoning Amelia by the noise of his movements.

In the corridor, he staggered toward the stairs and started down them, wary of the dense shadows of the lower floor. But when he reached the bottom, he realized he could stop worrying now. When she had fled from the upstairs, she must have tripped on the carpeting and fallen down the steps. Her neck was broken, and she lay in an untidy bundle on the last riser.

Curiously, aware now that he was in no personal danger and that the nightmare was drawing toward an end when he could get help, he did not react as logically as he should have. He stood there, over the dead body of the mad woman, and for a long while, he screamed, as if the explosion of air and noise carried the despair from him.

Christmas Eve, 1957.

Chapter 8

Elaine closed the door to Jacob Matherly's room and leaned against it for support. She had managed to sit through the grisly story of the Christmas Eve murders and had waited with Jacob until the night's sedative had taken effect and he had fallen asleep. In all that time, she had tried to keep in mind that her own actions were not important. What mattered was making Jacob feel at ease and giving him no need to worry more than he had. He was, after all else was considered, her patient, her very reason for being here, the center of her new life. So she had commiserated with him and tried to soothe him, had done much tongue-clucking and hand-patting, all the while forcing her fear deep inside where he would not be able to see it. Now, out of the old man's sight at last, the fear rose up and bubbled through her darkly.

What was she doing in this house?

Oh, yes, there was the job, the money and the room and board—and the feeling that she was getting ahead for the first time in her life, standing on her own feet. But that was not enough to keep her here, was it? She could as easily obtain a job in a happier home, away from the brooding evil that hung like a pall over the Matherly place. First of all, there was that fifteen-year-old double-murder and all that such a nightmare left behind it, the residue of insanity which no one would ever be able to cleanse from these rooms or from the minds of those people who had lived through the aftermath of the killings. And, much closer to home, there was Paul Honneker's drinking, which disturbed her more than she had realized. She had never liked being around drunks, for they were unstable, cut off from reality, too prone to fantasize. And there was Dennis Matherly and his frivolity. He and the house, together, made her terribly uneasy. And there was, of course, the stabbing of Celia Tamlin. And, perhaps most frightening of all, Jacob Matherly's early insistence that one of his own family was the guilty party.

Leave.

Go away.

Get another job.

But she could not do that. She could not, chiefly because that would be like running away from a problem, refusing to face up to reality. And she had never run away. Not from anything. There had been times, when she was yet a child and the coldness and inhumanity of the orphanage and its staff had bitten into her and made her afraid, that she had contemplated running. She had dreamed of being found by a wealthy couple and taken into their house and nourished and nurtured and given much love. But she had soon discarded those dreams and learned to cope with what really was. Now, so many years later, she could not give way to the childish impulses for escape which had plagued her then.

And other things held her here, she realized. There was Lee Matherly, whose fortitude throughout this ghastly affair of Celia Tamlin, had been indeed admirable. He was strong and tall, and he had borne the grim circumstances well, even if he had grown more pale and less cheerful through them. He was a father-image, she supposed. He was the stern, able father she had always longed for and never really known. And there was Gordon. She didn't like to think about that, because she was afraid that she was deluding herself. Yet, when they passed in the hallway or met for meals, they exchanged looks that made her certain he felt the affection for her which she, cautiously, was beginning to admit for him.

She tried to remember that Jacob Matherly had apparently given up the notion that one of the family was the guilty party in Celia Tamlin's case. The old man assured her that he no longer held to the notion that the madness which had infected Amelia Honneker-Matherly had also infected some other with her blood. He was subscribing, now, wholeheartedly to Captain Rand's theory about the hitchhiker. That should make her feel more at ease.

It did not.

She admitted to herself that she did not believe the old man's newfound optimism. He was too eager to accept Rand's proposal. He was too vocal in his support of the possibility of a stranger having committed the crime. Behind his expression of relief and his concern that this strange hitchhiker be found

and punished, lay the doubts he had evidenced before, in times when he wished to be more honest with himself. Jacob Matherly still believed that either Dennis or Gordon or Paul had been responsible. He was frightened near to death, waiting for something to break.

And so was she, she realized.

“Have you been hired as a guard now?” Gordon Matherly asked. He had come up the stairs to the landing before she realized he was there.

She looked confused for a moment.

“Given up the nurse's duties for guarding grand-father's door?”

She smiled. “No. I was going to my room, but I seem to have run out of energy at this point.”

He said, drawing her away from the door, “How is he?”

“His angina seems not to be bothering him, despite the continued excitement. I'd say, all in all, he's doing well.”

“I worry about him,” Gordon said. “I don't want to lose him.”

She smiled. “He's a wonderful old man.”

Gordon agreed, enthusiastically, and then said, “I came up to ask if you'd like to come downstairs and play a few games of billiards with me.”

She giggled, and immediately she was amazed at hearing herself do so. She blushed and said, “I can't play. I never have.”

“I'll teach you,” Gordon said.

It was one of the most enjoyable evenings of her life. Bess brought them soda and snacks halfway through the evening, but they were otherwise left alone in the game room. Ordinarily, Elaine would not have been much interested in games, for she thought them a waste of time. But Gordon was careful to explain that pool, unlike many other games, was beneficial, since it tested the players' mathematical judgment and sense of relationships. He proceeded to teach her the game as if it were a puzzle to be solved, explaining bank shots and how to hit a ball to make it go left or right. It was all very fascinating, and his company made it doubly rewarding.

When she went to bed around 11:30, she felt elated. Despite what had happened to Celia, despite the gloom that hung over the house, despite everything and anything, she felt fine.

Because of Gordon.

When she dreamed, it was of Gordon. They were walking together in an endless garden, where all the grass was mown and all the shrubs tended to. Wild fruit grew on many of the trees. Birds sang overhead and followed them, like special servants, wherever they went. The sky was blue, the air warm, and the rest of the world a million-billion years away.

She woke up to thunder that exploded like a bomb on the roof . . .

At first, she did not recognize the source of the noise or, indeed, the room in which she had awakened. The thunder shattered the flat, gray sky again and again, slammed ethereal fists upon the Matherly house, rattled the windows in their mountings and set the very air itself into sympathetic vibration. Lightning, coaxed from another dimension by the heavenly cannonade, played yellow-white fingers on the glass and thrust brittle shards of ghostly light across the floor and over the spread on the bed in which she lay. When half a dozen bursts of that strobe-like illumination had stabbed into the dimly lighted room, she re-membered the Matherly house, her job, her patient, the attack on Celia Tamlin, the story of Christmas Eve . . .

Her dream of peace was gone.

Her dream of Gordon had evaporated.

She rose and went to the window.

The morning was intensely black, the low sky heavy with sheets of cold rain which swept through the trees and across the tidy grounds of the estate. The storm was so fierce, the rain so dense, that she could not even see the colonial Bradshaw house which was usually visible from her window, even at dusk.

A particularly violent thunderclap made her start and jump backwards. When it was gone, she was angry. There was a time—of very recent vintage—when she would never have been frightened of thunder, when she would have thought of it only as noise, harmless noise. This house was changing her,

and she was not offering enough of a battle against it.

She turned away from the storm, showered, dressed, and checked on Jacob. He was still filled with a false certainty that the would-be killer of Celia Tamlin was a stranger.

Downstairs, the rooms were dark, lighted only by the cloud-filtered sun which shone dimly through the deep-set, rain-streaked windows. In the kitchen, she found dirty dishes stacked in the sink. Bess was neither clearing up the morning's debris nor preparing the afternoon meal, though it was now a few minutes before ten o'clock. That meant, she decided, that the old couple had the day off and were away shopping or visiting. Bess was too compulsively neat to have left work to be done.

She fixed herself toast and coffee, finished them at the kitchen table where she had a view of the back lawn, the scudding clouds, the willows whipped by the wind. She was dawdling over a second cup of coffee when the kitchen door opened, and Dennis Matherly entered the room. His face was flecked with red paint along the left cheek, and his hands were stained with green. He wore tattered jeans and a work shirt, quite a less affected costume than what she was used to seeing him in.

"Good morning!" he said, cheery despite the rain and the mood of this old house.

Uneasily, she said, "Good morning, Denny."

"I see you made coffee."

"I didn't fill the pot," she said. "But there should be another cup or two."

He poured a cup, added sugar and cream in doses she found excessive, then sat down at the table, directly across from her, sipping cautiously at the steaming brew.

"Have you heard about Celia?" he asked.

She found she did not want to look directly at him. She said, still staring past his shoulder at the rain, "I haven't, no."

"She's past the crisis," Dennis said.

She looked at him. "Out of the coma?"

He frowned and pulled at his lip. "Not yet. But the doctors say that her chances are very good for a complete recovery. They're intent on keeping her under heavy sedation whenever she does regain consciousness, so we probably won't know for some time who was responsible."

She did not know what to say in response. She did not want to talk to him at all, and especially not about the stabbing of the young girl *he* had originally brought to this house. Looking at him, somewhat entranced by the perfection of his good looks, she saw something behind his eyes that she did not want to face and could not clearly identify, something that frightened her more than a little.

"Is it Bess and Jerry's day off?" she asked, hoping the conversation would quickly extinguish itself in trivialities.

"Yes," he said. "And Bess will shout the roof down when she sees the dishes stacked here." He chuckled and sipped the last of his coffee.

She finished hers, too, and put her cup in the sink after she rinsed it out.

He came up next to her, put his cup with hers, and said, "Would you like to come up to my studio and see the last few 'masterpieces' I've been working on so diligently?"

No.

But she said, "Well, I have things to do and—"

"Come on," he said. "Father's away on business in town. Gordon's gone with him. I don't have anyone to admire a miniature I just finished. And I am utterly lost without admirers."

"Your Uncle Paul seems to be your greatest admirer," she said.

"Yes, but he's gone as well. It's that day of the month when he collects his trust check from his portion of mother's estate. He'll have picked it up at the bank by now—but he won't be home till supper. He likes to celebrate the receipt of each check in one or another of his favorite bars." He smiled as he said it, and she saw there was no anger or recrimination in his face or voice. He didn't seem to mind, at all, that his uncle was a drunkard.

Then it occurred to her that, but for Jacob Matherly, they were alone in the house.

And Jacob was a cripple, incapable of helping her If—

If what?

“Come on,” he said. “You’ve not been up to see my work yet, and it’s high time you were.”

He took her hand.

His hand was warm, large, dry and firm. She did not know why she should have expected anything else, but when she felt his hand and found it was not cold, she was surprised.

“I actually should look in on your grandfather and see—”

“He’ll be fine! Only for a few minutes,” he said, leading her from the kitchen, into the downstairs corri-dor.

She did not see any way that she might gracefully refuse his invitation, and she did not want to make him angry. He was, after all, his father’s favorite son. And he had Honneker blood . . .

“I want an honest opinion,” he said, as they started up the stairs to the second floor.

She did not reply. She *could not* reply, because her throat had constricted, and the ability to speak seemed to have left her.

“I hate people who say they like everything. Uncle Paul is my best critic, because he’s honest. He never fails to point out my failures and to criticize mistakes in my technique. He had a bit of art training himself— among many other things.”

Elaine remembered Paul Honneker’s honesty at the supper table that first night, when Celia had been ex-pounding on her notions for a complete rebirth of the mansion. She wished she could be as truthful herself. She wished she could overcome her fear of Dennis and her reluctance to risk insulting him. If only she could say: “I am afraid of you. I don’t want to go up there with you while we are alone in this house. Let me go!” If only . . . if only she could run.

At the end of the second floor corridor, they opened a door and went up steep, narrow wooden steps to a second door which opened on the attic. They walked into a large room where Dennis Matherly slept and worked. The walls were intensely white and hung over with perhaps twenty of his paintings and drawings. The floor was polished hardwood and softened to the tread, on one half, by a tattered oriental rug. The ceil-ing was open-beamed and polished until it gleamed darkly. A skylight broke the wooden arches and shed sunlight on the large drafting table and swivel stool which occupied the center of the room. There was a great deal of other furniture, though it was all utilitar-ian. There was a bed, an easy chair, a desk and chair, bookshelves crammed full of art texts, four easels, a cabinet of supplies, a xerox machine, a mounted cam-era for photographic enlargement, and a small refrig-erator where cold drinks might be kept.

“Not much, but it’s home for me,” he said.

“I like it,” she said.

She meant that. She had been prepared for a room full of plush and expensive furniture, deep pile carpeting, senseless knickknacks, a playboy’s notion of what a working artist’s studio was like. This was more the sort of place she could feel at ease in, utilitarian, sensible.

“I’m glad you like it,” he said.

He closed the door to the stairs so that they were, more than ever, completely alone.

Chapter 9

Here at the very top of the mansion, the storm was nearer, and its fits of temper were more explosively loud than they had been downstairs. At times, it was even necessary to stop talking and wait until a roll of thunder had abated before continuing.

The lightning forked the sky directly overhead, spearing the blue-black clouds and making—for brief instants—a flat mirror of the panes of the skylight.

Elaine did not consider herself an art critic, but even so she felt that Dennis Matherly actually did have some talent. More than she would have guessed before seeing his work. True enough, the paintings were all too colorful to be comfortable with, splashed through with fantasy, disembodied faces, weird landscapes not of this earth, detail so intense—at times—that it bordered on madness to have spent such time to trace the tiniest of lines. But they were good, no question about it. Good, she decided, in a way that was not exactly professional. Who, after all, could stand to live with such blatant fantasies and such unreal bursts of color hanging on their walls? He might be good, but he would not be financially successful.

As she made the tour of the room, she stopped before a painting of a startlingly beautiful woman. The entire canvas was composed of her face and a few, de-tailed yet indecipherable shadows behind her. She looked out upon the room with a gaze that appeared empty, directionless—strangely inhuman. Her flesh was tinted a light blue, as was nearly everything about the portrait. Only the green droplets of some fluid, glistening on her face, were at variance with the dominating blues.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

He was close behind her, so close she could feel his breath. But she had nowhere to move as she stared at that woman's strange face.

“Yes,” she said.

“It's one of my favorites too.”

“What is it called?”

“Madness,” he said.

When she looked again, she could see that was quite appropriate. And, in a moment, she realized who the subject must have been. Amelia Matherly. His own mother.

A crackle of lightning, reflected downwards by the skylight, made the green droplets on her face glisten and stand out as if they were real and moist and not dried oils.

“The spatters of green are blood,” he said.

Elaine felt dizzy.

He said, “The person who is mad, I think, might not look upon death with the same viewpoint as the sane. The madman—or madwoman—might very well see death as a new beginning, a chance to start over. They might not see it as an end, a final act. That's why I chose the green for the droplets of blood in the picture. Green is the color of life.”

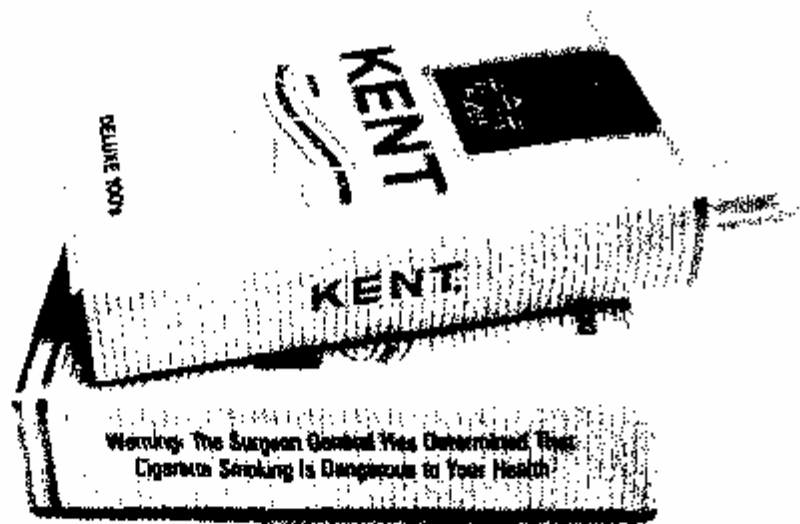
She could not say anything. She was grateful when a clap of thunder relieved her of that duty.

**What a good time
for all the
good things
of a Kent.**



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good time
for all the
good things
of a Kent.



Cozy 'n Kent!



"The woman in the painting is a murderess," he said

She nodded.

He said, "You know who?"

"I've heard the story," she managed to say.

"I loved my mother," he said. "She was always doing odd things and reacting strangely. But I loved her just the same."

Elaine said nothing.

She considered excusing herself and walking for the door, but she had a terrible premonition that she would not reach it. Best to wait.

"When I discovered what she had done to the twins, what she tried to do to grandfather, I almost lost my mind."

Lightning and thunder. The door: so far away.

He said, "You can't imagine how adrift I was. For more than a year, I wanted to die. I had counted so strongly on my mother, depended so deeply on her love. And then she was gone—and she had ruthlessly destroyed two of her children—and might have destroyed me if I had been there at the time. I was possessed with a pessimistic certainty that no one in this world could be trusted, and I dare not turn my back on anyone, even for a moment, no matter how much they might profess their love for me."

Elaine managed to turn from the picture and look at him. His squared, handsome face was drained, drawn in fatigue and paled by the memory.

"I can imagine how terrible it was," she said.

"Fortunately, my father understood that. He saw what was happening with me, and he went out of his way to see that I knew I was loved. For long months, he left the business in the hands of his accountant and spent endless hours trying to assure me, to make me forget. In the end, he succeeded. But without his care, I'm afraid I would have given up long ago."

Abruptly, he turned away from her and walked to the largest easel where a work-in-progress was clipped.

He said, "Look here."

Reluctantly, she walked to his side.

"Do you think it's shaping up well?" he asked.

"It's Celia, isn't it?"

He said that it was. Half of her face had been painted in, while the other half was still in sketch form and pasteled over with a pink-brown stain.

"I thought you were bad at portraits," she said.

"Funny thing is, I am. But with my mother, and now Celia, I haven't had any trouble."

"You must love her a good deal."

"Celia? Not at all. She's a fine girl, but I don't have those emotions for her. It's just that—that I seemed only to be able to paint the faces of those who have fallen under the misery of the Honneker legacy of madness. I have two other portraits, of the babies. They turned out not as well, for they were too young to have distinct images, individual faces."

"I see this is done in tones of orange," she said.

"Except for the blood," he said. "When I paint the blood, I'll make it red. Very bright red. Celia did not see death as a beginning, but as an end. She wasn't mad."

He picked up a palette knife and tested it against his finger.

It was not sharp, but long and flexible.

And pointed.

He picked at a section of the canvas he didn't seem to like, peeling away the coarse peaks of the oils.

"It will make a nice set—this one and the portrait of my mother."

"Yes," Elaine agreed.

She saw that, now, he was standing between her and the door, and she did not know how she could have let that happen.

Stop it! she told herself. You are acting like a fool, a silly, empty-headed fool.

He squeezed some paint onto the palette and began mixing it with the palette knife. It was scarlet paint. It clung in lumps to the silvery tool like—like—

“Blood,” he said.

She started, though he did not notice, and she said, “What?”

“I want to see how the blood will work against that orange pallor of her skin.”

Be still, she told herself. There is no need to be afraid. He is only a man, and you have learned how to deal with people. But she also knew that he might be mad, as mad as Amelia Matherly had been, and she realized that she could never cope with anything like that. Madness had no place in her world of logic and reasonableness. Madness was complex. She wished for everything to be simple.

He held the knife up, staring at it as the red paint ran slowly down toward the handle and his fingers.

“It looks good,” he said.

The rain beat more harshly upon the skylight, larger drops that sounded almost like hail.

“Well,” she said, “I ought to be going.”

He continued looking at the knife. “But you just came.”

“Nevertheless, your grandfather—”

“He didn’t like the first painting—the one of mother.”

His voice seemed so distant and unconnected to the moment, that she did not understand just what he meant. She said, “Who didn’t?”

“Grandfather,” he said.

“Why not?”

Dennis twisted the knife, forcing the paint away from his fingers and back up the blade. He said, “Grandfather took one look at it and refused to examine it in detail. He said he never wanted to remember anything about that afternoon and what he had seen— and he said that my painting was too vivid, that it was too true for him to study it calmly. He’s always been interested in my work, genuinely interested, but he never could stand that painting. And it’s the best I’ve ever done, I think.”

“I liked it.”

“Thank you.”

“And your grandfather’s reaction might be interpreted as praise rather than rejection.”

“I suppose so.”

She said, “I think I’ll be going now.”

He wiped the red pigment from the knife.

“Do you mind?” she asked.

“He’s your job,” Dennis said.

“Yes he is. And I can’t leave him unlooked after. I thank you for showing me around your studio. Your work is very interesting, and that is the truth. Well—”

Some of the red paint had gotten on his fingers. He stood there, staring at it, as if he saw something on the surface of the crimson blob, some image which he would have to use in a painting of his own.

She took a step away from him.

He did not turn.

She walked to the door, certain that he would come after her any moment now.

When she reached the door, she looked back, and she saw that he was painting crimson droplets on Celia Tamlin’s face. He seemed to have forgotten that Elaine had ever been there.

She took the attic steps two at a time, even though she realized that he might hear her panicked flight. She opened the bottom door, stepped into the corridor, and closed the door behind her.

Her breathing was fast and ragged. She sucked each breath deep into her lungs, as if she had never expected to breathe outside of that attic room again. It was cool and clean and delicious.

When her nerves had quieted considerably, she smoothed her hair and straightened her blouse. The attention to grooming details helped calm her even more. Recovered, she wondered what she ought to do now. Should she go immediately to Jacob Matherly’s room and tell the old man what Dennis had been like and what she had feared he was leading up to?

No. That would do her no good whatsoever. What, after all, had Dennis done? Talked of his mother.

Painted pictures of madness. Showed a morbid fasci-nation for blood. Toyed with a palette knife as if he might turn upon her and use it. None of it, in itself, was conclusive or even vaguely incriminating. Only if one were there could one understand what he had been like. It had not been only what he did, but how he did it, his mood, his expressions, the tone of his voice. And since no one but Elaine had seen those things and could grasp how they had been, the rest of it seemed silly.

Besides, Jacob would only tell her not to worry, that the killer was, after all, a stranger. A hitchhiker. He must be. Captain Rand said he was.

All she could expect to gain from Jacob Matherly was a little bit of conversation, a momentary escape from the dark house and the brooding people who lived there. He was the only haven of brightness in the place. But that was enough. Rather than sit alone in her room, she went down to talk to the old man. Di-saster was brewing. She could feel it in the air, weigh-ing down on her. At least, when it struck, she could be with someone else. Not alone. Please, not alone.

Chapter 10

If events in the Matherly house had seemed to describe a descending circle towards a distant point of terror ever since the attempt on Celia Tamlin's life, they plummeted toward that terror like a falling star on the evening of the third day. The night gradually evolved into something like a hideous dream which, at some of its worst moments, she was sure would never end for her.

It began gradually, at supper.

Dennis, immersed in his painting of Celia Tamlin, did not come to the table, but had his meal sent up. This seemed to please Lee, Jerry and Bess. They reacted as if his sudden intense interest in his work was an omen of a return to normality. Didn't they understand what sort of painting it was? Didn't his flamboyant fascination with madness make them ill at ease? How could they ever evidence pleasure at such a decadent preoccupation?

Anyway, whatever Dennis did to lift their spirits, Paul more than compensated for. He had not yet returned from his trip to town and was, apparently, still in some barroom squandering a sizeable sum of his trust check. From time to time, Lee Matherly cast a fretful glance at the empty chair, as if he hoped to look up once and miraculously find Paul there.

Celia Tamlin, they had learned, had come out of her coma but had not yet been questioned and would not be for at least another twenty-four hours. Her doctor was keeping her heavily sedated.

This last bit of news should, Elaine supposed, be cheering. But it only made her feel a greater, deeper tension. If the would-be killer was a member of the Matherly household, wouldn't the threat of Celia's soon-to-be-regained consciousness drive him closer to the brink? If he were frightened that she would point the finger at him, wouldn't his borderline madness become a berserk spree against which none of them were safe?

Dinner would have been a terribly depressing affair if Gordon had not been there. He engaged her in conversation, and he seemed able to draw from her things she would never ordinarily have talked about. His quiet, somewhat shy manner, so much like her own, gave her confidence.

They were finishing dessert—strawberries and peaches in heavy cream—when Paul Honneker returned home. He slammed the front door so hard the noise reverberated throughout the house like a cannon shot. Then, for a time, he stood in the vestibule, out of sight of the dining room, and cursed someone—perhaps himself—quite loudly.

"Will you excuse me?" Lee Matherly asked, wiping his lips with a napkin and rising. He was embarrassed for his brother-in-law.

Gordon stopped talking and listened closely to what was said in the vestibule, and Elaine pretended to be interested in the last of the fat red strawberries swimming in the cream in her dish.

"What the hell do *you* want?" Paul Honneker asked.

From the sound of his voice, the slight slur on his words, it was clear that he was very drunk indeed.

"Lower your voice," Lee Matherly said. His own voice was calm, sympathetic, even.

"Why in hell should I? Why *shouldn't* I yell all I want? I've had an afternoon to make a man yell!"

"Come upstairs, and you can tell me about it, Paul."

"I'll tell you now. Those damned townspeople—"

"Upstairs, Paul."

"I want something to drink."

"You seem to have had plenty."

"I want another," Paul said. His voice had gone whiny, but there was an underlying rage in it that Elaine had never heard before.

"You have a bottle in your room?" Lee asked.

"Yes."

"Let's go up, then. You can have a drink and tell me about it."

There was quiet for a moment, as if the big man was considering the suggestion. Then, suddenly,

there was an explosive sound of shattered glass. "Damned mirrors," Honneker said. "I hate damned mirrors like that. You know I do, and still you have mirrors around. What the hell? Is everyone against me around here? Does everyone hate me?"

"Of course not," Lee said.

"I'm going up to get a drink," Honneker said.

He cursed and hollered the whole way up the steps, and his voice died slowly to a distant grumbling as they went into his room.

Gordon pushed his unfinished dessert aside. His face had gone white, his lips tight and angry. "I'm so sorry you had to be subjected to that."

"It's all right, Gordon."

"It really isn't all right," he said. "He's a disgusting man, most of the time. I don't like people who don't achieve things. He's lazy and drinks too much. Despite mother's will, I think father ought to see about putting Paul on his own. It might do him good."

She agreed, but she did not say anything, for she felt that it was a family affair which was none of her business.

Gordon said, "My brother's another who needs a bit of discipline. Living up there, doing nothing but his oils, dreaming about critical acclaim. It would be funny if it weren't that he reminds me, so much, of mother."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Flighty, excitable. Given to a lot of fantasy. Some of that's in Paul, too. It's terrible the way father does nothing to curb that attitude in both of them. It frightens me at times."

She knew just what he meant.

Once she had seen to Jacob Matherly's well being and had heard him promise that he would take a sedative when he was finished with the book he was reading, she went to her own room and dressed for bed. She intended to read something light, the comedy-adventure novel which was among those she had purchased before she came here. But the novel was a bit too silly for her tastes and, besides, Paul Honneker's periodic noisy ramblings would not allow her to settle in for more than a few pages without being disturbed. When it was clear she was not going to become absorbed in the story, she put the book down and busied herself with a number of small chores.

She washed out two pair of stockings in the bath attached to her room and hung them to dry.

Paul Honneker was still rambling.

She filed her nails and painted them with clear polish to keep them from chipping more than they usually did. She really did not care much about the appearance of her nails, but this was, at least, something to help pass the time.

She dusted her room and straightened things a bit—mostly things that did not need straightening.

She wrote a short letter to a girlfriend who had attended nurses training with her. They were not really that close, and Elaine had intended to let the friendship gradually wither once they had gone their separate ways. But now it was nice to be able to make even this limited contact with the outside world.

She watched a television documentary about the ecology movement. Ordinarily, she did not care for situation comedies or westerns, preferring those shows which she felt were educational. Tonight, however, she watched several intolerably ridiculous programs when the ecology hour was over. She watched, in fact, until she grew sleepy. At a few minutes past midnight, she turned off the set, rolled over, pulled the covers up around her and reached out for the shimmering aura of sleep which was close at hand.

She dreamed of a painting.

The painting was her face, so huge it filled all horizons. Her face, in that painting, was covered with droplets of blood. Her own blood. Her eyes stared sightlessly out of the universal canvas, her mouth parted in a wordless scream of pain . . .

She woke to the sound of the emergency buzzer and leaped out of bed, her professionalism taking precedence over her grogginess. She pulled on her robe and hurried down the corridor toward Jacob's

room.

The door was standing ajar, but she did not stop to consider the importance of that. She went in, turning on the light as she passed the switch, and found the old man doubled over, retching, panting for breath, his angina as fierce as it had ever been.

She got two glycerine tablets from the medicine cabinet, poured a glass of water. She held his head while he swallowed the first pill and lowered him back onto his pillows again. His face was furiously red; perspiration dotted his forehead and streaked along his cheeks. His hair was damp, as was the pillowslip under it. She gave him the second glycerine tablet, then began filling a syringe with a charge of morphine.

“The key—” he wheezed.

His voice was thin and birdlike, all but unintelligible.

“Key?”

He pointed toward the top of the nightstand where a ring of keys lay, his long fingers shaking uncontrollably.

“The key . . . for this room,” he said.

“Relax,” she told him, working up a smile that she thought would soothe him.

“Lock me in . . . when you . . . when you go!”

“Please rest, Mr. Matherly. Relax, and we’ll have you better in no time at all.”

“Swear . . . swear you’ll . . . lock me in.”

“Let’s just roll up your sleeve,” she said.

“Swear it!” He was purpling with fury. His whole body shook as if someone were repeatedly striking him. She saw that it was worse to ignore his rantings than to give in to them.

She said, “I will.”

He slumped back, his face quickly paling, his lips taking on the blue tint of death.

She rolled up his sleeve, swabbed the area on the inside of his elbow joint and administered the morphine.

Shortly, color returned to his cheeks. His eyes looked heavy, but they were devoid of the agony they had contained.

“Better?” she asked.

“Tired,” the old man said. “Very tired . . . so tired.”

She listened to his heart with a stethoscope, listened for a long while. At first the beat was so ragged it frightened her, and she had decided to call an ambulance if it did not soon subside into a more regular cadence. In a few moments, the beat did soften and fall into a steady rhythm.

Jacob’s face was healthy again, both in color and tone—except, of course, for the damaged half—and his lips had lost the deathly pallor.

She filled a basin with water from the adjacent bath and wiped his forehead and face with a cold wash-cloth. That done, she changed his bedclothes and made him comfortable once more.

“Now?” she asked.

“Better.”

“I’ll stay with you until you’re asleep.”

“You won’t forget your promise?”

“I’ll lock the door,” she assured him, though she didn’t know why she should.

“I don’t want him getting in again.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know who it was. All I saw—I saw the knife, in the light from the window.”

She felt her own heart beat faster. In her professional role, so deeply involved in carrying out her nurse’s functions, she had momentarily forgotten the Matherly house and its legacy of madness.

“You don’t mean that someone tried to kill you, again?”

He nodded his head affirmatively.

She knew that she should drop the subject, but she could not. She said, “But why couldn’t you see who it was? The nightlight would have—”

“There was no nightlight when I woke up.”

She knew, then, that he must have dreamed the en-tire affair, for there was always a nightlight burning here, at his own insistence. She clearly remembered seeing to it before she left the room earlier in the night.

He continued: “I was awakened when he stumbled against the chair in the dark. When I opened my eyes, there was no nightlight. Just the dim light from the window. I reached for the cord and pulled the buzzer to get your attention, because I found I couldn't build the lung power to scream.”

“There's no one here now,” she said. “When the buzzer sounded, he fled.”

“You rest now,” she said. “He's gone and can't hurt you.”

“Do you believe me?” he asked, fighting the drugs that worked on him.

“Of course,” she lied.

He leaned back, exhausted, and soon found sleep.

Elaine listened to his heartbeat again, took his pulse. Satisfied that the attack had passed, she turned to leave—and saw the small, blue bulb of the night-light. It was lying on the floor where someone had dropped it after unscrewing it from its baseboard fixture.

Numbly, she picked it up and threaded it into its socket again; it lighted and glowed against the palm of her hand. When she had entered the room and switched on the main lights, she had been too concerned with Jacob's condition to notice that the night-light was out. The old man had not been dreaming, after all. When she left his room, she carefully locked his door as he had requested.

In the corridor, she stood in darkness, holding the ring of keys and wondering what her next move should be. Back to bed? Or should she wake Lee Matherly and tell him what had happened? The darkness seemed to close in, like a living thing, and it made clear thought impossible.

She hurried down the corridor to her room, closed and locked her door behind.

She could not sleep.

The storm had begun again, complete with rolling thunder and the heavy patter of rain on the roof and against the windows. Lightning snapped open the clouds and peeled back the darkness for brief moments, then gave way to the thunderclaps again.

But it was not the storm which kept her awake. She could have slept through a hurricane if only she had not had to cope with the certainty that a madman roamed the night in Matherly house.

Perhaps she should not have left Jacob alone. She doubted that the killer would force the door. But if she had remained with the old man, she would not be alone now . . .

Elaine remembered the dream from which the buzzer had awakened her, remembered the mammoth canvas that filled the universe with a skillfully rendered portrait of her blood-stained countenance. And that did not help her state of mind at all. It so disturbed her, in fact, that when she first heard the noise at the door of her room, she thought it was nothing more than a figment of her overworked imagination, generated by these unpleasant memories. She tried to turn away from the door and concentrate on regaining sleep.

But the noise continued.

It sounded as if someone were testing the lock.

Finally, unable to ignore it any longer, she rolled over. In the light of the bedside lamp, which she had not been able to bring herself to extinguish, she looked at the door. The brass knob moved slightly. It turned first to the left—then to the right.

She sat up in bed.

Someone, on the other side of the door, turned the knob as far to the left as possible, then cautiously put their weight against the panel. She could see the oak bulge slightly against its frame, and she was thankful that the door was as thick as an old tabletop.

She slid out of bed and stepped into her slippers.

A shattering blast of thunder swept against the house and made her gasp and whirl, as if her unseen enemy had somehow abandoned the door and come in through the window, behind her.

At the door, the would-be intruder twisted the knob back, all the way to the right and, again, applied

pres-sure to see if the lock could be snapped.

She considered screaming for help and realized that might not be the wisest move. How could she, after all, be certain that her scream would be heard by anyone but the man who was trying to force the door to her room? The walls of the old house were thick; the storm further served to cut the effectiveness of a scream. And if a familiar voice answered her scream and told her that everything was fine, how could she be sure that, when she opened the door, he would not turn out to be the killer—holding a knife and smiling at her?

The movement of the door knob ceased.

For a time, there was not the slightest sound to be-tray any furtive activity.

Elaine stepped up to the door, treading softly, hope-ful that whoever it was had given up and gone away. It did not occur to her, at that moment of intense fear, that—if the killer had departed—he might very likely have gone to attack someone else in the house. She never once considered that her own safety might be at the expense of another life. All that mattered was that, for whatever reason, he should leave her in peace.

The roll of thunder was somewhat more distant than it had been, though still loud enough to set her nerves on edge.

The lightning flashed intermittently, like some lone, forgotten, guttering candle.

As she leaned against the door to better listen to whatever was transpiring in the corridor, the thin blade of a wickedly long knife was thrust through the crack between the oak panel and the frame, inches from her face, almost as if the killer had seen her and knew where to strike! As if he might have been watch-ing her through two inches of solid oak!

She leaped back, too terrified even to cry out. She might as well have been a mute, for her lips moved and her throat worked without producing a sound.

The blade withdrew.

And came back.

It worked up and down the tiny slit where the door met the jam, clicking audibly against the mechanism of the lock. She realized, then, that the killer had not seen her, but was merely trying to spring the lock with the blade.

She leaned closer to the door now and said, in a small voice which sounded utterly unlike her, “Who is it?”

The blade continued to work.

“Who is it?” This time, she hissed the request louder.

The blade stopped.

It withdrew.

Silence . . .

“Are you still there.”

More silence.

She waited what seemed like hours, though only ten minutes passed according to the bedside clock. Even with her ear pressed to the door, she could not hear anything in the corridor beyond.

Had he left?

Should she open the door and see?

As if in warning, the thunder's greatest rage re-turned, smashing the stillness of the air. In its booming voice, she seemed to hear it cautioning her against un-locking the door.

She retreated to the bed and sat on the edge of the rumpled sheets, leaning against the old-fashioned foot-board. Aware that the danger might not yet have passed, she fixed her gaze on the oaken door.

Long minutes passed, and her mind rambled over dozens of memories, as if seeking escape from this ugly moment. She recalled her first look at the Math-erly house from the road and the first premonitions of unpleasantness which had possessed her. She remem-bered, earlier than that, graduation from the Univ-ersity Hospital and the eagerness with which she had packed to leave the dormitory for this job and a new future. And before that: the orphanage, the chang-ing nurses and house mothers, the children she had rarely gotten along with. Before that: the social work-ers bringing word of the accident, trying to

break the news of her parents' deaths with the least amount of nasty detail . . .

Abruptly, she looked up, aware that she had drifted into sleep, slumped against the footboard in an un-comfortable position.

At the door, the intruder was working the knife in the jam again, intent on springing the lock.

She required all her strength to rise up and go to the door and lean against it while he worked, trying to hear some other telltale sound. All she could hear was his heavy breathing which only frightened her more. He sounded like some sort of crazed animal.

"Go away," she said.

The knife stopped moving but remained thrust through the crack.

"Go away."

He said nothing.

"I never did anything to you," she said.

For a moment, she felt as if she would go mad her-self, driven into insanity by the simplest of things:

—the silence, deep and foreboding;

—the persistent wind, howling at the windows, pressing on the glass and driving the rain like fingers on the panes;

—the sound of her heart, pounding so fiercely and so loudly that it must surely burst;

—the gleaming blade of the knife, still most of the time but now and then jiggling as his hand twitched

. . .

Minutes passed as if they were cast of lead and given a minim of life, crawling minutes that eventually brought a withdrawal of the knife blade from the door. And then, thank God, the passing minutes also brought the sound of his footsteps as he retreated down the hall. He walked quietly and was soon gone.

She almost laughed, but managed to choke the urge down. She was afraid that, if she once gave in to laughter, she would be unable to stop. She was on the edge of hysteria.

She went back to the bed and crawled onto it and began to lift the sheets to wrap around her. But she saw that was no good. She dare not fall asleep again this night, lest the killer have another change of heart and come back after her. "I never did anything to you," she said to him. And he had been satisfied with that, apparently. But he might not remain satisfied for very long.

Her hands were sweating. She wiped them on her pajamas.

Her mouth was as dry as sand, but she was afraid even a glass of water would make her ill.

Twenty minutes later, she found herself standing in the middle of the room, swaying back and forth, staring at nothing, thinking of nothing. For a third of an hour, she had lost track of the world, slipped into a self-protective shell.

That was dangerous.

She shook herself, figuratively and literally, and she angrily berated herself for being unable to control her fear. There was nothing to fear. Nothing concrete. Not until he returned, if he did. She had always believed in keeping things as simple as possible, hadn't she? All right, then. The danger had passed. Relax. Don't let your imagination run away with you.

She drew the easy chair to a spot ten feet away from the door, and she sat down in it, facing the only entrance to the room. She would maintain a vigil. And she did. Until she fell asleep, utterly exhausted, two hours later.

Chapter 11

It was 9:45 when she woke the following morning, and the knowledge that she was going to be late performing Jacob's morning checkup helped to keep her mind occupied and held the previous night's terror at bay. When she had showered and dressed and applied what little makeup she required, she found herself hesitant to unbolt the door. But, because she was late and because she was—above all else—professional in the performance of her duties, she overcame that hesitancy in short order.

The corridor was empty; the house was quiet

She unlocked Jacob's door and entered his room to find him sitting over the remnants of his breakfast, perusing the morning paper.

"Ah," he said, "good morning! As always, you look charming."

"Thank you," she said, a bit embarrassed, as she always was when anyone complimented her. "I hope your locked door wasn't the cause of any trouble. I should have been up earlier, but—"

"Nothing to it, nothing to it," he said, waving away any apology or excuse she had prepared. "Bess unlocked it and locked it after herself."

"Well, shall we go through the ritual?"

"Get out your infernal devices," he scowled in mock perturbation. "See if I'm alive or not."

When everything checked out as well as they might have expected, she said, "Is Lee home this morning?"

"He and Gordon are in the city on business again. If I'd worked myself as hard as they do when I was young, I'd never have lived to earn a pretty nurse!"

She could not understand his cheerfulness or why he had decided to take last night's incident so lightly. He did not appear—except for his insistence that the door remain locked—to fear anyone or anything.

She had hoped to find out what she wanted to know and unburden herself to Lee Matherly. If he was not at home, the next best sympathetic ear was Jacob's.

"Have the police talked to Celia yet?" she asked, watching the old man carefully.

"Yes," he said.

Then that is why he's relieved, she thought. The girl must have positively identified her assailant as a stranger. Yet, why should he still want his door locked if that were the case?

"What did she tell them?"

Jacob pretended to want to return to his paper, but he did manage an answer for her. "She can't remember it at all. It was too much of a shock to her, poor child. Those last few minutes, from the moment she turned into the driveway, are blank. No memory of them."

She did not say anything as she considered the consequences of Celia's hysterical memory loss.

"Her doctor is bringing in a psychiatrist to see if he can make her relive those missing minutes," Jacob explained.

"Do they think he can do that?"

"He uses hypnosis to cause age-regression in his patients, to make them remember traumatic episodes in their childhood. He should be able to regress Celia to the time of the attack." He peered over the rims of his glasses at a story on the sports page.

"When?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" He looked up, quizzical, as if he had become so quickly immersed in the story that he had forgotten their train of conversation. It was clear that he did not want to consider the subject and that he was putting on an act he hoped would dissuade her from questioning him about it.

"When will the psychiatrist treat Celia?"

"Today, perhaps."

"Perhaps?"

“Or tomorrow,” he said.

“And Captain Rand is just going to wait?”

“What else *should* he do?” Jacob asked, finally putting the paper down, convinced his ruse was worthless.

“Have you told him what happened last night?”

“Nothing happened,” he said.

She was so surprised by his statement that she could not speak.

“We’ll know soon enough,” Jacob said. “When the psychiatrist gets Celia to describe the hitchhiker, they’ll round him up in no time.”

“Last night, you didn’t think it was a hitchhiker,” she said.

“I had a bad dream last night.”

“It was more than that.”

“No,” he said. “A nightmare.”

She realized that, again, the old man was fighting against the acceptance of the truth. He wavered between rationality and an almost absurd degree of head-in-the-sand escapism. Right now, he was playing his ostrich role.

She decided that it would be useless to tell him about the nightlight bulb having been unscrewed. And he would probably flatly refuse to accept her story about the man who was trying to pry open her door with the blade of a knife. He didn’t want to believe, and therefore, he would not. She would have to wait for Lee Matherly and tell him everything. He would know what to do. He would, most likely, call Captain Rand at once.

“Well,” Elaine said, “I think I’ll see if Bess has anything to serve a late breakfast.”

“You run along,” he said. “I’ll be just fine.”

“I’ll check in on you after lunch.”

As she opened the door, he leaned forward in his chair, folding the paper haphazardly against his lap. “Lock the door, please.”

She turned and faced him, wondering if his facade of cheerfulness was about to break down. “Why?”

“I’d feel better.”

“Why?”

The old man looked pained, as if he were confronted with a child he loved, but a child intent on being nasty with him. His face was drawn tight, holding back a flood of emotions. His eyes were filled with a sadness that had been nurtured for a long, long time, a sadness that had become as deep as his soul. He clearly could not bear to offer her another reason. And if he were forced to tell the truth, to explain the nature of the fears he wished to deny, he would break down and he would cry—and he might very well suffer another attack of his crippling illness.

She felt that she was his friend, which meant she could not permit the tears. And as his nurse, she could not permit the attack of angina.

“All right,” she said.

She closed the door and locked it, tested the knob, then hurried down the steps and along the narrow first floor corridor toward the kitchen.

As she pushed open the kitchen door, Bess wailed as if she had been struck; a short, sharp wail of pain.

Chapter 12

For the first time in many years, Bess was both at a loss for words and incapable of functioning. Usually, the white-haired, jolly woman was vivacious and talk-ative, abustle with the chores of her position as if she were a wind-up machine that could not stop until its mainspring wound loose again. Now, however, her ruddy complexion had turned a gray ash, sickly and defeated, and her almost nervous abundance of energy had drained from her and left her wilted, sagging.

"I can't believe it," she said to Elaine, though she seemed mostly to be speaking to the wall in front of her.

"It's all right now," Elaine said. "It's over with now; there isn't anything you can do."

"I should have known," Bess said, accepting the glass of water the nurse gave her but not bothering to sip of it. "He was missing this morning. I said to Jerry, I said, he wouldn't have gone out before we got up and fixed his breakfast, now would he. And if he'd gone out sometime during the night, he should have come back. Unless something happened to him." She shud-dered uncontrollably and blinked tears from her eyes. "And something did, didn't it?"

Elaine had often handled situations where children needed comfort at the death of parents or where par-ents were deeply grieved by the loss of a child. That was hospital duty that every nurse learned to cope with, though she might not like it much. But this was the first time she had run across grief over a dead pet, a black and tan mixed-breed cat.

"Bobo was with us for eight years—until last night," Bess said. "He has a little hatchway in our front door that he can use to go in and out whenever he feels like it. With all this going on with the Mather-lys, though, I should have locked his hatch. I should have."

"You couldn't have known," Elaine said, taking the old woman's hand and patting it. "No one could expect you to—"

"I should have," Bess said. "I should have known. After Miss Tamlin, I should have been careful even with Bobo." She looked up at Elaine with very clear, blue eyes and said, "Bobo was a skitterish cat. He wouldn't have gone to anyone unless he knew them. You know what that means, Miss?"

"You think someone in this house killed him?"

Bess looked very sober, and her eyes were lined with fear. "In a manner of speaking, Miss. In a man-ner of speaking, it was someone from this house that did it."

Elaine thought of the feline corpse which she had seen lying in the garbage bag. It had been stabbed repeatedly with a sharp knife, then slit down the sto-mach as a final gesture. It had lain in that plastic sack all morning while Bess made breakfast, concealed by other pieces of trash which had been neatly wrapped around it. If the blood had not soaked through and collected in a puddle in the bottom of the bag, and if Bess had not noticed it and begun to empty the sack to discover its source, it would never have been found.

She did not know whether it was a good thing that Bess uncovered the cat's corpse or whether it would have been better all around if the cat had simply dis-appeared. It proved, in a gruesome way, that the killer was indeed a member of the Matherly household —if one could make the police see that there was a connection between the attempted murder of Celia Tamlin and the brutal slaying of the cat. On the other hand, having seen the mindless violence vented upon the cat, how could any of them think clearly enough to deal with a crisis if one should arise? Any fears that al-ready plagued her—she knew—had begun to grow like cancerous cells, and she imagined the same would be true for everyone in the house.

"Perhaps we should call Captain Rand," Elaine said.

"Won't do no good."

Bess dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

"But you said that someone in this house was re-sponsible. It seems very possible that the same person took a knife to Celia, someone deranged enough to—"

"I said it was someone in this house, *in a manner of speaking*," Bess corrected her.

"I don't understand."

"It wasn't no one *living* here," Bess said.

Elaine could not understand what point the old woman was trying to make. "Just the same—"

"Let's go tell Jerry about Bobo," Bess said. "He'll feel just so terrible awful about it."

It seemed to Elaine that they should call the police first, but she was a nurse who always put the values of her patient first—and Bess had become a temporary patient in her grief.

Jerry and Bess lived in an apartment over the garage, separated from the house by only a few steps. At the top of the outside stairs that led to their back door, Jerry came out to meet them.

Inside, while Bess tearfully related the tale of the discovery of Bobo's mutilated body, Elaine looked about the large, poorly lighted front room, fascinated by, at first, the singularly odd collection of furniture and, later, by the unusual volumes which filled the wall-sized bookshelves behind the sofa. The chairs were a mixture of padded, reupholstered monsters with heavy arms and high, deep backs, and heavy, un-padded rocking chairs which bore the scars of long use. All the lamps were floorlamps, the last having been bought no later than the late 1940s, a silk-shaded thing with gold tassels hanging around its rim, catching the light like hair and diffusing it. Some of the other pieces were Victorian, some early American and some in styles she could not identify. The room had the look of an auction platform in the country or perhaps the look of a room wherein each piece holds family memories and has been handed down from generation to generation for sixty or eighty or a hundred years. She supposed this last was true, since Bess and Jerry were surely paid enough to afford whatever they might wish. Obviously, they spent a handsome sum of money on books. And such strange books . . .

She walked along the shelves, her head tilted as she read the titles: *The History and Practice of Magic* by Paul Christian, *The Paganism in Our Christianity* by Arthur Weigall, *Natural Chiromancy* by Rampalle, the two Pennsylvania Dutch hex books, *The Long*

Lost Friend and *The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, a number of collections of unexplained, possibly supernatural events edited by Frank Edwards or Brad Steiger, *The Study of Palmistry* by Saint Germain . . .

She looked up suddenly, aware that Jerry had addressed her.

"Excuse me? I was absorbed in looking at your books."

"I asked if you were aware of the ghost," Jerry said.

He was standing beside his wife where she had settled into the musty embrace of a large and utterly un-attractive easy chair.

"What ghost is that?"

"The Matherly ghost," he said.

"Amelia's ghost," Bess added by way of further clarification.

"I don't believe in ghosts," Elaine said.

The old couple looked knowingly at each other, then looked back at Elaine—as if they pitied her ignorance.

"No, really," Elaine said. "When you're a nurse and you've had to study medicine and biology and chemistry, and when you've read lightly in the other sciences, it just isn't possible to believe in things like that any more." She wanted to say more, but she restrained her impulse to lecture.

She realized now that she should have expected something like this from the moment that she had seen the nature of their library. This was not the first couple she had ever met who professed a sincere belief in the occult, in supernatural goings on, curses and hexes and ghosts. At one time, she had gotten angry and had tried to argue the superstitious out of their silly beliefs, but now she understood that such a task was Herculean, all but impossible. After all, not everyone looked upon the world quite so sensibly as she did. She would always have to tolerate the most fanciful of philosophies in other people—but she did not have to like it. And she did not. Usually, when she saw that scenes like this were inevitable in any relationship with other people, she excused herself. The discovery of the dead cat and all the previous tension of the Matherly house, however, had dulled her perceptions a bit.

"We've educated ourselves, too," Bess said defensively, though Elaine had not meant to imply that

they were poorly educated. Even the best educated and the most intelligent people became involved in occult-ism, searching for some reassurance they apparently did not find in their daily lives or in their regular church attendance.

“We haven’t delved into the sciences which you mentioned—medicine and biology and such,” Jerry said. “But we have read and studied the sciences of the occult.”

“They’re hardly sciences, though,” Elaine said.

“Some think they are.”

Elaine did not answer, and she felt much better for having held her tongue. She liked both of these old people and did not wish to become involved in some petty and bitter argument about something so silly as the existence of demons and witches and—ghosts.

But Jerry was not satisfied. He said, “Perhaps if you heard about the Christmas Eve murders, you’d believe in ghosts after all.”

“I’ve heard about them.”

“From whom?” Bess asked. “Jake?”

“Yes. And the Bradshaws.”

“Neither of them would tell it all,” Jerry said to his wife.

“Course not,” Bess agreed.

Jerry said, “They wouldn’t have told you about the knife.”

“I heard that, all the terrible details,” Elaine said.

“But did the Bradshaws or Jake tell you that the knife Amelia used was never found?”

Elaine recalled the story as Jacob Matherly had told it. Amelia had killed the twins and then had stabbed him. She had fled the room and had broken her neck on the stairs while fleeing from—whatever a mad woman might imagine was chasing her. The knife should have been found alongside her or somewhere between the nursery where she wounded Jacob and the spot where they had found his body.

“A mystery, isn’t it?” Bess asked.

She seemed to have recovered from her grief for Bobo, and she leaned forward in her chair, her eyes bright and her lips curved in a gentle smile.

“She hid it somewhere,” Elaine offered.

“Why would a madwoman take the time to hide a knife when her guilt was plain enough without it?”

“Why would a madwoman do anything?” she replied to Bess by way of another question. “She had lost all her reason, remember. She was not behaving logically. You can’t try to reason what she did and why.”

“What you say may be so,” Jerry offered. His voice was breathy with expectancy which Elaine found unsettling. “But, then, why didn’t a search turn up the knife?”

“Who searched for it?”

“The police.”

Bess said, “They gave us all a hard time for a while when they couldn’t find the knife. Especially Jake, poor man.”

“Why especially Jake?” Elaine asked.

“Fools!” Jerry said, shaking his head at the very thought of the police.

“The police had some notion or other that Jake might have—might have taken the knife to the children, pushed Amelia down the steps and then cut himself to make it look like he’d been attacked.” Bess clucked her tongue. “You know Jake. Could he ever have done a deed as black as all that?”

“No,” she said. “I can’t see how.”

“Cops finally learned about Amelia’s grandfather being in a place for the insane, and they quit poking around.”

Elaine felt a bit dizzy. She wanted a breath of fresh air and some light—neither of which this tightly sealed, dimly lighted room could offer her.

Jerry continued the argument for the existence of a ghost. “Then, it was about a year after the murders that we began to hear the wailing of a child, late at night. It carried through the house, into most every room.”

“Gordon and Dennis were children then.”

“This wasn't like that,” Bess said. “It was an *eerie* wailing, not like a baby wanting water or comfort. It was one of the dead children calling out to us, is what it was.”

A little fresh air. Yes, that would be all she needed.

And some light, of course.

“And then the cards,” Jerry said. “The cards told us that the ghost would come back some day.”

“Cards?” Elaine asked. She hoped that, by hurrying them along, she would be able to leave sooner.

“Jerry and I went to a reader in Pittsburgh,” Bess said. “Janey Moses was her name. You heard of her?”

“No.”

Jerry said, “She was one of the most famous readers in the East, and maybe *the* most famous. Her mother and father were gypsies. Her mother was an Albanian, and her father was Polish. Her mother's mother was a white witch who cured ailments to earn a living after her husband died. And her brother Leroy was the sev-enth son of a seventh son—and he died in Janey's arms.”

Bess wanted to tell some of it. She twisted in her chair and said, “Janey Moses was only part of her name, the easiest part to say. She laid out the cards and read them to us, and she said that the knife hadn't been hidden at all. She said that the ghost of Amelia Matherly, when it rose from her dead body, had car-ried the knife away. And she said that was a sure omen that the ghost meant to return some day. And she was right. It has returned.”

“After all these years,” Jerry agreed.

Some light, away from these shadows . . .

A little air . . .

That was all she needed.

“Excuse me,” she said. “I really ought to check in on Jacob and see how he's doing. It's really past time for that.”

The time had not passed, really, but the excuse worked well enough. A moment later, she was hurriedly descending the stairs to the lawn. She rushed back toward the kitchen door of the main house.

She stopped on the threshold, however, suddenly aware that the house was no better a place than the darkened living room of the old couple's apartment.

Bobo lay dead in that kitchen.

And, somewhere in the great house, the knife which Amelia Matherly had used on the children lay hidden where her bloodied fingers had placed it just before her death . . .

Elaine turned away and hurried out into the sun-shine that spilled across the well-tended lawn. She was not certain where she was going, but she knew she had to be alone for a while, to think this thing out.

Chapter 13

Elaine found a large, tabletop formation of lime-stone at the edge of the largest copse of pine trees on the Matherly property, and she sat there in the full light of the morning sun, letting the heat bake some of the confusion and fear out of her. Only when she felt relaxed and in control of herself again did she begin to consider what she had been through, what it all meant, and what she might be forced to go through before this nightmare was all over.

She could not quit and leave without notice, though the notion had occurred to her. She simply could not afford that extravagance. When she had come to the Matherly house a few days ago, all she owned in this world had been packed into the Volkswagen: her clothes and a very few mementos of her childhood and the years she had spent at the University Hospital. Her wallet contained only seventy dollars; she had no bank account and no hidden funds. Even the car, five years old now, was not worth a great deal. Lee Matherly's kind advance of money against her salary had been more than welcome and made her feel secure as she had never been in her life. If she quit without notice, she would, in all good conscience, have to return the check he had given her. Then she would be without a job—and, worse, without a good reference to obtain another job. She would not even have enough to rent a room for more than a month or so, while she tried to find a job, and she would probably have to take a position waiting tables or some such, while her training as a nurse went to waste. No, she could not quit; she would almost rather die than accept the insecurity of unemployment.

But there were other considerations besides finances. For one thing, it was against her professional code to leave a patient untended. Certainly, with the salary they could offer and with all the fringe benefits that befell their employees, the Matherlys could find another nurse in a day or two, three at the most. But Elaine could not bring herself to abandon a patient for even that short a period of time. She believed Jacob needed her and that the height of selfishness would be to leave him alone when his angina might bother him again at any moment. She must also consider, she knew, what quitting the job would mean in terms of her self-respect. She had never run away from anything. She had never allowed herself to be consumed with fear of anything. If she did not hold on now, if she ran, she would never again be able to think of herself as the sensible, intelligent, sober young woman she had always liked to believe she was.

And there was Gordon.

In high school and later in nurses training, no one had ever shown much interest in her. Oh, now and then, boys would talk to her and ask her for a date. But none of them ever dated her twice. And word always seemed to get around that she was “too serious” or “cold.” She had never liked to do the things that most young people liked to do. Games bored her. All but the best and most thought-provoking films seemed a waste of time to her. She did not like to drink, not even a cocktail now and then, and she found no particular interest in dancing. She could understand why so many young people were frivolous, of course. They had been raised by loving parents, and they had never had a glimpse of how cold the world could be. She had gotten that glimpse—and many others—early in life, and she knew that one had to be sober, had to be serious, had to work to keep oneself from sliding to disaster in a world where pitfalls were everywhere prevalent. Educate yourself, spend your time wisely, always be prepared to do battle with life: that had been her code since she was a child. And because of it, there had been no romantic interest in her life to date.

Until Gordon.

Gordon was so much like she was, so aware of the cruelty of life and so anxious to work to avoid it, that she could not help being attracted to him. She thought that he was, likewise, attracted to her. She hoped so. Oh, God please let him be!

The rest of her reasons for having to remain on the job were sound, logical ones. This one was emotional. And having never been possessed of such an emotion before, she let this one carry her away more completely than she would ever have admitted was possible. She would not yet say she loved him. It was too soon for that. She did not know him well enough. But strong, very strong affection, yes . . .

So, if she were to stay, if she were to start to build her life at this time and place, she would have to give some thought to the identity of the killer who prowled the Matherly house. When she told Captain Rand of her experience this past night, she would want to be able to clearly answer any questions he might ask and give him her own projections if he should want them.

Ghosts?

That was silly. Perhaps the knife had disappeared. And perhaps the voice of a child had cried out at night, all over the house, in a ghostly fashion. There would be rational reasons for these two events.

Her visit with Jerry and Bess had not been a total loss, however. She had learned that the police had once suspected old Jacob Matherly of the Christmas Eve murders, no matter how briefly, and she knew that she would now have to include him in any list of suspects she might devise—no matter how ludicrous his inclusion might seem.

Jacob Matherly. Though she was sure that the old man was not capable of any such outrage as the attack on Celia Tamlin, and certainly incapable of the atrocities that had occurred in this house fifteen years earlier, she had to admit that he had the opportunity, perhaps a better opportunity than anyone else. After her evening checkup, he was not bothered until the morning, unless one of the family spent time with him. The night of Celia's misfortunes, he had remained in his room until she, Elaine, had come to check on him. Or so he said. He might easily have been outside the house and could have returned, with little trouble, while the rest of them were running to see what had happened. He was protected by his semi-invalid status, and the police showed little or no interest in him.

Dennis Matherly. Supposedly, he had been in the kitchen, drinking a glass of milk, alone, when he heard Celia scream. That would explain, of course, why he had come *up* the stairs that night and had asked if Elaine had called out. On the other hand, if he had been the wielder of the blade, he might also have been returning from the drive where he had tried to kill the girl. She remembered his strange paintings, his manic frivolity. She recalled Lee's favoritism for Dennis, and she remembered that Dennis had admitted to being deeply psychologically shaken by his mother's madness. Could he have been so shaken that he, himself, had gradually relinquished his sanity over the years?

Paul Honneker. He shared the same parents, carried the same sort of genes that Amelia had carried. Had the faulty gene, the bad seed, which his grandfather possessed, been passed to him as well as to his sister? She remembered his drunkenness, his inability to hold a job for any length of time, though he was a grown man nearing middle age. Surely, that indicated an unstable individual. And there was the way he smashed mirrors, unable to face himself. Was that because he knew what he was and remembered terrible things he once had done? She remembered, too, his fascination with the eerie paintings that Dennis Matherly labored over in his attic studio.

Gordon Matherly. She would even have to consider Gordon, no matter how much she might care for him. He did, after all, come of the same gene pool as Dennis and from somewhat the same heritage as Paul Honneker. She remembered his swift reaction to her mention of the Christmas Eve murders, the way he had gone cold and withdrawn from her. That might be attributed to a reasonable shame for the family's history—or to something darker.

That was the list she could give Captain Rand. All the household except herself and Lee Matherly, who was clearly shaken by the attempted murder of Celia Tamlin and who—besides—had no Honneker blood.

Abruptly, she remembered that Jerry and Bess were also members of the household. Although she could see no motive for their having been involved, she could not discount them. When she considered the books in their front room and the unswaying belief in ghosts which they had manifested in their recent conversation, she had to consider the possibility of some unpleasant connection between the old couple and the killer. Either or both of them, after all, could have stabbed Celia and fled into their own home, without any risk of being seen returning to the main house from the scene of the crime.

Paranoia?

Perhaps it was.

Common sense?

Definitely.

She would have to suspect everyone, or nearly every-one, until the real culprit was apprehended and his guilt was proven. That could not be more than a few days, what with Celia being treated by a psychiatrist. And if she helped Captain Rand now, today, the end might come even more quickly.

She stood up, stretched, and brushed the dust from the back of her skirt.

The sky was an incredible shade of blue. Perhaps that was a good omen, a promise of better times to come.

Somewhere nearby, a bird sang, a long trilling note caught in its throat, and that was somehow a positive omen as well.

She decided against phoning Captain Rand on her own hook. For one thing, she might find it hard to reach him, and she would not want to impart her information to a clerk or a lesser officer who would not respect the privacy of what she said. This evening, after supper, she would tell Lee Matherly exactly what she had heard and seen last night, about the intruder at her door and about the attempt on Jacob's life which he now denied (or maybe there had been no attempt and his story had been concocted for her benefit, to generate her sympathy). If Lee then took it to Captain Rand, it would have more power, be more believable. She did not trust herself to make important news sound important.

She looked at her watch. It was 1:18, and she had been sitting here far longer than she would have guessed. It was time for another of Jacob's checkups.

She started back for the house, feeling better.

Tonight.

Tonight, it just all might break open. And then she should be able to live in peace again

Chapter 14

Lee Matherly finished his coffee and looked around the full table, smiling at everyone, as if they were all his children, even Elaine and Paul Honneker. He had been in an especially good mood ever since he had come to the table, though the reason for this was not entirely clear to Elaine. It was almost, she eventually decided, as if he had some big secret which he was hid-ing from them but which he would soon reveal. That was, as it turned out, exactly the case.

"I spoke with Captain Rand this afternoon," Lee said. "He had some very interesting information."

Everyone at the table looked at him, the last bits of dessert and last sips of coffee forgotten.

"Even without Celia's help, they're making some headway on this hitchhiker."

"Oh?" Dennis asked.

"You didn't tell me," Gordon said. He had been with his father that afternoon, though not when Rand had spoken to him.

"I wanted to save it for now," Lee said. "I know how bad everyone has been feeling over this, and I wanted to be the one to cheer you up."

"What did Rand have to say?" Dennis asked.

"They know the hitchhiker was bound for Philadel-phia," Lee said.

"Dammit, Lee, don't be so cryptic. Tell it all!" Paul Honneker was flushed: He was not drunk; but he had evidently had a nip or two earlier.

"Apparently, the police have had this for a couple of days, ever since they went through Celia's car, but they've been holding it because they don't want the kil-ler to know they're onto him."

"What?" Dennis asked. His face was hollow, his teeth bared. The way he leaned over the table re-minded Elaine—perhaps melodramatically—of an animal tensing to leap.

"A sign," Lee Matherly said. "You know how hitch-hikers carry signs that say where they're headed? They flash them up for oncoming traffic to see."

"And they found a sign in the car?" Gordon asked.

"Yes. Jammed down between the seat and the back of the seat, a piece of cardboard with PHILADEL-PHIA lettered on it. They figured Celia picked him up in or near the city and brought him this way, as far as the turnoff from the main highway. At that point, he forced her to drive up here. Lord knows what he had in mind—perhaps holding us hostage or something. He apparently had second thoughts when she drove onto the grounds, and he made her get out and tried to kill her there."

Dennis relaxed again. "She always was one for pick-ing up hitchhikers. We used to warn her about it all the time."

"I don't see," Paul Honneker said, "where this sign is really very much of a clue. Unless they've taken fingerprints from it and the car."

"No," Lee said. "Rand explained that paper didn't take prints too well and that none of the prints in the car lead them anywhere."

"Then how can this mean anything?" Paul asked.

Lee said, "They plan to use the sign, if necessary, to jolt Celia's memory when the psychiatrist has her hyp-notized."

Paul said, "And they think that'll work?"

"The psychiatrist thinks it might. Anyway, it's a lead. And we can all breathe easier when they catch him, whoever he is."

Elaine realized that Lee Matherly had also won-dered if one of his own household was the guilty party and that this bit of news from Rand, no matter how slight, relieved him of that awful burden of doubt.

She was not convinced.

She doubted very much that the hitchhiker had re-turned to prowl the corridors of the house last

night. *That* had been a member of the family.

"Well," Lee said, rising, "I have some ledgers to look over before I can call the evening mine." He nodded to them and left the dining room for his first floor den.

Shortly, the others had left, all but she and Gordon, as if they both had planned to be left alone.

"Come into the drawing room a while," he said, standing and coming to her where he performed the courtesy of pulling her chair out for her. "I expected father to tell everyone about the psychiatrist who's treating Celia. We both met him, a Dr. Carter. I asked to sit in on his session, and he said I could, once Celia had been hypnotized. It was quite fascinating."

"I imagine so," she said as he took her hand and led her from the dining room, through the archway, across the deep carpet to a sofa where he sat beside her.

She felt warm and protected, and for a moment she forgot all about telling Lee Matherly her story.

"Did you have any contact with psychiatrists in your nurses training?" Gordon asked.

Elaine said, "Not much. Medical science still frowns a little on psychiatry, you know."

"Well," Gordon said, "I don't know if Dr. Carter is an example of the average psychiatrist or whether he is superior to the average, but he is a most impressive man!"

She felt herself smiling, and she realized that Gordon had put her more at ease than she had felt in days. She could hear Bess clearing the table. Lee was using the adding machine in the adjoining den. Upstairs, a phonograph was playing classical music. For the first time, this seemed like a house where people lived, instead of a house where they died. She liked it all very much, and she felt that she belonged and was not an outsider.

"In what way?" she asked.

Gordon said, "He is tall and, I imagine, the women would say he is very handsome. He's maybe thirty-five or so, terribly young for a psychiatrist, at least in my estimation."

"Was he able to regress Celia under hypnosis, to take her back to the moment she was stabbed?"

"No," Gordon said. "But he came close. Let me tell you exactly how it was."

Celia had been sitting up in the hospital bed when Gordon was conducted into the room by Dr. Carter. She was pale, but as lovely as she had been before the incident. She seemed to have lost a little weight, but there was no other sign of her condition.

"Can't she see me?" Gordon had asked.

"She only sees me—and she only hears what I tell her to," Carter had informed him. "Sit down over there. She does not even know you're here."

Dr. Carter walked to the side of the bed and stood by Celia. He touched her face with his fingers, but she hardly seemed to notice. He cupped her chin in his hand and raised her face so that she was looking directly into his eyes.

"Hello, Celia," he said.

"Hello, Dr. Carter."

"How are you feeling?"

"I don't feel," she said.

"How old are you?"

"I am no age."

"No age at all?" he had insisted.

"No age at all," she said.

Dr. Carter turned to Gordon then, smiling, and explained what he had done, through hypnosis. The first step in age regression was to get the patient used to floating about in time, to accepting a fluidity of age. By giving her no age at all, he could suggest, hypnotically, that she was now only twenty years old. Now nineteen. Now eighteen. And so on until she was a child. In this case, however, it was only necessary to go back a few days, back to Monday evening.

"What time is it now?" he asked Celia.

"No time."

"What day?"

"I don't even know," she said. And she giggled self-consciously.

"There's no need to be ashamed of not knowing the day," he said, speaking warmly, still touching her face.

Okay," she said, immediately malleable to what-ever he said

"Now, do you see a clock in front of you, Celia?"

"No."

"Look closely."

"I see it."

"Watch the hands," he said.

"I am watching them."

"Are they turning backwards?"

"Backwards?"

"They are, aren't they?"

"Yes," she said, her pretty face puzzled.

"Don't worry about that. They should turn back-wards. That's what we want them to do. In this case, that is perfectly natural."

The frown was erased from the girl's face.

"It is now Wednesday morning, yesterday morn-ing," Carter said. "Do you remember yesterday morn-ing?"

"I woke up in a hospital."

"That's right."

"I was hurt very bad," she added. "I touched myself and I hurt where I touched myself, and the nurses came and there was this needle in my arm, feeding me glucose and . . ."

"Okay, fine," he said. "You're okay now. Yester-day's hurt doesn't matter if you're okay today. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," she said, calmed instantly.

"Now," Dr. Carter said, "it is no longer Wednesday anymore, is it, Celia?" He stroked her chin.

"No."

"It's Monday morning, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Carter had then turned to Gordon and explained that he did not want to regress the patient immediately to the moment of the attack, prior to her coma. That would have been too traumatic, too sudden. Instead, he intended to regress her to Monday morning and then slowly work her through the day until the mo-ment when she had been attacked.

And so it had gone until Carter said, "Now, it is late Monday night, and you are putting the suitcase in your car. You are going away to stay somewhere for the weekend. Is that right?"

"Yes," Celia had said. But already there was a look of trouble on her face, a shadow of anxiety.

"Where are you going, Celia?"

She did not answer.

"Where are you going for the weekend?" Carter asked again.

"I—"

"Yes?"

She could not speak it.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Good. There is nothing to be frightened of, no-thing at all. Now, where are you going for the weekend?"

At that moment, she tore herself away from the doctor's gentle hand and began to scream.

"It was horrible," Gordon told Elaine, breaking his narrative to add his first personal comment since he had begun to relate the tale. "It was as if she were being stabbed right then, in the hospital."

Dr. Carter had not been unduly disturbed by her sudden, violent reaction. He merely said, "Stop scream-ing, Celia."

And she stopped.

He said, "No one will hurt you. No one will ever hurt you, because you are too pretty and too charming. Do you believe that anyone would ever hurt you?"

"No," she said. But she said it reluctantly.

"It is now Wednesday morning."

"Wednesday," she repeated.

"Where are you?"

"The hospital."

"Watch the clock. The hands are moving forward. Do you see how they're moving forward now?"

"Yes."

"It is Thursday morning now, isn't it, Celia?"

She said that it was.

At that point, Carter had turned to Gordon. "I'll have to wake her now and try again tomorrow. Would you please leave? She might be harder to control in subsequent sessions if she knows she's being observed."

"And I left," Gordon said. "I was quite shaken."

"I imagine so," Elaine said as the story slowly impressed upon her how eerie the scene must have actually been.

"At first," Gordon said, "I considered going back to watch the other sessions, until he was finished with her. I'm sure Carter would have let me. But when I heard her scream and saw the look on her face towards the end of the session, I knew that I didn't want to be there when she finally relived the attack. That would be too much."

For a moment, they were both quiet, and Elaine said at last: "Gordon, do you believe this hitchhiker theory?"

"What other theory is there?"

"I don't want to make you angry at me," she said.

He leaned forward. "You couldn't do that. What is on your mind, Elaine?"

She hesitated only a moment, then told him everything.

He listened closely, and when she was finished, he said, "Come on. We have to let father know about this."

He led her into the den and had her repeat what she had told him. Lee Matherly listened, amused at first, then more and more concerned until, when she finished, he looked deeply disturbed.

"And you never got a look at the person and haven't any idea who it was?"

"No," she said. She did not want to go into detail about her suspicions of nearly everyone. There would be time for that when Captain Rand was here.

"I'll have to talk to father," Lee said. "Will you wait here a few minutes?" He stood up, not waiting for a reply, and left the room.

"You must have been terrified," Gordon said. He took her hand, and she felt his strength enclose her fingers, felt that protected aura again.

She nodded agreement.

"Don't worry," he said. "Father will take care of this. It looks, now, like it will all be settled this evening." He sounded grim. He had realized, just as his father must have, that her story was a strong indication that the killer was a member of the family. "It will all be settled shortly," he repeated. "I'm certain."

"I hope so," Elaine said. The dark, paneled walls seemed terribly close, the air thick and unbreathable.

They waited for Lee Matherly to return.

Chapter 15

When he returned, Lee Matherly had regained some of his cheerfulness. He sat on the edge of his desk, directly before Elaine and said, "Well, Elaine, father admits having told you that story about nearly being murdered last night. But he says, when he buzzed for you, he was so terrified that he wasn't able to think clearly. He says, now, in retrospect, he knows he was dreaming. But when he woke, having an attack, he was confused about what was real and what wasn't."

Elaine shook her head negatively. "The bulb had been taken out of his nightlight."

"I'm sure there's a logical explanation for that," Lee said. "It's just coincidentally pertinent to his night-mare. And father is certain it was only a dream."

"Was I dreaming too?" she asked. She was beginning to get angry. None of these people wanted to face up to reality, to truth. They were so eager to accept the theory of the hitchhiker that they would bend over backwards to misinterpret any clue that pointed to their own number.

"It's possible," he said. "You had gotten little sleep in the past days. And you had the frightening experience of listening to father recount his nightmare as if it were truth. You can see how—"

"What about the cat?" she asked, figuring she had already lost that point.

"What about it?"

"Who stabbed it and put it in the garbage bag?"

"I can't tell you who murdered the poor animal," Lee said, "But it was Denny who put it in the bag."

"Dennis?" she asked. She felt her stomach rise, felt her hands begin to tremble as she remembered his paintings and the odd mood he had been in the previous afternoon.

"Yes," Lee said. "He found the cat this morning when he went for a walk before beginning his work. It was very early—he gets up quite early many days—and he knew Bess wouldn't be in the kitchen yet. He couldn't think of what to do with Bobo, but he knew that Bess mustn't find the animal. He knew how hurt she would be. Unfortunately, he made a bad choice. And Bess found the body."

"But who killed it?" she persisted.

"Apparently, one of the neighbors," he said uneasily. "Bobo had a tendency to roam about that wasn't appreciated."

"But they would have poisoned him. Or shot him. They wouldn't have stabbed him like that!"

"It's difficult to know just what people will do," Lee said. "Many of our neighbors are unfriendly towards us. I believe you met the Bradshaws. Well, they aren't the only people in the neighborhood who would do us a bad turn if they had the chance."

"But—"

"Now," Lee said, "if you'll excuse me, I really must get back to the ledgers. Rest easy, Elaine. Tomorrow or the next day, Dr. Carter will make a breakthrough with Celia, and all this will be finished with. I'm sorry you arrived in the middle of such a mess." He went behind his desk, sat down, and began to leaf through a sheaf of papers.

An hour later, as they sat on the sofa in the main drawing room, Gordon excused himself for the remainder of the evening, pleading work to be done with restaurant invoices. Evidently, he had sensed the mixture of anger, fear and confusion which filled her, for as he took his leave, he bent to her and brushed her cheek with his lips. And he said, "I wish that you would lock your door again tonight and that you would, perhaps, brace it with a chair under the knob."

She was so shocked by the kiss, the tender kiss that still lingered on her smooth cheek, that she took some long seconds to find words. She said, at last, "You believed me, then?"

"I see no reason to disbelieve you."

"And your father—?"

"He is doing what he thinks is right."

“Can't you persuade him—”

He waved his hand, negating what she was about to say. “Elaine, this is all strange business. I do not know really what to believe. I just hope you will lock your door tonight. I shall lock mine, I know!”

Then he excused himself and left the room, pausing only by the arch to look back at her. There was concern mirrored in his face, a concern that touched her and made her feel quite rich, richer than a queen. Then he was gone. She attempted to will him to stay, to keep the archway filled with him so that she would not be alone. But that was impossible and silly.

And, in another way, she was just as glad that he was gone—for she did not know whether he would approve of what she intended to do now. When she had seen that Lee Matherly was not going to accept the hard reality of what she was placing before him, she knew that she would have to call Rand whenever she got the chance, even though she did not have Lee's support. Now, as bedtime drew near and she would have to soon look in on Jacob, she realized that the time had come.

She crossed the room and sat down in the heavy, maroon lounge chair in the corner by the archway. It engulfed her as if it were a living organism, soft and pliable.

The adding machine clicked and ratcheted in the den.

The classical music still played upstairs.

She picked up the telephone from the end table beside the chair and dialed information to obtain the number of the precinct house out of which Captain Rand worked. A moment later, she dialed the police.

“Desk Sergeant Wilson,” a voice said. “Can I help you?”

“I'd like to speak to Captain Rand,” she said, with no little amount of effort, her tongue cleaving to the roof of her mouth as if she had just eaten peanut butter.

“I'm sorry, the Captain is off duty now. Is there any-one else who can help you?”

“Could I have his home number?”

“I'm sorry, we don't give out home numbers of our officers. Did you want to make a report or something? If you'd tell me what—”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw someone move into the archway from the hall. She turned just far enough to see Dennis Matherly looking down at her.

“I'm terribly sorry to have bothered you,” Elaine told the police sergeant.

“If someone else could help—”

“Sorry,” she repeated.

And she hung up.

She turned around and, with a supreme effort she would never have guessed herself capable of, managed to smile at Dennis. She said, “I hear that you've finished the portrait of Celia that you were working on. I'd like to see it some time.”

“It isn't quite finished,” he said. “Almost.”

“How much do you have to—”

He interrupted her, his voice lowered so that no one else could hear the exchange. “Was that the police?”

She hesitated, fished for an answer, found that she simply could not find any reply.

He frowned. The lines in his face gave it a curiously rubber look, cleft so deeply that one could never believe they were etched in flesh. He licked his lips and stared away from her, at the sofa, as if he were seeing something that her own eyes would not register, something more than a piece of furniture.

He said, “Do you still think it was one of the family?”

“No,” she said.

“You do, though.”

She did not answer this time.

“Who do you suspect, Elaine?”

“I don't know.”

He looked away from the sofa, engaged her eyes again. His own gaze was so intense that she could not look away from him, and she thought this must be what it was like to let Dr. Carter hypnotize you.

“Elaine, you must have some idea. There must be someone who has made you suspicious.”

“No,” she said.

“Tell me,” he insisted, taking a step towards her.

“*I just don't know!*” The vehement tone she had adopted was a surprise even to her.

Dennis blinked, as if her tense, clipped reply had snapped him out of fantasy into reality, broken some daydream that had him bound in a spell. He backed away from her again, and he said, “You'll have to come up and see the painting tomorrow.”

She could not reply. She was certain he could hear the heavy thumping of her heart and that he would understand—from that biological betrayal—who she most suspected. Him.

“It'll be finished by then,” he said.

She nodded her head.

“Tomorrow, then,” he said. And he went away, quietly.

For several minutes, she could not move. Her feet had fallen asleep and stung as if a thousand needles had been driven into them. The calves of her legs might have been molded from jelly, so weak were they and so regularly did they tremble. Her stomach was a knot which wouldn't come untied, and her chest was filled with lumps of dark, unmelting fear. She had to direct her thoughts to pleasant subjects, like the beautiful day which had just passed and the good meal she had just eaten and the kiss Gordon had bestowed upon her cheek. *Then* she could get up.

She mounted the stairs, wary of the shadows that always lay on them, night and day. She intended to look in on Jacob, see him to bed if necessary, and then lock herself in her room and brace the door with a chair just as Gordon had recommended.

It was going to be a long night.

Longer than any that had come before it.

And, something told her, it was going to be a bad night as well, a really terrible night.

Chapter 16

Elaine did not immediately take notice of the book which someone had placed on the pillow at the head of her bed. The volume's cloth binding was a soft beige color which blended quite well with the bedspread; besides, she was far too intent on other things, when she entered her room, to be observant of details. She locked the oak door and tested the lock, found it un-yielding. She took the straight-backed chair from the desk in the far corner and carried it to the door, braced the back of it under the knob so that it acted as a barricade against the opening of the door even if someone *should* manage to pick the lock without first alerting her. That done, she took a quick shower to wash away the weariness of the day, slipped into a pair of blue and yellow flowered pajamas, and turned on the television. She knew that she was not going to be able to sleep for a long time yet, if, indeed, she got any sleep at all this night. Walking to the bed, she sat down on the edge, satisfied herself that the picture on the set was clear enough and that the volume was properly adjusted, then reached out to stand her pillow against the headboard as a comfortable backrest. It was *then* that she found the book.

For a moment, she thought it had been something she had been reading and which she had let lay there. But she could not remember it. Besides, all her books were inexpensive paperbacks.

The cover and the spine were devoid of lettering. She had to open the book to the title page to see what it was.

Recognizing the Possessed, a Detailed Guide to the Interpretation of the Damned and a Reference of Case Histories in Exorcism, by Anonymous.

Ordinarily, she would have found the excessively wordy title amusing. Now, however, it was somehow chilling, as she tried to put together a meaning for that string of phrases. What on earth would such a book be concerned with?

Turning the page, she found a handwritten note, faded with age. She read it twice before she understood that it was a prayer of sorts, twisted in its form and purpose but a prayer nonetheless:

“Dear Jesus, Spirits of the Holy Dead, White Souls and Bemused Angels—watch over this book and keep this book safe. Be always con-scious of the value of this book to mortals and see that it is transferred to those who require it, bringing light into an otherwise vast darkness. Make safe this book against the touch of those who would destroy it and the spells and stories it contains, those who would benefit from man's ig-norance—meaning especially keep it from Satan, Spirits of Evil, Black Souls and Fallen Angels.”

Below the prayer on the blank page, someone had drawn a cross. And below the cross was lettered, INRI, the Latin abbreviation for *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*.

She had begun to suspect who had left the book for her. When she looked over the contents page and found that the book dealt with the possession of the living by the spirits of the dead, she was certain that either Jerry or Bess, and most likely both, was to blame.

Why?

What did they expect to tell her by leaving this book in her room? They must know that she would not be converted to accept their silly string of demons and ghosts, witches and warlocks, their world of spells and hexeroi and liberating chants. Certainly, too, the con-version could not be accomplished with a single book, even if she were amenable to their viewpoint.

She flipped through the pages to the first chapter and began to read the fine, sober print:

“Some say that the Dark Things have passed into antiquity and that they no longer have mean-ing. It is now, these people tell us, in condescen-sion they carefully nourish for those who would disagree with them, the Year of Our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-Eight. Such a

year, they say, demands that man observe science as the only god and anti-god. In a time of auto-mobiles and airplanes, of electric light and mod-ern medicine, ghosts and spirits, so they assure us, have no place.

“But they are ignorant. And they refuse to be taught the truth, so content are they in their blindness.

“I, John Martin Stoltz, resident of York County, Pennsylvania, have therefore commis-sioned the printing of a thousand copies of the book you now hold in your hands. I have paid for the printing from my own pocket and do not wish profit on the venture. I will be content if, instead, those who own this book profit by the informa-tion it contains.”

Elaine put the book in her lap and stared at the tele-vision screen for a long moment. A silly situation com-edy was playing, one of those in which the wife is always an utter lamebrain and the husband continually misunderstands everything he hears and runs around half-cocked, messing up the situation even more than it was before he tried to fix it. Until that went off, at least, she might just as well see what Jerry and Bess had meant for her to understand.

Stoltz' introduction was a pompous mess, as smug throughout as in the first paragraph. And it was a te-dious bore as well. Gratefully, she finished it and turned to the actual text which had been written by “Anonymous” sometime in the early part of the 19th Century.

The first third of the book was a compilation of the “case histories” upon which a thousand superstitions had grown, each more fantastic than the one before it. The first tale dealt with a boy named Zachary Taine who, according to Anonymous, was an infantryman in the Colonial Army during the Revolutionary War. He had come of good Boston stock and was well liked by all—until it was discovered that Zachary was a ghoul and that it was he who had been responsible for the crude violation of a number of recent graves in mili-tary cemeteries during seven months of 1777.

As if this were not gruesome enough, the second story was about a Philadelphia shopkeeper who, in 1789, murdered his family while they slept and went on a murder spree that eventually left four more dead before the sunrise.

The third piece concerned a Frenchman who, dur-ing the Napoleonic Wars, had been infected with ly-canthropy and roamed the night streets of old Paris as a wolfman, preying on innocent citizens. The werewolf of Paris.

Elaine closed the book and put it down on the nightstand. She was disgusted with John Robert Stoltz, with Anonymous, and with Jerry and Bess as well. Who could ever seriously believe such stuff as that? It was all a lot of baloney!

She was angry, too, because she now saw what the old couple was trying to tell her, and she felt as if she were in the middle of a huge joke. Stupid. What they apparently believed about these recent events was so childish that she would never have imagined that an-yone in the civilized world would actually hold to such notions. Could they honestly be convinced that Amelia Matherly's spirit had returned from the dead, carrying the long-lost knife, and had taken control of one of the family? Yes, they could. They were not merely having sport with a gullible girl. She was not the least bit gul-lible. But *they* were!

She got up, filled with impatient energy, and she paced the lines of the room as she considered what she would say to the old couple in the morning when she returned their ridiculous book. “Here,” she would say, “is your fairy tale collection. I did get a few laughs from it.” No, that was too abrupt, too much like a child's retort. But she would come up with something, something that would make them understand that she didn't want to be bothered with any more such gifts as *Recognizing the Possessed* .

..

She was still pacing when the stone struck the win-dow. It made a sharp, quick crack that startled her. She stopped pacing and turned to the glass, half ex-pecting to see someone on the ledge, peering in.

There was only darkness.

A second later, another pebble, perhaps as large as a grape, rattled against the pane and fell back towards the earth.

Curious, she went to the window and pushed the heavy, amber drapes back even further until she

had an unobstructed view of the black grass and the creep-ing shadows of the monstrous trees. For a moment, she did not see anyone. As her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, however, she saw the man. He was standing in the deepest shadows at the base of the largest of the nearby willows.

Just standing there, very still.

Then he moved.

Another stone snapped sharply against the glass, di-rectly in front of her face.

The man dropped his arm and stood still again, looking up at her with a face she could not see.

Elaine turned and looked at the clock by the bedside. It read ten minutes past midnight. She could not imagine who would be standing outside her win-dow, at such a late hour, trying to attract her attention by throwing stones.

The man did not move, even now, and he was well concealed by the shadows in which he chose to linger. She could only see the outline of him, dark black against the brown-black lawn. Otherwise, the night ob-scured even the nature of the clothes he wore.

She slipped the bolt latch which held the halves of the gatelike window together, then lifted the hook out of the ring at the top. She swung the halves outward, like shutters.

“Who is it?” she asked.

He did not reply.

It had occurred to Elaine that the man standing be-neath the window might very well be the killer, trying to attract her attention for some inexplicable reason that only a madman could fathom. Yet she was not particularly frightened at the thought of confronting him like this. Twenty feet of horizontal space and twenty-five of verticle separated them. What could he do at that distance?

“Who is it, please?”

The man remained silent.

She leaned out, trying to get a better look at him, but she could not tell who it was.

“Dennis?” she asked, taking a chance, making the best guess she could.

He moved again.

This time, he did not throw a stone, but a rock as large as a baseball. It struck the stone wall of the house, two inches from the window frame, no more than four inches from her head. It struck with a sick-eningly solid, businesslike *smack!*, then dropped back to the grass.

Elaine gasped and grabbed for the halves of the window to pull them shut again.

The second rock struck her shoulder and made her cry out, though fear had leeched the volume from her scream.

Her arm ached miserably, but she managed to hold onto the gates of the window and swing them in. She slipped the latch bolt, jammed the hook into the ring at the top, and stepped back, out of line with the glass. When no third rock followed after several minutes, she drew the amber drapes, as if they would not only seal out the night, but would also wall off the entire inci-dent, as if it had not happened.

She went into the bathroom and removed the tops of her pajamas so that she could get a good look at her shoulder. Where the rock had struck, the flesh had al-ready begun to purple and swell. The bruise was as large as the palm of her hand and stung when she tried to touch it. She knew that, no matter how sore it was now, it would be twice as bad in the morning. It would feel as if she had been—stabbed.

She ran the water until it was icy, then used a wash-cloth to soak her wound until it was numbed. That done, there was little else she could do for herself. She dressed again and returned to the bedroom.

As she sat on the edge of the bed, she admitted to herself that the rock could have killed or at least given her a bad concussion. She had not wanted to think about that. But she was a nurse, after all. She could not avoid thinking about it for long.

He had tried to kill her.

Who?

On the television, a private detective was trying to run a car full of bad guys off the road. The chase raged up and down steep, narrow streets, along sharp embankments, rocking and heaving like a ship in bad seas as the camera took the place of the eye.

She knew she was stalling, that she was trying to keep from saying what she had discovered. The

killer was most definitely one of the family. She had a ninety-five percent certainty of it before. Now, she was entirely sure, without the smallest doubt.

It was Dennis Matherly.

He had been motionless and silent, almost cautious, until she had called his name. That had been the trigger. At that, he had reacted quite violently. The police might not call that iron-clad proof, but it was enough to satisfy her. In the morning, she would call Captain Rand, and she would tell him the story. He would say, "Is there anyone you especially suspect, Miss Sherred?" And she would say, "Yes. Dennis Matherly." Oh, she could almost write out the dialogue this minute! And even if Rand did not think her proof was very positive, he would begin to question Dennis. She did not think Dennis would stand up long to close questioning. The insane were easily pushed into betraying themselves. Or that was what she wanted to believe, at least.

She wished that she could have reached Rand earlier this evening. She might have been able to push the desk sergeant into something if Dennis hadn't caught her on the phone. That had been a bad moment.

She considered, for a scant second, going down-stairs and using the phone to call the police right now. But that was a bad idea. The man who had thrown the rocks, the man in the shadows by the willow, was down there. Dennis was down there! With a knife, no doubt.

When she tested the door, she found that it was still locked and that the chair was still bracing the knob correctly.

She went back to bed and sat down and looked at the television. The private detective was bound and gagged in the basement of the villain's house, but he was using the sharp edge of a drainage grill to saw through the ropes on his wrists.

She found that she could not watch television programs. Her mind wandered into areas of thought which she wanted to avoid, and she could not keep track of the threads of the plot on the screen.

She attempted to pick up the paperback adventure novel which she had started the other evening, but she could not get interested in the danger which faced the hero and the heroine, for that danger had somehow paled and seemed petty.

Shortly after two o'clock in the morning, she balanced a number of bottles of makeup and perfume on the chair which was bracing the door. She set the bottles precariously between the tilted seat and the slanted rungs of the chair back. They would fall and clatter at the slightest attempt to force the door, and that would be sufficient to wake her.

But when she slept, she did not find peace. She dreamed of getting hit in the face by a rock, a large rock with jagged edges. In the dream, her nose was smashed in and her left eye was ruined. There was rich, red blood streaming from her wounds, and she lay unconscious and perhaps dying . . .

She woke from the same nightmare so often that, by four o'clock, she gave up trying to sleep. She picked up the book that Jerry and Bess had left on her bed, and she read some more about men and women possessed by the spirits of the dead and guided to do unspeakable things. She hoped that, by reading this non-sense, she could make herself angry again. Filled with anger, she would have no room for fear.

That was the idea.

But it didn't work.

She longed for the morning as she had never wanted anything in her life, and she greeted the pale dawn with childlike glee, watching the slow advance of the sun in awe.

Soon, it would be morning. Soon, it would be all over with.

Soon.

Chapter 17

As a nurse, Elaine had always been fascinated by the ease with which people could overcome adversity which a moment earlier seemed to be suffocating them. Even the weakest people eventually stood up and faced whatever had been put in their path—a serious illness, the death of a loved one—and went on with their lives as best they could, eventually returning to normal. From the common laborer to the fanciful society matron, each human being seemed blessed with this resiliency. As she was, herself. Despite the long days of anxiety, despite the man who had hurt her with the rock, despite the long night of sleepless, fear-ful anticipation, she fell asleep in the easy chair shortly after dawn.

When she woke, she did not know where she was. For a long minute, she stared about her, perplexed, looked at the unrumpled bed, at the sun trying to cut through the amber drapes over the window, at the door with its alarm system still balanced precariously on the straight-backed chair. And then she knew where she was, and she was angry with herself.

She got up, weaving slightly with exhaustion, and stumbled toward the bathroom. She splashed cold water in her face until her eyes no longer tried to slide shut, then looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes looked sunken, her face pale. There were worry lines around her mouth. It had been a very bad week indeed. And a long and tiring night. She supposed she could not blame herself for falling asleep, and she decided that self-recrimination was only a waste of time.

Dawn had seemed like such a blessing, a release from the dangers of the night, and she had succumbed to its symbolic safety. Now that daylight had returned and she had recovered some of her energy through the short nap in the chair, she knew the danger remained. The only way it would be dispelled was through her own initiative. Just like everything else in this life.

The time was 9:07, which meant that Lee would already have departed for the city, Gordon with him. Bess would be washing the morning's dishes and put-tering around in the kitchen, while Jerry would either be engaged in dusting the furniture downstairs or at-tending to some bit of maintenance in the large house. Jacob would be finishing his breakfast tray and perus-ing the morning paper. Paul Honneker would be— probably—sleeping off some binge he had indulged in the night before. And what of Dennis? Would he be watching the door of her room, waiting for her to come out?

She remembered that Amelia Matherly had not re-quired darkness to engage in bloody murder, and she knew that Dennis might wield the knife as easily in the light of morning as in the glow of the moon.

It didn't matter. No matter what awaited her, she could not remain in her room indefinitely. If she did not call Captain Rand before he went off duty this evening, and if the psychiatrist did not manage to in-duce Celia to remember the identity of her attacker, then she would have to spend another night here, sitting up, tense, waiting for the knife blade to slip through the door frame and pry at the lock.

She wouldn't be able to tolerate that again.

She dressed simply, brushed her long, rich hair which fell over her shoulders like silken darkness. She removed the bottles from the chair that braced the door and replaced them on the dresser, taking time to arrange them as she liked them. As she was removing the chair from beneath the knob, someone knocked on the door, lightly but insistently.

She could not hope to pretend that she was not here. For one thing, her door was locked from the inside, which he would discover if and when he tried it. For another, he must have heard her removing the bottles which had served as an alarm and taking the chair out from beneath the knob.

“Who is it?” she asked.

“Gordon.”

“Gordon?” It did sound like his voice, through the thick door, but she could hardly believe it. She had thought that he would be in the city, at work, and that she would be alone.

“Are you all right, Elaine?”

She quickly unlatched the door and opened it.

Gordon stood there, looking a bit haggard himself, as though he had spent a night more tiring than hers. She was pleased to note that, despite this, he was shaved and neatly dressed, as always.

"I thought you'd be in the city with your father," he said.

He said, "I couldn't go today. It's the first day I've missed in some time. But I was up most of the night, listening for the sounds of trouble. I worried about you, and I couldn't sleep. Now and then, when I thought I heard someone moving about, I came out into the corridor to see if anyone was bothering your door, but I never caught anyone."

"Oh, Gordon!" she said, leaning against him with a suddenness and a dependency that surprised both of them. She was relieved by his show of concern, as if his interest in her safety insured that safety.

"Were you bothered during the night?" he asked.

"Yes."

His arm went around her, encircled her shoulders, firm and manly, protective. He gave her a sense of freedom that she had never experienced before. He made her feel that, as long as he were at hand, she no longer had to be so sober and alert and careful of her own interests. He would take care of her. He would be her hands to hold off the world.

"Tell me about it," he said.

And she did—most of it, anyway.

When she was finished, he said, "I have the feeling that you're holding something back, keeping some-thing from me."

She couldn't look directly at Mm, and she couldn't answer him, for he was right.

"What is it, Elaine?"

"I don't want to anger you."

"You can't. Is it something to do with the family? Do you think you know who it was who threw that rock last night?"

"Yes."

"Well," he said. He seemed to be trembling just the slightest, but he forced down his fear and faced up to the very thing his father refused to believe. "Which one of the family was it?"

"Last night, you didn't know whether to believe that it *was* someone in this house. What changed your mind so suddenly?"

He said, "I guess I've known all along that there was no hitchhiker involved. Celia might have picked up someone riding to Philadelphia, but he did not try to kill her. I didn't want to face the truth. Just like father, I did not have the courage for it. Now I do. I saw, last night when I couldn't sleep, that I would have no peace of mind until I *did* accept this burden."

She found herself laying her head against his shoulder, listening to the rapid beat of his heart, finding comfort in the crook of his arm.

"Well?" he asked.

"Dennis," she said.

He was quiet for a long time.

"Do you believe me?"

"I think I do. But I want to hear why you suspect my brother. I want to know everything you have seen which points to him."

She told him all of it, from the paintings which Dennis worked on, to the way he had held a palette knife and seemed vaguely to threaten her. She mentioned Dennis' concern, at the supper table, when Lee reported that Celia was out of her coma. She reminded him of Dennis' problems, as a boy, when his mother had killed the twins and then herself. And, finally, she told him about last night, about Dennis' catching her on the phone and about the way the man beneath the willow had reacted to Dennis' name.

"My God!" he said when she was done. He had aged ten years in the time it took her to tell her story.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You aren't responsible for anything," he said. "The trouble is not with you, but with our family, with the blood we carry in our veins and with the way we've tried to hide our history. The trouble is with

father for letting Denny grow up as he has, without responsibility, frivolous.”

She nodded, in full agreement with his assessment of Denny's character. “What can we do?”

He thought a moment, then said, “You'll have to stay here, in your room, Elaine. I'll go up to Denny's studio, by myself. I'll simply confront him with all this.”

“No!”

“It's the best way.”

“Call the police, Gordon!”

“I couldn't do that,” he said.

“But—”

“I feel it's my responsibility,” he said. “He's my brother. Despite what he may have done, if he did do it, I cannot just call Captain Rand. I can't just let Dennis be treated like a common criminal.”

“But if he is mad—”

“Then he's still my brother. Nothing can ever change that.”

“No!”

She was frightened for him. He was too good, too considerate, and he would end up paying for his consideration if she did not stop him from going through with this foolish plan.

“Elaine, you don't understand how—”

“I won't let you do it, Gordon!”

She pushed him aside, spun by him, pushing away his hand as he reached for her. She ran down the hall-way as fast as her legs would carry her and took the stairs two at a time. Downstairs, she hurried into the main drawing room and picked up the telephone. She began to dial the seven digits in the police number that she had gotten from the operator last night, and she had dialed the fifth number before she realized that she had never heard the dial tone. She hung up and tried again.

The line was dead.

“Elaine, what are you doing?” Gordon asked, running into the drawing room and coming to stand beside her at the phone.

“It isn't working,” she said.

He took it from her and listened.

She lifted the cord, drew on it, and found no resistance. It came through her hands until she was holding the cut end.

“Someone has cut the line,” Gordon said.

“Gordon, we must get out of here!”

“Let me go up and talk to him.”

“He *knows*, Gordon,” she said. She felt cold, clammy, as if she were standing in the middle of a very old, dew-slimed tomb. “He knows that I suspect him, and he's taken steps to see I don't call the police. Don't you see what I mean? If he has done this much, he won't stop at trying to kill us all, this morning, before we can get help.”

“But if we can't call the police, what else is there to do but let me talk to him, see if I can get him settled down? He might give himself up.”

“I'll get my car, and we'll drive in to the police station,” she said. She turned and ran past him, hurrying into the hallway.

“Elaine—”

“Hurry!” she said.

She turned and ran for the kitchen, not bothering to see whether he was following her. Neither Bess nor Jerry was in the empty, quiet kitchen, and she did not see any sign of them outside, on her way to the garage. She lifted the white, windowless door over the garage stall which Lee Matherly had said was for her use and hurried to the Volkswagen. She opened the door, slid behind the wheel, and only then realized that she did not have her keys.

For a moment, she froze as she considered returning to that house, climbing that dark staircase again, re-turning to her room, so close to the studio where Dennis worked.

She couldn't do that.

She'd rather stay here and—

And what? Die?

No, she couldn't give up so easily. Her whole life had been geared to survival, to learning to cope. She had early understood that the world was a hard place, and that had never gotten her down. She had stood up to it, a little mite of a girl with long black hair, and she had bested it time and time again. She was sober and serious and not at all frivolous, and she would not sit here and do nothing.

Besides, there was Gordon. Dennis could hardly harm both of them, if they got the keys together. The advantages would be with them. And, most likely, they would not even be bothered. Dennis might still be sleeping.

She slid out of the car, closed the door, and stopped cold.

She looked, for the first time, into the rear seat of the car, stared hard at what had caught her eye. It was the gleam of a wristwatch. The wristwatch was at-tached to a wrist. The wrist to a shoulder. The shoul-der to a body.

She opened the front door.

In the overhead light, she looked at the face of the dead man, and she saw that it was Captain Rand. He had been stabbed several times.

Chapter 18

No.

This was not the way it was supposed to be, not at all the way the world was supposed to operate. True, the world was hard, life was difficult. But there had to be some certainties. One of these was the law. If there were trouble, you went to the police, and you received help, and everything was all right again. In a good, sensible world, organized law was supreme, always triumphant over madness since madness was disorgan-ized. When insanity could strike down the law, could smash your last hope, then the whole world must be insane. Madness then ruled supreme and law was use-less, hope was useless.

She reached over the seat and touched the Captain's face, as if by her hand she would prove this was no-thing more than a very solid illusion, a bit of her imag-ination that she was taking far too seriously. But when she touched him, he did not fade away. He remained on the seat, slumped half onto the floor, very cold and very stiff and very dead.

She stepped back and closed the door.

What now?

That question was answered for her when someone, behind her, said, "So you found him."

She turned.

Gordon stood only five feet away.

He was holding a long, sharp knife with a serrated edge.

"Gordon?"

He smiled, a terrible smile, a smile that contained no humor whatsoever, cold and distant.

"Your eyes don't decieve you," he said.

It was just too much. First, finding the Captain in the back of her car. Now, to learn that she had been wrong about Dennis—and wrong about Gordon as well. It was not Dennis, despite his frivolity, despite his strange moods, who had stepped from the brink of sanity into the abyss of madness, but it was, instead, Gordon. Hard-working Gordon Matherly. Serious, di-ligent Gordon Matherly. Gordon Matherly, whose reasonableness and sobriety she had so much admired, who would one day go so far because of his nose-to-the-grindstone attitude. Such a switch-about did not merely indicate bad judgment on her part, but struck a solid blow at the very foundations of her outlook on life. Too much, too much, too much!

"Why?" she asked.

"He was snooping around the house last night," Gordon said. "I don't know why he was here. If you didn't get your call through to him, then he had no reason to suspect anything was wrong with the hitch-hiker theory. But when I was outside, after you had closed your window to me and I had missed my chance to kill you with a stone, I heard him cough. He had taken up a position near the garage. He had not seen or heard our little scene, but that was only luck. I circled on him and stabbed him. He died very easily. You would be surprised how easily such a big man can die, Elaine. I think he was done for the third or fourth time I cut him. But I kept on for a while, kept stabbing him, just to be certain."

He smiled again, a smile that bared his teeth in an animal grimace, skinned his lips back more in hatred than in humor. His eyes were bright, like beads of pol-ished glass. His nostrils flared unnaturally as his breathing became hurried.

She wished he would not smile.

She said, "That isn't what I meant."

Gordon stopped smiling and frowned at the knife in his hand. With the thumb of his left hand, he tested the blade to see if it were sharp. Elaine thought that a scarlet string of blood appeared on his thumb, so tho-rough was his test.

"Why did you do any of it, Gordon?"

If she talked, if she kept him occupied, perhaps he could be tricked—or perhaps someone would

walk by the front of the garage and see them. She was still shocked and bewildered by the discovery that he was the killer, but some of her hard-headed reasonableness had returned, enough to let her seriously contemplate means of escape from what appeared to be imminent and certain death.

"I don't understand what you mean," he said.

"Why did you want to kill Celia? You hardly knew her."

"She was a woman," he said, as if that were all the answer that was required.

The simplicity of it, the coldness with which he said it, almost made her abandon hope.

She did not press that point but said, "But Jacob isn't a woman. And you tried to kill him without reason."

"I had reason!" he snapped, defensive now. He skinned his lips back, smiled, stopped smiling, smiled again, hardly able to control the flux of emotions which poured through him.

"What reason?"

"Oh, I have a good one," he said.

"Can't you tell me?"

He held the knife toward her, pointed directly at her stomach. It was held straight out from his body, as if he were warding her off, as if he had to be frightened of a counterattack. His fingers were so tightly wrapped about the wooden grip that his knuckles were blood-less. He waved it back and forth, much the way a cobra might weave its head in order to mesmerize its victim prior to a strike.

"You have no reason to hurt me," Elaine said, re-remembering how a similar argument had made him stop picking at her lock two nights ago. "I haven't done anything to you."

"You don't understand," Gordon said.

His voice had grown thin, climbed several tones until it was high-pitched and unmasculine, partly the result of his fear—but also the result of something else, something she could not place. Perhaps it was as if he were trying to imitate someone else's voice. But whose voice?

"Explain it to me, then," she said.

"I can't."

"Then you're mad. You're a madman."

"I am not!" He tensed, though he did not menace her with the blade any longer. "You must not believe something like that. I know what I am doing and why."

"Tell me."

"No."

"Only a madman cannot explain his reasons."

Gordon seemed to sway, as if her words had been a physical blow, and he lowered the knife, though not very far. Clearly, he was troubled by what she said. Even a madman, surely, must now and again see that he is operating in darkness, viewing the world at a tan-gent rather than straight on. That had to be true. Otherwise, she might as well give up right now.

Trying not to look at the knife, trying desperately not to think of what it had done to Captain Rand, she steeled herself to continue the argument, to increase his self-doubt.

"You have no reasons," she said.

"Will you listen if I tell you why?"

"You know I will, Gordon." Immediately, having opened up this chink in him, she switched to a tone of sympathy, of understanding. She found that this was not unlike talking to a patient who knew he was going to die. It was merely acting, stringing together cautious lies.

"I believe you," he said.

"Trust me."

He looked around the garage stall, at the darkness overhead, the dust on the windowsill to his right, the ancient oil stains on the concrete floor.

He said, "This isn't the place to explain."

She grew wary again, wondering what he was about to propose. She could still see no way around him.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

He thought a moment. "We'll go over to Bess and Jerry's place. I'll tell you there. That will be a good place to explain."

For a brief moment, she actually thought that he was going to usher her outside and unwittingly provide her with an opportunity to escape. She wondered whether it would be better to run for the wall between the Bradshaw grounds and the Matherly estate—or whether she should try to regain the house and, with luck, Dennis' studio where she might obtain some help. She opted for the latter and prepared to make the dash for freedom, but had her hopes destroyed when he grasped her arm and dug the point of the knife into her side. He pressed it hard enough to tear her blouse and to draw a bead of blood, though he apparently did not intend to kill her. Not just now.

"We'll walk together," he said. "Please don't try to get away from me. I really do want to explain this to you first. I don't want to kill you until you understand."

"I want to hear about it," she said, fighting down a deep, strong urge to be ill.

Think, think! For God's sake, find a way to escape! But—also for God's sake, for my own sake—be care-ful!

"Let's go," he said.

She let him lead, and she leaned against him in hopes that he would remember how pleased he seemed to have been, earlier, when she relied upon him for his strength.

Outside, the sun seemed oppressively hot, causing her to sweat so that her face was instantly covered with a salty sheen.

The day was perfectly silent, the birds still, the wind down, as if the earth itself was aware that death lurked so close by.

"To the steps," he directed her.

The hand that gripped her arm pinched her flesh painfully, and the point of the knife twisted a bit deeper into her skin.

They walked across the front of the garage, passing the three other closed doors.

Let someone see us! Let someone interrupt us! she prayed.

But they turned the corner and started up the stairs without being seen or questioned.

Elaine considered her chances of thrusting sideways and propelling him through the wooden railing that edged the steps. She was young and strong and filled with adrenalin summoned up by her fear. It might very well work. The railing did not appear to be very strong, and Gordon weighed at least a hundred and eighty pounds. If she slammed all her weight against him, when they were near the top of the stairs, and if that unbalanced him, he might fall twenty feet onto the cement walk beneath.

Would that kill him?

She shuddered at her cold-blooded plotting, but told herself there was nothing else she could do. It was self-defense. It was the reasonable thing to conceive.

It was also reasonable to expect that he might hold onto her, that he would drag her with him. And if she were not killed by the fall or badly hurt, he would not be either. And then he would kill her.

The top of the stairs was at hand.

She could not do it.

They stepped onto the landing and came to the door. Gordon knocked on it with the handle of the knife.

Jerry opened the door, wiping his hands on a soiled rag. A streak of grease marred his chin, and he appeared to have been working on some piece of machinery. He said, "Well, hello!" Then he saw the knife in Gordon's hand. He looked quickly at Elaine, correctly interpreted the expression on her face, and tried to close the door.

Gordon still holding the knife reversed in his hand, slammed the heavy handle against the side of the old man's head.

Jerry staggered, clutched at the door, then crumpled at Gordon's feet, unconscious.

"Inside," Gordon said.

She went in.

He followed, pushing Jerry out of the way, and closed the door. He locked it too.

Chapter 19

Elaine sat in one of the large, flower-patterned, heavily-stuffed lounge chairs, nearly engulfed by the plush seat and the high, thick arms. The chair smelled unpleasantly of dust and age. But that was, she decided, the least of her worries.

Across from her, Bess and Jerry sat together on the purple brocade sofa, bent over themselves, shrunken, withered as if they had been dehydrated. Jerry held his head and from time to time let out a low, trembling moan of pain that sounded, to Elaine, somewhat like the bleat of a cow. She could not manage to be concerned about the old man. His agony was too carefully rehearsed, his moans too well-timed to be genuine. Bess cowered in fear, certain—Elaine began to understand—that Gordon was not really Gordon any longer, but was the reincarnate spirit of Amelia Math-erly. The same fear, of course, was what so completely paralyzed Jerry. But he was either too ashamed to admit it or reluctant to come to grips with his own fears. He relied on his wound for an excuse not to act.

Gordon stood between the three of them and the door. He paced back and forth, always keeping his eye on them, far more alert than Elaine would ever have expected a madman to be.

He had cut the telephone cord.

Elaine was furious with the old couple. There were three of them and only one of Gordon. If Bess and Jerry had not been so consumed with superstitious fear, they could have overpowered him, despite his size. But neither of them, she knew, would make a move to help her if she initiated a confrontation.

“You asked for an explanation,” Gordon said.

His face was like a screen upon which a film loop of emotions was projected, one following the other—fear, happiness, hatred, envy, doubt, joy, awe, love, disbelief, fear again, happiness again—with little relationship between what he said and what his features expressed. He was much farther along the road of madness than he had been downstairs, in the garage. Something about this “explanation” stirred deeper evil within him and set him off into greater depths of manic-depressive contrasts. Surely, he would kill all three of them when he was done. And he would start, being clever, with Elaine, the only one who could seriously resist him.

“Do you *have* an explanation, Gordon?” she asked. It was a calculated risk, egging him on. But she knew their only chance was to take as much time with the “explanation” as possible. Perhaps no one would miss them. Perhaps no one would stumble upon them. But the chances improved with every minute they gained.

“I told you I'm not mad,” he said.

“He isn't crazy,” Bess said. “It's more than that. We tried to tell you, Miss Sherred, we tried to tell you it was more than that.”

“The book,” Elaine said.

Bess nodded.

To Gordon, Elaine said, “Explain to me why you did these things and why you want to kill me too.”

“It started just after grandfather came back from the hospital.” His eyes seemed to look at her, and yet beyond her. “For a while, we had a private nurse here by day, another by night, while we got your room ready.”

He stopped, fidgeted a bit, rolled the knife over and over in his hand as he stared down at the point of the blade.

“Go on,” she said.

He looked up, as if he had forgotten them, then continued. “That room used to be the nursery.”

“My room?” she asked, beginning to see connections, subtle webs between this event and that.

“Yes,” Gordon said. “It had been closed and locked for fifteen years. No one had been in that room ever since the police finished with it.”

“Why wasn't it converted earlier?”

“Father didn't want to go in the room. He said, for years, that he wouldn't be able to use it for anything, even if it no longer looked like a nursery. So it was sealed.”

Elaine thought that it would have been far better to destroy the furniture and remodel the nursery immediately. To live in that house for fifteen years, knowing the nursery was exactly the same, except for the dust, as it had been on the day of the murder, would have worn her nerves to their last. What must it have been like for the children, and especially the younger Gordon, to pass that sealed door and know that the bloody cribs lay beyond it?

Gordon said, “When you were hired and we had to prepare a room for you, we chose the nursery. Father had outgrown his emotional horror of it. It was opened. The furniture was removed. Carpenters and plasterers were hired to redecorate it, and new furniture was bought to match the rest of the house.”

Again, Elaine interrupted him. “I don't see what this has to do with Celia Tamlin. Or with me. Or with anything you've done.”

Gordon held up the knife, as if it were something he had just discovered and wanted them to appreciate. He said, “The cribs were very heavy, antique brass pieces. When I was moving one of them, the knob on the top of one of the two headposts fell off. It had, apparently, been loose for years. I don't know why, but—I tilted the crib and shook it, as if I thought something might be hidden in the brass pipe. Something was. The knife fell out.”

Bess moaned, and Jerry seemed to draw back against the couch, though he still held his head as if all his discomfort were physical.

Gordon said, “When I saw it, I knew what it meant.”

He did not continue, and Elaine was forced to ask, “What did it mean, Gordon? I don't understand you.”

“She had come back,” Gordon said. His mouth bent in an expression of hurt, and tears clouded his eyes. This was a genuine feeling, not one of the reasonless expressions he had previously seemed unable to control.

“She?”

But both Bess and Jerry could answer that. “Amelia,” they said. “Your mother.”

“Yes,” Gordon answered. “I've always remembered that visit you paid to the medium in Pittsburgh. Mrs. Moses, her name was. You told me about it so many times, before father called it hogwash and forbid you to talk about it any more. When I saw that knife, I knew that Mrs. Moses was right. My mother came back—through me.”

“Oh, God, God!” Elaine said, overwhelmed by the stupidity, the senselessness of all that had happened. She looked at Bess, who returned her look, and at Jerry who did not, and she said, “Don't you see what you've done to him?”

“Nothing,” Bess said. “We educated him, that's all. We taught him things they don't teach in schools, but things a person should know about life, anyways.”

“You planted this idea,” Elaine said. “You set the seed for this insane notion of spiritual possession!”

She had thought, when she had first seen the ornate stonework of the Matherly house, that it was all too complicated, too fancy and clever for her. She had wondered if the lives of the people who lived in it were equally as silly, as decorative and useless. And now she found that they were, twisted and full of superstition.

Gordon said, “You can't blame Bess and Jerry for anything. They only told me, once they had seen Mrs. Moses and had the cards read, what I suspected myself. I couldn't believe that my mother would leave me, or that she would do something like this—something—that she might have done—to me. I knew that she wouldn't do anything bad to me—anything like she had done to the twins. And I knew she wouldn't leave me without explaining it to me. Dennis broke down under it. Dennis couldn't sleep nights and didn't want to eat and became listless. It took everything father had to pull him out of it. I was different. I couldn't believe it, I hated to hear people call her a murderer, and so I came to understand that she was only temporarily gone. Mrs. Moses confirmed my suspicions. I did not cry like Dennis did, and I didn't stop eating either. You know,” he said, brightening suddenly, “I even made it a point to clean up my plate at every meal, down to the last crumb. I found an inner strength that was rare in a boy my

age, the strength of a man. I was able to stand up against it and find my peace.”

“It wasn't strength and it wasn't peace you found,” Elaine said. She spoke gently, warmly, for she genuinely pitied him now. “You merely found an excuse, an escape from reality. All this notion that your mother would return, that her spirit—”

“No,” he said sharply. “It was lasting strength that has borne me through all these years. And I have been proved right. I found the knife, and I have her spirit in me now.”

Elaine saw that she could not blame only Jerry and Bess for what had happened to the little boy who grew up to be this madman. They shared a particle of guilt. But Amelia Matherly must also be blamed, both for her genetic infirmities and, more than that, for the way she raised her children and for the memories of blood that she left them. And, too, Lee Matherly and Jacob must shoulder some blame. They had seen Dennis crumbling under the memory of his mother's mad deeds, and they had lavished affection on him, had cured him with love and concern and time. Mean-while, because his own sick reaction was not as overt as his brother's, Gordon had been ignored. His pain and doubt and confusion had been allowed to fester until it had given rise to unwholesome fantasies. The guilt was everywhere, the webs densely crisscrossed.

“But why did you try to kill your grandfather?”

“He frightened my mother. Fleeing from him, she tripped on the stairs and fell and died. Otherwise, she would be alive today.”

There was nothing that she could say in the face of such insane reasoning. He would not listen. And, if he did listen, he would never be able to conceive of a world in which his grandfather was faultless, a victim of circumstance. Gordon's touch with reality had been damaged many years ago and had been smashed beyond repair from the moment he had found that knife where his mother, for some incomprehensible reason, had secreted it.

“Why Celia?” she asked. She was certain the explanation would be as unsound as all the others, but she had to know anyway. And she had to stall as long as she could.

“She was a woman,” Gordon said.

She remembered him having used that excuse before, as if it was enough, of itself, to explain *anything*.

She said, “What does that matter?”

“She was a pretty woman,” Gordon said. “My mother disliked other pretty women. She was beautiful, and she was somewhat vain. I suppose you would say 'vain.' I choose to think that she was afraid some other woman, some prettier woman might come into our life and take us away from her.” He sighed, as if remembering his mother's beauty. “Celia was lovely and was going to live here. That was no good. My father has never remarried, though he has known women, many women, outside the house. He knew better than to bring a pretty woman here; he knew she would not like him being married again and keeping a wife in this house. Dennis should have known better than to invite Celia here.”

He began to sway again, and tears returned to eyes that had grown dry. He looked at Elaine and said, “And then you. You want to take all of them away from her, make them forget how lovely she was. You're just like Celia.”

Be calm, she told herself. You don't have a chance if you lose your calm. Be quiet, think. Think!

Jerry grasped his head again and bent forward on the sofa. He moaned more pitifully, but just as phonily, than before, as if he wanted to make it clear to her that he would be of no help when Gordon decided to make his move against her.

But she already knew that. She no longer hated him for his cowardly behavior. A lifetime of superstition had not prepared him to play the hero in this room.

Her only hope was to get Gordon's mind off her for a moment. She said, “If Amelia Matherly was so concerned about losing her family to another woman, why did she kill her own children?” She addressed this to no one in particular, in hopes that the indirect nature of her attitude might defuse the question of some of its power.

But Gordon did not seem to think it had any power to being with. He said, evenly, “The twins were little girls, weren't they? They would have become women, wouldn't they?”

Elaine shuddered miserably and sank deeper into her chair, actually hoping it might completely conceal her. Such cold exposition of such a hateful notion had resurrected the worst of her fears. The room was freezing, even in the middle of June. Surely, it was snowing outside and ice was hanging from the eaves.

She said, not without some effort, "And you honestly believe that was a good enough reason for her to kill them? Was plain jealousy sufficient— No, not plain jealousy but mad jealousy, unreasoning jealousy that—"

"She was my mother. She has returned to me and has possessed me and will remain with me. I don't care. I don't care what her reasons were, and I don't need to make judgments of her."

"Why did you kill Bobo?" she asked.

This seemed to interest Jerry and Bess more than anything else that had been said.

Gordon hesitated and looked confused. But, in a moment, he recovered with the help of that inner "strength" of his. He said, "At first, I thought it was only because I had come to like the sight of blood. I stabbed him over and over. He came to me to be petted. I grabbed him by the neck and plunged the knife into his back. It was marvelous!" He was lost, for a moment, in the recollection of that supreme moment. Then he said, "But later I realized that there was more to it than that. I couldn't have been consumed by a lust for blood, by a pure urge to kill something. I'm not the type for that. I am far too sensible and methodic for that. Then I saw that Bobo was not just a cat, but a familiar, possessed of the spirit of another dead woman. He planned to throw a monkey wrench into my duties to my mother, to upset what she hoped, through me, to achieve."

"That's only an excuse," Elaine said. "Can't you see that? You really did kill Bobo because you liked to see the blood. But later, you couldn't live with that in your mind. So you made up another fantasy about a cat with a human spirit."

"It wasn't a fantasy," he said.

"Why did you kill Captain Rand? For the fun of it?" She was pushing him hard now. She hoped he didn't break.

"Of course not," he said. But from the fleeting look of strange, degenerate joy which crossed his twisted face, it was obvious to Elaine that the murder had not been without a certain thrill for him. "Rand was watching the house. Someone had evidently called him and given him a tip of some sort. I couldn't risk letting him stay alive. And it was a miracle that he had not seen me already; he was sure to catch sight of me if I tried to get back into the house."

Bess, roused from the odd stupor into which she had settled—but for a few short comments now and again—ever since Gordon had forced his way into the apartment, said, "Gordon, have you seen your mother's spirit yet? Has she appeared to you at all?"

"No," he said. "She doesn't have to. She's here, inside of me, with me all the time."

"And you saw no hint of her before the possession?"

"No."

"I wished you had."

"She's inside me," Gordon repeated.

"I wondered what she would have looked like," Bess said.

"Perhaps I'll see her yet," Gordon said.

"You will," Jerry said. "Oh, yes! She'll come to you like a mist, all vaporous and vaguely seen."

Elaine let them ramble on. Neither Jerry nor Bess held anything against Gordon. To them, he was the helpless tool of a spirit, the puppet of an unseen master. The subject and their attitude struck Elaine as being very nearly obscene in light of the much more real horror of Gordon's psychotic madness. At least, however, this inane chatter distracted him from using his knife . . .

But then even that line of conversation was finished, and they were all silent. No one could think of anything to say. It had been like a playlet, all that went before this moment, and now the last scene had been enacted. The curtain should fall, and they were all waiting for someone to pull the rope.

Gordon hefted the knife and took a step toward Elaine.

She started out of her chair. She was not willing to let him have her so easily. If she were to die, she

would inflict some damage on him too, claw his face, go for his eyes, anything to make him know that he had put the blade to a living creature and not to some predestinated marionette-victim who had no choice but to die.

“You should never have come to this house,” he said.

Again, he spoke in a voice which was not his, a voice that was more feminine than masculine. Bess gasped and silenced Jerry's moaning so that she could better catch this new development, as if it had great importance.

“You can't have my family; you can't steal them away from me,” Gordon said, his voice rising even higher, the inflection changing.

He raised the knife and took another step.

And the window on the front door smashed in, sending shards of glass tinkling against the furniture nearby.

For a moment, Elaine refused to believe that it had happened. The sound of breaking glass echoed in her mind, and she held onto it in desperation, for it was hope. But she could not see past Gordon, and she could not be sure that the sound was a reality or a figment of her Imagination, a trick of her mind to soften the suddenness of death which would soon receive her. Then she saw that Bess and Jerry were looking toward the door and that Gordon had stopped advancing on her and had swung around to see who the intruder was.

A hand came through the broken pane, found the lock, threw it open, and pushed the door inward.

Dennis Matherly stood framed in sunlight, his face a mask of horror but also of—determination. “Put the knife down, Gordon,” he said.

But Gordon said, “No.”

Chapter 20

Dennis stepped into the room; the broken glass crunched and snapped under his feet. Elaine did not know whether it was only her mind playing tricks on her or whether what she saw was untainted by her emotions—but Dennis looked manlier, taller, huskier and far more formidable than she had remembered him. In his work shirt and jeans, he might have been a laborer rather than an artist.

“Go away, Dennis,” Gordon said.

“You know I can’t”

Elaine wondered if there were anything she could do, now that Gordon’s attention had been diverted. Should she run? Should she try to lift that heavy glass ashtray and hit him with it? No, that was all too melo-dramatic. That kind of thing only worked in movies. She would just have to wait and see . . .

“This doesn’t concern you,” Gordon told his brother. “Stay back.”

Elaine was both amazed and pleased to see that Dennis ignored the threat and the waving knife. How could she have so misjudged him?

“I’ll kill you,” Gordon said.

“No you won’t, Gordon. Give me the knife.”

If she could not move, at least she could speak. At least she could warn him. “Dennis,” Elaine said, “be-lieve him. He will kill you. He thinks he’s possessed by your mother’s ghost”

Dennis did not question what she had said, did not even lift his eyebrows, though she was certain the news confounded him. Clearly, his mind was agile and adaptable, not frivolous. Or, could it be that familiar-ity with all the faces of frivolity produced an adaptable mind—?

“She’s right,” Gordon added. “Mother has returned, and she has come back only to me—because I’m the one who waited for her and wanted her all these years.”

Dennis picked a thick, souvenir pillow of the New York World’s Fair from the seat of an old rocker and held it before him like a shield. He intended to take the knife away from Gordon.

Elaine realized that Dennis’ extra size would be offset by his brother’s fanatic energy. She made a last attempt to reason Gordon out of murdering his older brother. To manage that, she had to use the madman’s own illogical brand of logic.

“Gordon, your mother only wanted you to destroy women—women who were trying to take her family away from her.”

Having said that, she felt queasy, very alone and tiny and weak in the midst of so much insane power.

Gordon, without taking his eyes from Dennis, said, “He’s trying to keep me from dealing with you. Mother wants me to deal with you. She’s told me so many times. She won’t stop nagging me until I’ve done with you.”

Elaine remembered what Celia had looked like when Gordon had done with her, and she felt all the heat draining from her body. She was cold, indescribably cold, a tooth of ice. She said, “Your mother will never stop nagging you if you kill your brother. Don’t you see that you’d be taking her family away from her—the very thing she’s trying to prevent!”

The argument had its intended effect on Gordon. He lowered the knife which he had thrust toward his brother, and his face twisted in agony as he attempted to puzzle his way through the maze of “duties” which he owed Amelia.

Elaine felt breathless as she launched into more of the same amateur but effective psychology. “Your mother would want you, if it came to a conflict of in-terests, to protect her family first. Your mother would tell you to let us all go—then take care of me at a later date.”

The old couple on the sofa looked at Elaine in amazement, as if they did not understand that she was lying, as if they thought she had accepted the theory of spiritual possession.

“Throw down the knife,” Dennis said.

Gordon looked at the knife.

Dennis stepped toward him, still using the pillow as a shield.

“The knife . . . mother meant for me ... to use it to . . .”

“Throw it down!” Elaine said.

That seemed to be the trigger, the last command, which made him explode. Without warning, he whirled about and leaped for Elaine. He raised the gleaming weapon high above his head and brought it down toward her chest, his voice caught in a high, gleeful scream.

Elaine flung herself backwards, more from instinct than a genuine understanding of how close she was to death. But the chair brought her up short, blocked her escape. The whole world seemed to ice over, become as cold and aching as she was—except for the knife. In the middle of all that frost, in the midst of ice and cold, the knife was a blazing lance, slicing toward her as the frost melted around it. She was going to die.

At the same moment, Dennis threw aside the pillow he carried, reached for Gordon's wrist and stopped the swift descent of the murderous weapon.

Gordon turned on his brother, his face blood-flushed, his eyes wide, his mouth opened in a fierce grin. He and Dennis engaged in a grimly silent struggle for possession of the knife.

“Get help!” Elaine told the old couple. They looked at her stupidly; Jerry seemed to have forgotten his head wound. “Get Paul!”

The mention of Amelia's brother's name broke the spell; Jerry rose and hurried across the room, disappeared through the open door. Please, don't let Paul be drunk or suffering from a bad hangover!

Despite his lesser size, Gordon wrenched the knife away at last, slashed Denny's biceps shallowly as he stepped away from his brother. Blood flowed down Denny's arm.

Elaine picked up the ashtray, felt the cold weight of it. She did not really think she could use it. She was a nurse, accustomed to healing, not to injuring. *Oh God, if I have to use it, let me able to!*

As Dennis stepped in on him, leaving a trail of crimson drops behind him, Gordon struck again. Dennis feinted to the right, stepped in past the blow, gripped Gordon's knife hand in both hands, trying to bend the wrist back until Gordon was forced to drop the blade.

Elaine had seen a great deal of blood in nurse's training, had seen deep wounds. But the sight of Dennis' blood was something outside her experience. It made her feel empty and tired. She did not want him to die. Oh, how she wanted him to live! And maybe then she could make up for the awful things she had thought of him.

Gordon used his free hand to beat unmercifully at Denny's head. He had started his brother's nose to bleeding and had split his lip. Denny looked weary, unable to continue much longer . . .

Then, in an instant, the advantage changed. Gordon's wrist snapped under the pressure of Dennis' hands. He howled, dropped the knife, broke away from Dennis, cradling a broken wrist. He looked wild, as white as sifted flour, his mouth a black hole in his face.

Dennis kicked the knife across the room and said, with an amazing degree of gentleness: “Sit down, Gordon. You're hurt”

For a moment, Gordon looked as if he would disregard his wounds and make one last try for the weapon. Then, as if struck by a large hammer, he fell sideways against the chair in which Elaine had been sitting short minutes ago. She had been waiting for him to kill her. And now he never would.

“I didn't want to kill you,” Gordon said to Dennis.

“Don't talk about it.”

“Do you love me?” Gordon asked.

Dennis looked tired, not angry. “You're my brother. I love you very much.”

Gordon Matherly, holding his ruined wrist in his good hand, lowered his head until his chin rested on his chest, and he began to cry.

Elaine watched Dennis cross the room and retrieve the knife. He looked at it almost as if he did not know what it was. She went to him, feeling very much a woman—because he had been so much of a man, braver than she had ever had a chance to see any man be—and she said, “Let me look at your arm.”

“It's okay.”

“We have to guard against infection,” she said.

He said, “Why didn’t you tell me who you suspected last night?”

Elaine blushed, looked at the defeated Gordon. She said, “I didn’t think it was him.” Then, she blurted, “I thought it might be you!” She knew she would have to tell him sooner or later. She had never been the sort to postpone judgment for her mistakes.

He stared at her, incredulous. Just as she began to pray that he would not hate her, he burst out laughing. It was a strained, nervous laugh, but better than the outrage she had expected.

When he had control of himself again, he said, “Father told me someone had tried to pick the lock on your door. When I found you phoning the police, I knew you were seriously worried. I got hold of Rand half an hour after you went to bed and told him what you’d told father. He said that he intended to come out and have a look around.”

“He did,” Elaine said, shuddering. She remembered what Rand’s pay had been for his diligence.

“I know. I found his body just before I came up here.”

“How would you know where to look?”

He said, “I was sitting in my studio, at the window, and saw you and Gordon come out of the garage. You walked so stiffly and behaved so strangely, I was in-trigued. Besides, I’d not forgotten your fear that the killer was one of us. Gordon has always been strange, eager to work and reluctant to play, sober, serious. When I saw the two of you, I began to think the worst. I went to the garage to see what had happened—and found Rand.”

“You saved my life,” Elaine said. Again, she felt womanly, small and delicate in the capable shadow of a man.

“You saved *all* our lives,” he countered. “You were the only one who faced up to an unpleasant possibility. We owe you a great deal.”

At that moment, Paul Honneker blustered through the doorway.

Elaine said, “You’d better call an ambulance. The police. And Lee.”

Plainly shocked by what he saw, Paul said, “Right away!” He thundered down the steps and was gone in a moment.

When they went back to Gordon, he looked at them and twisted his lips in an expression of deep hatred. Elaine felt chilled again. He said, “Dennis, you will give me that knife.” His voice had risen and had changed inflection so that it sounded exactly like a woman’s voice.

“It’s Amelia,” Bess said, and she fell back against the sofa.

“Dennis,” Gordon said, “your mother commands you to give over that knife!” His voice was definitely feminine, almost sensuous, attractive but for that underlying hatred.

“You wouldn’t believe that she had returned to pos-sess him,” Bess said. “But now you can hear that it is true!”

Chapter 21

Elaine stood by the pine trees, cool in their feathery shadows, her small hands held over her ears. Dennis stood beside her, alternately watching the lawn where the construction crew worked and watching her face as she made a squinted expression of expectation. He laughed at her, though not cruelly—and he made her wish that the blast would come so that she could drop her hands from her ears and lace her fingers through his.

I've changed so much in so short a time, she thought. *There was a time when thunder or loud noises did not bother me.* But that had been before she had anyone upon whom she could rely. That had been when she was alone.

When the explosion came, it was gentler, more muffled by the earth, than she had expected. She felt the ground tremble, saw clods of earth spin into the sky over the excavation, saw chips of granite and lime-stone peel up into the blue sky and rattle back.

Jerry and Bess stood close behind Jacob Matherly where the old man sat in his wheelchair, watching the blasting operations. At first, Elaine had been surprised that no one had blamed the old couple and their superstitions for what had happened to Gordon. But, in the two weeks since Dennis had subdued his brother and ended the nightmare for all of them, she had come to see that no one could be blamed for the combination of circumstances which had plunged Gordon into an early, undetected madness. Jerry and Bess were both of Pennsylvania Dutch parentage, raised in homes where every room had a framed Himmelsbrief on the wall and every occasion called for a different charm. They sincerely believed in all that occult nonsense. You might as well try placing all the blame on Lee or Jacob (for their neglect of Gordon in the face of Dennis' more obvious need of comfort), or on Amelia Matherly for having been mad in the first place (a condition she could not, indeed, have helped). Jerry and Bess would have to live with their guilt; and that was punishment enough.

And they must understand, by now, that Gordon was *not* possessed. He was an extreme schizophrenic personality—as the doctors said. He actually did believe he was his mother. Indeed, only in rare moments of lucidity did he any longer remember his real name and situation. Though the doctors did not put it so bluntly, it appeared as if Gordon would have to be institutionalized for the rest of his life.

“Here we go again,” Celia Tamlin said, sidling up to Elaine. She was very beautiful, despite her band-aids, but she no longer generated any jealousy or dislike in Elaine. *Because,* Elaine thought, *now I know that I'm pretty too. And I know that frivolity isn't such a terrible thing.*

The second explosion was larger than the first. Elaine was glad she had kept her ears shielded.

“That does it,” Lee said. He clapped Paul Honneker on the shoulder. “In two weeks, there'll be a kidney-shaped, blue-bottomed swimming pool where that ugly hole is now.” He sounded relieved, as if the dynamiting had not only torn a hole in the earth, but had shaken away the last vestiges of the Matherly house's terrible history.

“Let's go in and see how the painters are doing,” Celia said. “I'm just dying to get them out of the way, have the carpeting installed—and then start doing some really wild things to the inside of that dungeon!”

“Dungeon it was,” Paul said. “Not any more.”

“Just you wait and see the difference!” Celia said, starting for the house. Most of the others followed.

“We've all recovered so well,” Elaine said. “Even Jacob, despite his condition, seems healthier.”

Dennis took her hand. “My family has been wanting to recover for fifteen years, but it didn't know how. We had to face up to certain truths and then make a positive change. Redecorating the house is enormously helpful, don't you think? I tell you, with each room they take the wallpaper off, with each room they paint in those gay colors Celia chose, I feel that a bit more of the—the pain is gone. As if pain can be painted over or stripped away, like wallpaper. Silly, isn't it?”

“Not terribly silly,” she said.

The wind was stirring her hair and making her denim skirt flap. She was suddenly conscious of the short skirt and the blue and yellow psychedelic blouse, the sequined choker, her thin-strap sandals—all the clothes she would never have chosen for herself if Denny, when he had taken her shopping last week, had not insisted they were right for her. She grinned at him, at the wind, at everything. Frivolity could be wonderful!

Her lonely childhood, the orphanage, the near-poverty had all conspired to twist her outlook on life. She had come to value seriousness and simplicity too much. Likewise, she had come to place too little value on fun. Life had to be a mixture of solemnity and mirth. And the more mirth, the better. What good was life if it couldn't be enjoyed? Denny enjoyed it immensely. Jacob, now that he was relieved of his awful suspicions about a murderer in the house, also had a talent for life. They were all beginning to impart a measure of this joy to her.

A week ago, she hadn't been able to see any value in being an artist. Now, she regarded it as a rewarding occupation—in every respect.

A week ago, she had distrusted the frivolous man and found the sober sides reliable. She now saw life was more complex than that, people harder to judge.

She really looked forward to seeing what wild things Celia would do with those stuffy old rooms!

She had been a stuffy old room herself. But the events of the past week had unlocked the door. And Denny, wonderful Denny, had opened that door the rest of the way and had ushered in a breath of fresh air.

As they walked toward the house—the house she no longer feared, the house which had been transformed by the explosions and by the painting of its rooms, the house transformed by Celia's forgiveness toward the family and by her enthusiasm for the redecorating job at hand, the house which had once harbored horror but would now, in equal measure, be filled up with happiness and good will, the house of death which they would have to work to make a house of life and love—as they walked towards this house, Denny held her hand more tightly than before and said, “What are you thinking?”

“About the future,” she said.

As they drew near the house, she saw the windows were open, airing out the odor of paint—and of misery.

“Don't worry about tomorrow,” Denny said. “Enjoy today, Elaine. That is a big achievement in itself.”

“Oh,” she said, “I'm not *worried* about tomorrow. I'm looking forward to it!”

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