A new novel of suspense based on ABC-TV's DARK SHADOWS

Victoria Winters

Victoria is stalked by four menacing strangers through the grave-like halls of sinister Collins House

Marilyn Ross
VICTORIA WINTERS is the second Gothic novel in Paperback Library's new series based on DARK SHADOWS, ABC-TV's continuing suspense drama.

Still believing that the clue to her own identity lies hidden in Collins House, Victoria Winters stays on as companion and governess—despite danger from someone in the isolated mansion trying to destroy her.

But Victoria's determination to remain is shaken by the unexpected arrival of four mysterious strangers who begin a series of terrifying attacks on her life.

As a ghostly figure stalks her in the shadows, Victoria becomes convinced that staying at Collins House is a mistake that could well prove fatal!
Other Books In This Series By
Marilyn Ross

DARK SHADOWS
STRANGERS AT COLLINS HOUSE
THE MYSTERY OF COLLINWOOD
THE CURSE OF COLLINWOOD
BARNABAS COLLINS
THE SECRET OF BARNABAS COLLINS
CHAPTER ONE

VICTORIA WINTERS stood alone on the footpath at the high point of the cliff known in Collinsport as Widow’s Hill. Almost a hundred feet below her the waves lashed the jagged rocks lining the shore, leaving a wake of foam after every assault. Since early morning of this June day the banks of fog had hovered out on the horizon and now in the late afternoon the swirling mist had slowly crept in until the sun was blocked out and the entire coastline was shrouded in wet fog.

Glancing down the coast, she could no longer see Ernest Collins’ yellow mansion. The rolling gray fog had dropped a curtain on it. Even the outline of nearby Collins House was fuzzy in the mist, making it seem more like some weird haunted castle than ever. The huge rambling mansion with its tall chimneys and captain’s walk had held a strange fascination for her from the first moment she had seen it nearly a year ago.

That had been on a stormy night in October. She had come to take a position as governess to young David Collins, nine-year-old son of Roger Collins. Recalling the frightening experience of that first evening, when Ernest Collins, cousin to Roger and Elizabeth, had rescued her from danger of a serious accident in the darkness, she wondered that she had found the courage to stay on in these grim surroundings. Especially since Elizabeth Stoddard, Roger’s older sister, had been so cold and austere in receiving her into the household. The attractive middle-aged head of the Collins clan had later shown herself a thoughtful, kindly person, too kind for her own good in many instances. But there was always an air of reserve and mystery about her; even yet Victoria had not learned the truth about the strange disappearance of Elizabeth’s husband and her reasons for not having left Collins House for eighteen years!

But with the passing of the months Victoria had come to feel a part of the strange household. Besides the boy, David, there had been the lively teenager, Carolyn, Eliza-
beth’s attractive daughter, to keep her company and make the atmosphere more bearable. And, of course, there was Roger Collins, Elizabeth’s younger brother and David’s father. The good-looking Roger was something of a woman chaser and a little too fond of the bottle. Rumor had it these weaknesses had lost him his wife, although this was another subject never discussed in the house. Victoria understood that Roger’s wife had left him when he moved from Augusta to live with his sister in Collinsport at the family mansion.

Only a few hours before Victoria had walked out to the cliff, just at lunch time, Roger had come to her room to deliver a letter that had arrived in the early mail. Because it was postmarked New York and bore the return address of his cousin, Ernest, he had handed it to her with a knowing smile.

“Ernest is as regular as clockwork with his letters,” he observed, passing her the letter.

Victoria had taken it, a slight hint of embarrassment crossing her attractive, somewhat thin face. She was only twenty and still felt somewhat uneasy in dealing with the sophisticated Roger. Touching her free hand to the dark hair that tumbled to her shoulders, she said, “He sends just one a week. We promised to do that before he left.”

Roger’s weakly handsome face showed mild interest. “I wonder how he finds the time. He must be busy with his concerts and all the exciting people he’ll be meeting in New York. I wish I were a violinist instead of an executive drudge in a canning factory. I’d give a lot to be free of this dismal place.”

Victoria forced herself to smile. “I’m sure you’re only saying that. You really do enjoy running the family business. And Mrs. Stoddard needs you here so badly.”

An expression of distaste was his reaction to her words. “This house gives me the creeps,” he said, glancing around the shadowed second floor hallway outside her door. “And I should think it would be even worse for you after what happened.”

She knew what he meant, but this was another subject which no one mentioned. She and Ernest Collins had become close friends. Later she was told how the wife of
Ernest Collins had died in a West Coast auto accident. Puzzled by the strange behavior of the violinist, for whom she was beginning to care a great deal, she had come to fear he might be mentally unbalanced. This fear was heightened when she learned of the mysterious death of a young woman artist, Stella Hastings, who had plunged to her death over the cliff of Widow’s Hill. There was a suggestion that she might have been shoved over and that Ernest was somehow involved.

It had been a bad time for Victoria. Gradually the truth had been revealed to her. First by Carolyn, who told her a story so fantastic that at the time she had been ready to question the teenager’s truthfulness. But she had listened, and later, on a night when a storm of hurricane intensity had struck this bleak section of the Maine coast, a strange drama had been enacted in the dark shadows of Collins House.

When morning came and the storm abated Victoria learned the remaining facts that had been kept from her. She knew, at least to her own satisfaction, that Ernest Collins had not had any part in the mysterious death of the lovely Stella. And she came to understand the ordeal the sensitive young man had been through. Ernest had been ready enough to confess his love for her but had not insisted on her making a sudden decision about him. He had decided to take up residence in New York for a year to give them both time to think about the future. The exchange of letters had been part of the agreement between them.

Brushing away her memory of that time of torment, she told Roger, “I don’t mind it here anymore. In fact, I’m beginning to regard it as my home.”

“Why not?” he said. “Isn’t it the first actual home you’ve ever known?”

“I suppose that’s the reason,” she said, hoping he would leave soon and allow her to read the letter. Yet she did not wish to appear abrupt with him.

Still Roger lingered in the doorway. He could often be obtuse in this fashion, and it required Elizabeth to keep him in line. She knew exactly how to deal with him.

He eyed her cynically. “Or maybe you still have some
of those fancy notions about being a Collins yourself.
You never have made much headway in discovering any-
thing about your past.”

Victoria felt her cheeks flame. They all knew that she
had been left at the door of a foundling home and had
been raised there without any knowledge of who her
parents were. They knew, too, about the mysterious pay-
ments of twenty dollars that had been sent to her monthly
at the foundling home over a period of fourteen years, the
envelopes always bearing a Bangor postmark. When she
had been offered this position in Collinsport, only fifty
miles from Bangor, she had been eager to accept it,
hoping the rather mysterious offer of employment from
Elizabeth Stoddard might furnish a lead to her past. There
had been times when she felt something was about to be
revealed to her, but so far she had learned nothing.

She said, “I have never thought of myself as an actual
member of your family, but I do know someone in Bangor
sent me that money. That is why I wanted to come here.”

“You’ve been to Bangor a couple of times,” he said.
“Find anything out?”

Victoria shook her head. “No. They suggested I visit
Augusta, since it’s the state capital and all the records are
kept there.”

Roger pursed his lips. “You’d have to know what you
were looking for in the first place. Otherwise I don’t see
you’d be any ahead.”

“I’d look up records of births for the year in which I
was born, to begin with,” she said. “I mean to do it as
soon as I can.”

He nodded. “Good luck then. You should find time
now with David and Carolyn in the Adirondacks on holi-
day. They won’t be back for a month, you know.”

“I’d have gone before this,” Victoria said, “but Mrs.
Stoddard hasn’t been feeling well, and she has asked me
not to leave her alone.”

Roger showed mild surprise. “Alone? With me in the
house?”

She managed a faint smile. “I suppose she hardly
counts you or Matt Morgan,” she said. Matt was the only
employee who served the Collins family and he lived in
one of the two small stone cottages on the estate. He was a surly brute whom Victoria still distrusted.

"I suppose not," he agreed. "She is so used to us being around. By the way, Will Grant called a while ago. Someone is interested in renting Ernest's house and he's sending them over to see Elizabeth this evening. If she approves, the deal is all set."

"I'm glad," Victoria said. She knew Ernest wanted to rent the big house that had been empty so long.

Roger turned to leave and then glanced back over his shoulder with a grin. "Have you seen much of Will lately?"

"Not much," she said, annoyed at his teasing. He knew that the family lawyer, Will Grant, had been interested in her since her arrival. He also knew she liked Will but had more or less transferred her affections to the absent Ernest.

"I'd consider him a real good bet for a husband," Roger said slyly. "Better than Ernest." With that parting remark he hurried downstairs leaving her staring after him indignantly.

She went quickly into her room and shut the door. Then she gave some time to reading Ernest's letter. He wrote of being extremely busy, saying he doubted he'd be able to return to Collinsport before October. He also stressed that he was still as much in love with her as when he'd left and hoped they might begin the New Year with her wearing his ring.

Victoria read the letter twice. While she was glad to receive it, the knowledge that she soon might have to make a decision about Ernest, together with the remarks made by Roger concerning her complete ignorance of her background, made her unhappy. She was reluctant to marry without first finding out the truth about herself. Yet no one here seemed anxious to help her. Several times she had appealed to Elizabeth Stoddard, but always the attractive mistress of Collins House had put her off. She was sure, however, that Elizabeth, aloof and retiring, could supply her with some facts if she wished.

In her most hopeful moments Victoria tried to comfort herself with the idea that Elizabeth would come forward
with the secret of her birth at a time she considered suitable. But when she was depressed, as the letter had left her, she feared this was only wishful thinking.

She sat at the table in her room and wrote Ernest a long reply telling him of the week's happenings in detail, trying to hide the unhappiness that she felt and assuring him of how much she looked forward to his return in the fall. She also mentioned the possibility of the house being rented and promised more information on this in her next letter. She left the letter downstairs on the foyer table to be picked up by the mailman the next morning.

Then she slipped on a heavy white sweater over her blue cotton dress and went out along the footpath that fringed the cliff for a stroll. She had not realized what inroads the fog had made nor how cold it had become. Now, standing staring back at the black hulk of Collins House, she gathered the sweater around her. The bleakness of the spot and the chill of the day made her shiver slightly.

She realized that even before she had read Ernest's letter she had been in a fit of depression. Normally, receiving word from him would have had a cheering effect on her, but this had not been the case today. Her brooding uneasiness seemed to dominate everything else, and she couldn't help wondering if it might presage some trouble.

In spite of the brave front she had presented for Roger's benefit, she was by no means reconciled to this strange old estate by the sea. The isolation of the towering dark mansion and the fact that the majority of its forty rooms were shut off and cobwebbed from not being used created an eerie atmosphere. And she could not forget her experiences of dank cellars and dark hidden passages leading to the underground area of the old house.

True, Elizabeth had ordered Matt Morgan to bar the hidden passage which had been discovered, the hidden passage built long years before and kept a secret. It had connected her room with the cellar by a series of winding stone steps. It was sealed now and yet, a real sense of fear persisted in her. What other dark secrets did the shadowed, silent rooms of Collins House conceal? What other hidden passages might still exist undiscovered?
Jeremiah Collins, who had long ago built the weird, rambling house, had known great sorrow there. His French wife, Josette, had been the first to die by plunging over this cliff a suicide. And there had been other deaths in the dark history of the estate, Stella Hastings being the last one, meeting her death on the rocks. This probably was the result of a murderous attack, although it was still listed as a suicide in the local police records.

All these tragic events had left their mark on the place. The local people in Collinsport avoided the estate whenever possible. It was common gossip that the Collins family were cursed in spite of their prosperity—they owned the small village’s only industry, the canning factory. Ghosts were said to show themselves on the grounds surrounding the mansion and in its gloomy corridors. Victoria had not been able to avoid hearing this talk and so her own attitude was one of apprehension. Only her firm resolve to learn the secret of her past and her fondness for young David and the gay teenager Carolyn had made her remain on in the house. Of course there was her love for Ernest, but that was not dependent on her staying in Collinsport.

With David and Carolyn away for an extended holiday, the mood of Collins House was more oppressive than before. She was beginning to regret letting Elizabeth persuade her to stay on through the holidays as her paid companion. She felt the need to get away, to enjoy a more normal atmosphere for a while.

As she stared back toward the old mansion she saw a car emerge from the wooded road that led in from the main highway. Its parking lights were on as a defense against the fog and she recognized it at once as belonging to the young lawyer, Will Grant. At once some of her feeling of desolation left her and she hurried down the footpath to greet him before he entered the house.

In spite of the heavy mist that cut visibility to a minimum in the gray afternoon, Will Grant had seen her. He came across the lawn to meet her at the place where the footpath began. The tall young lawyer had a smile on his good-natured, boyish face as he joined her.
“I thought it was you,” he said. “Though I couldn’t tell properly in this fog.”

“It really is something,” she agreed, and with a smile looked up at him. “We haven’t seen much of you lately.”

Will nodded. “I know. I’ve been meaning to come over, but I’ve been away a lot and busy.”

“I hear you have someone interested in renting Ernest’s house,” she said.

“Yes,” Will said. “I came by to brief Elizabeth on the matter. It’s a middle-aged man and his two daughters who want to take over the house for a while. One of them is recovering from a serious operation and he hopes the quiet and fresh sea air here might be helpful to her.”

“I’m sure of that,” Victoria said. “And Ernest will be pleased to have the house occupied again.”

“They are only interested in a month-to-month arrangement,” Will explained. “But this Henry Francis—he’s a retired stockbroker—is willing to pay well.”

Victoria considered this. “I suppose that is the main thing,” she said. “But won’t the house be too large for just the three of them?”

“I discussed this with him, especially as he has no plans for hiring help,” Will said. “But he seemed more concerned with the privacy Ernest’s house offered and he says that his older daughter is a nurse who can not only look after her ailing sister but also cater to their other needs. He claims she enjoys doing household chores.”

She laughed. “Well, she’ll find plenty of them over there. Looking after even three people can be a task in a large house like that. Especially with one of them an invalid.”

Will glanced toward Collins House with a slight frown. “I think our main problem will be getting Elizabeth’s approval of the arrangement. Ernest left the final decision up to her and you know how cautious she is where strangers are concerned.”

“I know.”

He shrugged. “I suppose anyone would be apt to grow sensitive after hiding themselves away in a place like this for eighteen years.” He gave her a questioning look. “Do you find Elizabeth completely normal?”
The question was direct and not expected. Victoria hesitated a moment before replying. When she did answer, she knew she could not offer a satisfactory reply. "She seems to be within the restrictions she has made for herself."

Will smiled ruefully. "That sounds a little ambiguous."
"It wasn't meant to be," she said sincerely. "I have grown to understand her more in these last months. I feel she is my friend."

"Elizabeth has many fine qualities," he agreed. "But it's difficult to know how to take her. Her reactions can be just the opposite of what you'd expect some times. Pride in family goes a long way with her. There's not much she wouldn't risk to preserve the Collins name."

She studied him with mild surprise. "Is that such a bad quality?"

"If carried too far. And you must agree she did just that with Ernest."

Victoria's face clouded at the memory. "I think we can call that a special case," she told him.

Will asked, "How is Ernest making out these days?"
"He's very busy. He's taken on a lot more concert work. Too much, perhaps."

"He keeps you well informed."

Victoria tried hard to hide her self-consciousness as she replied quietly, "He writes me quite often."

There was an audible sigh from the lawyer. "Ernest always did have all the luck," he said. "Seems to me he's hit a winning streak again." He smiled at her. "Don't think I'm dealing myself out of the game. I'll be calling you for a date one of these evenings. Trouble is, the only place to take anyone in this village is the Blue Whale and jukebox bars aren't really your style."

"There are worse places than the Blue Whale," she said, laughing. "At least it offers a change."

"A noisy change," Will said. "It has lots of atmosphere, but the wrong sort. Joe Haskell is there alone every night since Carolyn went on vacation. The boy really looks lost."

"I can imagine," she said.

"Well, I must get on in and see Elizabeth," Will said.
"I have a client coming to meet me at the office around five. Someone you've met," he added.

"Oh?" She was at once interested.

"Burke Devlin," he said. "The one who's living at the hotel. Seems to have made a fortune and he's come back here to impress the natives. He and Roger don't hit it off, if you'll remember."

She frowned. "I know. Roger gets angry whenever anyone mentions Burke Devlin's name. Especially if anything good is said about him. I wonder what he's doing back here?"

"No one in Collinsport is really certain about that," Will said. "But he has been buying up quite a bit of farm land and general property in the district. He retained me to look after the legal matters for him."

"And he never tells you anything else about himself or his business?"

"Nothing," he said. "Devlin is a strange customer."

They both turned their steps toward the house. When they went inside Elizabeth was standing in the elaborate wood-paneled foyer with its crystal chandelier and its paintings of sailing ships and long-dead members of the Collins family. The slim, aristocratic head of the house greeted them with a tight smile on her still lovely face.

She said, "I saw you talking so earnestly out there. I'd about given up hope you'd ever come in."

Victoria blushed. "I didn't realize you were waiting." With a nod of farewell to Will she went on upstairs. As she did so, she heard him apologizing and bringing up the matter of the rental as he and Elizabeth went into the library.

Not until dinner time did Victoria come down again. Elizabeth presided over the table. Roger was in one of his quiet moods. The mistress of Collins House told her, "You've heard about Ernest's house being rented, I suppose."

"Yes," she nodded.

"Mr. Francis is coming here to see me after dinner," Elizabeth went on. "I suppose if he appears the proper type I'll have to let him have the place, although I can't imagine why three people would want it. And I can't
understand his being unwilling to rent it for longer than a month at a time.”

Roger spoke up. “Perhaps he feels his daughter will have recovered enough in a month for them to return to the city.”

“I doubt that,” Elizabeth said. “She has had extensive brain surgery for a large tumor. It often takes a year or more to recover from such an operation.”

“Well, he should find it quiet enough,” Roger said in a vexed tone. “Although I doubt if he’ll appreciate the fog we’ve been plagued with nearly every day. I haven’t been able to get in a decent week’s boating all summer.” Roger’s latest toy was an expensive cabin cruiser which he kept tied to a small wooden wharf not far from Collins House.

Elizabeth gave him an annoyed glance. “I should think you’d have plenty to occupy your time without worrying about that boat.”

Roger bent over his plate. “I need some recreation.”

Elizabeth made a comment that Roger’s whole life was devoted to recreation of various kinds. Realizing the two were in an argumentive mood, Victoria said little as the meal progressed. It was at times like this that Carolyn and David lightened the atmosphere, but it would be weeks before they returned.

With dinner over, Victoria went to the library and spent some time studying the fine selections of classics in rich leather and gold bindings. The good taste of the Collins family was reflected in their library. She was still there when she heard a car drive up and she guessed it was the man coming to interview Elizabeth about the rental. Elizabeth answered the door herself, for Roger had gone out. Victoria heard the exchange between the gracious older woman and the stranger, although she could not clearly make out their words.

When she left the library with a volume of Hawthorne about twenty minutes later, Elizabeth and the stranger were still seated in the living room talking. As she passed its wide entrance on her way to the stairs, Elizabeth rose and invited her to come in.

“I want you to meet Mr. Henry Francis,” she said, a hand on Victoria’s arm as she guided her towards the
stranger. "This is Victoria Winters, our governess and presently my companion."

"A pleasure, Miss Winters," the newcomer said, urbanely bowing and taking her hand briefly. He was an almost-handsome middle-aged man, his brown curly hair graying at the temples, his skin olive and his eyes piercing under heavy brows. There was a magnetism about him, although he was not especially tall or virile-looking. Victoria was at once aware of an unusual quality in him. Certainly he had a ready charm, yet she found herself wondering about the sincerity of it.

"Mr. Francis is not entirely a stranger to me, although I only realized that when I saw him." Elizabeth explained with a radiant expression. "We knew each other in our college days. In fact, he visited in this very house several times then."

Henry Francis glanced around the large, luxuriously furnished living room with a sigh. "Other and happier days, I'd say," he told them with a deep sigh. "I hoped it would be Elizabeth who would greet me here, but I could not be sure."

"I have persuaded Henry he made a mistake in thinking of renting Ernest's house," Elizabeth went on for her benefit. "It is much too large. Instead I have offered him the use of an apartment in this house, the one Ernest had, as a matter of fact. I'm happy to say he has accepted."

Henry Francis smiled. "Too kind of you, Elizabeth," he said. "I'm sure this could be the ideal place for my poor Dorothy. And a small apartment will make it so much easier for Rachel, my other daughter. The main thing is quiet, and I do not want Dorothy exposed to strangers in her present state."

Victoria was confused by this sudden change in plans. She'd had no idea that Elizabeth would open her house to strangers, yet she seemed only too willing to do so in the case of Henry Francis and his daughters. It struck her that she had never seen Elizabeth so pleasantly excited since her arrival at Collins House. She wondered if the two had been sweethearts in their college days.

She told him, "It is certainly quiet. And we are isolated from other people."
“There are two main concerns in finding a proper place for Dorothy to recuperate,” Henry Francis said, his piercing eyes fixing on her intently. “I have to travel a good deal and I also want a place where the girls will not be completely alone.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I understand, and one of the advantages of a large house like this is that you can enjoy complete privacy and yet have others under the same roof. Just now there is only my brother and Miss Winters here with me. Unless you count Morgan, our servant.”

“It sounds ideal,” Henry Francis assured her in his smooth voice that so matched his easy charm. “And if you don’t object I’d like to move the girls in here tomorrow. They are staying at a Bangor hotel. I can drive back there tonight and make all the arrangements for them to travel down here in the morning.”

“That will be quite satisfactory,” Elizabeth assured him. “I will see that Mr. Grant is informed of the change in your plans.”

“Excellent,” he said with another of his small, courtly bows. He glanced at his wristwatch. “I would like to stay on and meet your brother, Elizabeth, but I really must begin the return journey to Bangor. I dislike leaving the girls alone too long.”

“That’s quite all right,” Elizabeth said. “You will have plenty of time with Roger after you move in here.” She moved toward the door with him.

At the archway he turned to smile for Victoria’s benefit again. “I’ll look forward to a longer conversation with you, Miss Winters.

When he had gone, Elizabeth came back into the living room and faced her with a smile. “I suppose you’re startled at all this.”

“You know best what you want to do,” Victoria said.

“Henry was a sweet boy when I knew him years ago,” Elizabeth said with a wistful smile of remembrance. “I’m sure we’ll enjoy having him and his daughters here with us now. And it is a kindness to help that poor sick child of his.”

“You haven’t seen him for a long while then?” Victoria asked.
"More than twenty-five years," Elizabeth said. "I'm pleasantly surprised he has changed so little." She sighed. "I wonder what he thinks about me."

Victoria smiled understandingly. "I'm sure he seemed eager enough to accept your offer. I'd say he was impressed by your attractiveness."

Elizabeth looked almost girlish in her pleasure. "Oh, come now!" she protested.

Victoria would have liked to add that she felt some doubts about the charming widower who was about to descend on them with his daughters as a guest, but she had an idea Elizabeth would not want to hear her opinion. The mistress of Collins House was thrilled at the idea of having her college friend as a house guest and there seemed no point in spoiling her pleasure. Still, Victoria wondered if Henry Francis had not actually changed more than his outward appearance indicated. Perhaps she was being ridiculous, but beneath that charm she felt there was something sinister.

She said none of this but excused herself from Elizabeth's presence and went out on the steps for a moment before going upstairs with her book. The fog was still heavy but in her sweater she did not immediately feel cold. She wondered where Roger was at the moment and decided he was at the wharf with his boat. He spent the major part of his time there lately.

Mostly because she was upset by the turn of events and was eager to hear Roger's reaction to them, she decided on impulse to stroll down the short distance to where the cabin cruiser was tied. She hurried, once she made her decision, and within a few minutes found herself walking out on the fog-shrouded wharf. There was no sign of Roger. She hesitated as she stood on the wooden planks of the wharf above the boat. Only then did she realize that dusk was at hand and with the fog it would soon be dark.

She heard a sound from inside the cabin of the sleek boat and at once decided that was where Roger had gone. Taking a cautious step, she lowered herself down aboard the boat and headed for the cabin entrance. There was no light so she could not see clearly as she took the several
steps down into the interior of the cabin, calling Roger's name. There was no reply. Standing there in the almost complete darkness, she became suddenly terrified. Her panic grew as she became dimly aware of heavy breathing in the shadows behind her. She screamed in fright.

CHAPTER TWO

At the sound of Victoria's scream there was a swift rustling in the darkness behind her and a moment later she was horrified to see the crouching shoulders and head of a male figure outlined in the doorway of the cabin above her. Knowing that whoever it was had now blocked off her only avenue of escape, she retreated backward a few faltering steps and screamed a second time.

Her second scream caused the hazy figure in the doorway to vanish but she could not tell whether he had slipped down the steps to advance surreptitiously upon her in the blackness of the cabin or had fled onto the deck above and made his escape. Sick with fear she waited, hardly daring to breath, while she listened for some hint of the intruder. There was only silence.

Then from the deck above she heard heavy footsteps. Her hopes raised a fraction and again she called out, "Roger!"

This time her cry was answered. A moment later Roger's familiar outline showed in the doorway as he peered down at her. "Is that you, Victoria?" he asked somewhat nervously.

"Yes!" she burst out and hurried toward him.

"What the devil are you doing down there?" he wanted to know.

She allowed him to put an arm around her and assist her up on the deck. The cool mist partly revived her as she leaned against him weakly. "I came down here looking for you," she said. "I had a bad scare."

"What sort of scare?"

"I heard someone aboard. I thought it was you, but when I went down to find out they kept themselves hidden
in the shadows. I screamed and then I saw the figure of
a man crouching in the doorway."

"I came here just a few minutes ago and I saw no one."

"There was a man on the boat," she insisted.

Roger continued to keep his arm around her and when
Victoria lost some of her fear she became aware of the
danger of putting herself in a compromising situation with
Roger.

He said, "You're shivering like a puppy! You can't be
all that cold!"

She moved to escape his embrace. "I'll be all right now,
thank you," she assured him. "It's just that I had a nasty
scare."

Roger stared at her through the gathering darkness.
"You're quite certain you didn't imagine any of this, that
there was someone on board here?"

"I'm very sure."

He rubbed the back of his head in obvious perplexity.
"Can't understand why I didn't see anyone. Still, you may
be right." He took her by the arm. "Let me help you up
on the wharf. You need to get back to the house where
it's warm."

She allowed him to help her back up on the ancient
wharf and they walked the short distance up the path to
the house together. Little was said between them on the
way, but her thoughts were racing at a furious pace. Once
inside, Roger insisted she join him for a drink in the living
room.

Pouring her a glass of sherry, he handed it to her.
"Take this," he ordered. "It will knock some of the chill
out of you."

She accepted it and sipped the warming liquid as he
helped himself to a generous snifter of brandy. He savored
it lingeringly. "Good stuff!" he said.

"I'm sorry to have been such a nuisance," she said.

"Nonsense!" He regarded her sternly. "Did you get any
kind of a good look at whoever it was?"

"No."

"Too bad," he frowned. "Likely someone from the vil-
lage after my equipment. I have some valuable stuff
aboard."
“It hardly seems like any of the fisherfolk,” she protested.
“You’re right,” he agreed. Observing that she had finished her first sherry, he poured her another without being asked. “It could have been some transient, though hardly any of them get this far off the main road.”
“I know,” she said.
He stared at her over his brandy glass. “Unless,” he said slowly, “it was an intruder of a different sort.
There was the hint of something in his eyes and in those measured words that made her feel suddenly cold again despite the wine. Her face drained of color as she stared at him.
“What do you mean?” she asked in a subdued voice.
There was a brief silence in the big shadowed room, broken only by the regular ticking of the grandfather clock that was one of the prominent pieces in the foyer. Roger gazed up at the portrait of Jeremiah Collins, the austere ancestor who had supervised the building of Collins House.
As he spoke he continued to stare thoughtfully at the portrait. “In his old age, after he’d lost his Josette, he claimed he saw them here,” he said.
“Saw who?”
He turned to her with a gleam in his eyes. “Ghosts!”
At first she thought he was attempting some macabre joke, but as he stood there waiting for her reaction, she was embarrassed to discover that he seemed deadly serious. “I’m sure whoever I met up with just now was flesh and blood,” she said.
His eyes narrowed. “I wonder how you can tell since you claim to have had such a fleeting impression of this stranger.”
Certain he was teasing her, she struggled to maintain her calm, to resist allowing him to upset her. “I don’t happen to believe in ghosts,” she said.
“Nor do I,” he said, taking another sip of his brandy. Then his eyes met hers directly. “But something happened the other night that made me wonder if I shouldn’t.”
Victoria frowned. “You saw something?”
He nodded slowly. “I saw something.”
She said, “There are times when we’re all deceived.
Most of us have had that sort of experience. Usually it can be explained."

"I wonder," he said thoughtfully, dropping his eyes to the almost empty brandy glass. "I was coming across from Morgan's cottage late the night before last. He's been repairing a carburetor for the boat. I watched him work until past midnight; then I came back here. It was raining and there was a high wind."

"I remember," she said, already caught up in his story. "My eyes happened to turn toward the footpath, near where it joins the lawn," Roger said solemnly. "I saw something moving, maybe just the trees in the wind. Of course I hesitated and as I stared more closely the moving branches took on a shape. I saw someone there gesturing to me, trying to get my attention. Someone I recognized!"

"Who?"

"Stella."

She stared incredulously. "Stella?"

"Yes. Stella Hastings, the girl Ernest was so fond of. The one who went over the cliff. For just an instant her face peered out of the shadows and then it was gone. The whole illusion vanished and I was watching branches swaying in the wind and rain again."

"Of course that was it," she exclaimed. "It was all an illusion from the beginning! You imagined the whole business!"

Roger drained his glass and then gave her a taunting smile. "You seem very anxious to believe that. Just the same, if you'll take my advice you'll keep inside the house after dark. Why did you go down to the boat tonight?"

Victoria quickly told him. She gave him a brief description of Henry Francis, saying that Elizabeth seemed to know him very well. She ended by saying, "I went down to tell you. After that, you know what happened."

"Henry Francis!" he said, smiling. "It's been a long while since I've heard his name. I didn't connect him with the Mr. Francis Elizabeth mentioned at dinner."

"Then you know him?"

"Only by name," he said. "We've never met. I was away when Elizabeth had him here. And of course I'm much younger than either of them. Elizabeth used to have
quite a crush on him,” he added in a confidential tone with a glance toward the stairs.

Victoria was reasonably sure Elizabeth was not there or she wouldn’t have openly brought up the subject. She knew Elizabeth had been retiring early lately because of her headaches.

She said, “She seemed very willing to have him here.”

“I hope she knows what she’s doing,” Roger said. “She’s apt to find Francis is not the college boy she knew. And having a sick girl in the house could be quite a nuisance.”

“I understand she’s recovering from an operation,” Victoria pointed out. “So she may not be too ill.”

“Let’s hope not,” Roger said, turning to fill his own glass again. “And the other sister, the nurse. Sounds as if she might be interesting.” He winked.

Victoria hardly knew what to say. Naturally Roger would welcome any young female in the house and would no doubt flirt outrageously with her, regardless of what she was like. Not that it mattered as far as Victoria was concerned. She had almost made herself a conspirator by telling the news. Now all she wanted to do was get away from him and go upstairs to her room.

Moving toward the door, she said, “Well, by this time tomorrow we’ll have met them all.”

Roger raised his glass. “To youth and beauty! The feminine sort!”

She hurried up the stairs, leaving him standing there in the living room, chuckling over his brandy. She did not approve of him and he knew it. Not until she was in her own room and preparing for bed did it occur to her that Roger might have played an unpleasant trick on her. He could well have been the one hiding in the darkness of the cabin and by assuming a weird crouching position when he stood in the doorway, have concealed his identity.

Later it would have been easy for him to pretend to have only appeared on the scene. Hadn’t his own carefully timed account of seeing Stella’s ghost been offered at a moment calculated to stir her fears and make her open to the acceptance of any wild tale? It might very well have been Roger who had given her this awful scare.

She lay back against the pillows and studied the ornate
plaster ceiling as she reviewed the events of the night and tried to sift out the important facts. If it hadn’t been Roger playing a prank, who had it been? Someone bent on theft, as he had suggested? Not likely. Apparently nothing had been taken. Could it have been Morgan? Roger had mentioned he was working on the boat’s engine. It was a more probable explanation.

Yet after a moment’s consideration she quickly rejected the idea. Morgan was too large a man. It had seemed to her the figure that had emerged from the darkness had been much smaller. She realized this left only the possibility that Roger had suggested. It could have been a ghost!

While everything in the ancient, dreary mansion conspired to make her believe this, she was determined to reject the thought. Once her mind began working in that direction she would be bereft of courage and it would take very little to make her flee in panic. This she must not do. If there was even a small chance of finding out about herself in this place, she had to remain. With this thought she reached out and turned off the bed lamp. Far off she could hear the steady blaring of a foghorn and the regular wash of the waves on the rocky shore. To these sounds, she finally fell asleep.

Next morning the fog was gone and there was a steady cool breeze and bright sunshine. Victoria forgot her unpleasant experience of the night before while she helped Elizabeth prepare the apartment in the rear section of the house for the expected tenants. The rooms had been kept clean and needed only airing and a little dusting. Elizabeth, with a yellow kerchief to protect her hair, did most of the work and finished by changing the linen on all the beds.

At last she stood in the middle of the apartment’s small living room and surveyed its dark walls and antique furniture with satisfaction. “I don’t think there is anything we’ve missed,” she told Victoria with a smile.

“No,” she agreed. “I’m sure they’ll be comfortable here.”

“Henry is a fine fellow,” Elizabeth said. “It’s too bad he has had so much trouble. I hadn’t heard from him in years until yesterday. People drift apart so. I must find
out what happened to his wife and more about his daughter’s illness.”

Victoria was privately wondering about these things also. And she was not as optimistic as her employer about the chances of finding out the facts from Henry Francis. She still felt he was not the open charmer he pretended to be, yet she realized she could be wrong. Only time could provide the answer.

Elizabeth turned to her. “I have no right to expect you to assist me as a domestic,” she said. “To even things up, you must take the afternoon off.”

“That’s not necessary,” Victoria protested.

“No, I mean it,” Elizabeth said with a firm note in her voice. “I’ll not need you this afternoon.”

Victoria spent the afternoon with Nora Grant on the small stretch of beach near the wharf where Roger kept his cabin cruiser. Nora was Will Grant’s cousin. She lived in Portland all winter but came down to Collinston in the summer months to help her mother in a tourist gift shop. She had a cottage not far from Ernest’s big yellow and white mansion, and when she had a free period, she often took a short cut along a path following the cliffs and came over to see Victoria. The two girls had taken an instant liking for each other and had become close friends.

Stretched out on blankets on the somewhat pebbly beach, Victoria, in a white bathing suit, told Nora of her experiences the previous night. She had not said anything to Elizabeth, feeling it would needlessly upset her, but she was anxious to confide in someone.

Nora, a pretty girl with a ready, appealing smile, was close to Victoria’s age and near her size and coloring. Will Grant made a joke of this, calling them the terrible twins. As Victoria told her what had happened on the boat, Nora sat up, her arms clasped around her bare knees. She looked at Victoria excitedly. “You don’t really think it was a ghost?”

Victoria shook her head. “No.”

“It better not be,” the other girl said. “Otherwise I won’t dare come across the cliffs at night.”
She gave her a worried glance. "You probably shouldn't try that anyway."

"But it saves so much time."

"I'd feel happier if I knew you were driving over," Victoria told her. "There are so many strangers wandering around at this time of year."

"A nice one arrived in town yesterday," Nora announced with a smile. "His name is Paul Caine and he's an artist. I sold him quite a few items. He's renting a room at a farmhouse just up the road from our place."

Victoria was amused. "It didn't take you long to get his name and all the important details," she said.

"That wasn't hard," Nora said. "He talked almost all the time he was in the shop. And he doesn't look like the artist type. I mean his hair isn't long and he has no beard. In fact he has a crew cut, red hair and plenty of freckles on a very nice face."

"I don't know," Victoria teased her. "It's often the innocent-looking boyish ones who can be the most dangerous."

"He's not dangerous!" Nora said. "He's just a nice young man. Likely you'll meet him. He plans to paint all along the shore and he was asking me about Collins House."

"Oh?"

Nora nodded. "He thought it was a spooky old place. I agreed."

Victoria smiled. "Don't let Roger or Elizabeth hear you saying that. They're pretty sensitive about the house and its reputation."

The other girl made a face. "Not Roger! I can say anything to that one! He comes into the shop whenever he's sure mother isn't there and flirts with me for ages."

"That sounds like Roger," she agreed dryly.

"And that Elizabeth must be a queer one! Everyone pities poor Carolyn having a mother like that," Nora went on. "Is it true she hasn't left the house for eighteen years?"

Victoria hesitated. "I don't like to gossip about Mrs. Stoddard. She's a fine woman and she's had a tragic life."

"Mother says she wants it that way." Nora leaned close to her. "Do you know that right after her husband disap-
peared she let all the servants in the house go except that
crazy Matt Morgan?”
“Someone mentioned it.”
“Everybody in the village thought she’d gone clean
crazy,” Nora asserted. “And some still think she’s not
quite right in the head.”
“I think she’s a fine person,” Victoria said.
“You want to believe that,” Nora pointed out. “And
it’s right you should be loyal. But you’ll have to admit
there is something peculiar about her hiding in the house
the way she does.”
“It’s her own business.”
“That may be so,” Nora said. “But she can’t stop peo-
ple talking. Some think she may know more about where
her husband went than she lets on.”
“What do you mean by that?”
Nora shrugged. “Some people say she might have
killed him.”
Victoria was horrified. “But that’s nonsense!” she pro-
tested. “Mrs. Stoddard simply isn’t that sort of person.”
“I’m not saying she is. But there was a lot of talk about
the Collins family when Burke Devlin came back to the
village. It’s still going on for that matter.”
“I can’t see how Burke Devlin could be mixed up in
the affairs here,” she said.
“Some say he was mighty friendly with Elizabeth before
he went away. And everyone knows that he hates Roger
like poison.”
Victoria smiled. “I think we’d better not talk about
them anymore,” she said. “Most of what you’re saying is
just silly gossip repeated over and over. And I really don’t
know enough about either Elizabeth or Roger to properly
defend them.”
“Or about yourself either,” Nora pointed out with keen
perception. “Do you think you could possibly be related
to such a strange lot of people? I don’t. You’re much
too nice.”
“Thanks for the compliment, anyway,” Victoria said
lightly. “There are times when I wish I could count my-
self one of a family—even the Collins family, unhappy as
they appear to be.”
Nora regarded her with a sly smile. "Maybe you’ll wind up a Collins no matter what. Ernest is still writing to you, isn’t he?"

Victoria nodded. "Yes. I had a letter from him yesterday."

"He’s really serious then?"

She marked a pattern in the sand with a forefinger. "He’s asked me to marry him, if that’s what you mean. I still haven’t made up my own mind."

Nora was surprised. "I can’t imagine why! Ernest is such a wonderful person. I tell you he wouldn’t have to put the question to me twice."

Victoria smoothed the sand over the pattern she had drawn and turned to her friend. "But then you haven’t my problems. You know who you are and all about your family. There’s no mystery in your life."

"Sometimes I’d like it if there was," the girl said. She added, "Are you certain it isn’t Will who is holding you back? Can’t you make your mind up which one you like the best?"

Victoria smiled. "I like them both a great deal."

"But one day you’ll have to decide which one is the most important to you," Nora reminded her. "Which one you want as a husband."

"I know that."

"I sort of hope it’s cousin Will," Nora said wistfully. "He thinks so much of you and he’s wonderful, even if he is my cousin. Of course he’s not rich and famous like Ernest Collins but you could do worse."

"I know that too!"

Nora smiled. "I can predict what will happen," she said. "Someone else will come along and you’ll not marry either of them."

"You’re much too imaginative," Victoria reproached her. "I’m sure you’re a bad influence on me." She glanced at her wristwatch. "I have to be getting back to the house," she said. "Mrs. Stoddard is expecting guests."

Nora’s eyebrows raised. "Guests? In that house?"

Victoria smiled as she got up to fold her blanket and prepare to leave the beach, and she told Nora about Henry Francis and his two daughters.
“He sounds sort of creepy to me,” Nora said. “And so does that daughter who had the brain surgery. I guess they’ve picked the right place to visit.”

“Elizabeth thinks so,” Victoria said. “And I’m probably wrong about Henry Francis. He’s likely a fine man.”

She thought of this again later when he finally drove up with the two girls in the rear seat of a late model dark sedan. It was about an hour after she said good-by to Nora on the beach. In the meantime she had changed into a yellow afternoon dress and had waited in the living room for Henry Francis and his daughters to arrive.

Elizabeth appeared in another of her striking black dresses relieved by a string of pearls. She had taken some trouble with her hair and looked extremely attractive. Victoria heard her tell Matt Morgan to be ready to assist with the invalid girl in any way required and also to be there to help with the luggage.

Both Victoria and Elizabeth went out on the steps to greet Henry Francis. He smiled and waved to them as he got out of the car. “We’re a little later than I’d expected,” he apologized with his usual charm. “Dorothy wasn’t feeling well and that delayed us.”

Opening the trunk, he lifted out a folding wheelchair. As Matt Morgan appeared to stand waiting to help, the middle-aged man expertly opened up the chair. He went to the car and lifted out a petite girl with blond hair and large dark glasses. She appeared limp and without any awareness as he gently sat her in the chair. Another girl, this one redheaded and extremely attractive, had emerged from the car with a blanket, which she gave to Henry Francis. He carefully covered the ailing girl’s lap with the blanket. After he gave Matt Morgan brief instructions about the bags, he then wheeled the inanimate blond girl toward the steps. The other daughter walked beside them.

Henry Francis neatly maneuvered the wheelchair up the steps without unduly disturbing the motionless girl. He paused when he reached the top step and Victoria had a good opportunity to study the invalid at close range. She judged that she had once been pretty, although now her face was wan and without expression. There was no way to tell if the eyes behind the very dark glasses were open.
but if they were, Victoria doubted if the girl took anything in.

Francis told them, "This is my poor sick girl, Dorothy. Now you can understand why I have sought a place with solitude. I feel complete rest and quiet offer her only chance for recovery. Indeed, that is what the doctors have told me."

Elizabeth regarded the motionless girl with concern. "She'll not be disturbed here," she promised.

Francis turned to the other girl with one of his bright smiles. "And here is my other daughter, Rachel. A blessing to both Dorothy and me. As a daughter and happily, also as a nurse, she is an invaluable asset to me."

Introductions were made all around and Victoria decided that the flashily attractive Rachel would be bound to catch Roger's attention when he met her. She was made to order for him with her sultry voice and insinuating smile. It also struck her that neither of the girls bore any resemblance to their father or to each other. Of course it was hard to judge what Dorothy would be like if she were well and without her glasses.

Rachel took in the rich foyer with a sweeping glance and told her father, "You didn't exaggerate. It is a wonderful old house!"

When they reached the main stairway Henry Francis tenderly lifted his sick daughter from the invalid chair and carried her up in his arms. Rachel brought the empty chair along and when they reached the landing, Dorothy was put in it once more and her father wheeled her along the corridor as Elizabeth showed the way to their apartment.

Victoria remained below to see that Matt Morgan looked after the bags and took the car to the garage. The gentle care Henry Francis offered his ailing daughter had given Victoria a completely different impression of him. She was now ready to agree that he was a kind, considerate person.

She told Roger so when he arrived a little after dinner. She was about to mention the other daughter when Rachel came down the stairs to join them. She looked extremely attractive in a simple dark green dress.
“We’re managing very well,” she told Victoria. “Father is staying in Dorothy’s room for a while. It takes her a time to get adjusted.” She glanced Roger’s way. “And I suppose you are Mr. Roger Collins of whom I’ve heard Father speak so glowingly.”

Roger’s pleasant face lit up like a candle. “And of course you are his daughter Rachel,” he said. “Welcome to Collins House.”

Rachel smiled. “I’m certain we’re going to enjoy it here. Your sister is such a lovely person.”

“Unquestionably,” Roger said. “A little difficult to know, but solid gold. Would you care to join me in something, Miss Francis?”

“Rachel,” she corrected him coyly. “I could stand a martini. I’m so weary after our drive.” She let him lead her into the living room.

Victoria watched them go without surprise. It was exactly what she had expected. She had an idea Elizabeth would warn her brother to go slow as soon as she was aware of the situation, but she was still upstairs. Either she was talking with Henry Francis or had gone to her room for a while. The latter was more likely.

Feeling somewhat ill at ease, Victoria stood there alone for a moment, listening to Roger offering heady compliments to the redhead. Hearing Rachel’s sultry laughter in return, Victoria decided to take a stroll outside. She had prevailed on Elizabeth to have Matt Morgan do some work on the rear garden for the first time and there were now some nice beds of mixed flowers where weeds had flourished in earlier years.

It was to the garden she went now. She was disturbed by a return of the premonitions of trouble she had felt earlier. It was silly of her to think of Henry Francis and his daughters in terms of the sinister, but she could not shake off that impression. Were they destined to bring new tragedy to Collins House?

Another dusk was falling, a much more pleasant one than the previous night. Recalling her weird experience on the boat, she felt a small ripple of fear go through her. She paused by one of the more elaborate flower beds and
marveled at how well Matt Morgan had done as a gardener.

Victoria scanned the rear of the old mansion. This was the section that had been shut off for years except for the apartment once used by Ernest and now occupied by the Francis family. She let her eyes follow the ivy that clung to the dark building, noted the many small windows with their neglected curtains and dusty panes. A picture of utter desolation!

As she watched, her heart all at once skipped a beat. She stared in shocked fascination as she saw the curtains of one of the cobwebbed windows flutter and move back. For just an instant she caught a glimpse of a pretty, dark girl who looked down at her, an expression of sheer horror on her face. Then she vanished and from behind the closed windows there came an unearthly wailing scream! The curtains fell back in place and all was silent again as Victoria stood there dazed and terrified.

CHAPTER THREE

AFTER A LONG MOMENT of standing there in stark terror Victoria turned and ran toward the house. She did not stop until she had let herself in the main door and then stood weakly leaning against it, struggling for breath. Her heart pounding wildly from her fear and the hasty flight.

Elizabeth and her brother were standing near the bottom of the stairway as if in the midst of some argument. Seeing Victoria in her shaken condition, their attention was immediately centered on her.

Elizabeth came forward first, her attractive face showing concern. “Whatever is the matter?” she asked.

Victoria swallowed hard. “I saw a face.”

“A face?” The older woman’s tone was slightly querulous.

“At the window in the deserted wing,” Victoria said, speaking in a strained voice.

“Who did you see?” Roger asked.

Victoria shook her head. “I don’t know! Someone I never saw before. She was dark and attractive.”

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Roger and Elizabeth exchanged glances. She could tell they both doubted her.

“I did see a face,” she insisted. “I’m sure of it.”

Elizabeth took on her aloof manner, her face quite expressionless. “It’s possible you saw Rachel from one of the windows. Her father just called her upstairs to help with her sister.”

“No,” Victoria said. “It wasn’t Rachel! I’d have recognized her.”

“At such a distance and in the twilight,” Elizabeth said coldly, “how can you be so certain?”

“It was from the upper floor. A window on the floor above the apartment,” she insisted. “I know it wasn’t Rachel!”

Roger’s face was shadowed by annoyance. “You admit the face appeared in an upper window and yet you claim to have seen it so clearly in this fading light?”

“Yes,” she said. “And then it vanished and there was a scream!”

“But that’s preposterous,” Elizabeth declared. “The area of the house you mention is completely deserted except for the apartment. There’s not a living soul up there!”

Her words had a meaning for Victoria quite different from the older woman’s intention. She glanced at Roger. “Not a living soul,” Victoria repeated in an awed tone as she remembered his story of the ghostly figure materializing in the bushes a few nights ago.

He caught her glance and her meaning and his face went crimson. He rubbed his chin nervously. “Quite a different set of circumstances,” he muttered.

Elizabeth swung angrily to face her brother. “What other nonsense have you been up to?”

“Nothing,” he said uneasily. “Nothing at all.”

But his sister was not to be put off. “Victoria was referring to something. Something you must have told her. I’d like to know what you said.”

It was a moment of crisis and Victoria felt compelled to rescue Roger Collins from the unhappy position in which she’d placed him. She spoke up quickly, “We were discussing ghosts the other night. It was stupid of me to bring it up now. I’m sorry.”
Elizabeth turned her anger on her. “Indeed you should be!”

“Is something wrong?” The question was put to them in a mild voice from the stairs as Henry Francis slowly descended the final few steps. He came across to join them, the epitome of a retired gentleman in his smartly cut brown suit. In contrast to the others he showed an assured poise. The face that would have been handsome if it were not somewhat flat wore an inquiring smile.

Elizabeth was plainly startled at his sudden appearance and his question. With an attempt to dismiss the situation lightly she said, “Miss Winters has just come to us with a story of seeing a strange young woman’s face in one of the windows of the empty rooms. Of course it was an optical illusion caused by some trick of light.”

Henry Francis turned his penetrating gaze on Victoria. “You really believe you saw a face?”

“Yes.”

He glanced at the others and shrugged. “The chances are she did. As you know, my daughter Rachel is upstairs. It’s possible she may have glanced out of one of the windows.”

“It wasn’t Rachel,” Victoria protested. “This girl’s hair was dark and she had quite different features.”

The retired broker raised his eyebrows. “Indeed. You seem to have had a good look at her.”

“I was so startled the face is burned in my memory,” she said simply.

Elizabeth sighed. “I’m sure you’re allowing your imagination to run away with you.”

Henry Francis smiled sympathetically. “If it wasn’t Rachel you saw and there is no one else up there we must assume you were deceived by some freak of circumstance. People often think they’ve seen things when they haven’t.”

Victoria found herself wavering. “I don’t think it could have been that.”

The broker’s smile faded. “Are you suggesting it was a phantom?”

Roger, who had been silent since the appearance of Francis, spoke up. “Let’s not get off on that again,” he protested. “I’d say Victoria is overwrought following an
arduous day. We’re making entirely too much of this incident, and I’m certain she will agree and feel quite different about it all in the morning.”

Victoria realized she must admit defeat, at least for the moment. None of them were willing to believe her story. Roger had offered her a path of retreat; she might as well take it.

“I am weary,” she confessed. “And I do have a headache.”

Elizabeth was at once more sympathetic. “Of course. This has been an exciting day for us all. You should go up to bed at once.”

Henry Francis studied her with understanding. “I agree with Elizabeth,” he said. “You need rest. When my poor Dorothy first became ill, she also had severe headaches. Later they were combined with flights of fancy much wilder than this one of yours.”

Elizabeth asked, “When did you first decide she had a growth on the brain?”

“I didn’t realize it myself,” the man in brown said in his poised way. “But I am not a doctor. I took her to be examined. When they found her sense of balance was fading, they considered the condition warranted extensive X-rays. These showed the site of her brain tumor.”

Roger frowned. “Aren’t such operations extremely hazardous and generally fatal?”

“That’s correct in the majority of cases, I regret to say,” Henry Francis said sadly. “Fortunately in Dorothy’s case the growth was removed successfully. But the shock of the operation has left her—well, as you see her. It might take months for her to regain her faculties if she ever does.”

Elizabeth looked shocked. “There is the possibility, then, that she may always be as she is now?”

Henry Francis sighed. “Yes.” He turned his attention to Victoria. “In the face of such tragedy, I am sure you will forgive an older man for advising you to take great precautions to guard your health.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly and started toward the stairs, feeling humiliated at having betrayed herself by making such a scene.
Elizabeth led Henry into the living room after bidding her goodnight and Roger seemed ready to follow them. Then at the last moment he turned and hurried back into the hall to intercept Victoria before she had gone up more than a few steps.

His pleasant face showed concern. In a low voice he said, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to let you down.”

“You didn’t,” she assured him quietly.

He gave a nervous glance toward the living room to make sure the others had gone in. Then he said, “You know how Elizabeth is about certain things. The very mention of the word ghost upsets her.”

“It’s all right,” she told him wearily and prepared to go on upstairs.

Roger reached out and caught her arm to hold her back. In the same confidential tone he asked, “Did you ever see a snapshot of Stella Hastings?”

Mention of the dead girl’s name sent a chill through her. She shook her head. “No. Never.”

“I wondered,” he said unhappily. “Your description seemed to fit her so well.”

“If you’re suggesting I saw her picture some time and allowed my imagination to play tricks on me tonight, you’re wrong,” she said.

“Sorry,” he said, and let his eyes drop. “Better let it rest at that.” Murmuring, “Goodnight, Victoria,” he turned and followed the other two into the living room.

Victoria, watching him go, knew that he was badly upset. She continued on upstairs with this picture of his dejection vivid in her mind. It stayed with her long after she entered her own room and troubled her almost as much as the ghostly face she’d seen from the window. Roger had said the girl’s face was like that of Stella Hastings, who had gone to her death over the cliff on Widow’s Hill, and only last night he had soberly assured her he had seen Stella’s ghost appear in some wind-lashed bushes. What was the meaning of his obsession with the phantom of the dead girl?

Victoria paused in brushing her hair and stared at her wan face in the mirror with frightened eyes, the brush still
suspended in her hand. An alarming thought came racing to her mind. It was a badly concealed secret that most people felt Stella had been murdered rather than a suicide. There had been the awful time when Ernest had been suspected, until a much more likely suspect had been revealed. But suppose that other supposition, which had never been actually proved, had been wrong. Suppose the murder had been the work of another's hand? And that other person was Roger Collins!

Shocking as the idea was, it was not beyond the realm of the possible. Roger was the weakling of the family and was always pursuing young women. Perhaps Stella had resented his attentions and a quarrel had followed, a quarrel which had ended with her toppling from the cliff to her death. Because there had been a more likely suspect, no one had thought of Roger. But now he seemed to be haunted by visions of the unhappy Stella. Was it his conscience?

And if all this were so, could she have truly seen an unhappy spirit in this dusk? Had the wan, frightened face been that of the girl whose ghost still stalked the lonely corridors of Collins House, seeking refuge in those empty, cobwebbed rooms? Was the scream she had heard that of a human voice or the cry of Stella's tortured soul?

She lowered the brush and stared at the dresser cover. One nightmare possibility led to another. Even Elizabeth could have been the murderess. Many people still believed she had been responsible for her husband's disappearance. Perhaps Roger had discovered his sister's guilt and felt bound to cover up for her. It could be that his fixation about Stella's ghost was the beginning of his breaking up under the strain. She found this possibility more frightening than the first.

And she realized how dangerous her position was in this old mansion. Up until a few days ago she had believed all the tragedy surrounding Collins House had been relegated to the past. Her only concern had been whether she should marry Ernest without discovering the truth concerning her own identity. Now that problem faded into the background in the face of what was gradually being revealed to her.
She saw now that her premonitions had not been linked to the appearance of Henry Francis and his daughters. They had just happened on the scene by coincidence. This feeling of impending disaster that had stalked her for the past week had been based on something else. Perhaps a hidden instinct that had vainly tried to warn her of the dark cloud of murder that was slowly gathering over this lonely old mansion by the sea again.

It was clear to her now that the days and nights ahead might be filled with danger, that once again there could be violence and revelation of evil. She should be grateful for the presence of Henry Francis and his family in the house. Perhaps their being under the same roof would stave off the desperation of the murderer she now was firmly convinced lurked along the shadows of the old house. She must be cautious.

And as soon as possible she must discuss these unsettling fears with the one person in Collinsport upon whom she could depend, Will Grant. The thought of the earnest young man at once offered some comfort. She would talk it over with Will and he would be sure to advise her well. Lifting her chin firmly, she went across to her four-poster bed and slid between the sheets, but she waited a few moments before summoning the courage to snap out the bed lamp. And it was some time before she slept.

She was not sure what sounds first penetrated the depths of her sleeping mind. But all at once she sat up in bed, alerted by some warning noise, her eyes wide with fear as she stared through the darkness toward the door. Then, very distinctly, there was the creak of a floor board on the other side of the door as someone took a careful step in the corridor. And immediately she heard the doorknob turn, very slowly but with a firm pressure, as someone tested her door. Fortunately she had slipped the night bolt in place; whoever it was could not open it.

Scarcely daring to breathe, she waited and listened. After a moment there was another creaking of the floorboard and then the sound of measured footsteps retreating. When quiet had returned, with only the mournful wash of the waves to break the after-midnight silence, she still remained sitting up and apprehensive.
Now she was more certain than before that she had made herself a target for murder. Someone thought she knew too much, felt that she had seen more than she should and so wanted her out of the way. She could not cast off the notion that it all had to do with the mystery of Stella’s death. Was her shadowy enemy Roger? Elizabeth? Or could it even be Stella? Or someone else, someone she had not guessed, the person who had stalked her in the darkness of the cabin cruiser the other night?

Finally she slept again, and when she awoke it was another dull, foggy day. It seemed as if even the weather had fitted itself to the grim atmosphere of the old place. It had been a summer of almost continuous fog and rain. With David and Carolyn away she had no set duties. Her activity of the day depended a good deal on what Elizabeth suggested. So as soon as she had breakfasted, she sought out the older woman, who was sitting at a small desk in the rear study working on a list.

She raised her head and smiled faintly. “Do come in and sit down for a moment, Victoria,” she said. “I’m making up a list of things for you to pick up in the village.”

She sat in the nearest chair, heartened by the news that Elizabeth meant her to visit the village. It would give her a change from the forbidding atmosphere of the old house and she might have a chance to talk with Will Grant.

Elizabeth sat back and looked up at her. “That’s finished,” she said. “You may take Carolyn’s convertible in and get these things this morning.” She paused. “How are you feeling?”

“My headache has gone,” Victoria told her. “I’m much better, thanks.”

Elizabeth’s attractive face showed interest. “I’m afraid I was a bit short with you last night. But you were so badly upset, I felt you had to be brought to your senses.”

“I understand,” she said quietly.

“It was embarrassing to have our guests overhear such a scene,” Elizabeth went on, “though Henry Francis is a most understanding man.” She sighed. “As long as you’re feeling better, we shouldn’t dwell on it, I suppose. It might be a good idea to stop by the apartment and ask Mr. Francis if there is anything you can get for him when you are
in Collinsport.” Saying this, she passed the list across to Victoria.

As soon as she left Elizabeth, Victoria went upstairs and took the corridor that led to the rear of the old mansion and the apartment. She really didn’t want to, but she had no choice. It seemed to her that Elizabeth was over-solicitous where the widower and his two daughters were concerned.

The very air of this section of the ancient house had a heavy, dank smell. She only ventured into this deserted wing when it was absolutely necessary. At last she found herself in the semi-darkness of the hallways before the solid wooden door of the apartment. She knocked gently and waited. After what seemed an endless wait she heard soft footsteps approaching. A moment later, the bolt was slid back and the door opened a small distance. In the dim light on the other side she saw Rachel standing with her hand resting on the doorknob.

“Yes?” The redhead’s tone was none too friendly.

“Mrs. Stoddard sent me,” Victoria explained quickly. “I’m going to the village to do some errands and she wondered if you might need something.”

“I don’t think so,” Rachel said curtly. She seemed ready to close the door.

But at that moment Henry Francis called out from the living room of the apartment, “Who is it?”

Rachel turned. “It’s Miss Winters, the governess. She wants to know if we need anything from the village. She’s going in.”

“Have her come inside a moment,” Henry Francis said in a genial voice.

Looking none too happy, Rachel opened the door wider. “He wants to see you,” she said with a hint of annoyance in her husky voice.

Henry, immaculate as usual in dark trousers and a fawn sports jacket, stood in the center of the small living room to greet her. “You’re looking much better this morning, Miss Winters,” he said.

“I feel very well,” she told him.

His flat, almost handsome face took on an amused
smile. "I’m afraid Elizabeth was much too concerned about your scare last night."

"I’m sorry to have upset everyone," Victoria said.

"Perfectly understandable," Henry assured her suavely. He always appeared so much at ease, yet Victoria continually felt there was an underlying tension beneath the apparent poise. "This is a rather grim house. Rachel isn’t happy about our coming here at all. Isn’t that true, darling?"

Rachel Francis had followed Victoria into the living room and was standing in the background with a rather sullen expression. "I can think of a lot of places I’d rather be," she said in her throaty tone.

He laughed good-naturedly and ran a hand through his graying curly hair. "You mustn’t pay any attention to Rachel," he warned her. "She is rarely satisfied with anything."

To change the subject Victoria asked, "How is your Dorothy reacting to her new surroundings?"

Henry Francis at once became serious. "As well as can be expected," he said. "Of course she is only dimly aware of what is going on around her." The piercing eyes met hers. "Do come in and say good morning to her."

Victoria hesitated. "Might it upset her?"

"On the contrary," the girl’s father said. "I think it is good for her to see strangers occasionally. Not that I want her exposed to the view of the curious. That was my chief reason for coming here." Without allowing her a chance to protest, he led the way to the largest of the apartment’s bedrooms.

When Victoria entered the room of the ailing girl she again experienced a strange feeling of revulsion. It puzzled her because she did not normally have this feeling towards invalids. Dorothy Francis sat huddled and motionless in the wheelchair as before. It was turned toward the window, although the window had not been opened. Victoria felt it should have been. The air in the room was stale and needed changing.

"It is hard to see her like this," Henry Francis said sadly, a hand on the back of the wheelchair. "But the
doctors have told us we must be patient. She may not emerge from this state for some time.”

Victoria tried not to let her gaze rest too long on the invalid since she knew how sensitive her father was concerning her. But she did note the dishevelled ash-blond hair, the relaxed and expressionless face and the huge black glasses whose dark lens gave no hint of the eyes behind them, or if they were open or closed. She was about to look away when she was startled to observe a large horrid-looking spider crawling slowly up the front of the girl’s pink dressing gown, slowly making its way to the neckline and the flesh beyond. Stifling a gasp of alarm, she turned to Rachel, who had followed them into the bedroom.

“There’s a spider on her robe,” she said, unable to hide the shock and repugnance in her tone.

Rachel’s hard, pretty face showed utter disdain. “It’s not going to hurt her,” she said, making no move to brush the crawling insect off the sick girl.

“How dare you be so unfeeling of your sister,” Henry Francis said in a voice so harsh that Victoria was aware of his being badly upset. He leaned forward and himself flicked the spider to the floor, where he stepped on it savagely. “It seems to me your nursing training did little to soften your nature. It hardened it, if anything.”

“Why make such a fuss?” Rachel asked, looking shame-faced. “I would have taken care of it.”

“I should hope so.” Henry Francis still sounded angry. “Because Dorothy has been ill so long is no excuse for us to neglect her.” He led Victoria back to the living room again, saying, “I’m sorry to have exposed you to this unpleasantness. Rachel is young and she’s bitter because she has been tied down so by Dorothy’s illness.”

Victoria could not shake off the feeling of uneasiness that had been with her from the moment she’d entered the place. Now she was anxious to get away from the apartment and these unhappy people.

She said, “I should be starting for the village. Is there anything you want?”

Henry surprised her by saying, “It so happens I’d like to go to the village myself. I have some phone calls to
take care of and also I'd like to do some personal shopping. I could use you to guide me. Instead of taking your car, why not come along with me?"

"If you like," she said, not having expected this. "It makes no difference."

So she found herself a passenger in Henry Francis' car as they made the drive through the woods and along the main highway to the village. Although he chatted continually during the drive, Victoria felt he was constantly on edge, rather than ever relaxing. He told of his daughters' childhood and of his wife's lingering illness and death, finishing with an account of Dorothy's tragic sickness.

He looked away from the wheel a moment to assure her, "You mustn't think Rachel doesn't love her sister. She does. But she is high-strung, and Dorothy's illness has gone on so long."

"I understand," she said quietly, but she knew that she didn't. She couldn't quite get any of the trio in proper focus. Certainly Victoria was forming a dislike for the flashily pretty Rachel with her curt manner. She could not blot out the memory of that revolting spider crawling over the helpless invalid while her sister stood unconcernedly by.

They reached the village with its hilly main street and Victoria was glad to have Henry Francis go off on his own, leaving her to do as she liked. She first made her way to the Collins General Store and gave her list to one of the clerks, requesting that she gather the various items and have them ready to pick up on her return. Normally she enjoyed doing the shopping herself in the large store that extended far back from the street with an elevated office at one end and warehouses tacked on beyond that point. The cool, high-ceilinged store with its heavily stocked counters and shelves reaching to the ceiling with every sort of merchandise had been a continual wonder to her. She liked the pungent smell of its mixed wares and she enjoyed sampling the cheese and pickles that were sold in the bulk. But today she had no time to waste. She wanted to talk with Will Grant in his office and she had promised to meet Henry Francis in forty-five minutes.

Leaving the store, she made her way up the narrow
street to the new wooden building that housed a barber shop on the lower floor and Will Grant’s office above it.

She soon found herself entering the open door of Will Grant’s outside office, which served as a waiting room. His stenographer was apparently out; the office was deserted. But from the inner office she could hear Will’s familiar voice and that of another man in what seemed an earnest discussion. She took a chair and hoped she wouldn’t have to wait long.

She didn’t. A few minutes later the door opened and Will showed his client out. Victoria stood up, surprised to see that it was Burke Devlin who had been talking to the young lawyer.

Devlin paused to nod to her. He was an impressive-looking man who had the air of one used to having his commands carried out promptly. He asked, “How is Mrs. Stoddard?”

“Very well,” Victoria told him.

“I must go out and visit her one day soon,” Burke Devlin said. Victoria recalled that he had said the same thing many times before but he never had.

“I’m sure she would be glad to see you,” Victoria assured him.

The big man smiled dourly. “Give her my regards,” he said, and with a parting word to Will he went on out.

When Will returned, he smiled and said, “This is an unexpected pleasure. Come on inside.”

She followed him into the inner office and took a chair. “I was afraid you might be busy for a long time,” she said nervously. “And I have to meet Mr. Francis in a little while. He drove me in to do some errands.”

Will sat behind his desk, his pleasant face perplexed. “I can’t imagine what got into Elizabeth,” he said. “I was completely surprised when Francis came and told me he wouldn’t be renting Ernest’s house as Elizabeth was letting him have the apartment.”

Victoria smiled faintly. “I believe they’ve been friends since college days. She seems to think a great deal of him.”

“Not that it will matter much to Ernest that he lost the rental,” Will went on. “And Francis isn’t certain how long
he’ll remain here anyway. Still, I hardly expected Elizabeth to open her door to three relative strangers.” He hesitated. “What do you make of them?”

“The daughter, Dorothy, is pathetic,” she said. “I feel sorry for her. But I can’t decide about her sister or father.”

Will Grant nodded. “I know what you mean. I’d hardly call Francis my favorite sort of person. Of course, he’s been under a great strain for some time. I suppose one should make allowances.”

“I suppose so.” Victoria then plunged into the real purpose of her visit and told him of the strange happenings at Collins House since she had last seen him.

Will listened with a small frown and finally said, “And you’re quite certain you did see this face at the window?”

“There’s no question of it.”

“You have been upset,” he reminded her. “You could have been mistaken.”

“No.” she insisted.

He clasped his hands on the desk and studied her with grave eyes. “Even if you did see someone, there is no reason to jump to the conclusion that it has any great significance. There may be some simple explanation. You shouldn’t automatically assume you are in danger or that Elizabeth and Roger might possibly have done something criminal.”

“But they have denied everything so,” she said. “And it couldn’t have been a servant or a stranger. We have no servants but Matt Morgan and how would a stranger get in that deserted part of the house?”

“I can’t tell you,” Will admitted. His eyes met her. “You mention Stella. Did you ever see her picture?”

“Never.”

Without replying, he opened a drawer on the right of his desk and drew out a file. From it he selected a snapshot, which he held out to her. She gasped. It was the same face she had seen in the window.
CHAPTER FOUR

“That’s her!” she exclaimed, staring at the snapshot. “Highly unlikely,” he reminded her, “since Stella Hastings has been dead and buried for nearly two years.”

Victoria lifted fear-stricken eyes to meet his. “I can’t help it,” she told him. “This is the face I saw last night.”

Will Grant looked bemused. He took back the snapshot and studied it for a moment himself. “I’ve had this since her death,” he said. “You know how much trouble there was at the time.”

“Could there be a sister? Someone who resembles her?”

He put the snapshot back in the file and returned it to the drawer. He said, “Stella was an only child. There were no sisters.”

She stared at him. “How can you explain it?”

“I still think you imagined seeing that face,” he told her. “There must be other snapshots of Stella at the house. Ernest must have had some. My guess is he showed one to you long enough ago for you to have forgotten about it. And when you had this scare last night, you delved her face up from your subconscious.”

Victoria slumped back in her chair. “I’d hoped that you would help me.”

The young lawyer looked unhappy. “Believe me, I want to,” he said. “But I can’t encourage you in wild fancies that lead to only two possible conclusions, that a dead girl is still alive or that you’ve seen a ghost.”

“What about the danger to my life?”

“I think you’re allowing your imagination to work overtime. Roger was probably right when he suggested it was some petty thief from the village on his boat. And as for the footsteps in the corridor and the hand trying your door, put that down to midnight nerves or a nightmare.”

Victoria’s smile was somewhat bitter. “So I’m just to forget anything happened?”

“You’d be better off if you could.”

“I see,” she said. Then she got up. “I’m sorry to have taken so much of your time, Will.”
He rose hastily and crossed over to her. “Now you’re angry,” he said, studying her with troubled eyes.
“I had hoped you’d be more helpful,” Victoria said reproachfully, knowing she’d said much the same thing already.
Will sighed. “I have given you what I think is good advice. I’m not surprised that living at Collins House has left you nervous. It’s perfectly understandable. But the answer isn’t to tell you things that will make you even more nervous.”
“But it would be wise to consider facts.”
“My legal mind won’t accept the face of a dead girl in a window as a fact,” Will said.
“You’d believe me if you’d been there to see it yourself.”
“Perhaps,” he said, smiling gently. “Which proves you should invite me over more often.”
“It’s not a joke, Will.” Her eyes were anxious. “I’m going to write Ernest and tell him what I saw. What’s been going on.”
“Do you think that is wise?”
“Why shouldn’t I?”
“Ernest is trying to forget the past. And Stella is part of those bitter memories. I’d hardly think you’d want to bring all this up again for him.”
She saw what he meant. Ernest might even feel he had to return at once and she knew how this could complicate matters. “Perhaps you’re right. I’ll not write him.”
Will now held her by the arms and he looked down at her with grave eyes. “You’ll try to put this entire business out of your mind?”
Meeting his earnest gaze, she said, “I’ll try.”
“I’ll count on that,” Will said quietly as he drew her close for a kiss. The young lawyer’s arms gave her a feeling of security and she wished that she could always have him near.
As he released her she shuddered. “I’m frightened, Will. I’m afraid to go back there.”
He kept an arm around her and gave her a tolerant smile. “Just try to relax and talk some with the visitors. I should think having some new faces in the house would help.”
“It should,” she agreed. “But I’m not certain that it does.” She gave him a look of appeal. “Please come out there soon.”

“Depend on that,” he said, escorting her to the door. “Thanks for giving me so much time,” she said, hesitating at the head of the steps.

Will Grant smiled at her. “It was well invested. I seldom get a kiss during office hours.”

She blushed and laughed. “I wish I could be as casual about all this as you are,” she told him.

“I don’t want you worrying,” he said. “And give my regards to Francis.”

So she left Will’s office with nothing solved and her plans still unsettled. Henry Francis was standing by his car, looking rather impatient, when she walked down the hill. She went into the store and had one of the clerks carry out the carton with Elizabeth’s order and place it on the back seat of the Francis car. Then they began the journey back to the house.

She could tell that Francis was not in as jovial a humor as when they had first driven to the village. He seemed tense and replied vaguely to her talk as if he were preoccupied. Victoria wondered what could have happened to change his mood so.

“You were up to the lawyer’s office,” he said in almost an accusing tone.

She stared at his tense profile in surprise. “Yes. He sent you his regards.”

“Thoughtful of him,” Henry Francis said coldly. “I take it you and he are close friends.”

They had turned off the main highway and were heading along the narrow wooded road that led directly to the estate now. She said, “He is one of my closest friends in the village.”

His piercing eyes flashed her way a moment. “Did you tell him about last night?”

“Last night?”

“Surely you’ve not forgotten,” Henry Francis said irritably. “The face you thought you saw in the window.”

Victoria wondered with surprise why he was bringing
this up. It couldn’t possibly concern him. She said, “Yes, I told him.”

“What did he think?”

“He seemed to feel I’d let my nerves run away with me.”

Keeping his eyes on the road ahead, he nodded approvingly. “In other words, he had the same attitude as everyone else.”

“Just about.”

“How do you feel now? Are you still so certain?”

She shrugged. “Does it matter? I mean, since no one will listen to me.”

They were emerging from the wooded section and now the hulking outline of the dark old mansion rose directly ahead of them against the drab midday sky.

Francis glanced at her quickly. “You still haven’t changed your mind. You still believe you saw someone.”

“I do,” she admitted quietly.

He gave his full attention to guiding the car up the gravel roadway. “I don’t blame you for standing by your convictions,” he said. “But I don’t think you’ll gain much by continuing to repeat your story. It seems to bother Elizabeth particularly. Don’t you agree it would be wiser to keep your thoughts on the subject to yourself?”

Victoria was impressed by his concern for Elizabeth. “I’m sure you’re right,” she said. “Please drive around to the rear door. I’ll want Matt to carry in the carton for me.”

Mr. Francis did as she asked. She thanked him for the drive and then went across to the garage to summon Matt. The big man was busy at his workbench when she approached him and told him about the box of provisions.

Putting down the file he’d been using on some intricate piece of machinery in the vise at the edge of his bench, he scowled at her. “You want me to take it in right now?”

“If you don’t mind,” she said. “Mr. Francis will want to move his car later. She added with a smile, “You’ve done an excellent job with the rear garden, Matt.”

He gave her a suspicious glance. “Did the Missus tell you that?”

“Mrs. Stoddard has said she’s very pleased,” Victoria
assured him. "And so am I. I had suggested we try some flowers there this season."

"Only means more work for me!" the big man said as he stalked out to take care of the carton.

Henry Francis at once went up to his apartment and remained there for most of the rest of the day. Rachel, coming down after lunch, met Roger and they both went off in his car. Victoria’s dislike for the redhead continued to grow and she was sure Rachel was out to lead Roger a merry chase. Elizabeth had noted the friendship between them as well and was not looking pleased.

She told Victoria, "I should think she’d spend more time taking care of her poor sister instead of putting all the burden on her father."

"I suppose she thought he had the morning."

"Just the same, I don’t believe she cares whether Dorothy lives or dies. It would likely please her to see the poor creature out of the way."

"I saw Burke Devlin in town today," Victoria said, changing the subject.

Elizabeth’s attractive face clouded. "I had no idea he was still in Collinsport."

"I believe he did leave for a while. But he’s back now. He asked to be remembered to you."

"Really?" The older woman’s voice held a certain wariness.

Victoria was perplexed at Elizabeth’s reaction. Might Devlin have some connection with those tragic events of long ago? Or with Elizabeth’s self-enforced imprisonment in the house for so many years? "He spoke of coming out to visit you one day."

Elizabeth’s mouth twisted in a sarcastic smile. "Tell him to come anytime. I'm always home to greet visitors." In another swift change of mood she asked almost anxiously, "Did you tell him about Mr. Francis and his daughters being here?"

Victoria looked surprised. "No. I was only speaking with him a moment. And I wouldn't expect that to interest him in any case."

Elizabeth relaxed. "You are quite right," she said. "Tell Burke Devlin nothing. Even if he questions you. And be

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especially careful not to say anything concerning Roger. Those two are not good friends.”
“I know that.”
“It wasn’t always so,” the mistress of Collins House went on. “But that is how it is now. And I doubt if there will be any change.” She paused. “The weather seems to be improving. You should go out and get some fresh air. I won’t need you for a while.”

Moving to the front window of the living room, Victoria saw that the sun was indeed burning through the rolling waves of thick fog. She went out on the front steps and found the air warm. Because it was so much pleasanter, she decided to take a walk along the footpath that followed the cliffs.

She strolled at a leisurely pace and by the time she had reached the high point overlooking the rocky beach the sun had broken through in full strength. She stood luxuriating in its warmth and staring out at the ocean. For a moment she was completely lost in her enjoyment.

The sound of a footstep close behind her snapped her back into reality. She turned with a surprised expression to find herself facing a smiling young man—one whom she recognized at once from Nora’s description.

She found herself saying, “You’re Paul Caine!”

Now it was the young man’s turn to look surprised. He said, “Either you’re psychic or somebody has been doing some talking about me.”

Victoria laughed. “Somebody’s been talking. I heard about you from my friend Nora. She works in one of the village gift shops and sold you some art supplies.” She liked his appearance. His freckled face was friendly beneath his red crew-cut, and he had a ready smile. He wore dark madras shorts and a white shirt open at the neck and he carried an easel and a brief case.

“I remember her,” he acknowledged. “Very pleasant girl. Really pretty. Looks a lot like you!”

She enjoyed the deftly phrased compliment. “How did you find your way here?” she asked.

He glanced back. “I came along the cliffs. It’s a short-cut Nora told me about. I’ve been here before when the weather was decent. We haven’t had much sun lately.”
"Are you going to do a painting from up here?" she asked.

He stared around him appraisingly. "I'm thinking about it." He glanced at her. "I don't mean to do the ocean. I'm fed up doing seascapes. I thought a study of the house from here would be interesting."

She frowned. "You don't mean it! It's such an ugly old place."

He turned to study Collins House. "I don't know," he said. "It represents a period. Has a kind of grandeur."

Victoria, following his gaze, was forced to admit he was right. The rambling old building surely had character, though for her it suggested tragedy and great loneliness. She said, "I can't see it objectively, but I guess I know what you mean."

The young man's eyes narrowed as he continued to stare at the mansion and the area around it. "That old house has withstood a lot of storms."

"It's more than a century old."

He turned to her with a grin. "But you haven't lived here quite that long?"

She laughed. "I've been here less than a year."

"Probably long enough. A crazy crowd, this Collins family, I mean."

Victoria found herself on guard. "Why do you say that?"

He shrugged. "It's what I've heard. Some old woman hasn't been outside the house for nearly twenty years. And there've been a couple of mysterious deaths up here as well."

"You've been hearing village gossip," Victoria said. "You shouldn't pay any attention to it."

His blue eyes searched her face. "You ought to know all about it. Don't you agree they're a queer bunch?"

"The Collins family are fine people," she said. "And I wouldn't be too glib about them if I were you. After all, you happen to be trespassing on their property at this very moment."

His eyes twinkled. "You're not going to tell them, I hope."

"They can see you from the house."

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He looked a little less sure of himself. "You're right," he said. "I'd forgotten about that. I've never come this way before. I've always stayed down by the wharf."

"You'd be safer down there," she said.

He smiled. "I suppose so. I hear they've got a wild man caretaker, name of Matt Morgan. Is he liable to come growling after me any moment?"

"I think that depends on you—but I'm not certain Mrs. Stoddard would approve of your doing a painting of Collins House."

Paul Caine raised his eyebrows. "Why not?"

"She's very retiring, for one thing," Victoria said. "She doesn't like to have strangers around. And I doubt if it would help even if you were to ask her permission."

A slight change came in the young man's manner. He eyed her coolly. "She can't always be so fussy about strangers. She has guests in the house now."

Victoria was startled. "How do you know that?"

"How did you find out my name?"

"You mean Nora told you?"

"I think it was her," he said. "Sure, she was the one who mentioned it. Said some old duffer and his daughters had come to pay a visit here."

She was still not convinced that he'd gotten his information from Nora. It struck her that perhaps this young artist was not what he pretended to be, that he was merely playing a role for her benefit. Immediately she felt annoyed at herself. She seemed to find something sinister about everybody these days.

"We do have company at the house," she admitted.

Paul Caine grinned at her. "That redhead is sure something!"

"You don't miss much!"

"No one is apt to miss her."

She said, "Are you going to set up your easel here?"

He shrugged. "I was. But after what you've told me, maybe I'd better not."

Victoria eyed him with amusement. "You don't look like a retiring person and you certainly don't talk like one. I'm surprised you aren't willing to stay and take your chances."

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“I think that’s just what I’ll do,” Paul Caine said, sliding the strap holding his easel from his shoulder. “If the old lady decides she doesn’t want me around, I can argue it out with her.”

She smiled. “I’ll try and put in a good word for you. And incidentally, she is not an old lady. She’s a very attractive woman. In fact, I think I prefer her type of beauty to your Rachel’s.”

“No kidding?” He was busy getting the easel set up in position for the best view of the house.

Victoria turned to go back. “Good luck,” she said. “I’ll be interested in seeing how it turns out.”

“That won’t be hard. All you have to do is date me and I’ll give you the painting.”

She lifted her shapely eyebrows. “What a generous offer! Your art can’t pay you much if you make a habit of giving away your work.”

Paul Caine smiled. “This is a special offer.”

“Well,” she said, “I’ll have to think it over.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense,” he warned her. “It’ll interfere with my work.”

“I wouldn’t want to be guilty of that.”

“Well, then the problem is solved,” he said. “Suppose I come by in my car tomorrow night and pick you up.”

Victoria laughed. “Don’t rush me! Besides, I doubt if you’ll have the painting done so soon.”

“I’ll have the best part finished,” he promised. “What about it? Is it a date?”

She was already a few feet away from him and now she smiled back over her shoulder. “I’ll think about it.”

He was getting ready to paint when she looked back a second time. He waved and she returned it. Nora’s description of the brash young man had been reasonably accurate, but she decided she liked him in spite of his boldness. She wondered if he really had any talent. So many of the summer artists who flocked around the coastal towns had no ability at all.

When she reached the house she found Elizabeth waiting for her in the foyer. The lovely mistress of Collins House was looking her most striking in a dark green,
beautifully simple dress. But Victoria could see she was somewhat concerned.

"Who is that young man up on the cliff?" she asked at once.

"His name is Paul Caine," Victoria said. "He's a friend of Nora's and she told him she thought it would be all right to come here. He's interested in doing a painting of the house."

Elizabeth showed disbelief. "I can't imagine why!"

"He considers it an interesting example of its period," Victoria told her, hoping she would not decide to send him away. "He seems very nice."

The older woman eyed her sharply. "Indeed," she said. "You know I don't encourage trespassers."

"I explained that to him," she said. "But I do think his case is a little different."

Elizabeth glanced toward the window. "I suppose since he is here we may as well let him stay. But if you should be speaking with him again, don't encourage him to return."

"Very well," Victoria said meekly, secretly delighted to have won this small concession from the stern older woman.

"I'm glad you've come back," Elizabeth went on. "I want to go down to the cellar and look in one of my old trunks. There are some pictures taken when Henry Francis and I were in college together. I'd like to find them. And it's such a nuisance with the older section of the cellar not being wired. I want you to come along and hold the flashlight while I try to locate the trunk."

"I'll be glad to," Victoria said. "Where is the flashlight?"

"It should be in the kitchen on the shelf above the sink," Elizabeth told her.

Victoria found it just where the older woman had said, but the batteries were weak. The faint beam of light from it would be valueless. She hurried back to Elizabeth with the news.

She sighed. "Something else I should have put on the list today," she said. "I imagine Morgan has a flashlight, but no need to bother him. We can use a candle instead."
So a few minutes later Victoria found herself descending the narrow stone steps to the old section of the cellar in company with Elizabeth. The mistress of Collins House went ahead leading the way.

“I haven’t been down to look at these trunks in ages,” she admitted as they reached the earthen floor of the dark cellar. “It’s hard to say what things will be like.”

She led the way through a low door. Victoria followed, holding the flickering candle high. Their shadows were grotesquely silhouetted against the grimy, dank walls. Down here they were transported to another era and she suddenly felt the faint stirrings of fear that had so often come to her in the old mansion.

Elizabeth pulled open another door that seemed swollen shut with the dampness and they made their way into a room that was lined with old-fashioned trunks of every size and design. The air smelled of mildew and had a strange chill to it. The candle flickered in a draft and Victoria glanced at it, worried that it might be snuffed out and leave them in this eerie darkness.

Elizabeth, unaware of her concern, stood staring at the various trunks with a fretful expression. She said, “There are so many of them. It always takes me a moment to decide which one I want.”

She waited for the older woman to decide, hoping it would be soon. Glancing up at the low ceiling, she was startled to see a huge spider web only a few inches from her head. She drew back in alarm, the memory of that spider creeping across Dorothy again crossing her mind.

Elizabeth glanced around at her in surprise. “What is it?”

Victoria indicated the spider web. “I almost caught my hair in it,” she said.

The older woman’s lovely face looked strangely different in the flickering glow of the candle flame. She seemed younger and her expression almost crafty. She spoke with scorn. “Surely a woman of your age isn’t afraid of spiders?”

“Not really,” she said, wanting to explain what had happened earlier in the day, but knowing this was not the place for long explanations.
Elizabeth returned to scrutinize the trunks again. "In this corner, I'm certain," she said. She took a few steps to the right and added, "Bring the candle closer."

Victoria followed warily and shifted the candle to her other hand as Elizabeth bent down on her knees to fit a large key into one of the older trunks. She could see that its metal work was rusted and there was mold at the back, where it rested against the earthen wall. Elizabeth worked with the key but did not seem to be able to get the lock to open.

"Maybe we should get Matt Morgan to help," Victoria suggested.

"I don't want Morgan down here," Elizabeth said sharply. It was plain her patience was fast running out and her nerves were on edge. "Hold the candle closer, please!"

She did so. "Is that better?"

"We'll see," Elizabeth said grimly, rattling the key in the trunk lock again.

Victoria thought she heard a movement in the background and turned quickly to scan the blackness beyond the feeble glow of the candle. She could see nothing and could only hope it was another case of her nerves causing her to imagine things.

"There! That's done it." Elizabeth swung the trunk lid open. A new whiff of stale dampness assailed their nostrils.

Victoria held the candle low now, so the contents of the trunk stood out clearly. It was filled with books and papers. "Is it the right one?"

"Yes," Elizabeth said vaguely, rummaging through the trunk. "But the dampness is ruining everything. I doubt if I'll find what I want." She lifted out several books, returning at once to the trunk's shadowy interior.

"You should really bring some of these upstairs," Victoria said. "At least it wouldn't be so damp."

The older woman was frowning as she continued her search. "I suppose so. But then, no one really cares about most of the things that are here. I'm sure they won't interest Carolyn. I might as well dispose of many of these trunks."

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Victoria sighed. She hoped the other woman would find whatever she was looking for and they could then be on their way.

"Here we are!" Elizabeth spoke in a happy voice and held up a shabby snapshot album. "It doesn't look like much, but all my teen-age and college pictures are in it."

"I'm glad you found it," Victoria said sincerely as Elizabeth closed the lid of the trunk and locked it once more.

Rising, she said, "I must come down again and sort things over. It's time I decided what should be kept and what discarded." She moved to the middle of the trunk-filled room and glanced about her. Then she suddenly gasped, a hand raised to her mouth.

Victoria moved closer to her. "Is something wrong?"

Elizabeth moved ahead slowly. "Bring the candle over this way," she said in a taut voice.

She did so and for the first time saw what had upset Elizabeth. One of the trunks in this far corner had been opened and its contents strewn about. "Someone must have been down here recently."

The older woman nodded. "Yes." Her reply was little more than a whisper. She stared at the disorder of the opened trunk again with a weird fascination.

"Is it one of your trunks?" Victoria asked.

"No."

"What were they after?" Victoria wondered.

"I can't imagine," Elizabeth said in a strained voice. "You see, this is the trunk that Stella Hastings had here. I packed her things in it and a bag after her death. Her parents came and got the bag. They were supposed to have sent for the trunk, but they never did. So I had it brought down here." She paused. "Who would want any of Stella's things?" She turned to Victoria, her lovely features shadowed with the horror of her thoughts.

"Stella's things," Victoria repeated in a whisper as she recalled the wan face she had seen in that upstairs window and the terrifying scream she'd heard immediately afterward.
CHAPTER FIVE

Even after they left the cellar and came upstairs, Elizabeth was still obviously shaken by her discovery of the ransacked trunk. Almost at once she went on up to her own room, the snapshot album under her arm.

Left alone in the living room, Victoria considered the eerie experience and wondered what it signified. Will Grant had told her to put Stella and all the tragedy associated with the dead girl out of her mind, but this was becoming increasingly difficult to do. This new discovery had increased her apprehensions.

She moved to the window to see if Paul Caine was still out on the cliff and saw that he had left. Her brief meeting with the young artist had been pleasant, and she thought it might do no harm to see him again. Perhaps he and Nora would join Will Grant and her for a double date. During the summer there were more places to go. And if they hadn’t planned anything special, there was always the Blue Whale.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone coming downstairs. A moment later Henry Francis appeared in the doorway. She saw at once that he was irate.

“Hasn’t Rachel come back yet?” he demanded.

She took a few steps toward him. “I don’t believe so.”

“She has no right to stay away so long,” he fumed.

“She knows her sister needs attention. I had planned to take her out in the garden for a short time and I can’t possibly do it alone.”

Victoria said, “Let me help you.”

He hesitated. “I don’t want to impose on you.”

“I’m not doing anything,” she said. “I’d be glad to help in any way. If you’ll just tell me.”

She went upstairs with him and along the shadowy corridor. He opened the door to the apartment and she followed him in. He led her directly to Dorothy’s bedroom with an urgency in his stride that made her wonder. Again
as she entered the room she was appalled at the staleness of the air and found it hard to understand why a window wasn’t occasionally opened. Dorothy Francis lay back in the wheelchair, her mouth open and her breath coming laboriously in an odd, snoring fashion.

Victoria glanced from the ash-blond girl to her father and with genuine concern asked, “Are you sure she’s all right?”

He nodded irritably, but she could see that he was upset. Her eyes wandered to the dresser, where a hypodermic needle was resting. Noticing her startled expression, Francis was quick to reassure her.

“Because Rachel hadn’t come back, I was forced to give her a needle myself,” he said. She saw the beads of perspiration at his temples as he spoke. “I’m not used to doing it. She requires them several times a day. It is possible I gave her too strong a dose. I’m sure she’d be better if we got her outside.”

Victoria looked at the stricken girl again and made no attempt to conceal her alarm. “There is a doctor in Collinsport. Hadn’t we better get him to come out here?”

“No,” Henry Francis said emphatically. “Even if I’ve been over-generous with the dose, it will do no harm. I would like to get her in the open and we’re only losing time talking. I’ll carry her when we reach the stairs.” Without waiting for any comment from Victoria, he quickly grasped the wheelchair and started to wheel it out of the room.

At the head of the stairs, he took his daughter in his arms and Victoria took the wheelchair down. He returned Dorothy to the wheelchair again and tucked the blanket around her before taking her outdoors. She was slumped back in the chair and apparently still having trouble breathing. Victoria accompanied them thinking she might be needed again and certain that Francis was making a serious error in not calling the doctor for help in what appeared to be an emergency.

Mr. Francis was plainly more troubled than he would admit. He wheeled his daughter out to the rear garden and from time to time bent over to examine her. After what seemed an age, but was probably only a few min-
utes, he glanced up from one of his examinations with relief showing in his face. “She’s better,” he announced. “Her breathing is much easier now.”

“I’m glad,” she said, and noticed it was true. The girl in the wheelchair was sitting up in a more normal fashion and the gasping sounds had ceased.

Henry Francis rapidly regained his composure. “She’ll be all right,” he said, as if to convince himself. “It was the air she needed.”

It was now a warm, sunny day and Victoria was shocked to see that he had provided no cover for the girl’s head. The ash-blond hair was exposed to the sun and she was sure this could not be safe for anyone recovering from a delicate brain operation.

“She has nothing to protect her head,” she said.

He paused and stared down at the motionless Dorothy. “Of course!” he said. “Stupid of me! I forgot in my rush. And then, too, I depend on Rachel to take care of such things.”

Victoria drew a scarf from her own pocket. “This might do,” she said.

“Excellent!” Henry Francis said. “Thank you.” He covered his daughter’s head and tied the scarf loosely under her chin. Dorothy showed no sign of realizing what was going on. He turned to Victoria with a smile, “I’m deeply indebted to you. When Rachel returns I’m going to have a serious talk with her. I can’t condone her running off like this.”

“I suppose she was eager for a change,” she suggested in a weak attempt at defending the redhead.

“She knows how I depend on her,” he said grimly and continued to stroll along pushing the wheelchair. They came to the shade of several tall pines and he stopped and turned to Victoria.

“In my worry I’d almost forgotten,” he said. “There is something I want to discuss with you. Something rather urgent.”

Victoria was startled by the quick change in his manner. He was all assurance again now, his penetrating eyes fixed on her. “What is it?”

“Earlier in the afternoon I looked out the window and
saw you talking to a young man on the footpath by the cliff.”

“Yes,” she said, puzzled.

“Do you know him?”

“Yes, I do,” she said, even more perplexed.

“You know him well?”

She shook her head. “Not well. He’s a newcomer to the area.”

A strange expression crossed the middle-aged man’s face. “I thought so,” he said quietly.

“His name is Paul Caine,” Victoria went on. “I know him through a friend of mine who works in a shop that sells art supplies, among other things. He’s here to do some painting.”

“Is that what he claims?” There was a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

Victoria stared at him. “You sound as if you think he hasn’t told the truth about himself.”

Henry Francis smiled grimly. “That’s exactly what I think.”

It was an extraordinary statement. Paul Caine had struck her as a normal, pleasant young man with no suggestion of guile. And yet, now that she remembered, he had asked a lot of questions about the people in the house.

“Why should he lie to me?” she asked.

The almost-handsome face of Henry Francis wore a veiled expression as he said, “That is something I mean to find out. I got a close look at him when he came by the house a little while ago. And I’m sure I’ve seen him before.”

“Where?”

“In Philadelphia, where I lived with my daughters for a time—before Dorothy became ill. I never met him. But I’m sure he’s the same one who used to wait outside our apartment building, trying to speak to Rachel.”

Victoria’s face showed her disbelief. “Are you certain?”

“I’d swear it was him. I had to call in the police to keep him from bothering Rachel. We left the city not long afterward.”

“And you never heard from him again?”

“No,” he said, a thoughtful look on his lined face. “But
I should mention that we did receive some rather frightening news from friends of ours in Philadelphia a few months later. There was a series of murders. All young women. And this fellow I’ve mentioned was one of those called in as a suspect.”

“It couldn’t possibly be the same person,” Victoria protested.

“Why?” Henry Francis asked in a cold voice. “Because he was pleasant to you when you met just now? Because he offered you a plausible story about himself?”

“What happened?” she asked in a faint voice. “Did they prove anything about this young man in Philadelphia?”

“No. They had to let him go, finally, although they were by no means sure of his innocence. They never did find the killer. However, the murders stopped. They called them the silk stocking murders. In each case the girl was found strangled with a stocking knotted around her neck.”

“And you’re suggesting this young man might have followed you here?”

“I’ve made no secret of my movements,” Henry Francis told her. “It would not be too difficult for him to learn that we have come down to this area for the sake of Dorothy’s health.”

Victoria said, “If you really think it’s the same person and there is any danger you should notify the local and state police.”

He shrugged. “You know how that sort of thing would upset Mrs. Stoddard. Also, there is the possibility I am mistaken.”

She couldn’t hide her annoyance. “A good possibility.”

Henry Francis looked chagrined momentarily, then smiled blandly. “Exactly as you might have been the other night, when you were so certain you saw that face in the window.”

“I’m still certain,” she said, the color mounting in her cheeks.

He showed satisfaction. “Then you can understand why I feel the way I do about this young man. Call it a mere hunch if you wish, I can’t believe he is merely the artist he pretends to be.”
In all honesty Victoria knew that there had been a moment when she had wondered if Caine could be quite as guileless as he tried to appear. Yet she was not willing to give Francis the satisfaction of knowing this.

She was sure that he was not a criminal, regardless of the older man's opinions. But she did think there might be some mystery about him, that he could be cloaking his identity for some reason. She had no intention of avoiding him in the future because of this warning from Henry Francis; rather, she intended to cultivate him whenever possible and find out the truth on her own if she could. In this regard she felt Nora might be able to help.

Henry Francis seemed able to read her thoughts, for now he said, "Please don't let what I have said influence you unduly. But I would be cautious in building a friendship with your Paul Caine."

"I'll certainly keep your comments in mind," she promised.

He suddenly turned his attention to Dorothy. "I think I should take her in now," he said, bending down to study the girl.

Victoria was trying hard to decide about him. She could not seem to define his attitude toward his ailing daughter. In many ways he was attentive and extremely solicitous of her welfare, yet in others he was completely neglectful—bringing her out in the sun without any protection for her head being one example and his digression concerning Paul Caine. All the time he had been discussing the young artist he had ignored Dorothy.

It was also evident that he depended on Rachel for her nursing care. The injection he had given her on his own had probably been much too strong; it seemed mostly good luck that she had not suffered more from it than she had. Yet with a stubbornness that seemed typical of him he had gone ahead and administered the shot without waiting for Rachel.

Victoria said, "I can help you get her inside again."

"If you'd be so kind," Henry Francis said, all smooth politeness once more.

The procedure they had gone through in coming out was reversed as they returned Dorothy to the apartment.
As Victoria watched the dignified Francis carry the limp body of his ash-blond daughter up the stairway, she thought that another touch of the macabre had been added to a household that already had more than its share of strangeness.

Once the girl was installed in the stuffy bedroom again Henry Francis saw her to the door of the apartment. "I am in your debt, Miss Winters," he said urbanely. "And please don't let what I said about that young man trouble you. I've been thinking about it just now. And I'm inclined to agree I've likely made a mistake. It would be too much of a coincidence that this fellow is the one that bothered us in Philadelphia."

"I had almost forgotten about it," she said.

"Do that," he suggested. "And thank you again."

With a small bow he closed the door after her.

She went back downstairs feeling that people were always too quick to accuse others without sufficient evidence. The way in which Ernest Collins had suffered at the time of Stella's strange death was an example.

The thought of Stella brought her back to the incident in the cellar, when Elizabeth had come upon the open trunk with its strewn contents—the trunk that had contained Stella's things. She had rarely seen Elizabeth so shocked.

She stood in the silence of the big hallway and let her gaze wander to the portrait of Isaac Collins, the first Collins to settle in the village that came to be named after him. His stern, lined face showed great character and yet there was an odd resemblance between his features and Roger's. Of course Roger had a look of weakness that was absent in the portrait of his ancestor, but the family likeness was remarkable.

At this time of the day, with the others in their rooms, the quiet of the old mansion bore down on her. Staring at the portrait of the first Collins to live in Maine, she found herself wondering about her own identity once more. Was it possible that she was linked to this strange, unhappy household by a bond of birth? Would she one day rightly be able to say she was a Collins? Or was it merely a fantasy she had nurtured too long, a will-o' the-
wisp that had let her accept Elizabeth’s offer of work and come to this gloomy house?

With a sigh she turned away from the portrait and let her eyes wander to the rich oak table that stood against one wall of the foyer and which was used, among other things, for outgoing and incoming mail. She saw that the postman had made his call and in checking the small bundle of letters found one addressed to her. She opened it quickly; it was from Carolyn.

Elizabeth’s daughter told her of the fun she was having at the mountain resort town where she and the nine-year-old David were spending part of their holidays. But at the end Carolyn said that they were both looking forward to their return and missed her a great deal. Victoria was touched. She had come to feel very close to Carolyn, and David was more like a younger brother than her pupil.

As she folded the letter and returned it to its envelope she heard a car pull up in the driveway. A moment later Roger and Rachel entered. Both of them were talking and laughing and didn’t see her standing there at first.

Roger smiled as he became aware of her. “Well, Victoria, don’t tell me you’ve spent all this lovely afternoon indoors,” he said. She could tell by this too-jovial manner that he’d been drinking again.

“I was out in the garden for a while,” she said, and turned to Rachel. “I helped your father with Dorothy. He was anxious to take her out there and couldn’t find you. I believed he’s waiting for you now.”

The good humor vanished from the flashy redhead’s pretty face. She said, “Thank you,” in an icy voice. Glancing at Roger she added, “I’d better go straight up and see what he wants.” She headed for the stairs.

Roger waited until she had gone and then he said, “I suppose her father thinks she stayed away too long.”

“You were gone the entire afternoon.”

His face flushed and he adopted a sulking manner. “I don’t have to account for how I spend my time. Why should she be kept to a strict schedule?”

“She is a nurse and has a very sick sister,” she reminded him. “She should be aware of her responsibility.”

Roger glanced up the stairs angrily. “I think her father
expects entirely too much of her," he declared. "I've been hearing some things about him this afternoon."

"Probably a one-sided view."

"He's making a slave of Rachel. And it's not fair that she should be made to suffer because her sister has this unfortunate illness."

"I don't think we know them or the situation well enough to take sides."

Roger scowled. "I'm not taking sides. But Francis had better not make a fuss about this afternoon. That girl deserved a rest."

She gave him a teasing look. "And you were only too willing to come to her aid."

"I don't like the man!" he stormed on. "I can't imagine why Elizabeth agreed to let him have the apartment."

Victoria was amused at his belligerence. "You should be thankful," she pointed out. "Otherwise you wouldn't have had the chance of meeting Rachel and you two seem to be getting on so well."

He gave her an uneasy glance and grunted. Then he went across to the table to sort out his mail from the stack. Without turning he asked, "Where is my sister?"

"In her room," Victoria said. "I expect her down shortly. We went to the cellar this afternoon and she looked up an old snapshot album in a trunk down there. I expect she's busy going over it."

Roger turned to her, several letters in his hand, and a peculiar look on his broad face. "So she was down in the storage room."

"I've never been in that particular room before," she said. "There are no lights in that part of the cellar. It was like a dungeon."

He nodded. "I know. It's too damp for storage. Everything goes to ruin down there."

Victoria decided to tell him all that had happened. She went on, speaking slowly, carefully weighing her words. "Elizabeth made a rather strange discovery as we were about to leave."

He was studying one of his letters. "Oh?" he said, without looking up.
“Yes. She found a trunk that had belonged to Stella Hastings.”

Roger glanced up now and his pale eyes met hers. “Did she?”

“It gave her quite a shock,” she said. “Because it was open, I suppose,” Roger said, and as soon as the words were off his lips he showed consternation.

Victoria was completely taken back. “How did you know?”

“Know what?” he stammered. “That Stella’s trunk had been opened and her things strewn about.”

Roger looked completely confused. “I didn’t know,” he protested. “I thought that was what you said. That Elizabeth found the trunk open and it gave her a shock!”

She shook her head, staring at Roger’s frightened face and knowing that he was lying. “I hadn’t mentioned it.”

“Then I misunderstood you. Sorry!” Roger said curtly and hurried off down the corridor in the direction of the study.

Victoria watched him go with growing astonishment. He had known about the trunk, she was certain of it. He had given himself away. What did it mean? Could it be another clue to the secret of Stella’s death? Did it mean Roger was the murderer?

They gathered for dinner in the long, dark-paneled dining room with this latest mystery to add to the murky atmosphere of the old mansion. Roger was morose and unusually quiet all through the meal. Victoria couldn’t help feeling that their conversation was the cause of this mood, although undoubtedly he had a hangover from the afternoon drinking bout with Rachel.

Elizabeth seemed her normal self. Wearing one of her many black dresses, she presided over the table in her usual regal way. The snapshot album had turned out to be a treasure, she confided to Victoria, and she was looking forward to showing Henry Francis several pictures taken of him many years back. Noticing that Roger was showing no interest in her remarks, she turned her attention to him.
“You seem in a dark mood,” she said.
Her brother sat up in his chair and tried to assume a casual expression. “I have a headache,” he said.
“I can imagine,” Elizabeth told him dryly. “I hope for the sake of Henry and that poor sick Dorothy your friend Rachel isn’t suffering from one as well.”
Roger looked startled. “What does that mean?”
“Don’t think I miss what goes on here,” Elizabeth told him. “I know you two were away together this afternoon. It shouldn’t happen again.”
“I resent your treating me like a stupid child!”
“Then you shouldn’t act like one.”
“I have no intention of remaining here and being insulted,” he said, rising from the table and stalking out of the dining room.
His sister gave Victoria a bored look. “You realize he was just waiting for an excuse to leave us. I imagine his head is splitting.”
Victoria had debated whether or not to tell the older woman of her brother’s slip of the tongue. In the end she had decided against it, since she didn’t know whether Elizabeth was involved or to what extent. Better to wait for more of the mystery to be revealed.
After dinner Henry Francis came downstairs. He seemed upset and Victoria thought that he had probably been having trouble with the impetuous Rachel. The redhead did not appear, nor did Roger, who had either retreated to his own room or gone down to his boat. He often took the cruiser out for a short trip in the early evening.
Elizabeth had the snapshot album to show Francis and seemed quite youthful in her excitement, entirely unlike her usual subdued self. They went into the living room to go over the various pages of the album and enjoy reminiscing about their college days.
This left Victoria on her own and so she wandered out to the rear garden which had become her favorite place to stroll since Morgan had restored it to some of its former splendor. It was still fairly light and the fog had not come in as it did on many evenings.
She paused by a circle of purple, yellow and orange
flowers set out in an area of lawn almost directly below the apartment the Francis family was occupying in the rear wing. Suddenly the silence around her was broken by the sound of an angry high-pitched feminine cry which came from the Francis's apartment above. There was a moan and then the clear impact of a slap. Victoria glanced up toward the apartment and saw that one of the windows had been opened a fraction. Even as she watched it was slammed closed with unseen hands.

Victoria's eyes remained on the window for several minutes, but there was only silence now that the window was shut. At last she turned away with a troubled expression on her pretty face. There was no question in her mind that in an angry tantrum Rachel had been abusing her sticken sister. It nauseated her to picture the cruelty that might be going on up there in those musty rooms.

There was something unhealthy about the relationship between the Francises. The grave concern that Henry felt for his invalid daughter was understandable, but some of his actions were not. He was doing Dorothy no good by reprimanding so strongly Rachel that she took out her rage on her helpless sister. Surely he must realize this was likely to be the redhead's reaction; he undoubtedly knew her better than anyone else.

Occupied by these and other thoughts, Victoria continued to stroll on until she came to the garage. She saw that Roger's car had been parked there in its usual place and the convertible she drove, which belonged to Carolyn, was in the shadows beside it. The sedan belonging to Henry Francis was left in the open, since there was no remaining space in the garage.

As she stood there a figure emerged from the dark interior of the garage and came slowly out to stand facing her. It was Matt Morgan. He wore his usual dark work clothes and his beetle brows were wrinkled in a frown.

"You come spying on me again?" he asked her.

She stared up at his angry face in surprise. "Of course I'm not spying," she said. "I just happened to walk out this way."

"I bet," he said. "I know you keep a sharp eye out and report all you see to the Missus."
“That’s ridiculous!” Victoria protested.

The big man continued to glower at her. “One of these times you’ll look too far and come to regret it,” he warned.

She turned quickly away from him and headed back to the main entrance. Morgan had never been friendly with her. She knew he resented any newcomers, and to his slow mind she would probably still be categorized as such. She had no idea what was bothering him now and did not care. She entered the old house promising herself she would keep strictly out of his way in the future.

It was getting dark and there seemed to be no one in the living room or any place downstairs. She went directly to her own room and sat down to answer Carolyn’s letter. She was still feeling upset from the quite mad encounter with Matt Morgan, but she tried to give her letter a pleasant tone and conceal the fears that were crowding in on her.

By the time she had finished, it was fairly late and she decided she would go to bed. She soon turned off the light and tried to settle down to sleep. It took some time as she was still in a highly nervous state.

The scream woke her. She did not know how much later it was, but she was roused from a deep sleep by it. She sat up quickly in the blackness of her room and listened for it to come again, not certain whether it had been part of a nightmare or real. She heard nothing but the mournful wash of the waves.

Still upset, she turned the light back on and threw on her robe. Then she went across and unbolted the door and stepped out into the shadowed hallway. The scream had seemed to come from the apartment. She had visions of Rachel mistreating the invalid again and felt so strongly on this that she found herself heading down the dark corridor toward the apartment. She had gone only a third way when she heard a swift movement behind her. Before she could cry out, something descended over her head and tightened around her throat, effectively cutting off her scream of terror.

As consciousness faded, Victoria clawed frantically at her throat in a vain effort to ease the choking restriction
that was shutting off her breath. Then the struggle be-
came too great and she fell back limply into the swirling
darkness.

CHAPTER SIX

THE NEXT THING Victoria knew Elizabeth was bending
over her, urging her to speak. She tried to reply but
seemed to have lost her voice. It was then she became
aware of the terrible aching at her throat.

Elizabeth was wearing a robe and her lovely face show-
ed despair as she pleaded, “Victoria! Please answer me!”
She stirred listlessly and saw that the night light had
been turned on in the corridor and that Roger was stand-
ing there as well, an expression of consternation on his
broad features.

“Who was it?” she whispered hoarsely, thinking that
they must surely have seen her attacker.

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth said. “Thank heavens you’ve
come around!” She glanced anxiously down the corridor
in the direction of the apartment. “Do you think you can
get back to your own room if we help you?”

Victoria’s throat hurt so that she could hardly reply.
“Yes,” she said in another low whisper.

“Just let me take your weight,” Roger said gently as
he and Elizabeth assisted her to her feet.

She feared she would faint again and surely would
have if they hadn’t supported her on either side and very
slowly helped her the short distance to her own room.
As she made the exhausting journey she gradually began
to think more clearly and by the time they helped her
onto her own bed she was no longer so confused.

Her throat still ached miserably as she asked, “Are
you certain you saw no one?”

“No,” Elizabeth said, staring down at her. “I woke
up thinking I heard someone moving about in the corri-
dor. I worried that there might be come sort of crisis,
that Dorothy Francis might have taken a bad turn. I put
on my robe and went out to the landing. Then I saw
that the front door was partly open.”

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"I always check to make sure it is locked properly before I come upstairs," Roger said. He was in pajamas and dressing gown and his hair was rumpled. He looked and sounded sleepy.

"You must have forgotten it tonight." His sister spoke accusingly across the bed. "I thought of burglars as soon as I saw the open door and went straight to Roger's room and roused him."

"Then we began a check of the hallways. We found your door ajar and you gone," Roger said. "A few minutes later we came on you stretched out in the corridor leading to the apartment."

"What were you doing there?" Elizabeth asked her. Victoria swallowed in an effort to ease her throat. "There was a scream from somewhere."

"A scream!" Elizabeth's eyes opened wide.

"Yes," Victoria insisted. "I went out to see what was wrong. I thought it came from the apartment."

"And someone attacked you out there," Roger filled in. Elizabeth touched a hand to Victoria's throat and examined it thoroughly. "There is a red welt all around your neck," she said, "as if someone had tried to strangle you."

"Someone did!" Victoria exclaimed, sitting up a little. "Someone came on me in the darkness. Perhaps whoever it was is still in the house. You should call the police!"

Both Roger and Elizabeth looked startled at her outburst. She saw the odd glance that passed between them. They stood there in silence for a long moment, in which she found herself wondering what they had to conceal. Could they know more about what had happened than they were willing to admit?

"Let's not act too hastily," Elizabeth begged her. "You know how I feel about making this place a center of attention. We've had enough scandal here in the past."

Victoria protested, "But someone tried to murder me just now."

"You were certainly given a bad scare," Roger said. "But it could have been a misguided prank on someone's part." He offered the rather ridiculous explanation in a weak manner.

"Look at my throat."
“You were savagely attacked,” Elizabeth admitted readily. “We can’t question that. But I don’t want to raise a hue and cry and have the police making the house a headquarters and finding nothing. That is what happened last time. Before we make a complaint we should have proof.”

“Isn’t what happened proof enough?” Victoria demanded.

“In a sense,” the older woman said with agitation showing in her voice. “I’m especially anxious not to disturb Henry Francis and the girls.”

“I can’t imagine why either he or Rachel hasn’t made an appearance,” Victoria said. “Surely they must have heard something.” She didn’t add that she was sure the scream had been from the apartment in the first place.

Roger frowned. “There wasn’t any loud noise to disturb them,” he said. “And I’m concerned about that open door. I know I locked it tonight.”

His sister nodded. “I say it can only mean one thing. Victoria was the victim of someone on the estate, someone who knew how to get into this house through another entrance and who escaped hastily by the front door.”

Roger’s expression was grim. “I think I know who you mean,” he said. “Matt Morgan.”

“Exactly,” Elizabeth agreed. “Morgan has been acting strangely lately. I’ve been worried by his erratic behavior. This could be the culmination of it. He has always resented you, Victoria.”

She recalled the scene she’d had with him earlier in the evening. He had certainly behaved in a menacing way toward her then. But even as she saw this might be the answer to the mystery, she was conscious that Elizabeth had jumped on the explanation almost too quickly—as if she had been searching for a scapegoat and this was it.

Now Elizabeth spoke again. “So you see why I would prefer to wait until morning, at least, before we make any drastic moves. It will give me a chance to question Morgan. I promise you if he is guilty I will not stand in the way of his punishment.”

“I should hope not!” Roger Collins agreed indignantly. Victoria was bewildered. She was still suffering from
shock, but it seemed to her that these two were joining in some strange way to stop any action being taken to determine who had tried to murder her. Their pretense of great concern appeared to be part of a scheme to avoid calling in the authorities. She felt weak and trapped.

Henry Francis suddenly entered the room. He was immaculate in a silk dressing gown, his curly hair looking freshly combed, and his flat, rather handsome face wore a perplexed expression.

“What is going on?” he wanted to know. “I was certain I heard voices and people moving about.”

Elizabeth gave him a brief account, looking dreadfully embarrassed and attempting to minimize what had happened. At least Victoria thought that was her attitude.

Henry Francis listened to her gravely and then looked at Victoria. “I’m very sorry for you, Miss Winters,” he said. “But you will realize that I’m not too surprised at what has happened.”

Suddenly she knew what he was insinuating. Full memory of their talk about Paul Caine came flooding back to her. Francis had said he thought the supposed artist was the young man who had hounded his daughter in Philadelphia—the man who had been suspected of three stranglings!

Victoria swallowed hard. “I don’t think we can be sure about anything.”

His gaze was sardonic. “Except that you have some very ugly bruises on your lovely throat.”

Elizabeth seemed baffled by this exchange. “I don’t want you to let this upset you, Henry,” she said. “I’m sure there is an explanation, and one not too frightening. I believe I know the guilty party and I intend to question him. I may say it is someone who has always had a grudge against Victoria.”

“Indeed,” Henry Francis lifted his eyebrows. “I was thinking along other lines. But of course you may be right.”

“Mixed-up business,” Roger said in his brusque manner, stifling a yawn as he finished speaking. “We found the front door open.”

The piercing eyes of the other man fixed on Roger.
“I believe I can explain that,” he said. “My daughter Rachel left the apartment a little while ago. At least I suppose she did. She’s not there now.”

Elizabeth showed alarm. “Something dreadful may have happened to her.”

“I am worried,” Henry Francis said, turning to her. “Although she is rather good at taking care of herself. We had another argument before going to bed. At such times she frequently goes out for a midnight stroll.”

Listening to him, Victoria saw how much of it fitted in. The scream that had woken her might have come from Rachel. But who had surreptitiously attacked her in the corridor once she had been lured out there? Then she realized her attacker needn’t have been a man. It could have been the strong hands of a woman that had looped the noose about her neck. It could have been Rachel or even Elizabeth.

“Rachel is outside somewhere?” Roger Collins exclaimed in almost comic concern. “You should have told us that at once. Who knows what may have happened to her!” And he started for the door.

Henry Francis watched him go. “I appreciate your feelings,” he said sarcastically. “I realize how friendly you two have become.”

Roger did not stop his march to the door to reply and he would certainly have gone off in search of the missing girl if she hadn’t just then strolled into view. She stood in the doorway with a rebellious expression on her pretty, somewhat hard face, well aware that she was suddenly the center of attention.

Roger, who was closest to her, spoke first. “Rachel, my dear,” he said with exaggerated emotion, “you don’t know how you’ve upset us all.”

She regarded them coolly. “It’s not a prison, is it? There are no rules that say the inmates can’t go out occasionally for a breath of air.”

Henry Francis was staring at his daughter with cold eyes. “I wouldn’t say you picked a very suitable time for your walk. Nor was it very thoughtful of you to leave the front door open.”

“I only intended to stand on the steps a minute,” she
said, a little less brazen now. “Then it was so nice I strolled out across the lawn.”

Elizabeth said, “It is not wise to go out alone so late at night. This place is very isolated. Did you see anyone when you were out there?”

Rachel stared at them blankly. “See anyone? Why should I?”

Roger blurted out the story of the attack on Victoria before anyone else could say anything. He finished, “We thought you might be in trouble as well.”

Rachel’s expression made it plain she was not in the least interested in Victoria’s narrow escape. Coldly she told Roger, “I’m not the helpless type.” And now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to bed.” Without waiting for their reaction, she went off as quickly as she had appeared.

Henry Francis addressed himself to Elizabeth. “I regret Rachel’s behavior,” he apologized. “As you can see, she is not in a good mood.” He paused. “I had no idea any difficulty would present itself here or I would not have imposed on you. As it is, I feel we had better make other plans in the morning.”

Elizabeth moved swiftly across to him. “Please don’t be rash, Henry,” she begged. “I can promise you things will be different from now on. I have already talked the matter over with Roger.”

Roger Collins angrily approached the two. “What sort of nonsense is this?”

Henry Francis swung on him in cold anger. “We don’t have to mince words at this point, Mr. Collins. There’s no secret that you’ve used your dubious charms to impress my daughter. You deliberately took her out on a drinking spree this afternoon and now we are all suffering the consequences.” With this he nodded to Victoria and Elizabeth and strode out of the room.

Roger glared after him and then turned to Elizabeth. “Are you going to allow him to talk to me like that?”

“He said nothing that wasn’t the truth,” Elizabeth told him. “I think you could help best if you checked to see the front door is locked and then went to bed.”

He stood there awkwardly. “What about Victoria?”
“I’ll look after her,” his sister said firmly. Roger shrugged and then turned and left.

When they were alone Elizabeth said, “I must do something for that poor throat of yours.”

First the older woman bathed the bruises in warm water and then she located a soothing cream and carefully rubbed it on the injured area. Victoria found the pain gradually diminishing; by the time Elizabeth was ready to leave she felt much better.

The older woman hesitated at the foot of her bed. “You will be perfectly safe in here,” she said.

Victoria couldn’t help glancing toward the paneled wall where once there had been the entrance to a hidden passage leading to the cellar. It seemed ages ago that the secret door had swung open to reveal Elizabeth standing in the darkness. The mistress of Collins House had ordered the passage sealed as soon as she discovered it. But now Victoria wondered if that could have been the only concealed entrance to her room. Rumors were that the old mansion was a literal honeycomb of secret corridors.

Elizabeth had followed her glance and guessed her thoughts. She said, “Now you’re allowing yourself to be upset without cause. There is no longer any way an intruder can get in here. Once your door is locked you need not worry.”

She sighed. “I suppose not. Do you think it was Morgan?”

“I don’t know,” Elizabeth confessed. “Don’t think about it anymore tonight. I promise the matter will be thoroughly investigated.”

Victoria accompanied her to the door and bolted it after her. She was shocked to find how weak she felt and how weary, now that the worst of the pain had passed. She touched a hand to her throat and the coating of fragrant cream with which Elizabeth had smeared the sore places. It seemed incredible that the older woman could be her enemy. Yet Victoria could not throw off the feeling Elizabeth was working against her in this—trying to placate her and protect someone. It was with these uneasy thoughts she at last sank into a troubled sleep.
Nothing happened the following morning to make her feel differently. It was another dark, foggy day and Victoria did not wake up until nearly an hour after her usual time. She rose and washed and dressed quickly. Just as she was about ready to go downstairs, there was a knock on her door. When she went over and opened it Elizabeth was standing there with a tray.

The attractive woman entered at once and told her, “I thought you should have your breakfast up here this morning. You deserve some rest and quiet. I was hoping I’d catch you before you had gotten up.”

“You shouldn’t have done this,” Victoria protested.

“It’s nothing,” Elizabeth assured her, taking the tray over to the bare end of the dresser. “You can wait on me if I should be taken ill.”

“But I’m not ill!”

“How does your throat feel?” Elizabeth stood studying her with a worried expression.

“Much better. I’m sure it won’t give me any serious trouble,” Victoria said. And this was true. It was not nearly as painful as she’d feared.

“Try and rest some more after you’ve eaten,” the older woman said. “There’s nothing for you to do today. It’s miserable out, as well. So you’d be wise to rest while you have the chance.” She smiled. “Carolyn and David will soon be back and then you’ll have no time to yourself at all.”

“I won’t mind that,” she said, returning the smile.

Elizabeth moved to the door and then turned. “Mr. Francis had to leave on business today. He left early this morning and told me it was possible he might not get back until very late tonight or even tomorrow. I’m afraid he was badly upset by last night’s dreadful affair and I suspect he’s gone to look for a more suitable place to take his daughters.”

“It may not be that,” Victoria said. “He does have other business that must be attended to.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Perhaps so. I feel so sorry for that poor Dorothy. I would like to see her remain and perhaps improve in health. If only Roger had been more discreet. But then he never is!”
After Elizabeth’s departure, Victoria enjoyed the luxury of breakfast in her room. But she was let down by the fact Elizabeth had made no mention of speaking to Matt Morgan. She had carefully avoided the subject and Victoria did not think this was merely tact on the older woman’s part. She had expected her to act just this way, to put off any showdown in the hope she might be willing to say no more about the murder attempt.

Despite Elizabeth’s kindness there was an ulterior motive in her handling of the situation. It could be no more sinister than an attempt to make the matter seem less serious in Henry Francis’ eyes. She was clearly anxious to have her friends stay on in the house and he would hardly do this if he decided a murderer was at large on the estate. But, on the other hand, she could be deliberately concealing the identity of a killer.

Victoria’s mind went back to the details of Stella Hastings’ death. She tried to remember all that Ernest had told her concerning the mysterious events surrounding it. Some of them were hazy in her mind; Will Grant could fill her in on them. He had acted for the family at the time and it had been largely due to his efforts on behalf of Ernest that the police did not charge the musician with Stella’s murder.

Seeing the face of the dead girl in the window had filled her with wild fancies. And these admittedly undisciplined thoughts had been fed by the peculiar behavior of Roger and Elizabeth until now she was beginning to speculate if Stella were really dead, if the body that had been found on the rocky shore had actually been that of the young artist whom Ernest had liked so much. She knew she was indulging in fantastic theorizing, but she found herself faced with an equally fantastic set of circumstances.

Finishing her breakfast, she covered the tray with the white napkin Elizabeth had provided and put it aside to be taken downstairs when she went. First she made her bed and tidied up the room as usual. The foghorn was keeping up its doleful bleating, but she had become so used to it now that she hardly heard it.

Part way through her tasks she went across to the case-
ment windows and opened them. The catch on one of
the windows had given trouble for a while, but Elizabeth
had brought in a carpenter from the village for a day and
he had fixed it. The fog seeped in and Victoria could
tell that the air was cooler than it had been for awhile.
Visibility was cut down, but she could still get a clear
picture of most of the grounds.

She looked toward the footpath and a small frown came
to her thin, attractive face as she noticed a man in a rain-
coat—Roger, unmistakably—walking slowly along the
cliffs to the point where she had so often gone and where
Stella had plunged or been pushed to her death. It was
the highest point of Widow’s Hill and more than one life
had been lost in a fall down its sheer face over the years.

Victoria stood fascinated as she watched Roger, won-
dering what he could possibly be doing out on that lonely
path on such a dreadful day. The fog had shut off any
view and it was too cold and unpleasant to justify a casual
stroll. When he came to the jutting point he paused and
stood for a time with his hands in his raincoat pockets. He
seemed to be peering over the edge as if he were visually
measuring something. Then he slowly moved on to vanish
in the mist as the path gradually dipped.

She moved away from the window, still wearing a puz-
zled expression. It seemed to her Roger must have gone
out there for some special reason. And she believed the
reason could well have a bearing on all that had happened.

When she had finished with her room she took the tray
and went down to the kitchen. There was no sign of Eliz-
abeth, so she began washing the dishes herself. It was one
of Elizabeth’s strange whims that she would have no other
servants around the place other than Morgan. As a result
she had to do many of the menial domestic chores herself,
as well as cooking all the meals. When Carolyn was home
she did her share and of course Victoria helped, although
she had been strictly employed as a governess for David.

As she worked at the dishes Victoria realized more than
ever that Elizabeth had only been putting on a show for
her benefit. She would not accuse Morgan of last night’s
doings because she depended on him too much. Victoria
knew how many years the surly man had been the sole
servant on the vast estate. His bad temper was well known, but she doubted there was anything more behind it. She was certain Elizabeth had suggested Morgan’s guilt in order to throw her off the track of the real attacker.

She was still at the sink when the kitchen door opened and Rachel Francis came into the room. She had a sullen expression on her pretty face and she walked slowly across to her.

“You!” she said.

Victoria glanced at her in surprise. “Yes?”

“I know what you’ve been up to,” Rachel said.

She stared at the girl in bewilderment. “I don’t understand.”

Rachel’s lips curled in a nasty smile. “Sneaking around my father,” she said. “Trying to cause me trouble.”

“You’re wrong!”

“Don’t put on your mealy-mouthed act for me,” Rachel snapped. “I know your type. I suppose you’re jealous of me because you want Roger for yourself.”

Victoria found it hard to imagine why she thought this. “You couldn’t be more wrong,” she said. “I’m not interested in Roger at all.”

“That’s your story,” Rachel said acidly. “I have eyes. I’ve seen the way you look at him.”

“You must have a lively imagination!”

“Not nearly as lively as yours, it seems,” the other girl said with mocking sarcasm. “I warn you. Don’t come snooping around the apartment. You’re not wanted there.”

“I only tried to help your sister.”

“Dorothy will do very well without you,” Rachel snapped. “And if I hear of you carrying any more tales to my father, better watch out!” With this parting warning the redhead stormed out of the kitchen.

Victoria stared after the angry girl in utter disbelief. She had never liked Rachel, but she had not expected her to behave so badly. It was Rachel’s going off with Roger that had caused all the trouble, after all.

Victoria finished cleaning up in the kitchen and was about to leave when the rear door opened and Roger Collins entered. He looked surprised and somewhat guilty at seeing Victoria.
“I’ve been out for some air,” he said awkwardly, his eyes on the floor. He was still in the raincoat and hatless.

“I saw you on the cliff.”

He looked up at her with a wary expression. “Did you?” He glanced toward the other door through which Rachel had so recently flounced out. “The truth is, I’ve been trying to avoid Rachel,” he said unhappily. “My sister’s orders.”

“Miss Francis was here only minutes ago,” she told him. “And not in a pleasant mood.”

“I’ll bet,” he sighed. “I suppose her father has read the riot act to her as well.”

“She seems to have the mistaken idea that I’ve caused the trouble.”

Roger shook his head. “She’s quick-tempered. Blames anyone in sight without trying to reason. I’ll be going down to the office this afternoon, so that will take care of a few hours.”

Victoria was amused at this revelation. It proved the depth of his misery. She knew that he avoided going to the cannery whenever possible, although he had an executive title and his own office. It had been one of Elizabeth’s constant sorrows that he took so little interest in the family business.

She said, “Probably you should spend more time down there.”

“I will if Elizabeth has her way,” he said. “And she generally does.” He paused. “I want to tell you I’m really concerned about what happened last night. It’s got to be thoroughly gone into.”

Victoria heard his abject words with a feeling of derision. She knew it would have to be Elizabeth’s doing if any action were taken. And she was reasonably sure she intended to do nothing. She said, “There are a lot of things to be explained.”

Roger licked his lips nervously. “There is one other thing. I want to settle it while we are alone. Elizabeth mustn’t hear what I’m going to say. You must promise not to tell her.”

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"Aren't you putting me in an awkward position?" she asked.

"But I want to clear this up," he protested. "About that trunk belonging to Stella in the cellar. I did know it was open because I'm the one who opened it."

"You?"

He nodded. "I liked the girl. I hoped she would be interested in me. She wasn't, of course. But we did become friends. A while before the accident I gave her a bracelet, one that had belonged to my wife. Stella insisted that I take it back. I refused and kept stalling. Then she had that accident. And I realized it might look bad for me when the bracelet was found among her things and Elizabeth or anyone else recognized it."

"So you went down there looking for it?"

"Yes," he said, avoiding her eyes again. "I found it. I didn't even take time to put the other stuff back."

Victoria said, "Well, at least that is one mystery explained." But she wondered. Had Roger told her a whole truth or merely a half-truth to cover up some other devious action on his part?

The day wore on. Although she saw Elizabeth several times during the afternoon, the older woman said nothing about clearing up the incident of the previous night. Rachel did not come downstairs at all.

When Victoria dressed for dinner she put on a loose scarf to conceal the ugly red line still showing on her neck. Dinner was a quiet affair, with Roger in a subdued mood and Elizabeth hardly talking at all. Henry Francis had not returned and Victoria guessed this was bothering the older woman.

After the evening meal Victoria sat in the living room with a magazine and read until dusk began to settle. It was turning dark fairly early because of the fog. She was alone in the front of the house when she heard a car drive up and then the doorbell rang. She went to answer it and was surprised to see Paul Caine standing there with a wise smile. He was dressed in a dark suit with a plaid sport shirt and looked completely at ease.

"Are you ready?" he asked. "I've come to pick you up for our date."
CHAPTER SEVEN

For a moment she could only stand staring at him in surprise. His casual arrival after all that had taken place since their first meeting left her speechless. Yet he stood there with such a friendly smile that she found it hard to think of him as a possible murderer. And he had made no secret about his coming, but had called for her in a completely open manner. This hardly seemed in keeping if he had tried to kill her last night.

She said, "I'd forgotten all about your promise to call. I guess I didn't take you seriously."

He seemed amused. "That was a mistake."

"I hadn't planned to go out," she said. "I'm not ready."

"My plan was just to drive in town and perhaps stop by the Blue Whale for a while," he said. "You don't have to be formally dressed for that."

She managed a smile. "Hardly. But I'm not sure I want to go into town tonight at all."

Some of the good humor left his freckled face. "You mean you don't want to go with me?"

"Not necessarily," she said, although the idea of the fairly long drive through the woods with this young man who could well be dangerous did frighten her.

"I was in the shop talking to Nora before I left," he said, in an obvious attempt to get her to change her mind. "I told her we'd pick her up and take her with us after I got you."

"You shouldn't have told her that when you weren't even sure I'd be going into town," she said. His mention of Nora had put her a little at ease, although she knew it could be a ruse.

The pleasant freckled face showed disappointment. "You struck me as a good sport," he told her. "Nora claims you're tops. And you promised to go out with me tonight!"

Victoria still hesitated. "I don't remember that I did."

"You said you wanted to see my painting of Collins House."
She smiled. “Did you finish it so soon?”
“It’s not done yet. But you will see it when I’ve completed it.”
“Suppose we have our date then. I think that’s what I told you anyway.”
“I need inspiration along the way,” Paul Caine argued good-naturedly.
“I don’t believe I’d be much help.”
He looked forlorn. “What’s the matter? Are you one of those girls who have to know a fellow for years before you’ll go out with them?”
“Hardly.”
“Well, is it that I’m so terrible? Are you afraid of me?” His eyes met hers as he asked this bluntly.
She looked down at once, afraid of what he might see in them. She was having an argument with herself. All her instincts told her she’d be perfectly safe to go to Collinsport with the pleasant young man. But in the background there was the remembered warning given her by Henry Francis.
Victoria looked up at him. “Have you ever been in Philadelphia?” she asked.
He registered surprise. “No. Not even on a holiday. Why do you ask that?”
“No important reason,” she said, glancing down again. “Someone told me they thought they had seen you there.”
“Nora?” There was surprise in his voice.
Of course she needn’t expect him to admit to his background.
“No,” she said. “A girl named Rachel mentioned you.”
“Rachel Francis,” he said at once. “What did she tell you about me?”
Victoria felt a chill run through her. His quick recognition of whom she meant could only be proof positive that he was the fellow from Philadelphia who had followed the Francis family to Maine.
“You admit knowing her then?” she asked in a tense voice, staring at him for signs of guilt.
Paul laughed. “Admit it? I saw her in the village
with her father and sister. That redhead isn’t the type you forget when you’ve seen her once.”

“That was the first time you ever saw her?”

“Sure. How did she come to be talking about me?”

Victoria was now confused. “I brought up your name,” she said, “And she thought she remembered you from Philadelphia.” She said it lamely, feeling he would know she was making it up.

He looked slightly annoyed. “You can tell her,” he said, “that she’s mixing me up with somebody else.”

“I will,” she promised, a little ashamed of her contriving. She had gained nothing in her amateurish attempts to make him reveal more about himself. And she was beginning to believe there had been no truth in the accusations made by Henry Francis, that the young man was what he claimed to be.

Paul said, “Well, there’s no point in my standing here forever bothering you. Either you want to go or you don’t.”

There was no suggestion of pressure to make her go in his attitude. And so she found herself considering his offer and hesitating over it. “Does Nora really expect me?” she asked.

“I told her I’d be bringing you back with me.”

It had been a trying day and the prospect of an hour in the village away from the grim atmosphere of Collins House was appealing. She had reached the point where most of her suspicions concerning the young man had been dispelled. It seemed ridiculous for her to cheat herself of an evening out.

“T might go for an hour or so,” she said hesitantly. “You can come back whenever you like,” he promised.

She shook her head as she smiled faintly. “You should be a salesman, not an artist. You’re very persuasive. I’ll have to go upstairs a minute and tell Mrs. Stoddard.”

“I’ll wait in the car,” Paul Caine said, his freckled face radiant again.

She closed the door and hurried upstairs to Elizabeth’s room. She was still just a little fainthearted about going out with the artist, although she found herself liking him
a great deal and refused to believe that Henry Francis was right about him.

Elizabeth was in her dressing gown when she answered the knock on her door. She gave her an inquiring look. “Yes?”

“I’m going into the village for an hour with a friend of Nora’s,” she told the older woman, thinking this was a diplomatic way of putting it—much better than saying she was going with a stranger who had only been around a short while.

Elizabeth frowned. “I hope you won’t be late. And be careful on the road—it’s a terribly foggy night.”

“We will,” Victoria promised.

Still standing with her hand on the door, Elizabeth said, “Mr. Francis hasn’t returned yet. I’ve been listening for his car. I thought it might have been he a few minutes ago, but then I heard you talking with someone in the hall.”

“He mentioned that he mightn’t return tonight, didn’t he?”

The older woman nodded, looking a little less troubled. “Perhaps that is it,” she agreed. “He may not come back until the morning.”

Victoria stopped by her own room to pick up her trench coat and kerchief. Hastily putting them on, she went down to join Paul in his car. It was indeed foggy. As they headed out of the driveway onto the narrow road visibility was restricted to only a few yards.

“Do you get a lot of this weather?” Paul asked.

She glanced at him behind the wheel and was impressed by his appearance in the faint reflection of the dash light. He looked like a decent, average young man and not a crafty killer. It was silly to let herself go on being nervous in his company.

“This year we’ve had more fog than anything else, although Mrs. Stoddard tells me some summers are quite different.”

He gave her a brief look. “You’ve only been here a short time.”

“Less than a year.”

“You’ve been doing all right,” he said, smiling, his
eyes peering into the fog ahead which reflected his head-
lights rather than allowing them to cut through it. “I
hear you have two boy friends.”

“Who told you that story?”

“Nora. She says you’re practically engaged to Ernest
Collins, the concert violinist, and you also see a lot of her
cousin, Will Grant.”

“Ernest and I are good friends,” she said. “And Will
is doing some law work for the Collins family. Naturally
I see him a good deal.”

“So that is why you’re so independent,” Paul Caine
said, still having to give his full attention to the difficult
driving. “I guess there’s no chance at all for a struggling
young artist.”

She laughed. “I couldn’t tell you. I don’t know any.”

“Remind me to introduce you to one,” he said.

“I’ll do that.”

His manner changed slightly. “Why do you stay on in
this lonely place? In that big house with all those strange
people?”

“I don’t mind it. I enjoy my work.”

“You say that.”

“I mean it,” she insisted.

“Nora says you came here to try and find out some-
ting about yourself. That you have never known who
your parents were and you had an idea the answer might
be found here.”

Victoria was suddenly on guard. “Nora talks too much.”

He glanced at her. “Why do you resent my knowing
about it?”

She found herself uncomfortable under his brief scruti-
tiny and again began to wonder if he were such an in-
nocent young man as he tried to make people think, after
all.

“I don’t mind your knowing,” she said quietly. “It’s
just something I’d rather not talk about.”

“Sure.” He was quick to agree with her. “I guess we
all feel that way about some things.”

“Where is your home?” she asked quickly, thinking
she might do better if she gained control of the question-
ing and kept it.

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“New York City,” he said.
“Are you just an artist?”
“You make that sound like a disgrace,” he said.
She laughed. “Well, I didn’t mean it that way. I mean you don’t look the beatnik type and art doesn’t pay well for most people. How do you live?”
He grinned at her as he brought the car to a halt at the main highway. As they waited a moment before joining in the regular flow of traffic he said, “I’m lucky. I’ve got wealthy friends.”
“You are lucky!” she agreed. But she considered it an evasion. She had an idea Paul Caine was reluctant to tell her much about himself. Again she wondered why and she knew a slight feeling of uneasiness. Yet they had already covered the most lonely section of the road on their journey to Collinsport. He had behaved very well, although there was the return journey to keep in mind.
As they drove along the broader highway with its bank of neon lights on either side making splashes of color he again began to question her about the Francis family.
“When are you going to introduce me to your redhead friend, Rachel?” he asked.
“I don’t think I’d better. Her father doesn’t approve of her having friends. Her sister is very ill and it takes most of her time looking after her.”
He frowned. “I just got a quick look at the sister in the back of the car. What is she like?”
“It’s hard to say, in the state she is in now,” Victoria said. “I think she probably was at least as attractive as Rachel. She has a lot of ash-blonde hair. I don’t know the color of her eyes; she always has on heavy dark glasses. Her father says the doctors told him she must wear them until she has made some recovery from her brain operation.”
Paul Caine sighed. “Too bad!” he said. “You mean she can’t talk or anything?”
“She just sits in her wheelchair and doesn’t move or speak,” Victoria told him. “Like a person in a coma or under drugs.”
“I see,” the young artist said. “What’s her dad like?”
“He’s a strange man. But I think he means well.”
“Strange? In what way?”

“He tries to be kind to Dorothy, but he’s very impatient. And he can be neglectful sometimes and so can Rachel.” She told him about the incident of the overdose of medicine and again about the spider.

He frowned. “That Rachel doesn’t sound like the sort of nurse I’d like.”

Victoria smiled. “Only a little while ago you were begging to meet her.”

“I wouldn’t mind dating her,” he said. “That doesn’t mean I want someone like that to look after me if I should be sick. Give me a good, ugly competent nurse any day!”

They had arrived on the outskirts of the village where Nora’s mother had her summer gift shop. Now Paul headed the car off the highway and turned into the parking lot beside the long log cabin in which the shop was located. A bright yellow and purple sign proclaimed, “Gifts! Novelties!” and blinked on and off continuously. There seemed to be no other cars around, so Victoria guessed there weren’t any customers inside. With the fog and the lateness of the hour business was bound to have thinned out.

She and Paul went in through the screen door and found Nora standing by the cash register in the brightly-lit shop. Counters filling the center and around the sides were laden with gifts of all descriptions, from Swedish Christmas cards to perfumed soap from France, maple syrup bottled in Collinsport and birch bark miniature canoes and other novelties made on a nearby Indian reservation.

Nora came forward in a plaid summer dress with a neat black belt and round black collar. Victoria had always liked it on her. Her friend’s eyes sparkled as she said, “I’d just about given you two up!”

Paul gave Victoria a teasing glance. “This character had a hard time making up her mind.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Nora said pertly. “We can leave anytime. I told mother I’d be closing up as soon as you came.”

“On to the Blue Whale!” Paul said happily.

As Nora was putting on her raincoat she drew Victoria

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to one side and confided, "Will was by earlier. He seemed anxious about you. I told him you might be in tonight and if you came we'd be going to the Blue Whale. I have an idea he'll drop by there later."

"Good," Victoria said. She hoped that she might get a chance to talk to him alone.

As they all moved toward the door, Paul stared at her and Nora. He said, "I can't get over it. You two girls look enough alike to be twins!"

Nora laughed. "People tell us that all the time."

The drive to the Blue Whale was a short one. The town was dark and the bar, which was located a half-block from the main street, was not hard to find. From the outside it looked like an ancient factory building with its faded paint and broken clapboards, but the big neon sign spelling out its name hinted that there might be some gaiety inside. As they got out of the car she recalled the first evening when Carolyn had taken her there.

It was almost as crowded as that other time. Most of the patrons were noisy teen-agers and there was a good sprinkling of the summer crowd as well. The jukebox with its rainbow neon was thumping out rock-and-roll music and several couples were dancing on the tiny space reserved for a floor. They found an empty booth and sat down and ordered. Paul made it a point to seat himself beside Victoria.

Nora leaned across the table laughing. "Don't tell me you two came here to be quietly alone," she screamed above the din.

Paul Caine seemed perfectly happy. He grinned at Victoria. "At least you don't have to dodge phantoms here like you do at Collins House."

"What gives you the idea we spend our time dodging phantoms?" she challenged him.

"Maybe it's bats," he said with mock seriousness. "You go around chasing the bats out of those forty closed-off rooms!"

"Our bat count is very low too," Victoria told him matching his manner.

Suddenly Nora winked at her. Turning to Paul, she said, "I want to dance and don't tell me you can't Watusi!"
She didn’t wait for the surprised young man to answer, but got up at once. Grabbing him by the hand, she dragged him up on his feet.

He gave Victoria a parting glance of despair as Nora led him toward the tiny floor and its gyrating couples. “Are all the Collingsport girls so impulsive?” he shouted back.

Victoria laughed and watched them join the others. When she glanced back in the direction of the bar she at once understood Nora’s sudden urge to dance. Will Grant was standing there, an amused expression on his handsome face. Of course Nora had wanted to get Paul out of the way for a few minutes.

He came forward and sat beside her. “Will your boy friend object to my taking this seat?” he wanted to know.

She laughed. “He’s not my boy friend. And I’ve been waiting for you to come.”

Will smiled. “You seemed to be doing all right without me.”

Victoria said, “He’s really Nora’s friend, anyway. And I wanted to tell you about what’s been going on.” She did and at once the relaxed look left the young lawyer’s face.

He stared at her. “So that’s why you’re wearing the scarf. I thought it must be a new style.”

“It covers up the red marks,” she said.

“You should have made Elizabeth get in touch with me at once,” he told her.

“She promised she would work everything out this morning,” Victoria said. “I knew she didn’t mean to. And of course this morning she avoided talking about it altogether.”

“This is serious.” Will frowned. “I’m going to talk to her and let her know she must do something.”

“Then she’ll know I told you.”

“I don’t think that is as important as finding out who it was attacked you and what is going on in that house.”

Victoria said, “She doesn’t want any upset. She’s afraid it might scare Henry Francis away.”

The young lawyer showed disgust. “You are more important than that stranger and his daughters,” he said.
Victoria gave him a wistful smile. "To you, perhaps. But I doubt if that is the case with Elizabeth."

Will Grant frowned at the tabletop. "I swear she is neurotic. No wonder, after shutting herself up in that dreary place for eighteen years. Having Francis and his daughters as guests seems to mean entirely too much to her."

"She may have other, more pressing reasons for not wanting to pursue the matter too far," she reminded Will.

He gave her a sharp glance. "Such as?"

"She may be trying to protect someone else and merely using her concern about Henry Francis as a sham."

"I hadn't thought of that," he admitted.

"Roger has been behaving strangely," she said. "And there was something odd about a trunk downstairs that had belonged to Stella. He explained it in a vague way. I'm not sure that I'm satisfied."

"Tell me about it," Will said.

She looked back towards the floor to make sure the other two were still there and saw that Nora was doing a good job of keeping the young man busy. Then she quickly told Will about discovering the trunk open and Roger's later explanation of his retrieving a bracelet he'd given Stella.

Will said, "It's a thin story."

"Exactly the way I felt," she said. With a strained expression she added, "Sometimes I get the eerie feeling Stella isn't dead at all, that she is hiding somewhere in the house."

The young lawyer looked mildly shocked. "It's not much wonder you'd have some wild theories living in that dreary place. But I can assure you Stella is dead. I was there when they found her body on the beach."

"You're certain it was Stella's body?" she asked.

He opened his eyes wide. "They identified her by her clothes and a ring. She had been in the water a while and her face had been smashed to a pulp in her fall. It wasn't nice. Not nice at all."

Victoria looked down. "Then it must have been her
ghost I saw. I can still picture her staring out of that upper window.”

“Don’t talk like that!” he ordered her sharply.

She was going to tell him what Henry Francis had said about Paul Caine but before she could do this the others returned and sat down opposite them. Nora introduced the two men.

“So you’re here to do some painting,” Will said.

He nodded. “I’m working on a canvas of Collins House.”

Will smiled. “Why pick it for a subject?”

“I’ve been asked that before,” Paul Caine said. “I think it has character. Set out on the cliff, as it is, with the trees around it and those thin black chimneys. It is lending itself well to the treatment I’m giving it.”

Will glanced at Victoria. “Does Mrs. Stoddard know about his project?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“Don’t tell me she approves.”

Victoria smiled. “She wasn’t enthusiastic. But I persuaded her that it would do no harm.”

Paul Caine spread his hands happily. “You see I have a friend at court!”

Nora told him, “You’re lucky. Most strangers showing up at Collins House are shooed away by Matt Morgan before they know what’s happening.”

“I’d like to see that painting,” Will said.

Paul Caine leaned back. “I have a lot of work to do on it yet.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing it in progress,” Will said. “I like to watch a painting develop through the various stages.”

The other man’s freckled face registered slight annoyance. “I prefer not to show my work until it’s finished.”

Victoria was surprised to hear him declare this so emphatically. It seemed he was making far too much of a minor difference of opinion. She thought Will must feel the same way, for he stared at the young man a moment before replying.

Then he shrugged. “Well, every artist has his own ideas. Have you had any one-man shows?”

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“Not yet,” Paul said.
“But he has been displayed in galleries in New York and Paris, haven’t you?” Nora said, seeming anxious to keep the conversation on a pleasant plane.
Paul was not too helpful. He merely grunted, “A few of them.”
“Since you’ve come down to this part of Maine to work you must be familiar with some of our local artists,” Will said. “Do you like Greg Larsen’s watercolors? He’s the fellow in Ellsworth.”
“They’re pretty good.” Paul’s voice lacked enthusiasm.
“Have you met him personally?”
Paul shook his head. “No. I’ve just seen his paintings in the art magazines.”
“You want to keep an eye on him,” Will said. “That’s an artist who is going somewhere.”
Nora then changed the subject by bringing up a discussion of a summer fair the village was having in a few weeks. It developed that Will Grant was one of the directors and he invited Paul Caine to submit some of his work for display. “Be interesting for the local people to see your stuff. Especially that one of Collins House,” he suggested.
Paul Caine made no definite promise that he would. And then Victoria decided it was getting late and she should get back. Paul at once stood up, but Will Grant also got to his feet.
“I’ll drive her back,” he said. “I want to speak to Roger Collins and this will give me a good chance.”
Paul’s freckled face showed annoyance. “I brought you to town,” he reminded Victoria.
She offered him a placating smile. “And I’m grateful. It’s been a good evening. But I think it’s wise for Will to drive me home. Especially since he has to see Roger anyway.”
Nora smiled up at the young artist. “I don’t have to go yet, Paul. You can take me home.”
He gave her an almost angry glance and then he told Will coldly, “It seems the lady prefers your company. So go right ahead.”
As soon as they were outside and in Will’s car Victoria said, “I’m glad you insisted.”

Will eyed her grimly as he started the car. “I had a reason. I don’t think that fellow is an artist at all. He’s a phony.”

“Well?”

“Why do you say that?”

“When I found him so touchy about discussing his paintings or showing them I deliberately baited him,” the young lawyer said as he headed the car toward the main street. “I mentioned Greg Larsen’s work and he claimed he was familiar with it.”

“Well?”

“There doesn’t happen to be any artist named Greg Larsen. I made the name up on the spur of the moment.” He gave her a glance in the near darkness of the car. “What do you make of that?”

“I’ve been intending to tell you,” she said. And as they drove along the main highway she explained what Henry Francis had said to her. At the same time she made it clear that she didn’t think Paul Caine was the sinister young man from Philadelphia. She sat back with a sigh. “I agree there is a mystery about him, but I don’t see him as a possible murderer.”

Will seemed thoroughly alarmed. “You can’t be sure. There was that attack on you last night.”

“I’d say that came from someone much closer to Collins House.”

“Maybe,” he said reluctantly. “I’d still like to talk to Henry Francis about this theory of his.”

“You can after he gets back,” she said.

As they drove through the wooded road he came back to the subject. “I wish I hadn’t left Nora with him,” he said.

“She’ll be all right,” Victoria promised. “She’s been with him before.”

Still Will wasn’t entirely satisfied. He saw her to the door and stayed a moment to advise her to be cautious. “I don’t want to lose my bride before I lead her to the altar,” he said with a wry smile. And then he took her in his arms for a goodnight kiss. He left, promising he’d be back to see Henry Francis.
She stood in the open doorway as he drove off. It was still foggy and all the lights except the single night lamp on the stairs seem to be out in the old house. Will had not wanted to talk with Roger but had merely used it as an excuse so he had not gone in. In all likelihood Roger had already had his final brandy of the evening and was in bed.

Just as she was going to close the door she heard the moan. It was a feminine moan, almost a banshee wail and it seemed to come from the cluster of small bushes across the lawn. All sorts of frightening ideas crossed her mind. She moved outside again hesitantly and listened as above the wash of the distant waves the moan came again. Descending the steps, she went a short distance across the lawn and peered through the veil of fog in the direction of the bushes. There was a movement and then she saw the blurred face and figure of Stella take shape.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The shadowy presence wreathed in the swirling mist caused Victoria to freeze in sheer horror. Unable to speak or move, she stood staring at the wan, ghostly face. And then the bushes swayed and with another mournful wail the figure melted into the night. At the same time Victoria was grasped roughly by strong hands that drew her backward. She uttered a strangled cry of terror.

Things happened at a rapid pace. Even as she struggled to free herself from the cruel grip of her unknown assailant she was conscious of the sound of an approaching car and the beam of headlights gradually growing stronger. All at once she was released and as she collapsed weakly on the wet grass of the lawn she heard the sound of running footsteps in retreat on the gravel of the driveway.

“Victoria!” It was Will’s voice, loud and agitated, as he came hurriedly to her. He bent down and lifted her up a little. “Are you all right?”
She nodded weakly.
"I started away and something told me I had left too soon," he said as he helped her on her feet where she stood swaying for a moment and then leaned against him for support. "Who was it?"
Victoria shook her head. "I don't know."
"What brought you out here again?"
"I saw a ghost."
"A ghost!" His tone was touched with annoyance.
She looked up at him with frightened eyes. "I did, Will. Truly I did. I saw Stella again. This time she was standing by the bushes. She moaned. That was what caught my attention and brought me out here."
He frowned. "Someone deliberately baited a trap for you."
She crossed the back of her hand wearily over her eyes.
"I don't know. I only know Stella appeared in those bushes."

Impatience showed in Will's voice as he glanced around.
"Whatever you saw was some kind of illusion, be sure of that." With his arm around her trembling body, he continued, "I'll get you inside and then take a look around the place."

"I heard someone running off down the driveway as you came," she said as he gently led her toward the stairs.
"It looks as if your attacker of last night came back for another try," he said.
"But what about Stella? I know I saw her."
"You heard someone moaning in the bushes and probably imagined the rest. Then whoever lured you out there skirted around and grabbed you from behind."
"There was more to it than that," she insisted.
"I very much doubt it," Will said grimly.

Before he could reach to open the door it swung back and Elizabeth Stoddard stood revealed in dressing gown. She regarded them with concern and amazement.
"I heard the noise outside," she said. "What has been going on?"

Will Grant went in with Victoria, his arm still around her for support. His handsome face was stern as he told
the older woman, "Someone tried to attack Victoria again."

Elizabeth closed the door against the cold and fog and stared at them incredulously. "No! Not again!"

"I'm afraid so," Will said. "If I hadn't turned the car and come back I don't care to think what might have happened."

"I was worried about your going to the village tonight," Elizabeth said solicitously.

"Everything was fine until I got back here," Victoria said, finding her voice.

"You take care of her," Will ordered Elizabeth. "I'm going back outside to see what I can find."

Victoria gave him a pleading glance. "Be careful! And you will return before you leave?"

He nodded. "Don't worry. I'll be back." And he went out into the foggy night again.

It was Elizabeth who placed an arm around her now and led her along the dimly lighted corridor to the back parlor, where she gently pushed Victoria into an easy chair. "I'm going to get you some warm tea. You're trembling dreadfully."

Victoria was too miserable to protest. She had reached the stage where things went on around her and she simply sat in a kind of daze and allowed them to happen. She was worried for Will Grant out there in the darkness, and she tried to convince herself that there were no such things as ghosts.

Yet the wan face of the dead Stella had come back more than once now to haunt her. Why had Stella singled her out? Could it be because she was now the one whom Ernest loved? Had the lovely phantom returned from the grave to fight for the affections of the young violinist? These and other equally eerie questions tormented her.

She sat mute in the shadowed room, almost unconscious of her surroundings. Nor did she hear the gentle step of Elizabeth as she returned with the tea tray. Not until the older woman appeared before her and placed the tray on the table in the center of the room did she realize she had come back.
Elizabeth poured her a cup of the steaming amber liquid and added a dab of cream. "I've made it strong," she said, handing it to her. "It will help rid you of that chill."

Reaching for the cup and saucer, Victoria saw how her hands trembled. She began to sip the hot liquid. It did help.

"What really happened?" Elizabeth asked, standing by her.

Victoria closed her eyes. "I don't really know."

The older woman frowned. "Will spoke of an attack on you. I hope he was wrong. It would really be too much."

"Someone did come after me. But the car returned and he ran off."

"What ever made you go out there alone?" Elizabeth asked in a peevish voice. "Didn't Will Grant see you safely inside?"

She nodded. "Yes. He left me in the doorway. I waited to watch him drive away."

There was a pause as she hesitated. Elizabeth said, "Well?"

"I didn't come in. I heard something from the bushes."

Elizabeth stared at her. "What did you hear?"

"A kind of wailing sound or a moan. It was a terrifying cry, like someone in pain. A woman's cry! I was afraid someone was in trouble. So I went out."

"And what was it? Likely some animal howling."

Victoria glanced up at her with a fear-stricken gleam in her eyes. "No. I saw something else."

The older woman's face was set in grim lines. "Yes?"

"I saw the ghost again. Stella's ghost!"

"Nonsense! It must have been your nerves."

"I really did see it."

Victoria insisted unhappily. "And then it went away."

"Don't ask me to accept a story like that," Elizabeth said bitterly. "and please don't spread this wild story around."

She glanced toward the door, looking angry and bewildered. "I suppose you've already confided in Will."
"I had to tell him. He was mixed up in part of it."
"Tell no one else," Elizabeth said. "They'll not believe you and it will only lead to needless trouble."
Victoria studied her over the steaming cup of tea. "Then you don't believe I'm telling the truth either."
The older woman drew her robe tightly around her in an exasperated gesture. "Of course I think you're trying to be truthful, but you've had another bad scare and you're terribly mixed up."
"You have done nothing about last night!" It was an accusation.
Elizabeth looked unhappy but she drew herself up proudly. "Are you suggesting I have neglected your welfare?"
"It would have been better to call the police. Will thinks so, too."
"Will does not know my problems," Elizabeth said waspishly. "Nor do you." Her tone softened as she sank down in a chair opposite her and went on, "I do mean to protect you. Please believe that."
Victoria was bitter. "You don't seem to be in any hurry to begin."
Elizabeth twisted her hands nervously. "It's all so mixed up. Henry Francis arriving and then all this starting. I don't want him to leave and I'm almost sure he will if he hears any more silly stories."
Victoria wanted to say that it was no silly story, but she felt it would get her nowhere. So instead she asked, "Has Mr. Francis returned?"
"He came an hour or so ago and went straight to the apartment," the older woman said mournfully. "I didn't have any opportunity of speaking with him."
There were the sounds of footsteps approaching down the corridor and then Will entered the back parlor. Victoria could tell by his expression that his search had yielded nothing.
He said, "No sign of a soul. And I can't say for sure the grass was trampled enough to indicate anyone was hiding in the bushes." He frowned. "It's pretty frustrating."
“You see,” Elizabeth said. “It’s not so easy to find out what’s behind all this.”

Will Grant turned directly to Victoria. “I’ve been thinking,” he said.

“Yes?”

“About Paul Caine. He was badly upset when I insisted on driving you home. I wonder where he is right now.”

Victoria saw what he was getting at. She shook her head. “It couldn’t have been he. He wouldn’t have had time.”

Will appeared unconvinced. “I don’t know,” he said. “I drove back slowly and took the long way. You’ll remember we talked a good deal.”

“But at the best he would have had to drive Nora home first and that would have taken a lot of time. I don’t think he could have possibly been here ahead of us.”

“He might not have taken her home,” Will pointed out. “He might have rushed out of the place as soon as we left. That would have given him the extra time.”

“Nora will know,” she said, still dubious.

“And I’ll find out,” Will Grant said. He stood awkwardly for a moment. “I suppose I may as well start back to the village. There is nothing more I can do here.”

Elizabeth stood up. “And it is getting very late. We all need our rest.”

Victoria rose. “Thank you, Will,” she said with genuine gratitude. “It was lucky for me you got the idea to return.”

“I didn’t stay long enough in the first place,” he said. “This time go straight upstairs and to bed.” He turned to Elizabeth. “I count on you to see that she does.”

They went to the door with Will and then Elizabeth locked it and escorted her up to the door of her room. She said, “You’ll be all right now. And please believe that I am your friend.”

“Thank you,” Victoria said quietly, wondering if Elizabeth was only saying what she thought were the proper words of comfort. She doubted if there was real sincerity behind them.

They exchanged goodnights and Victoria went into her
room. She was now at the point where she wondered if she should remain on in Collins House. Never before had she been so frightened, so certain that someone in the great house planned to kill her. And yet she could think of no motive for her murder unless it was a matter of jealousy, or perhaps someone thought she knew more of the secrets of the house than she did.

She could not come to terms with Will’s suggestion that Paul Caine was behind it all, any more than she could believe that he was a criminal. She was certain he wouldn’t have had time to get to the estate before they did, even though Will had taken longer than usual in making the drive back.

She intended to talk to Henry Francis at the first opportunity and learn what she could about the incidents in Philadelphia. Perhaps she might come upon some clue that would help solve the mystery she was facing and the danger. She hoped so.

It was a full half-hour before she had changed for bed and creamed her face and throat. And still her nerves were in a highly upset state. Before turning off the lights in her room she went over and opened one of the casement windows and stared down at the lawn through the foggy night. She fixed her gaze on the bushes where she had thought she’d seen Stella’s ghost, but there was no hint of the unusual there now.

Had it been a hallucination induced by the wail that had first caught her attention and made her terror-stricken? Will had thought so. But he had not twice witnessed the wan face that so matched that of Stella’s in the snapshot. Try as she might she could not dismiss the apparition lightly. There had to be some answer.

She did not sleep well that night. And not even the sight of one of the summer’s rare bright mornings did much to cheer her up. When she went down to breakfast Roger was in the dining room helping himself from the buffet that Elizabeth always set out. He glanced around as she entered the room and gave her the nod of a surly child.

She said, “At last we have a lovely day.”

Roger moved to the table with a plate of toast and his
cup of coffee. "Not much pleasure in it," he observed grumpily as he seated himself in his regular place. "Not the way things are going here."

She filled her glass with orange juice and turned to him with a small smile. "You're having problems?"

He frowned. "Francis came in last night and when I tried to be friendly with him, he snubbed me. I asked him if I might invite Rachel out in the cruiser and he snapped off my head and went straight upstairs."

Victoria said, "Did he get back early?"

"No. It was fairly late." Roger said. "Where were you? I didn't see you around the entire evening."

She sat down with her cereal, wondering whether he was just putting on a show for her benefit or if he was really curious. She still counted him high on her list of suspects and wondered how much he knew about the events on the lawn.

She said, "I went into the village. I didn't get back until after everyone else had gotten in."

"You're lucky Elizabeth doesn't lay down strict rules for you as well," he said sulkily. "You'd think I was some kind of dangerous maniac and that Rachel was a teen-ager, the way she and Francis behave toward me."

"I think he's chiefly concerned about Dorothy," Victoria suggested. "He thinks you're apt to take too much of Rachel's attention."

"I'd be willing to take Dorothy out for a trip on the water as well," Roger said generously.

Victoria gave him a hopeless glance. "I really don't think she's well enough, do you?"

He scowled and drained his cup of coffee. "Who can tell?" he said, rising to go to the sideboard and pour himself another from the big silver percolator that was a standard fixture there. "The way they keep her hidden up there most of the time."

"She does need rest and quiet."

"So I've been told," Roger said sarcastically, returning with his second coffee. "I don't see that Elizabeth has the right to make all the rest of us miserable by turning this place into a nursing home."

She gave him a smile. "Not that you don't approve
of the nursing staff,” she said, rising to get her own toast and coffee.

He grunted. “Rachel is all right. But she’s a deep one. So is that father of hers. Retired stockbroker! I think he’s a bluff! I wouldn’t be surprised if he was hard up and that he deliberately planned to land the three of them here. I’ve never known Elizabeth to be an easy mark before, but she’s certainly let herself in for a headache this time.”

Victoria returned to the table again. “What makes you think Henry Francis isn’t what he pretends to be?”

Roger regarded her haughtily. “Because I can tell a gentleman! I’ve met a good many. He doesn’t ring true. And he seems to be on edge all the time. Last night when he came back he was a nervous wreck.”

“Perhaps he just struck you that way because of his attitude toward you,” she suggested.

“Don’t downgrade me like Elizabeth,” Roger said with annoyance. “I can tell when someone is upset and last night he came back here in a regular sweat. He was ready to blow up and of course when I mentioned Rachel it set off the fuse.”

She stared down at her steaming coffee. “He’s under a continual strain with Dorothy. Perhaps he was worried, being away, and wondering if Rachel was looking after her properly.”

“Now you sound like Elizabeth,” he said. “She can always find excuses for his behavior, but she doesn’t go out of her way to try and understand me.” He looked at her. “You know the trouble I’ve had. The mess my marriage turned out. I’m not a happy man.”

Victoria found herself embarrassed. “You have David and a good position with the firm,” she said. “And you know that Elizabeth is devoted to you.”

“I wonder,” he said, an odd look on his weakly handsome face. “Or is she just using me?”

“Mrs. Stoddard is not always easy to understand,” Victoria said, fixing her eyes on him. “She promised to look into the attack on me the other night and she’s done nothing about it yet. I’m certain she hasn’t even spoken to Morgan.” She could have added that there had been
a second incident, but she didn’t. She was trying to see if Roger might again let slip some information as he had before. Perhaps he knew about last night without her having to tell him.

He touched his napkin hastily to his lips. Then he said, “There can be no doubt you were the victim of some intruder. Rachel shouldn’t have left the door open.”

“I wonder if it was a stranger.” Victoria’s eyes met his. “It could’ve been someone on the estate.”

“I’m sure no one here could do such a thing,” he said, rising hastily.

“I wish I could feel the same way,” she said.

He moved quickly to the door and only paused to turn and say, “Perhaps you might like to go out in the cruiser with me if you get a little free time.”

“I imagine I’ll be busy today,” she said, although she didn’t expect to be. But Roger’s invitation had come so quickly after she’d mentioned the attack she was on guard. The cruiser could so easily be the scene of an accident. She was hesitant to go out on the water with him alone.

He nodded. “You can let me know.” And he made a hasty exit.

She finished her breakfast alone. Once again Roger had shown himself in a suspicious light and she began to think of him as a prime suspect in the happenings that were disturbing Collins House. Will Grant had been angry with Elizabeth last night and he’d made it clear he intended to investigate the attacks, whether she did or not. He had also promised he would find out whether Paul had left Nora at once or had stayed on with her at the Blue Whale.

Roger’s remarks about Henry Francis had also made an impression on her. And she was willing to agree with him that there was something distinctly strange about the trio. It could be that he was right in saying Francis was not as financially secure as he pretended and part of the falseness in their behavior could be put down to the fact they were engaged in a kind of fraud. She knew that although Elizabeth had offered them the apartment on a rental basis, the wealthy head of the Collins clan would
not accept payment from a friend when it came time to
settle accounts.

Henry Francis himself was a perplexing figure. She
could not say with the finality that Roger had displayed
that he was not a gentleman. Yet she had a feeling of
uneasiness in his presence. He was a magnetic person
and his eyes held you with a weird fascination. He always
seemed able to read your thoughts. And yet he, himself,
ever appeared to relax. She could not imagine what sort
of young man he had been. Elizabeth apparently had
been very fond of him in those days and perhaps still
saw him with the eyes of her youth, but Victoria felt life
had changed him a great deal over the years. And she
wondered if the change had been for the better.

Since she was the last one downstairs for breakfast
she gathered the dirty dishes up afterwards and took them
to the kitchen. She had only been there a few minutes
when Elizabeth joined her. She thought the attractive
older woman looked pale and drawn.

“I’ve been speaking with Morgan,” she told Victoria
at once. “I thoroughly questioned him about the other
night. And last night as well.” She paused. “I’m afraid
he doesn’t know anything.”

“I expected that,” she said, pausing in drying a cup.
“Of course he would hardly come right out and confess,
in any case.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I realize that. And I took it into
consideration as I questioned him. He can be surly, but
that is only because of his devotion to me and the family.
I believe he is innocent in the matter.”

“Thank you for trying,” Victoria said, although she
felt this was only a move on Elizabeth’s part to put her
off. Knowing that Will Grant had promised to take action,
she had gone ahead with this gesture.

“I still have something else in mind,” Elizabeth said,
her tone hinting that she had other information unknown
to Victoria.

“Will Grant should turn up here sometime today,” Vic-
toria said. “Perhaps he’ll discover something.”

Elizabeth hustled herself putting the dishes up on their
shelves. “I wouldn’t count too much on it,” she said.
With the dishes done, Elizabeth suggested she take the balance of the morning off for reading or whatever she wanted to do. There was little to occupy her in the old mansion these days. Her position as companion to the older woman was not demanding and if it had not been for the strange series of happenings she would have enjoyed an excellent rest.

Leaving the kitchen, she went along the corridor that led to the front of the house. She thought she would go for a walk but first wanted to find out how warm it was, so she could dress accordingly. Sometimes, even on days with bright sunshine like this, the breeze from the ocean could be unexpectedly cold.

Opening the massive oak door that guarded the entrance of Collins House, she went out on the steps to stand in the blazing rays of the morning sun. At once she knew she would need no sweater; it was a lovely warm day. She decided to change to her bathing suit and put on a light terry robe over it. She could walk for a little and afterward go down to the beach and have a swim before lunch.

Just as she was about to turn and go in she caught a flash of a figure moving about in the area of the bushes, the very spot where she had seen what she'd taken as the ghost of Stella Hastings last night. It was Matt Morgan, on his knees as if digging up some weeds or perhaps trimming the bushes. His back was to her as she watched with troubled eyes. She couldn't help wondering why he should be there.

She would have liked to go over and watch him at close range, but knowing how moody he was and that he disliked her, she decided this would not be wise. With a sigh she turned and reluctantly went into the cool, shadowed foyer and closed the door after her. Then she started upstairs.

The big house was silent as the tomb. It was like this much of the time since the young people had gone on vacation. She guessed that Roger had already left to take out his beloved cruiser, and Elizabeth would likely still be in the kitchen or in her own room upstairs. The chilling shadows of the stairs and hallway were in strong contrast to the warmth and brilliance of the outdoors. A
small shiver passed through her and she felt anxious to change and get away from the brooding mansion.

She had reached the landing and was heading for the door of her room when she heard the strangled cry and then a thudding sound as though someone had fallen. It came from the corridor leading to the rear of the house and the apartment. Without hesitating she wheeled around and ran in the direction from which the sounds had seemed to come.

Because of the perpetual shadows in the long corridor she was not able to see what had happened for a moment. Then she was greeted by a sight that brought consternation to her pretty face. Stretched out full length on the hardwood floor of the narrow hallway was the invalid, Dorothy Francis!

And as she came close to the fallen girl she saw a reaching hand open and close convulsively. The blonde raised herself just a fraction from the floor, only to fall on her face again after a second. Now Victoria was beside her and on her knees to help.

The dark glasses had tumbled off and when she tried to turn the invalid over she saw her thin, pale lips quiver as if she might try to speak. But her eyes were closed and her body seemed to have gone limp.

“What is happening here!” It was Henry Francis who spoke in an angry voice directly behind her.

“I heard her,” Victoria said over her shoulder, looking up into his livid face. “She must have walked a little and fallen.”

“Let me see her!” Henry Francis said harshly and pushed her away from the stricken girl as he knelt beside her. “This is the result of more of Rachel’s neglect,” he said grimly as he examined her.

“I had no idea she was able to walk,” Victoria said.

“Just a little at times,” Henry Francis said as he gathered his daughter up in his arms. “Another reason why she should never be left unattended. She might have gotten as far as the stairs and killed herself.” He started back to the open door of the apartment.

Victoria picked up Dorothy’s glasses and followed, saying, “Is she all right?”
Henry Francis made no answer but went forward to the bedroom of the apartment with his burden. Rachel had appeared and was standing watching after him with a frightened look. Victoria had never seen her so abject since her arrival.

Victoria went into the living room of the apartment and approached her. “I have Dorothy’s glasses here,” she said, holding them out. “Do you think she was hurt?”

Rachel turned to her with fear still written plainly in her expression. “She’ll be all right,” she said very quietly. “I’ll take the glasses. You had better go before he comes out. He’s in an ugly mood.”

The girl’s manner was so urgent Victoria did not question her. She handed her the glasses and turned and left the apartment. No sooner had she stepped outside than the door was closed behind her.

She started down the long dark corridor to her own room. The house was silent again. And for some reason impossible for her to explain she felt physically ill. The tension and horror of the past few minutes had actually nauseated her.

CHAPTER NINE

It took some time for Victoria to recover from the disturbing experience. Even after she had changed and started for the beach in her robe and bathing suit she was still not herself. There had been something sickening, even sinister, about her discovery of the ailing girl in the corridor. Combined with this there had been the strangely harsh behavior of Henry Francis and Rachel’s terrified manner—Rachel, who would be the target for her father’s rage over the incident.

As she walked across the lawn she almost found herself feeling sorry for the willful redhead. She noted that Morgan had disappeared during her stay upstairs; the area by the bushes was completely deserted. She hesitated and then, glancing toward the house to be sure that she was not being watched, she went across to the spot where she had seen him on his knees.
The bushes were set out in an orderly row that reached above her head and were planted in a depth of perhaps three or four feet to form a barrier between the ocean and that section of the grounds. At one time they had been ornamental, perhaps, but now they were wild and scraggly in growth. Moving closer, she tried to see what Morgan had been doing, but there was no evidence of his gardener’s trowel having turned up any earth. She peered at the short grass for signs of trampling by alien feet but it was cut too close to leave any indication if someone had stood there. And then, just as she was about to leave, she caught the gleam of something hanging to the bushes. She reached down and found a tiny silver earring shaped like a leaf.

She stared at it for a moment, aware that she would never have discovered it but for a vagrant ray of the sun in exactly the right spot. Was this what Matt Morgan had been seeking? Why? A frightening thought came to mind. Had it belonged to Stella? Stella, whom she had seen standing here last night? But phantoms didn’t wear real earrings nor lose them in the grass.

Slipping the earring in the pocket of her terry robe, she moved on to the winding path that led down the hill to the wharf and the small beach beyond it. She would need to find out who the silver earring belonged to before she would know its full significance. But she was sure it had a meaning and she was reasonably certain that someone had sent Matt Morgan out to search for it.

Her mind went back to the frightened Rachel and she wondered what was happening in the musty-smelling apartment in the rear of Collins House. She could not help but agree with Roger that his sister had made a serious mistake in taking these people in. There was a taint about the strangers that marked them as beyond the pale. She couldn’t fully understand why she felt this way, but she did. She hoped that Henry Francis would not do anything cruel and senseless in punishing Rachel. And she knew he might be capable of any extreme in his insane anger.

It was another shadow hovering over the old house that had more than its share of tragedy. Reaching the
wharf she saw that the cruiser was gone. Roger must have taken it out alone. He often did. She stared out at the rippling silver waves extending to the horizon and tried to see if his craft might still be in sight. But although she spotted a number of pleasure craft, including a group of small sailboats with a galaxy of white and blue, white and red, and yellow and green sails making a delightful picture on the calm ocean water, she did not see any that looked like the familiar cabin cruiser. She decided Roger had gone down along the shore.

Going on to the beach, she took off her robe and went to the water’s edge. It didn’t seem too cold. Deciding to take the plunge at once, she waded slowly into the water and soon was enjoying a refreshing swim. When she emerged fifteen minutes later she toweled herself and stretched out on the robe to sun herself. In her yellow bikini she luxuriated in the warmth of the brilliant sun.

At once she relaxed and drifted in a state close to sleep. She found herself wondering about Ernest and where he might be. She had not received his regular letter yet and she now realized it was a few days overdue. This was unusual. Once he had been caught on a tour of the Southwest with no time to write and instead had sent her a telegram. But there had been no telegram this time. She wished that he might surprise her by suddenly showing up at the estate but guessed this was too much to hope for.

In a way she was glad Henry Francis and his daughters had not rented Ernest’s big yellow and white mansion, which had been closed so long. Secretly she hoped that one day she and the violinist might be married and open it again as their home. By that time he would surely have been healed of the bitter memories of his dead wife, Elaine. At least she hoped so. The idea of the unhappy Francis family being in the house did not appeal to her. She preferred that it remain empty.

Roger had said that he doubted Henry Francis ever seriously meant to rent Ernest’s place. He had used his negotiations as a means of contacting his friend of college days, Elizabeth, with the idea she would offer him part of Collins House. If that had been his plan, it had worked.
It was possible Francis was without money as well as hav-
ing the problem of the ailing Dorothy. If he were as
wealthy as he pretended, surely he would have hired a
special nurse for the girl rather than burden Rachel with
the constant care of her.

These thoughts lazily drifted through her mind until
she heard the sound of voices, male and female, and foot-
steps approaching down the path. She lifted herself on
an elbow and squinted to see who it was. With relief and
pleasure she saw that it was Will Grant and his cousin,
Nora. Nora was wearing a bathing suit and carrying a
robe and towel along with a beach bag, while Will was
dressed in a business suit of some light brown material.

Nora ran forward laughing and said, “I told Will this
is where we’d find you.”

Victoria sat up with a smile. “I see you’re dressed for
the occasion as well.”

The girl who resembled her so much slumped down
on the sand beside her. “Mother gave me a few hours off
and Will said he’d bring me over. I can take the shortcut
back along the cliffs.”

Will eyed her with a hint of worry. “You may save
time but its dangerous that way,” he said.

“Not for me,” Nora assured him as she arranged her
robe more carefully as a cushion. “I know every foot of
that path.”

“Those rocks can be slippery and there is a long drop
in a lot of places,” Will said. Then he knelt down by Vic-
toria. “How are you today?”

“All right,” she said. She didn’t want to burden him
with an account of the sick girl’s fall. It was a personal
thing, the distress she had felt over it.

“I like the bikini,” he said with a faint smile on his
handsome, tanned face, “but I think you look a little
weary.”

“I had a hard time getting to sleep,” she admitted.

“Not much wonder.”

“Why don’t you go back to your office?” Nora teased
him from her place on the sand. “He’s been making me
miserable all morning. Giving me the third degree about
Paul Caine.”

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Will frowned. "Surely you don't mind my asking a few questions?"

Nora was stretched out on her back to enjoy the sun with her dark glasses on. "Not if you don't ask them here!"

He gave Victoria a despairing glance. "My cousin has no respect for me and bad manners as well," he said in mock annoyance. "But I did find out some of the things I wanted to know."

"Such as?"

"Paul Caine did storm out of the Blue Whale last night and leave her flat!"

"So what!" Nora said wearily. "What does it prove, except that I have no appeal for the man?"

The glance Will gave Victoria told her he had not given his cousin any details about what had happened on the lawn last night. Thus Nora had no idea of the significance of Paul's departure so soon after they left. It meant that he could have taken a short cut to the estate and been there to attack her.

"He did leave just after us," Will said, looking directly at her.

"It still doesn't prove anything except that he was annoyed."

"I know that," Will said quietly.

Victoria studied his solemn face. "Yet you feel he's the one responsible."

"I'm reasonably certain," Will said. "And for the night before, as well. I still have some questions to ask at the house. I'd like to talk to this Francis and Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth is around somewhere," she said. "But I wouldn't bother Henry Francis today if I were you."

"Why not?" he asked.

She glanced at Nora, who did not seem to be listening to their conversation. "Dorothy had a bad spell this morning. He was very upset. I don't think you'd find him approachable now."

Will frowned. "I can't come running back here a half-dozen times a day."

"I doubt if he'd be able to contribute much anyway,"
Victoria said. “Why not confine your questions to Elizabeth today? And Morgan, if you like.”

He stood up. “We’ll see.”

She reached in the pocket of her robe and produced the earring. Holding it up for him to take, she said, “Another thing. I found this by the bushes. Where I thought I saw something last night.”

He took it from her and studied it. “Different!” was his comment. “Hard to say how long it may have been there.”

“Did you ever see any like it before?”

He smiled grimly. “I’m afraid I haven’t paid very close attention to earrings. It doesn’t mean anything to me.”

He gave it back to her.

“It could lead to someone,” she said.

Will shrugged. “And all it would actually prove would be someone walked across the lawn at that point and lost it. No crime in that.”

Victoria put it back in the pocket of her terry robe. “Just the same, I’m going to keep it.”

“By all means,” he said with a hint of impatience. “I’m going up to talk with Elizabeth then I’ve got to hurry back to town. I have a client coming to see me at noon.”

“When will I see you again?”

His hand was on her arm. “Soon,” he said. “And in the meantime take care. Be especially on the alert if Paul Caine shows up.”

“I think you’re wrong about him.”

“We’ll see,” he said and started back up the path.

Victoria followed after him a few steps and watched as he ascended the rather steep embankment. When he reached the top he turned to wave and she waved back. Then she returned to the beach and sat down by Nora.

The other girl was sitting up now, rubbing sun-tan lotion on herself. She gave Victoria a rueful smile. “Will has really got a thing about Paul, hasn’t he?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Nora patted a thick layer of lotion on her upper arm. “I’m sure Paul is quite harmless,” she said, “although he may not be much of an artist.”

“Will thinks he is only pretending to be an artist.”
"I don’t believe that. He spent a lot of money on supplies."

"He could have done that to establish himself."

"I doubt it," Nora argued, closing the bottle of lotion. "He’d be able to manage that by just coming into the shop and talking. He needn’t have spent all that money."

"Yet you haven’t seen any of his paintings."

"No."

"And Will deliberately led him on by talking about an artist called Greg Larsen living in Ellsworth. Paul claimed he knew him and his work. The truth is, there is no Greg Larsen."

Nora eyed her indignantly. "I’d call that a dirty trick. And it doesn’t prove a thing. Lots of times people claim to know persons just to be polite. I’ll bet that is what Paul was doing."

"You’re very anxious to defend him."

"I happen to like him," Nora said.

"Even though he is a phony?" Victoria asked.

Nora showed disdain. "I don’t believe that. He isn’t the type. And I’ll bet you don’t either."

Victoria sighed and stared out at the ocean. "Right now I’m not sure what I believe."

"Paul is crazy about you," Nora told her. "That’s why he got so mad when you dropped him for Will last night. Even though Will is my cousin, I say it wasn’t fair of you."

"I’m not asking for your judgment on the matter," Victoria said. She felt she had confided in Nora enough to make her aware of the danger they might be facing from Paul. She had no intention of telling her more.

"I’m offering it on general principles," Nora said.

Victoria gave her a pleading glance. "Please don’t let us quarrel about it," she said.

Nora laughed. "I have no intention of that. You’re my best friend and almost my only one of my own age here." She got up and brushed the sand from her. "I’m going in for a dip," she said, fastening down her bathing cap.

They remained until it was nearly one o’clock. Then Nora had to hurry back to work in the shop for the after-
noon and it was time for Victoria to go up to Collins House and have her lunch.
She told Nora, “Be careful when you take the shortcut. Remember what Will said.”
Nora laughed. “He’s always making a lot of nothing. I may come back and see you this evening.”
“I’d be glad to see you,” Victoria assured her. Nora hurried across the rocks for the shortcut and Victoria went on up the path Will had taken. His car was not in evidence when she reached the driveway so she decided he had finished his conversation with Elizabeth and gone on back to the village. She wondered if he had found out anything.
Elizabeth was just coming out of the living room when Victoria entered the foyer. The attractive woman looked pale and worried.
She said, “I wondered what was keeping you. Have you seen anything of Roger?”
“No. His boat was gone when I went down to the beach.”
“Probably he’ll stay out the day and get lunch somewhere along the coast,” Elizabeth said. “And I want to see him. Will Grant was just here and told me they’re looking for Roger down at the plant. He seems to think he can run his office without ever showing up there.”
Deciding it was a good opportunity to ask Elizabeth about the earring, she drew it out of her pocket and displayed it for her. “Do you recognize this?”
Elizabeth stared at it in surprise. “Where did you get it?”
“I found it on the lawn.”
“On the lawn!” the older woman repeated in a hushed voice.
“Is it yours?”
Elizabeth shook her head, still staring at the earring. “No,” she said. “It’s not mine.”
“But you do know who it belonged to?”
The older woman nodded. Her face was drawn as she said, “It was Stella Hastings’. I remember very well.”
Victoria’s heartbeat quickened. “I found it by the
bushes where I thought I saw her last night,” she said quietly.

“But that’s nonsense!” Elizabeth protested. “I’m sure it must have been there for a long time. Stella probably lost it before she died. It has lain there all this while waiting to be found.”

“I wonder,” she said, returning it to her pocket.

“But that has to be it.”

“It makes the most convenient explanation,” Victoria agreed. “But I’m not sure that I’m ready to accept it.” She went on up to her own room to change for luncheon, leaving a pale and speechless Elizabeth apprehensively watching her go.

She wasted no time in taking a shower and slipping on a thin print summer dress. All the while she thought about the earring and Elizabeth’s reaction to it. She knew the older woman had been startled and she felt she had deliberately lied, or at least tried to mislead her, when she’d claimed the earring had been lost before Stella died. She didn’t believe it.

Luncheon was a quick and quiet affair and since Elizabeth had no special duties for her afterward, she went out to sit on one of the benches on the front lawn. She had only been there a few minutes when Henry Francis came striding out of the house in gray flannels and blue blazer. The retired stockbroker saw her and at once crossed the lawn to where she was seated.

“I’m glad I found you, Miss Winters,” he said. “I’d like a few minutes with you.”

Victoria glanced up at him with a growing feeling of dislike for the difficult-tempered man. “Yes?” she said with cool politeness.

The flat, almost handsome face showed embarrassment. “I hope you didn’t get any wrong impressions this morning.”

“Why should I?”

“I was too worried about Dorothy to be completely rational. By the time I had her safely in bed and made sure she was all right, you had left the house.”

“There was no need for explanations,” she said.

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“Rachel told me she thought you were badly upset by what happened. She thought I should speak to you.”

“It was a dreadful thing,” she admitted, staring up at his troubled face. “It seems to me you’re taking a great risk in not having a doctor see her.”

“There is no need,” he said quickly. “The fall did her no harm. And her condition would remain the same whether I had a doctor come by regularly or not.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Henry Francis drew himself up with a touch of annoyance. “I have already spent thousands on the best specialists for her. I happen to know her problem better than you.”

“That may be,” Victoria said reluctantly. “But it is disquieting to have an invalid in the house and know she is getting no medical care.”

“Mrs. Stoddard has not complained.”

“It may be that she will,” Victoria told him. “She is a very precise person and while she has shown great latitude with you, I think there will be a limit.”

His piercing eyes met hers. “You talk as if you think I am neglecting Dorothy,” he said. “I do not appreciate your tone nor your insinuations.”

“I am being perfectly frank with you.”

“I hope you will not make such statements about me to Mrs. Stoddard,” he said. “You are not being fair.”

“I intend to be honest,” Victoria told him firmly. “And I also think you are expecting far too much from Rachel, and treating her too harshly.”

“Rachel and I understand each other,” he said.

“I wonder. I have never seen her so frightened as she was this morning. I hope you didn’t take your anger out on her, as she undoubtedly expected you to.”

His smile was coldly sarcastic. “I can assure you I have not abused her.”

“Mental cruelty can be a dreadful thing. Even more sinister than physical violence.”

“I am well aware of that.”

“Then I should think you’d be more considerate of her,” Victoria said.

“I can promise you I take excellent care of both my
daughters,” Henry Francis said. “And I do not look for advice from outsiders. It seems to me, Miss Winters, you are setting yourself up against me.”

She shrugged. “I can’t help if you want to assume so.”

“I wonder that you feel capable of giving so much criticism of other people,” he went on hotly, “when it appears you know so little about yourself.”

Victoria got up from the bench. “What do you mean by that?”

The man in the blue blazer and flannels hesitated a moment, seeming to know he had gone too far. “I shouldn’t have spoken that way,” he apologized. “I heard some gossip—you don’t know who your parents are. You were brought up in a foundling home.”

“I don’t think that is any of your business,” she said scathingly.

He gestured placatingly. “I agree with you,” he said penitently. “I’m sorry I ever brought that up. I had no right to.” He ran his hand down his cheek. “When I’m bothered about Dorothy I want to fight the whole world. I can only ask your forgiveness.”

“It is all right,” Victoria said quietly, feeling his quick about-face was not sincere, that he still violently resented her.

He lingered on to say, “Have you seen any more of that young man from the village? I mean the artist who calls himself Paul Caine.”

“His name is Paul Caine, as far as I know,” she said. “I saw him in the village last night.”

“I’m still not sure about him,” Henry Francis said. “In fact, he has been bothering me, along with Dorothy. I keep wondering about him and whether he can possibly be that fellow from Philadelphia. I know the chances are all against it. Still, you never can be sure.”

“I have found nothing wrong with him,” she said. She hoped this would silence him on the matter.

He looked back at the great dark house and then turned to her awkwardly. “There is one other thing. The question of ghosts. Until I came here I would have sworn such things did not exist.”

She wondered what he was getting at. “And now?”
“Now I don’t know!”
“Why do you say that?”
He looked directly at her. “You have spoken of seeing the face of a girl named Stella Hastings, who came to a mysterious death on the cliffs here.”
“No one believes me,” she told him.
“Perhaps I do,” he said.
“Why?”
“Because I have seen a figure in the corridor several times. I have heard the sound of footsteps and the rustle of skirts, but never have I been able to get a close look at whoever it is. And then I have heard crying from behind the locked door of a room which Elizabeth has assured me is empty. Which has, in fact, been empty for years.”
“So?”
His face was grimly pale. “So I have had to alter my opinions. I am ready to believe with you that Collins House is haunted. I think the spirit of Stella Hastings may well walk its corridors.”
Victoria was astounded at his words and manner. Yet she felt sure he was playing a part to influence her for some reason. She said, “I hope you are not making light of my fears, Mr. Francis.”
He raised a hand. “Believe me, no! I am speaking as I feel and Rachel agrees with me. We do not feel this is a happy house. There is a darkness over it. If Dorothy were not in such a pitiful state we would not remain here for another day.”
Victoria gave him a scornful look. “If you feel like that, don’t you think you should leave anyway?”
Again the cold gleam of hatred showed in his penetrating eyes. “I could well ask the same question of you.”
“But I do not have to answer,” she told him and walked quickly away. Nor did she turn back to see his reaction. She was angry and unable to conceal it. She thought Henry Francis had gone too far in bringing Stella into the discussion for his own devious reasons.
She was well along the footpath before she glanced back in the direction of Collins House and saw that he had vanished. She decided that she could keep quiet no
longer. When she next saw Elizabeth she would tell her exactly what she thought about Francis and risk her anger. She felt that he was a definite threat to the peace of the household. And while she had great sympathy for Dorothy, and even for the arrogant Rachel, she knew it would be better if they were rid of all three of them.

She continued along the footpath to the high point of the cliffs. It had been several days since she had been up there. It was a walk that seemed to have a strange fascination for her. When she came to the point she stood for long moments staring out at the ocean. Some distance out she saw what she was sure was Roger’s cruiser.

It would be fortunate if it should be. She decided to watch and see if he came in toward the wharf. If he did she would hurry back and tell him about the message from the office. If he rushed he could get down a half-hour before closing time and look after any urgent matters. But the cabin cruiser seemed to be making little progress as she studied it. Rather, it seemed to merely be drifting with the tide. Tiring of watching it and not even sure it was Roger’s boat, she continued along the path as it took a downward curve.

She had only gone a short distance when she halted and stared ahead in surprise. There was Paul Caine sketching at his easel. She had not expected to see him and so the meeting came as a shock.

He waved to her. “You’re just in time to see my new masterpiece,” he said.

Victoria stepped up to the easel and studied the rough charcoal sketch. It was a very good drawing of the rocky shore below with the waves breaking over the boulders and making a high spray.

“I like it,” she said sincerely.

“Wait until I finish it,” he said.

Victoria looked at Paul with new interest. She felt happier about him than she had since their initial meeting, for now she saw there was no truth in Will’s theory that Paul was not really an artist.

“I didn’t know you were here,” Victoria said. “When did you come over?”
“About a couple of hours ago,” he told her. “I saw you and Nora on the beach.”

“Why didn’t you come down and speak to us?”

He gave her a mocking smile. “I wasn’t sure you’d want to see me. You were in a big enough hurry to get away from me last night. I can’t understand you at all, Victoria. When we first met I thought it was going to mean something. Then you ran out on me with that stuffy lawyer friend of yours last night and now I just don’t know.”

“Just let it go at that,” she said wearily.

“Not me,” he told her and seizing her, swung her around facing him.

“Paul!” she said, staring up at him with frightened surprise. There was a strange dark look of intensity on his normally good-humored face.

“I think I’m in love with you, Victoria,” he said in a taut voice. “I want us to have a chance.”

“You’re talking wildly,” she protested, wincing from the grip of his hands.

His smile was bitter. “So now I’m talking wildly. Well, maybe I should have my turn.” He made no move to release her. “What about us, Victoria?”

“I’m not in love with you,” she gasped. “I never have been. I don’t know what gave you the idea. Please let me go!”

His answer was to draw her to him and, in spite of her struggles, press his lips to hers so fiercely and so lingeringly that she groaned from the pain. With uncalled-for roughness he released her and she stumbled back a step, staring up at him with awed eyes.

“If you had any spirit or imagination I could show you something about love,” he said with a mocking smile. He no longer seemed the crew-cut innocent. It was as if she was seeing the real Paul Caine for the first time.

She shook her head. “I don’t want to see you again!” she said. “Don’t try to talk to me ever!”

His glance was derisive. “You’ll change your mind.”

“Don’t count on it,” she said, regaining some of her confidence but careful to keep several paces from him.
"And if you come back on the grounds of the estate again, I'll see that Mrs. Stoddard has Morgan deal with you."

"So it's threats now," he said.

"I mean it," Victoria said, her face flushed and her breath coming fast in her anger. "I accepted you as a friend and you've abused the privilege."

He gave a small, bitter laugh. "You talk like a character in Louisa May Alcott. You better get with it, kid. Look around and see how people are living."

"I'm not interested in your sort of people!"

He spread his hands. "So I made a mistake. Forget it!"

"You forget me!" She hurried up the path toward the point and Collins House again. Angry tears blurred her eyes as she hurried along the footpath. She found it hard to believe that Paul Caine had turned out so badly.

As she neared Collins House she regained enough of her composure to find the thought of Stella's image tormenting her again. She had come near the bushes where the apparition of Stella had presented itself the other night and suddenly realized that she could be ignoring the most obvious explanation for all the strange visitations. Stella's unhappy spirit could be abroad within the shadowed walls of Collins House and on the lawns where once she had walked in life. It was fantastic and frightening but so were many other things.

Life offered mysteries on all sides and there were not always mundane answers to explain them. All through the history of mankind there had been witness to the reality of a spirit world. History and folklore were filled with reference to demons, witches and ghosts. Could all this evidence be ignored and put down merely as superstition? Or was there another dimension generally not admitted except among those close in the same circle, discussed in hushed tones privately, denied in public and yet so apparent as to have endured down through the centuries?

It was a maddening question and one she could not hope to answer for herself. She did not want to believe in that ghostly dimension, but everything that was taking place here in this fear-shrouded old estate was gradually leading her in that direction—into the fog of the spirit
world, which seemed almost as real as wraith-like mists that so often encircled the gloomy old Collins House.

She was on the front lawn and close to the main entrance when she saw Roger coming her way from the direction of the wharf. So he had finally gotten back. He was dressed in white trousers and shirt, the shirt open at the neck. He looked exactly what he was, a wealthy playboy.

She waited for him and as he came up to her she said, "It's too bad you didn't get in a half-hour ago. You are wanted at the office. But it will be closed now."

Roger stood puffing from the exertions of climbing the path. He was not in the best physical shape, she thought. Too many brandies after dinner.

He looked unhappy. "I suppose Elizabeth will start a row about it," he said. "I went farther down the coast than I intended and so it took me longer to get back."

He sighed. "Well, I'll get down there first thing in the morning."

"You had better," she agreed.

Looking as if he wanted to change to a pleasanter subject, he said, "Have you seen Rachel today?"

"Not since morning," she told him. "Dorothy hasn't been well and it has apparently kept Rachel in the apartment watching her."

He frowned. "Her father should do more of that instead of running all around the country."

Victoria said, "I agree. But I doubt if you can reason with him. He's not an easy person to talk to."

"I know," Roger said.

Victoria managed a smile. Remembering the earring, she reached in her pocket and brought it out. "Have you seen that before?"

He stared at the tiny object. "It belonged to Stella," he said, dumbfounded. "How do you happen to have it?"

"I discovered it in the grass by the bushes."

Roger frowned. "She must have lost it."

"But you do recognize it as having belonged to her?"

"Of course. She wore them often. I liked them."

"I see," Victoria said and put the earring away. She had begun to again wonder about Roger. She would have
thought him too male and unobservant to have remembered the earring so quickly. Indeed, she doubted if he had ever noticed them when Stella wore them. But he had admitted to rifling the dead girl's trunk in search of the bracelet he'd given her. Was it not possible he had also taken the earrings at the same time? And could he have been the one who had staged the grim little drama on the lawn that night and left the silver leaf behind to add to the hint of ghostly visitation?

Roger stared at her. "You've suddenly gone silent. What's bothering you?"

"Nothing," she said hastily. "I was just remembering some things."

He shook his head. "No wonder you're beginning to act strange. This place has the same effect on everyone. Who could have guessed that Elizabeth would have made a prisoner of herself here for eighteen years? These old walls exert a diabolical influence on anyone who comes within them!"

They went inside and almost as soon as they entered the hallway Elizabeth appeared from the living room to greet them. Victoria was surprised to note she was wearing a pale blue dress. It was the first time she had ever seen her in anything other than dark green or black. The blue set off her patrician beauty and she made a charming picture as she stood there studying them.

She gave Roger a mildly reproachful glance. "You know the office has been looking for you?"

He nodded. "Victoria just told me. I'll go in first thing in the morning."

"I should hope so." Elizabeth turned to Victoria. "Henry Francis had to leave a short time ago. He promised he'd be back by late this evening, but Rachel will be alone with her sister until then. I'd appreciate it if you'd stop by the apartment and offer to relieve the girl from her vigil for awhile."

Before Victoria could reply Roger spoke up. "Why not let me look in on her? I'm only too anxious to make myself useful."

"You can do that at the office in the morning," Elizabeth told him. "Please do as I asked, Victoria."
She went up the dark stairway with some misgivings. She was not at all sure Rachel would welcome her. Both the redhead and her father had not encouraged any of the others in the house to come to the apartment. She supposed this was for Dorothy’s protection. But she felt she must carry out Elizabeth’s instructions, so instead of going directly to her own room and changing for dinner she first made her way down the long shadowed corridor to the rear wing and the apartment.

She knocked gently on the door. As usual it was a time before she heard the sound of footsteps approaching. Rachel opened the door and she saw that she looked less tense than before but her pretty face still had a wan appearance.

“Yes?” she inquired with surprising politeness.

Victoria, feeling awkward, said, “Mrs. Stoddard asked me to come by. She knows you are alone and she’s worried that it might be difficult for you. I’ll be glad to stay with your sister for a while this evening if you’d like to go downstairs.”

Rachel raised her eyebrows. “That is very kind of you both,” she said carefully. “But it won’t be necessary.”

“Is your sister better?”

The redhead nodded. “Yes. But she’s exhausted after her experience this morning. She’s really not well enough to get out of her chair. Afterward she is always very weak.”

“I see,” Victoria said. “Then there is nothing I can do.”

“Not really, although I may come downstairs for a while anyway,” Rachel said. And seeing Victoria’s surprise, she hastily went on, “I’ve given her a heavy sedative and she’ll not stir from the bed all evening. Come in and see her.”

Victoria hesitated. She was reluctant to enter the musty apartment but she didn’t want to hurt Rachel’s feelings since the redhead was being so much more agreeable than usual. So she accepted the invitation and followed her down to the bedroom. It was quite dark as the blind was drawn and she could hear the even breathing of the sleeping girl on the bed. Even as the blond lay there in
this coma-like state she still wore the same heavy dark glasses.

Perhaps that was what made her seem strangely unreal, Victoria decided. And then her eyes wandered to one of the girl’s hands that was spread on the coverlet. Even in the dim light she saw that the hand was not clean and the nails were broken in several instances, too long in others, and all of them black with accumulated dirt. It was a disgusting sight and she turned away.

It was hard to overlook this neglect of her sister on Rachel’s part. And it brought out the shocking fact that although both father and daughter pretended to be excessively interested in the ailing girl’s care, she was being shamefully treated in many ways.

Rachel broke into her thoughts, saying, “You can see she’s perfectly all right.”

“I hope so,” Victoria said in a stifled voice that she hoped would not attract the other girl’s attention and hurried out of the room.

Rachel saw her to the door and again assured her, “If Dorothy continues to rest as well as she’s doing now, I’ll be down.” She paused. “Is Roger around?”

She nodded. “Yes. I expect he’ll be in all evening.”

“Good,” Rachel said, brightening. “I’ll see you later.” And she closed and locked the door again.

Victoria went on to her own room. Once again she had been revolted by Rachel’s treatment of the invalid, but she knew it would be unwise to offer any criticism. She supposed many people in Dorothy’s position were looked after no better. Perhaps she was just too sensitive.

Dinner was over only a short while when Rachel came downstairs. She had changed to a low-cut green dress suitable for evening wear and probably chosen with a view to dazzling Roger. It worked. Roger greeted her with loud pleasure and at once dragged her off to the study, presumably to look at the book collection but more likely so that he could offer her a private drink.

This was not lost on Elizabeth, who hesitated at the bottom of the stairway with a resigned expression before going up to her room. “It seems my plan to ease things for Rachel was misguided,” she told Victoria. “Now she’s
deliberately leaving that poor girl locked in there alone while she comes down here to charm my brother.”

In an attempt to ease the situation, Victoria said, “I suppose she is tired of being up there alone with Dorothy. I doubt if she’ll stay down here long.”

“I hope not,” Elizabeth said in a tight voice. “I’ll be glad when her father returns. He seems the only one able to keep her in line.”

Then Elizabeth went on upstairs. Victoria wandered into the living room. She saw that it had darkened a great deal and looked as if there was going to be a storm. The clouds had started to gather late in the afternoon and the sky was gray and threatening now. She felt on edge and unable to settle down with a magazine or book as she so often did at this time in the evening.

Moving slowly about the room, she paused before the portrait of Isaac Collins, founder of the dynasty. In the subdued light his rugged features looked less grim than the artist who had painted the portrait intended. She wondered if he had envisioned what would happen through the years and how the family would spread and change. Had he guessed that his descendant Jeremiah would woo and win a bride in far-away France and build this giant, rambling house as a token of his love for her? And that the seeds of tragedy had begun with its foundation and the suicide of the lonely bride?

She turned away just as the bell at the main entrance rang. When she opened the door Nora came inside. The girl was wearing only a sweater and a kerchief over her regular things and looked cold.

“It’s raining,” she said. “I had the evening off and decided to come over, so I took the shortcut across the rocks. Will was right. They can be slippery when it’s wet. I almost took a tumble.”

Victoria smiled. “I’m glad to see you. I’m getting cabin-fever here alone.”

Nora glanced around at the paneled walls and rich oil paintings and furniture. “Some cabin!” she said.

“I’ll take your wet sweater,” Victoria suggested, “and let you have one of mine.” They went up to her room to get it and stayed there talking.
The big room was almost in darkness, but Victoria did not turn on the lamp. Instead they seated themselves in the dim blue of the fading light to talk. Victoria took a chair near the casement window and Nora sat on the edge of the four-poster bed facing her.

“What did you do to Paul Caine this afternoon to make him so angry?” Nora asked.

“I didn’t do anything,” Victoria protested. “He’s the one to blame.”

“He came into the shop just before I left and he was really in a rage,” Nora said. “I mentioned your name and I thought he would bite my head off.”

“We had a quarrel this afternoon,” she told her friend. And she went into a recital of what happened as the darkness in the room grew thicker.

“It sounds sort of weird and crazy! He doesn’t strike you as that type.”

“We don’t really know him,” Victoria reminded her. “Any more than we get to know a lot of the other summer people who come here. What can a few minutes or even a few hours’ conversation with a person tell you about them?”

“That’s true,” her friend said with a tone of regret. “And I was really beginning to like Paul, although he’s hardly taken a second look at me.”

“Count yourself lucky.”

“You don’t think those things that Francis man said about him were true?” Nora asked. “You don’t really believe he could be the fellow they suspected of killing those girls in Philadelphia?”

“I still have marks on my throat from the other night,” she reminded her. “There has been no explanation of that attack.”

Nora gave a deep sigh. “I’m getting really frightened. I think Will should hear about this afternoon, since he’s already suspicious of Paul.”

Victoria left her chair and went and switched on the lamp. Both she and Nora blinked, although its glow was modest. They had been sitting there talking in almost complete darkness. Now she saw that Nora was showing some fear.
"I'm glad you turned on the light," her friend said. "I was beginning to believe I saw something moving over there in the corner."

"You're letting your imagination get the best of you," Victoria said with a wan smile. "And that's not hard around here."

Nora looked at her anxiously. "Let's go into town and see if we can find Will. If he's not home he'll be at the office or the Blue Whale."

"I don't know," she hesitated. "I rarely go in at night."

"But no one would mind," Nora insisted. "You have the use of Carolyn's car while she's away, haven't you?"

"Yes," she admitted.

Nora stood up. "Then let's go. Will should hear what you told me."

Victoria began to feel she would like to talk to the young lawyer in any case. It would give her some comfort. Because of this, she was not too hard to convince.

"All right," she said finally. "But we won't stay more than an hour. Then I can drive you home. You can't take the shortcut on a night like this." The rain was hitting the window in big drops now.

"We'll worry about that later," Nora said.

She went over to the closet and took out her raincoat.

"You wear this," she said. "I can use my topcoat."

"Oh, no!" Nora protested.

"I insist," she said. "We'll be in the car most of the time anyway."

She paused to tell Elizabeth she was going and then they hurriedly began the journey to town. When they left, Roger and Rachel were still in the library and it seemed that Dorothy was going to be left alone for the entire evening. Victoria worried about this but knew there was nothing she could do.

They talked about the Francis family and Roger's erratic behavior as they drove through the rain and the time passed quickly. Before they realized it they were in Collinsport. But their luck was poor. The town was really shut down on this rainy night and Will Grant was neither at his home nor at the office.

As they halted the car before his office building and
saw the windows were dark, Nora shook her head unhappily. "I guess the Blue Whale is our only bet," she said.

"And that's not a good one," Victoria reminded her. "He only goes there once in awhile."

"But it's like Forty-Second Street and Broadway or Piccadilly Circus in London," Nora said. "Everyone winds up there at some time or other."

Victoria drove on, faintly amused at her friend's comparison of the shabby jukebox bar with the famous intersections of the two great cities.

There were quite a few cars parked in the street by the Blue Whale and when the girls went inside the bar was crowded. Almost the first person they saw was Paul Caine, leaning against it arrogantly with a glass of beer in his hand. His smile in their direction was close to a sneer and he made no attempt to come over and speak to them.

Victoria leaned close to her friend. "Let's leave!" she said in a tense whisper, afraid a scene might ensue.

Nora shook her head. "I'm not going to let him drive me out of here," she said in an indignant low voice. "We'll find an empty booth."

They walked quickly by where he was standing in search of one. But the noisy, smoke-filled bar was crowded with locals and summer visitors. The usual young couples were on the tiny dance floor as the rainbow-colored jukebox blared out. They didn't see a single empty booth and were about to turn and leave when a voice addressed Victoria at her elbow and a man stood up.

It was Burke Devlin, Collinsport's mystery man, and he smiled at her. "Won't you girls join me?" he invited. "In spite of the noise it's lonely occupying this whole booth by myself."

Somewhat awed by his impressive, courtly manner they accepted his invitation. He summoned the waiter and ordered for them with the air of one who had done this many times before on a grander scale and in more magnificent places. Then he sat back and studied them with a smile.
At least they would be safe from Paul's advances while they were in Devlin's company, Victoria decided. She told him, "We are looking for Will Grant."

"I haven't seen him," Burke Devlin said. "But I did notice Elizabeth's guest, Henry Francis, coming out of the telephone office before it closed."

Victoria frowned. "I thought he'd gone to Portland or Boston."

"He was here a while ago," Devlin said. "I knew him during his college days. At the same time he courted Elizabeth." He paused. "I don't know what he's like now, but he was a strange character then."

CHAPTER TEN

VICTORIA EXCHANGED GLANCES with Nora. "How do you mean, Mr. Devlin?"

Burke Devlin smiled. "When I first met Henry I took it for granted he was a rich man's son, the way he talked and the way he spent money. When he came here to visit and to court Elizabeth it was the same thing. He came in the latest model roadster. They were called roadsters in those days. When you thought of Henry Francis you pictured big money."

"Was he wealthy? I mean as wealthy as he seemed," Victoria asked.

Devlin across from them shook his head. "He wasn't wealthy at all. He was flat broke most of the time."

"But how did he manage?" Nora put this question to him.

"We found that out later," Burke Devlin said dryly. "He begged, borrowed and, according to rumor, occasionally stole. He had a number of wealthy young men as cronies and he didn't hesitate to make use of them. Of course, they soon tired of it and gave him up, but he has a winning personality and he always seemed able to find another easy mark."

Victoria listened incredulously. "I hardly know what to say," she said. "It doesn't seem possible."

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Devlin chuckled. "He was a smooth operator then. And he certainly has the air of a respectable businessman now—but I wonder if it isn’t still the old game of putting on a front."

She recalled Roger’s remarks in the same vein, but she didn’t care to mention what Roger had said to Devlin, knowing how much they disliked each other. Instead, she asked, "Did Elizabeth ever find out the truth about him?"

"I tried to tell her," Devlin said. "But she wouldn’t listen. She just wouldn’t accept the idea of Henry doing anything wrong. Even the car he came here in was borrowed and when he had an accident on the way back to Boston he left it at a country garage for the owner to come and get it and pay the bills."

Victoria said, "Then she has gone all through the years thinking what a fine person he is. Deceiving herself, because she wants to."

"I suppose she forgot all about him when she married Stoddard," Burke Devlin said. "Not that it worked out very well. But now that he’s back she seems to have fallen a victim to his charm again. At least, that is the story as Will told it to me."

"It’s true," she agreed. "As far as she is concerned, Henry Francis is a privileged character. I can’t imagine her allowing three strangers in her house otherwise. But she practically insisted he take the apartment."

"Which he was probably glad to do," Devlin said. "I understand his younger daughter is gravely ill."

"She’s in a pathetic state."

"And that is why he has sought the quiet of a place like Collins House," Devlin observed. "It may be that he has completely reformed. Life changes people. I think we’re all aware of that."

Nora said, "He is a nice looking man."

"In a way," Devlin agreed. "But I think if you study his face you will see weakness there. Though as I’ve said, he may be an entirely different Henry Francis from the one I knew as a young man. For Elizabeth’s sake I hope so."

Victoria showed her worry. "You mean you think he might cause her some trouble?"
Burke Devlin shrugged. "Unless he has changed I wouldn't enjoy having him in my house."

The evening wore on. When Victoria again studied the group at the bar she saw that Paul Caine had left. Seeing them with Devlin, he had probably decided there would be no point in his remaining. He would scarcely dare to intrude on the older man. The noise and smoke increased and still there was no sign of Will Grant. Burke Devlin ordered another round for them and went on entertaining them with talk of his travels. He seemed to have visited the most exotic places and had a story to tell about nearly every one of them. Before they realized it, the clock behind the bar showed that it was past ten.

Victoria at once became nervous. "We really must be leaving," she said with a smile for Burke Devlin. "It's been fascinating talking with you, but I don't want to be too late returning. Mrs. Stoddard would worry."

"I can understand that," he agreed with a smile. "I've enjoyed having you as my guests. I hope we can do this again sometime."

He rose to see them off and at the door cautioned Victoria, "Be careful. Collins House is not my idea of any place for a young girl."

"I don't think it can be all that bad."

"Perhaps you don't know as much about it as I do, Miss Winters," he said, with an implication of sinister knowledge. "Don't forget what happened to Stella Hastings."

"I hope you're wrong," she said, feeling her concern grow.

"Take care," was his final advice. "And try and warn Elizabeth some way that she could be taking a chance with Francis."

"I'll try," she said. She and Nora said goodnight and went hurrying across to the convertible in the rain. When they drove away, Burke Devlin was still standing in the doorway of the bar watching them.

Nora looked back and then said, "He's a fine-looking man, isn't he? I'll bet if he and Roger Collins weren't such enemies Elizabeth might be interested in him."

"I don't know," Victoria said doubtfully as she ad-
justed her windshield wipers to work faster against the downpour. “I think he is fond of her. But I have no idea how she feels about him.”

“Everyone in Collinsport is sure he’s a millionaire.” Victoria laughed, keeping her eyes on the road, which was difficult to follow on the murky, rainswept night. “It doesn’t take much to get the local people talking. And a little display of wealth can certainly impress them.”

“What do you think of his opinion of Henry Francis?”

“Roger said almost the same thing in different words,” Victoria told her. “Of course I didn’t mention that. But there is something strange about Henry Francis. About all of them.”

“I know,” Nora agreed.

“I wish they had never come to the house.”

“She may have a hard time getting rid of them.” Victoria nodded. “I feel that, too. Unless Dorothy should get worse and die. I’d say that was a major possibility when you think of the care they’re giving her.”

The other girl gave a small shudder. “Isn’t it awful!”

“And I don’t see any hope of it improving.”

Peering out into the darkness, Nora said, “If you drop me off at my place, you’ll have to drive home the rest of the way alone in this storm.”

“That’s all right,” Victoria said. She had already thought of this but felt there was no alternative.

“But suppose something should happen to the car when you’re driving through the woods,” the other girl worried. “What would you do? I won’t be able to sleep for thinking about you.”

“I’m not afraid of the rain.”

“Don’t think it’s only the rain,” Nora said. “After what has happened and then the way Burke Devlin talked tonight, I don’t want you driving all by yourself to that spooky old house.”

“You certainly can’t take the short cut back in the rain, even wearing my raincoat,” Victoria pointed out. “You admitted the rocks were treacherous and in the darkness it would be like committing suicide.”

“Then I can sleep in the car.” Victoria glanced at the other girl with a smile. “If
you're serious I can do better for you than that. I'm sure Mrs. Stoddard wouldn't mind you coming back and shar-
ing my room for the night."

Nora at once sounded happier. "Oh, Victoria, may I?"
"If you like," she said, giving her attention to the road
again.
"Then I'll do it," Nora said. "I shouldn't have urged
you to go in to the village in the first place. And I surely
can't desert you now when you may be real danger."
"It's a large four-poster bed," Victoria assured her.
"There's plenty of room for us both."
They had left the wooded section and were coming up
to the driveway. She saw that only the light by the front
doors had been left on. The rest of the house was in total
darkness. She slowed the engine and drove directly to
the front entrance. "You get out here and wait for me,"
she told Nora. "I have to take the car around back to
the garage."
"But will you be all right? I don't mind going with
you."
"I do," Victoria said shortly as she idled the engine,
waiting for the girl to get out. "It's dark and miserable
finding your way back. I'd rather do it alone. There's
an old abandoned well to avoid, for one thing. The first
night I arrived here I'd have toppled into it if Ernest
hadn't pulled me away from it."
"How long will it take you?" Nora asked, her hand on
the door.
"Only a couple of minutes, once I get the car parked,"
she said. "So please don't make any more fuss."
With some additional murmured misgivings Nora
quickly let herself out and stood waiting in the drenching
rain as Victoria drove around to the back. She hoped Nora
would have the good sense to stand on the steps in the shel-
ter of the house. At the rear her headlamps picked out the
sedan owned by Henry Francis. So Burke had been right.
He was back. She wondered if Burke Devlin's other stories
about Francis were true. It had been a strange and disturb-
ing evening. Prominent among her memories was Paul
Caine standing against the bar with that bitter smile on
his face.
Having pulled the convertible close to the garage, she got out hastily and ran through the rain to the front of the old house. With a knowledge gained by a year of living there she skillfully avoided all obstacles and hazards in spite of her haste. It had been for this reason she’d urged Nora to wait for her at the front door.

When she reached it she saw that Nora was not in sight. She was about to mount the steps, thinking Nora had opened the door and gone in to avoid being drenched. Then she heard the muffled cry from the lawn. It caught her completely by surprise—a surprise that turned swiftly to horror as she wheeled around.

“Nora!” she screamed, running in the direction from which the sound had come. It took her to the area of the bushes and the phantom appearance of the other night. The rain beat wildly against her face as she stood for a moment trying to distinguish some sign of her friend in the darkness and realizing that something dreadful must have happened.

“Nora! Please answer me!” she cried out.

She saw a quick movement of a blurred form in the bushes and an instant later heard the sound of running footsteps thudding across the wet grass. She moved forward in the direction in which she’d seen the shadow, not thinking of her own safety.

Then she stumbled over something directly in her path and when she dropped to her knees she knew it was Nora, silent and motionless, stretched out there. She tried to rouse her friend, calling out her name hysterically as tears ran down her cheeks, mixing with the rain.

It seemed that an age must have gone by before Nora at last stretched out a hand and moaned.

Victoria felt a wave of relief surge through her. Again Nora moaned and this time rolled over and when Victoria spoke to her she seemed to comprehend what she was saying. In a moment or so she had Nora on her feet and was helping her towards the house. Victoria kept talking to her to sustain her courage and it wasn’t until they entered the house and Nora was seated in one of the foyer chairs that Victoria saw the thing twisted around Nora’s throat. It was a sodden silk stocking!
With trembling hands she worked at the stocking until she had it free of her friend’s throat. Then she held it out for Nora to look at. “Someone tried to strangle you with this,” she said. “Did you see who it was?”

Nora shook her head. “They came up on me in the dark. I felt something tighten around my neck. Then they dragged me across the lawn.”

“I heard footsteps running away,” Victoria confessed. “But I couldn’t do anything. I hadn’t even found you.”

Nora touched her hand to her throat. “The same as happened before. But why?”

Victoria stared at her. “I know why. You were attacked because someone thought you were me. We look enough alike and you had on my raincoat.”

The other girl’s pretty face was chalk-white. “Then it must have been Paul Caine. The story Francis told you must be the truth. He came back and waited and tried to strangle you just as he did those other girls in Philadelphia.”

“So it seems,” Victoria said quietly, staring at the stocking. “Yet it could be someone else.”

Nora was on her feet. “I’m sure it was Paul. It all fits. We’ll have to get word to Will first thing in the morning.”

Victoria put an arm around her and in a calming voice said, “We will. I promise. Now let us get upstairs and see about your neck and then get some sleep.”

Nora’s eyes opened wide. “Sleep?”

For several reasons Victoria did not want to rouse the silent household and so she finally got her friend up the dimly lighted stairs and along the hall to her own room. There she gave Nora’s throat a thorough examination. The damage was not as severe as that done her, but of the same type. There was a red welt nearly all the way around the white skin of the girl’s throat. She knew it would not give Nora too much trouble. On the other hand, had the stocking been tightened just a little more she would have certainly died.

By the time she had Nora safely in bed the girl had almost come back to her normal self. “Victoria, is it this
old house?” she asked. “Is it a curse or something that causes all these horrible things to happen here?”

Victoria smiled sadly. “Some people seem to want to believe that. I guess it’s nothing so mysterious. I think it is the evil in those still here. We must face it. There is a murderer among us and until he is trapped there can be no peace for any of us.”

She switched off the lamp and took her place in bed beside her friend. Nora said nothing but it was a long while before the terrified girl managed to sleep. And it took Victoria even longer. She had so many things to consider and some highly important decisions to make. Unless the killer was apprehended, and apprehended quickly, she dared not stay on in Collins House.

She now was ready to believe that someone was trying to do away with her. The motive was too deeply hidden for her to guess. But she didn’t think that too important at the moment. Nora had been quick to accuse Paul Caine, but Victoria wasn’t all that sure. In spite of the bad light the young man had shown himself in, she could not think of him as a murderer. Even though the pieces fitted, as Nora had been quick to point out. All that could be done was place the facts in Will Grant’s hands and let him do what he thought best. She could not rely on Elizabeth Stoddard’s judgment since she was so influenced by Henry Francis, and Roger was too unstable to count on—could indeed be the criminal himself.

In the morning she would go into Collinsport with Nora and let Will take whatever action he deemed proper after he had heard their story. With this thought her eyes finally closed.

By morning the rain had given way to a drizzle and heavy fog that offered little in the way of cheer. When Nora woke up, Victoria was ready to advise her.

“I think it best we say nothing to anyone in the house about what happened last night,” she told her friend.

Nora, trying to do something with her hair as she worked before the mirror, said, “You think it might have been one of them and not Paul?” She turned a moment to study Victoria.
She shrugged. "You must admit there is that chance. Even though it may be slim."

Nora sighed and returned her gaze to the mirror. "I'll do whatever you want. You know that. You can hardly see the marks on my throat this morning."

"I'm glad of that," Victoria said. "Now we'll go down for breakfast. Any of the others can turn up there, so be careful what you say."

Actually, the only one in the dining room was Roger. He was delighted to see a pretty new face in the house and gave a great deal of attention to Nora, insisting on acting as a waiter and bringing all her food to her rather than having her select it from the sideboard. Victoria was sourly amused by his extravagant actions.

"Did you have a pleasant evening with Miss Francis?" she asked innocently.

Roger at first looked slightly put out, then said, "Yes. We spent a great deal of time going over the library."

Victoria said, "You were certainly in there together long enough."

"She very much interested in books," Roger said with a hint of annoyance. For Nora's benefit he added, "But today it is good-by to books and back to the office."

"For the first time in more than a week, isn't it?" Victoria's voice was still innocent. She saw that Nora, who knew Roger's reputation well, was having a hard time to keep from smiling.

"I'm sure you don't realize it, Victoria," he said pompously, "but I do a great deal of my work at home. I bring a lot of material here from the office." It was not the truth, but at least it saved his face, she thought, so she said no more.

Roger left the dining room first. When the girls had finished, Victoria went out to the kitchen, where she found Elizabeth in conversation with Matt Morgan. As she entered they both stopped to stare at her and Matt turned and went out the rear door.

Elizabeth came across the room to her. "You must have come in very late last night," she said.

"It was later than I intended," Victoria agreed, her mind still on the scene she had just witnessed and won-
dering what the two had been discussing so conspira-
torially. Could it be possible that Morgan and Elizabeth
were partners in some plot?

"Well, as long as you got back safely," Elizabeth said,
studying her.

"My friend Nora came along with me for company
and stayed here all night," Victoria said. "I’d like to
drive her back to Collinsport now if I may."

"Of course," the older woman said. "Take your time.
The driving will be bad on this foggy day. Henry Fran-
cis had a dreadful drive from Boston and got in about
nine last night, completely exhausted. Poor man!"

Victoria wanted to tell her that she was sure he had
never gone as far as Boston, but she felt it would be use-
less. She would only say that Burke Devlin must have
seen someone else and mistaken him for Francis. She
said only, "I wonder if he plans to remain here long?"

Elizabeth sighed. "He seems very uncertain about his
plans. He told me last night he is not satisfied with Doro-
thy’s progress and may have to take her to see a special-
ist again."

She raised her eyebrows. "I thought he felt she was
coming along well."

"Not according to what he told me last night. Per-
sonally, I think he spoke as he did chiefly because Roger
upset him again by paying undue attention to Rachel."

"Oh!" Victoria said, not wanting to comment further
on such a delicate matter.

Elizabeth went on, "I don’t blame him. After all,
Roger is still a married man and Henry doesn’t want his
daughter to become involved with him. And Rachel neg-
lects her sister when she devotes her time to Roger. She
was down in the study with him all last evening until her
father arrived."

"I imagine he was upset to find that Dorothy had been
left alone," she said, knowing there must have been a
scene and thinking that Elizabeth might fill her in on it.

The older woman took the bait. "I have never seen
Henry so furious," she said. "And of course that Rachel
is a snip. And Roger was no help. He just stood by like
an oaf. I explained that you had offered to stay with
Dorothy, but that didn’t seem to placate Henry at all. It was a most trying situation.”

“Perhaps it would be better if he left, then.”

“I suppose it might,” Elizabeth said sadly. “I will certainly miss them if they do. We have so little company here that is acceptable.”

She knew that Elizabeth meant she would miss Henry Francis and wondered if a man who was merely a smooth operator could so easily deceive the normally astute Elizabeth. She excused herself awkwardly and returned to Nora.

“I have permission,” she said. “Let’s hurry on in to town.”

When they drove away she saw that Henry Francis had not left the house. His car was still parked where it had been the night before and she doubted if he would be anxious to leave after Rachel’s actions of the previous night.

On the drive in to Collinsport she told Nora most of what she had heard from Elizabeth. The other girl listened with interest, asking a question now and then. She said, “Of course Roger doesn’t care. He is a dreadful flirt, isn’t he?”

“I’m afraid so,” Victoria said dryly. “Let’s hope that is the most harmful thing about him.”

Will Grant was in his office and free at the moment of their arrival. He greeted them with surprise and listened as they sat across from his desk and told of coming in to the village to see him the previous night.

“I wasn’t here,” he explained. “I went over to Ellsworth on some business.” He turned to Victoria. “Now what has gotten you both so upset?”

She told him, ending with, “Nora could have been killed last night.”

He had heard her story with growing grimness. Now he said, “You must realize that this is now a matter for the authorities. I can’t listen to Elizabeth’s wails for privacy any longer. The police have to be brought in on this. The state police, by preference.”

Victoria sighed. “I see that now.”

“Well, that’s something,” he said. “We’ve worried
about ghosts long enough. Let's concern ourselves about the living for a change."

"It must be Paul Caine," Nora said. "Surely it can all be settled if you see he's picked up."

Will Grant frowned. "He's a wily customer. I've never liked him from the time he showed up here. There was always something phony about him. And he gave away that he knew nothing about painting."

"What about the sketches I saw on his easel yesterday?" Victoria asked.

"Did you actually see him do them?"

She showed her surprise. "No. He did put a shadow in here and there as he showed them to me. But they were really all done."

"By someone else, without a doubt," Will warned her. "He had them for window dressing. Part of his game, whatever it may be."

Nora put in, "Mr. Francis said that he believed Paul had followed him and his family from Philadelphia, that he annoyed Rachel there."

"I know about that," Will said. "It is one thing to think it, but maybe another to prove it. Where is Caine boarding?"

"Mrs. Waddell's," Nora said promptly.

Will picked up his phone. "For a start we can call him. If he's in, I'll ask him to come over here. Meanwhile, I'll get in touch with the state police at Ellsworth."

He broke off to give the operator the number.

The girls listened as he put through the call to Paul's landlady. It was a brief one and he merely asked a few questions and then hung up. He looked at them with anger showing on his handsome face.

"It seems we're too late," he said. "Paul Caine paid up his board and left right after breakfast. Mrs. Waddell has no idea where he planned to go."

Nora gasped. "That proves it! It had to be him last night!"

Victoria leaned back in her chair, feeling a little ill. "I guess there's no doubt now," she said in a small voice. But it left her unsatisfied. There were too many loose
ends remaining. It didn’t seem a proper solution, though she had to accept Paul’s guilt.

Will looked at her with curious eyes. “You don’t seem overjoyed to know we’re on the brink of settling this business.”

“I am glad,” she said.

He still regarded her doubtfully. “I hope so,” was his comment. And he reached for his phone again and this time called the state police. His conversation with Ellsworth took longer and Victoria got the impression a statewide alarm was being put out for Paul Caine.

When he hung up he said, “That’s about all we can do now. The police will be here in an hour or so.” To Victoria he said, “Meanwhile, I want you to be very careful. Don’t leave Collins House until you hear from me.” He turned to Nora and cautioned her, “And don’t you leave the store. It’s my guess you’re both in serious danger.”

Victoria knew he must have learned something on the phone. She said, “What did they tell you?”

“They know all about that fellow in Philadelphia whom Francis thinks might have followed him here. In fact, the police in that city have just turned up additional information on him and want him back there. It seems they think they have a case now.” His eyes met hers directly. “In other words, the chances are strong our friend Paul Caine is a dangerous homicidal maniac!”
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Victoria and Nora left Will's office in a subdued frame of mind. It seemed clear that only good fortune had prevented them from becoming the victims of a demented killer. Neither of them said much. Victoria knew that Nora, like herself, had found Paul Caine a pleasant young man in some ways, and it was a stunning thing to learn that he was a vicious criminal.

Of course, he had revealed himself to some degree the other afternoon on the footpath. When he had taken her in his arms and shown anger at her lack of response to his embrace, she had been really frightened of him. She walked up the steep main street as far as the shop operated by Nora's mother and left her at the door.

"Remember what Will said," Nora warned her. "Drive straight back to Collins House and don't leave until you know it's safe."

Victoria smiled wryly. "You're also supposed to be careful."

"I'll have Mother for company," she said. "And I'll stay in the shop until we go home."

Victoria paused. "I still can't believe it."

"And I had to introduce him to you," Nora said. "Some friend!"

"You didn't know," she said. "It will be all right now that the state police are in on it." She tried to sound confident, even though she didn't feel it. The girls lingered a few minutes longer; then Victoria went on toward her car. She had parked it close to the Collins General Store.

On the way back she paused at the post office, which also served as a variety store and newsstand. She picked up a couple of magazines she read regularly and a New York paper. Deciding she had better get back, she hurried to her car.

The fog had not lifted and it was still as dark and miserable as when she'd driven in. She took her time on the return drive and her thoughts wandered a good deal.
To find herself involved with a criminal like Paul Caine was depressing enough but to know she was still in danger, as was Nora, made it even more grim. Also, she did not feel all the mystery revolved around Paul. It seemed probable that he had attempted to kill her several times and later Nora, whom he had mistaken for her, in the storm last night.

But there was the puzzle of her having seen the phantom face of Stella Hastings. And she had seen the dead girl more than once. This could not possibly have anything to do with Paul. She felt it was linked with the secrets of the old mansion. These ghostly visitations were likely to be left unexplained by Paul’s arrest.

She wished that she could talk to Ernest. Will Grant was efficient and he certainly meant well, but there was a certain coldness to him. She could not talk to him in the same way she she could the violinist. And then Ernest was a Collins and understood the family better, as well as knowing the tragedies that still were hidden in the dark shadows of the great mansion by the sea.

Again she wondered about herself. More time had passed and she was still as far as ever from discovering the truth about her parents or who she really was. Victoria Winters! She even resented her own name, because she could not be certain that it represented anything more than a deceit. Knowing that those letters with money had been mailed to her at the foundling home for years with the postmark of Bangor, she had felt elated at moving so close to the Maine city. But she had soon discovered that trying to trace the sender of those letters was a hopeless business without any sort of clue to begin with. Now she planned to check the records in Augusta. But she knew she could not count too much on making an important discovery there.

From the beginning it had been her belief that Elizabeth, who varied between kindness and curtness in dealing with her, knew a good deal more than she let on. That woman continually baffled her, as she had today, when Victoria had come upon her and Morgan in what seemed plainly a clandestine meeting of some sort.

She drove along the gravel driveway to the rear of the
house and parked the car. She saw that Henry Francis had not left yet and she wondered what was going on inside.

Entering the foyer, she came face to face with him. He was wearing a dark raincoat and hat and carrying a brief case. He was apparently going somewhere at last.

He confirmed this by saying, “I have to take care of some business in the village. What an unpleasant day.”

“It is,” she agreed.

He glanced at the magazines and newspaper she was carrying and smiled. “I see you plan to do some reading. Good weather for it.”

Victoria said, “I expect to stay in for awhile. I think you’ll be interested to hear that the police believe Paul Caine is the young man wanted on suspicion of those killings in Philadelphia.”

He showed concern. “You don’t mean it!” Then he pursed his lips. “Still, as you know, it doesn’t come as a shock to me.”

“You were the first one who warned me.”

“Well, I wouldn’t worry,” he consoled her. “As long as the state police have been called in, it shouldn’t take long for them to round him up.”

“I suppose not,” she said. “How is Dorothy?”

He looked troubled. “Not doing well. I fear I’ll have to take her back to the hospital.”

“In Philadelphia?”

“No. Boston. I was in to see the specialist who took care of her operation yesterday. He is anxious to see her as soon as possible.”

Victoria knew that he was lying. He could not have been in Boston, as Burke Devlin had seen him in Collinsport. Perhaps he was doing this to cover up an awkward situation. He wanted to separate Rachel from Roger Collins, an impossible task while they remained in the house. Apparently he planned to use Dorothy’s health as an excuse to get away. And she felt this might be best for all concerned. She would not like to see Henry Francis take advantage of Elizabeth.

She said, “I suppose you must do what you think best.”
The flat, almost handsome face beamed with goodwill. "I must thank you for the kindness you have shown us during our stay. I'm sure we are all deeply indebted to you."

"I would have liked to have done more for Dorothy," she said. She was thinking of the unkempt nails, the incident of the spider and the overdose of drugs that had been so recklessly administered to the poor invalid.

"Dorothy always inspires kindness," he said withunction. "But I am sure kindness is native to you, in any case."

"You won't be going suddenly, will you?" she asked. He shook his head. "Gracious, no! I wouldn't think of rushing off without having a day or two more with Elizabeth. Of course, it all depends on the doctor. If he should ask to see Dorothy at once, I'd have no choice."

He was leaving his escape route open, Victoria thought. This way he could announce his departure with little notice. He was certainly not going to stay long with them.

He bowed. "Well, I must get along."

He went on out and she continued upstairs. In her room she took off her raincoat and kerchief and then sat down with the magazines and the New York newspaper. She decided to look at the newspaper first—perhaps Ernest's name would be mentioned in the concert news.

She was sitting on the edge of the four-poster bed with the paper spread out on the bed before her. She flicked the pages in search of the theatrical and musical items. As she turned a page heavy with advertisements she saw a photograph that looked familiar. She was flipping the pages so rapidly that she'd passed it before a chill ran through her and with frantic haste she began going back to check on the picture again. She had suddenly realized who it looked like.

Finding the page she lifted the paper closer to her with trembling hands and stared at the photograph in disbelief. It was the picture of a charming, dark-haired girl with lovely sad eyes and a touching smile. It was the likeness of the dead Stella Hastings!

But the name beneath this photograph was not Stella Hastings. It was Grace Fontaine. And then her heart
thumped less rapidly and calm gradually came back to her. She was angry with herself for allowing a likeness in the photo to upset her so easily. It was becoming an obsession with her. Everywhere she turned she was seeing the face of the dead Stella. Had her grim surroundings started to take a toll of her mind?

She couldn’t take her eyes from the photo. So much like Stella! So much like the face she had seen! And then she went on to read the news story attached to the photo. At first the words meant little to her; she was still badly upset. Then they took on a special meaning. “Millionaire’s daughter still missing. Kidnap victim the object of nation-wide hunt for weeks. Father continues to receive dunning notes after having paid a quarter million in ransom, against police advice.” She let the paper fall on the bed and sat staring straight ahead, the room seeming to spin before her bewildered eyes.

And then she knew!

As if in a trance she rose slowly from the bed and made her way to the door. Her expression was curiously like that of someone in shock as she went along the shadowed corridor to the apartment occupied by Henry Francis and his two daughters. This time when she reached the door she did not knock but instead gently turned the handle. It responded and the door swung open. She was still too wrapped up in her thoughts to register satisfaction or surprise. Instead she continued on quietly through the rooms of the musty apartment, pausing only when she came to the door of Dorothy’s room. She saw that the girl was in bed and apparently sleeping.

She made no attempt to go in but continued on to the next bedroom. This door was also open and stretched out on the bed was Rachel. She could tell by her heavy breathing that she was deep in sleep and the half-empty liquor bottle and glass on the bedside table explained the reason. Victoria took in the situation without a change of expression.

Continuing in her sleepwalker state she returned to the room of the invalid and this time went inside. She moved close to the bed and stood staring at the wan face on the pillow. Carefully reaching over, she removed the large
dark glasses from the sleeping girl and laid them on the nearby table. With both hands she touched the ash-blonde hair and gently removed the wig from the girl's head. The revelation answered all her questions.

She was staring down at the lovely wan face framed by dark hair she had seen days ago at the upstairs window and mistaken for that of Stella Hastings. And no wonder, since Grace Fontaine bore such a resemblance to the dead girl. But Henry Francis and Rachel had known the truth. They had known she'd seen Grace Fontaine and their clever deception was in danger of being revealed. Once she came upon a photo of Grace Fontaine and connected it with her fleeting glimpse of the supposed ghost of Stella their game was at an end. They had counted on the isolation of Collins House to protect them until they could kill her and so eliminate any risk of being discovered. The ruse of pretending the kidnapped girl was an invalid daughter and keeping her constantly drugged was an almost perfect scheme.

But Grace Fontaine had come out of her drugged insensibility long enough to make that frantic appeal from the window and she had seen her. It had been the one thing to spoil their plan. So they had marked Victoria for death. And even though they had failed so far in their attempts they were bound to continue. They had no choice but to seal her lips permanently.

She thought quickly. She would return the disguise to the drugged girl and hurry back to the village. By this time the state police would be there and she could tell her story. If Henry Francis was still in the village they could take him in custody and then return to settle with Rachel and rescue the kidnap victim.

Burke Devlin had been right. Henry Francis was evil and he had not changed. If anything the years must have made him more callous. And how clever of him to remember Elizabeth and the lonely situation of Collins House and decide on it as his hideout.

But then it had not been Paul Caine who had tried to kill her! She was sure of that now. Whatever they had against him in Philadelphia, he was certainly not to blame for the attacks on her. And who could be sure he was
the youth from Philadelphia, since she only had the dubious word of Henry Francis for this?

In her excitement she had forgot that time was passing and she was still in great danger. Very carefully she went about returning the wig to cover the girl's own dark hair. It took a few minutes. When it was done to her satisfaction she picked up the glasses. Just as she had them in place she heard the floorboard creak behind her.

She froze with fear, not daring to move, not able to turn around. She knew that there was someone there watching her with silent hatred. She could feel eyes drilling into her back.

She stood there in the weird silence of the shadowed room waiting. She decided she must scream and scream loudly. It was her one chance of attracting Elizabeth's attention. But before she could cry out, there was a snarl from behind her and a hand came around her mouth. Another gripped her at the waist. She struggled to free herself, trying to bite and scratch, but it was no use.

"Easy. You're caught." It was the harsh voice of Henry Francis speaking in breathless, urgent tones as he struggled to keep her in his grasp. Then he called out, "Tape! Cord!"

A few minutes later a cord was looped around her ankles and was drawn cruelly tight. Then her hands were tied behind her back in the same way. And lastly a wide strip of adhesive was taped across her mouth. She could not speak; she was fearful that she'd not be able to breathe. Rachel had assisted her father in this.

Henry Francis dragged her across to a chair by the foot of the bed and threw her roughly into it. She stared with fear-stricken eyes at the flat face with the cruel smile engraved on it. She felt she was seeing the true Francis for the first time. All the urbane polish was gone. Now the face was sheer evil.

At his side was a frightened Rachel, her red hair tousled, her eyes puffy and her face swollen.

"What will we do now?" she pleaded anxiously with Francis.

He gave her a scornful glance. "You can ask that after the way you've let me down again." Without warn-
ing he hit her such a blow across the face that she went reeling back and only managed to keep her feet by gripping the bed.

“No!” she whined, holding up her free hand to protect her face from further blows.

He turned his attention to Victoria. “You were bound to find out, weren’t you?” he said with biting sarcasm. “That was certain from the time you saw our prize at the window. And when I saw you with that New York paper today I had a hunch. Lucky I came back when I did.”

“What will we do with her?” It was Rachel again.

With an expression of extreme distaste, Francis went on addressing Victoria. “That is my drunken, dissolute wife you are hearing. I’m telling you because even though you have so short a time to live, I don’t want you to get the idea that I could ever bear such a daughter!”

“You swine!” Rachel spat out.

He ignored her. “It has been my great misfortune to make several mistakes in wives. I’m afraid Rachel is the gravest error of them all. I have thought, since returning, how stable and pleasant my life might have been if I had married someone like the gracious Elizabeth. But alas, it’s too late for that now.”

“It’s too late to do anything but run,” Rachel told him in a quick change of mood. “We can still do that! We’ve got enough money already. We can let them both stay here. By the time that Stoddard woman finds them, we can be a long way from here.”

“You are also stupid,” Henry Francis told his young wife. “We wouldn’t get far with Elizabeth giving the police our description and every road blocked. We have just one chance—get rid of Miss Winters and then leave with my dear Dorothy along. We still need her, you see.”

Rachel stared sullenly at Victoria. “You say get rid of her. How?”

“I have that nicely planned. Miss Winters is going to drown, a most regrettable accident. Roger is at the plant and the cruiser is tied at the wharf. It will come in useful.”
Rachel’s puffy face took on a puzzled expression. “I don’t follow you.”

“I didn’t expect you to,” Henry Francis said disdainfully. “It’s very simple. I know Elizabeth’s routine. We will wait until she goes to her room. Then there will be only Morgan to worry about and he won’t bother us. Why? Because we’ll simply be taking our sick Dorothy out in her chair. The wig and glasses will make Miss Winters look reasonably like my invalid daughter. The robe will conceal that she is tied, and perhaps one of your chiffon scarfs adjusted about her mouth will cause less curiosity than the tape.”

Victoria listened to him, knowing that he meant every icy word of it. She had no doubt that he could carry the scheme through exactly as he planned. Her only hope was that Will Grant or the police would turn up. But they would be looking for Paul Caine, not Francis. Undoubtedly he would be wily enough to keep her concealed in the apartment until they had left, and then murder her at his leisure. She closed her eyes. There was no reason to hope.

Rachel argued, “I still think it’s risky. Especially if that Stoddard woman or anyone else should come close.”

He gave her a sharp glance. “Can you offer a better plan?”

She hesitated. “No.”

“I didn’t think so,” he said. “We’ll take a little cruise on the fog-shrouded water. Not too far out, but far enough. Then we’ll make sure she’s under long enough to drown. After that it’s a matter of removing the cords and tapes and by the time the ocean has done with her no one will guess that her drowning wasn’t purely accidental.”

Victoria gave no hint that she was hearing him, although his words produced a new feeling of horror. Already she could imagine herself being immersed in the cold sea water—the nightmare of her lungs filling with water and death creeping slowly through her.

Rachel spoke up nervously. “We should get it over with.”

“I intend to,” he said with contrasting calm. “First, I
believe it is time for you to administer another shot to our sleeping beauty. It would be very unfortunate to have her awaken while we’re out on the water dealing with this one.”

“T’ll do it now,” Rachel said and moved away.

Henry Francis also left the room. Victoria tried to think of some plan to attract attention, but there was nothing she could do. Wriggling against the tight bonds only made them cut into her arms and hurt terribly. Already she was beginning to feel a numbness in her hands and feet from having her circulation cut to a minimum. The tape had been expertly applied to her mouth. She couldn’t even manage a moan.

At last Henry Francis came back in raincoat and hat. He went to the bed and removed Grace Fontaine’s wig and glasses and then came over to place them on her. She twisted about as much as she could so that he finally had to call in Rachel to hold her.

As he fixed the wig in place he eyed her approvingly. “Excellent,” he said. “That will do nicely. And now the glasses. Secure them with a bit of tape behind the ears,” he instructed Rachel, “otherwise I’m quite certain she’ll manage to knock them off and that would be a pity, as the illusion is going to be perfect. You are the image of poor dear Dorothy, Miss Winters.”

He lifted her in his arms and she was aware of his great strength despite his age and wiry frame. With a blanket around her she was sure not even Elizabeth would suspect who it was, even if she passed on the stairs. Henry Francis led the way, Rachel following with the wheelchair.

They went down the steps. Victoria could see little through the very dark glasses. It seemed to her the old house had never been so oddly quiet and she thought with a tightening throat that this was her farewell to it and all her hopes. This was how she was to die.

Now they were outside in the thick fog of the lawn and he was gently placing her in the chair as he had so often done with Dorothy. With Rachel walking at his side they wheeled her down the path. It occurred to her that it was too easy! They should have had to struggle more
to be rid of her. This was like some simple game, except that the outcome would be her death.

The ground was rough as they neared the wharf and because she had managed almost to throw herself from the wheelchair he again took her weakly struggling body in his arms.

"Only a few yards more, my dear," he said, "and then we'll be in the boat. Can't you fairly taste the salt air?" He seemed quite gay, not at all bothered by the task he'd set himself.

Rachel, who walked ahead, looked less happy. At last they were on the wharf and she could hear the hungry lapping of the waves against it—waves that would soon close over her.

He stepped easily from the wharf into the boat and she now was conscious of the rise and fall of it on the water as he let her down roughly on the deck. That worked out very well. Do you want to help by casting off the line, Rachel?"

She was standing in the rear of the boat, her back to him. "I'm sick," she said thickly.

"That doesn't surprise me," he said with annoyance. "You really must learn to control yourself where the bottle is concerned." And he moved to do the job himself.

"Do I have to go along?" she asked. "It's the water. I'm always sick in a small boat."

"I think you had better come," he said quietly. "I'd feel safer to know where you are. You might get the idea to take the money in the house and leave."

"All right, Francis!" The words came sharply from the cabin in a familiar voice—the voice of Paul Caine. Victoria was conscious of his having come out in the open to stand guard over her prostrate body, a gun in his hand. She could neither move nor speak as she watched tensely.

Francis replied at once. "Don't try to frighten me with that toy gun," he snapped. "I can draw on you before your hand touches the trigger." As he spoke a shot blazed out. She knew he had fired as he finished speaking.

A return shot came from Paul's gun and then a second. She heard a loud groan and then wailing from Rachel.
Paul bent over her and in a strained voice said, "It's all right. Got him. He also winged me. I'll get you ashore somehow." And then he collapsed, his body falling across hers with heavy impact.

The events that followed were told to her later, for she lapsed into unconsciousness a moment or two after. Will Grant had arrived with the state police in time to hear the exchange of shots. By the time they reached the cruisers there was only one conscious person aboard. It was Rachel. She was sitting with the head of the fatally wounded Henry Francis in her lap. She said nothing when they came aboard and offered no resistance, being deep in shock.

Victoria did not even have to go to the hospital. Paul Caine was not so fortunate. He spent two weeks in the Ellsworth Memorial Hospital. Henry Francis died there a few hours after the shooting. His wife, Rachel, was kept in the hospital until she recovered from shock and was then sent to the Bangor jail to await transportation to New York.

Grace Fontaine's parents flew to Bangor and then had an ambulance take them to Collins House, where their daughter had already been treated by the local physician. He assured them that it would only be a matter of time before the girl recovered from the effects of constantly being drugged and soon would be normal again. She recognized them before they left on the return journey.

The sensational aspects of the case saw it featured in newspaper headlines all over the country. For a time the quiet of Collins House was disturbed by a host of reporters who descended on the big estate by the sea. Elizabeth refused to talk to any of them, although she did allow Victoria and Roger to give their versions of the affair to the press.

Roger was never happier than when recounting his conquest of Rachel. His pleasure was dimmed later when his sister acidly reminded him how near he had come to getting himself in trouble.

He came back with, "How about you? You were the one who let that Francis fellow come into the house in the first place."

Elizabeth had listened in her aloof, gracious way and
told him, “I don’t care what you say or any of them say. Henry Francis was a lovely fellow when I knew him years ago. I prefer to remember him that way.”

Victoria curbed the desire to reveal what Burke Devlin had told her—of Henry Francis and the borrowed car and clothes, cadging on his friends and stealing when he could get away with it. But she knew it would be cruel. There could be no harm in the older woman’s holding onto her illusion.

Paul Caine came to Collins House to say good-by after he got out of the hospital. He was looking well again, despite the fact his injured arm was still in a sling. It developed that he was a detective on the Grace Fontaine case. The police had been suspicious of Francis but had no proof. Paul Caine had been there to get that proof and he did.

He stood on the lawn facing Victoria one sunny afternoon and said, “I’m going back today. I had to say good-by.”

She smiled at him. “You certainly fooled me. I was sure you were an artist.”

He laughed. “It’s a hobby of mine.” He paused. “You know, Victoria, I meant that kiss.”

“Thanks,” she said. “That came through to me.”

“Any chance for a detective in your future?”

She shook her head as she regarded him with tender eyes. “My future is too crowded already.”

He nodded, his freckled face showing disappointment. “I was afraid of that.”

“I’ll always be grateful to you,” she said. “And I would like to have you as a good friend. One day I might need a detective to help me look into my past.”

He showed interest. “Sounds like something I’d enjoy. You know where to find me.”

She stood on the lawn as he drove away. She waved and he waved back; then the car vanished along the woods road. She turned away with a sigh. So it was over. It had been a bad time, but there had also been excitement and she had won at least one fine friend. Tonight she would write to Ernest and tell him that relative calm had been restored to Collins House. But within a
few weeks Carolyn and David would be returning. And Roger could always be counted on to get in more hot water. Elizabeth would probably remain the lovely enigma she had always been for Victoria, unless she should suddenly relent one day and tell her what she knew. And there was Burke Devlin, who had given her such good advice and who she felt certain was rather attached to Elizabeth in spite of his trouble with Roger. She smiled to herself. She would tell Ernest that while all was quiet now, there would always be something interesting ahead, new secrets to be revealed at Collins House.
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