

Linda
Cargill



No Name Girl

Her past is a fog and her future holds terror

No Name Girl

Linda Cargill

AN [*e-reads*]BOOK

New York, NY

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One

I opened my eyes to blackness. I was bumping along. I heard traffic. Loud music blared on a car radio. It sounded like Fifties Golden Oldies songs and Elvis. Oil and gasoline odors came in whiffs.

When I tried to jerk free, I could not. My wrists and ankles were tied together. The rope rubbed and chafed against my skin.

I kept passing in and out of consciousness. Disjointed images flitted through my mind. There was a big house with a row of magnolia trees leading up to it. A lady in a ball gown danced a waltz. An orchestra was playing *The Blue Danube*. A distinguished gentleman in a tux, who seemed oddly familiar, was talking about money. Gentlemen were gathered around him. A young man was grabbing at my hand. I was dancing, too, though I could not see my face. A ruddy cat peeked out at the dancers from behind a door.

A theater appeared. The curtain was drawn across the stage. Someone was practicing. I could not make out what he was saying. A female voice was singing something sad about Valentine's Day. I could just barely make it out:

*Tomorrow is St. Valentine's Day
All in the morning betime.
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine . . .*

A black coffin lay open on the stage. The coffin lid came down with what sounded like a scream as the wheels of a black sports car screeched in the distance. The car ripped across my mind. A guy in

a three-piece suit appeared. His face was blacked out. He seemed headless.

There was nothing more for who knew how long.

When I woke up again, people were asking for oil, gas, and to have their windshields cleaned. It must be a gas station. I wanted to scream. But I was too scared. Besides, the car radio was still playing Golden Oldies and Elvis songs. No one would be able to hear me.

Suddenly I saw a face staring down into mine. "Try to scream, will you? I'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget!" Hands stuffed something into my mouth.

I did not know anything again for awhile. When I opened my eyes the next time, the bumping was gone. I was not moving. There were no smells, no music, no traffic. In fact, there were no sounds at all. It was as quiet as the tomb. I could hear only the sounds of my own heartbeat.

I called out. My voice echoed. I put my hands up. I felt slippery objects and weird shapes. When I tried to stand up, I slipped and fell down. Maybe I was still dreaming. Perhaps everything was just a wild dream after all, and I was about to wake up.

Finally I got to my feet and tried to go forward. But I stumbled into a puddle of water.

Was I in a sewer? A basement? I could not picture the dimensions of the room or the place that held me. But nothing smelled foul, musty, or old. In fact, the smells were all earthy and even fresh.

Once my ears became used to the silence, I heard the sound of dripping. It seemed like water very close to my ear. I put my finger out and touched the wetness. Water trickled down my wrist. I put my whole hand in the wet. Then I tasted it. It was real water all right!

I realized that I was thirsty. I cupped my hands and filled them slowly, then drank greedily like a cat at a fast dripping faucet. The water was fresh and sweet, not like water dripping from an old lead pipe in a leaky basement.

Suddenly a light flicked on. It was shining right into my face. I squinted. I put my arms up to shield myself. I realized that had not seen light in ages.

"What are you doing here?" A booming voice sounded in my ears. The voice was low and bass. Grey eyes were staring into my own.

"I — I don't know . . . I — "

“Why you! I’ll kill you for coming here!”

A face full of fury was reaching for me. Strange shapes that I could not explain were suddenly everywhere. I stepped backward into a puddle of water. The water got deeper and deeper. Soon it was over my head. Again I blacked out.

This time when opened my eyes I was back inside that other, all too familiar dark space. Again I smelled oil and gasoline. Again I felt coarse blankets and fraying ropes touching my skin. Only this time there were no ropes around my wrists and ankles. But there were still Golden Oldies and Elvis music playing on the radio.

Gradually I became aware of two distinct voices outside my dark space. Male voices. They sounded like teenagers.

“What are you gonna do when you graduate in a few weeks — that is, if our illustrious principal, Buck O’reilly, lets you graduate?” One voice spoke. It was a tenor, soft and pleasant.

“Dunno.” The second voice replied. It sounded gruff and bass. This guy obviously did not want to talk at all.

“Don’t you have any big plans? I think I’m gonna win the lotto. I’ve got the winning numbers. I just sense it. Then I’m gonna go to Hawaii. Gonna fix myself up in one of those Polynesian shacks and get meself one of those island gals in grass skirts. I’ll spend the rest of my life there and — ”

“I pay you guys to work!” Another booming voice from some distance off echoed in my ears. This guy sounded much older and more authoritative. “Don’t yabber on my time. What’s that car in the shop for anyway?”

The low, gruff, bass voice spoke up. “The police found it along the side of some dirt road out in the country. Had to tow it into town. Can’t identify the owner. Police say since nobody claimed it, they’re gonna get it fixed up and sell it.”

“Get to work then!” The voice in charge boomed. “Wouldn’t employ kids your age if I had a choice. But nobody in this miserable, god-forsaken town stays put. Two men quit last week. Worth ten of you!”

“Police say they want the car in an hour.” The guy of few words commented.

“Then move your ass!”

"This car's in real bad shape." The guy with the tenor voice spoke up, the one who liked to jabber. "It needs a total fix-up job. Somebody must have driven it till it died. Odometer is past two hundred thousand miles. License plates are gone. Hope whoever it was had a good time and visited lots of nice places. Wow! You could drive from Alaska to D.C. and back again with that mileage. In fact, you could — "

The serious guy with the low voice interrupted. "Let's check off the list what we've done so far: 1) transmission serviced 2) engine mounts replaced 3) holes in transmission patched 4) axle boots replaced 5) pressure hose replaced 6) engine tuned 7) radiator flushed 8) new battery 9) new water pump 10) all belts and hoses replaced 11) thermostat replaced 12) new struts and front wheel alignment . . . "

"You forgot the radio!" The big-mouthed, excitable guy butted in. "It sounds like a broken record. It won't shut off no matter which way you turn it." It sounded as if he were bouncing up and down on the front seat trying to switch it off.

"We don't stock radios. Have to send to Eldorado City for one. Hardly have anything in stock around here anymore." The serious bass voice sighed. "Here, take this screwdriver and disconnect it."

The music finally stopped.

"Man, we'd better vacuum inside!" The tenor whistled. "Looks like a rat's nest. Look at all these fast food wrappers. Wastebaskets are overflowin'. There's maps from all across the country all over the floor. Whoever owned this car did a lot of travelin'. Look at this! Virginia and Tennessee and Arkansas and Texas and — "

"Old Man McDirk's eyeballin' us." The bass voice warned.

"Share and share alike, I say. If I win the lotto, pal, you're comin' to Hawaii with me."

"Sure thing, I guess!" The silent guy spoke grimly.

I wanted to attract their attention somehow. I started to tap on the metal trunk above my head. I even called out. But vacuum cleaners were going. I still could not be heard.

Finally somebody opened the trunk, car vac in hand. Sunlight flooded right into my eyes for the first time in who knew how long. I sat up and held my arms up over my face. The bright light nearly blinded me.

"Hey, pal, look what I found!" A guy with fire engine red hair and bright orange freckles whistled. He was the one with the "happy go

lucky" tone of voice who never wanted to shut up. "They sure don't make cars like this one anymore."

The silent, frowning guy came around the back of the car, another car vac in hand. He stood there gaping at me. He spat something that sounded like, "*What? You again!*"

For an instant that face, those grey eyes, seemed eerily familiar. And so, come to think of it, did that low, bass voice. In a flash I was back in that weird underground chamber with the pools of water, the water dripping over my head, and the cool, fresh smell. He was the one who had threatened to kill me there.

This time I got a very good look at his face.

His black, bushy curls fell into his tawny-complexioned face that looked as if he spent a lot of time outside. They even fell into those eyes that glared at me as if they wanted to burn a hole through me. Their look was accentuated by overarching eyebrows. He kept on brushing those black curls back away from his long, aquiline nose with a fine, sensitive bone structure. His nostrils had a way of flaring as he sucked in his breath with an anger that he seemed barely able to restrain.

Those grey eyes flashed. He pursed his lips. They looked as if they were frozen in a perpetual sneer. His lower lip protruded sourly as he regarded me. His expression appeared even more sinister because of the dark bristles covering the lower half of his face. He had obviously not shaved recently.

His big shoulder muscles could not be contained in his uniform and coveralls. They pressed against the material, threatening to rip it.

"Man, I've heard of the standard options like A/C and cruise control. But I've never heard of a girl in the trunk before!" The redhead shouted. His badge read "Skip Flannagan." He was about the same height and age as his friend, about eighteen. But his bright orange freckles made him seem years younger somehow. Maybe it was just that he acted less serious.

"What's goin' on?" The garage boss came thundering over to where the two guys were standing. "Are you boys tryin' to fool around with girls at work?"

Old Man McDirk glared at me with intense, beady brown eyes. He was a short, squat little man with a balding head and squirrel-like, puffy cheeks.

"Honest, we just opened the trunk. There she was!" The one named Skip proclaimed with a broad, sweeping gesture.

"What do you think you're doing?" Old Man McDirk accosted me. "Are you some expensive call girl who decided to do some hitchhiking? I don't know what else you could be in that get up. Nobody around town here dresses like that!"

He looked me up and down with a snort of disgust.

I looked down at myself for the first time. I was wearing a dirty and torn shimmery purple lace dress of about knee length. There were pearls sewn into the material around the neckline and the waist. On my legs were ripped nylon stockings. I was not wearing any shoes. But on my arm was clasped a diamond bracelet. A matching necklace dangled from my neck. My hands were covered with diamond and pearl rings in gold settings.

"Just who are you anyway?" Old Man McDirk moved closer to me.

"I . . . ah . . ." I thought hard. I wrinkled my brow in concentration. I honestly could not remember who was.

Again confused images swam through my brain. I saw the magnolia trees. I could even smell their musky scent. A ruddy cat peeked out from behind a doorway at me. A lady with blond hair and a mink coat smiled. She linked her arm through that of a gray-haired gentleman with whiskers wearing a suit with cufflinks.

There was a stage. Again I saw the coffin. Someone was singing about Valentine's Day. Then that black sports car ripped across my mind. I saw the blacked out face. Everything disappeared with the v-r-r-rooom of the motor.

I gripped onto the edge of the car trunk for support. "I — I don't remember!" I finally had to confess. It was shocking but true. I did not have the slightest idea who I was.

"Drunk are you?" Old Man McDirk thundered. He grabbed for me and dragged me out of the trunk. "Well, sleep it off someplace else! I run a respectable garage

The boss ordered Skip to show me to the door. But suddenly the dark-haired guy cut in. He grabbed my arm and thrust me out of the shop onto the street.

"I want you to stop hanging around. Do you understand?" He hissed.

I nodded. I had no idea what he was talking about.

He took out his wallet. He counted out some fives and tens. He offered the money to me.

I shook my head. "I'm — I'm not that kind of girl. I don't remember who I am or what I'm doing here. But I know I can't be a call girl."

"Sure give everybody the wrong impression in that get up!" The dark-haired guy grunted at my clothes. "Your last customer must have paid a lot. Looks expensive enough even if it's ripped and dirty. Go buy yourself some decent clothes."

He waved the money in my face.

There was a group of people across the street staring at us and pointing.

He forced the money into my hand. He made my fingers close around it and shoved me away. "I can't afford to be seen with the likes of you. Leave me alone!" Again he sounded ferocious just like the guy in that dark chamber with all the water.

I backed away from him and started to flee. Soon I discovered that did not know where was going. But I still had the money clutched in my hand, and I was hungry. I did not have a purse, a wallet, or anything else to pay with as wandered into a restaurant in the shape of an old train car with a sign outside that said the 50's Diner. At the last moment I forced the money down into a satin pocket in my dress.

Inside there was a counter with raised stools. Separate booths, each with a photo of a 50s movie star plastered right above the seats, lined each side of the room. A jukebox sat under the window right beside the door.

I seated myself at a booth. started looking at a menu featuring cheeseburgers, hot dogs, fries, malts, sundaes, shakes, ice cream sodas, and side orders of pizza and ice cream cones. My stomach started to growl. I had no idea how long it had been since I had eaten.

Suddenly the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Somebody was looking at me. I glanced over at the next table. There sat a gorgeous babe with frizzy black hair hanging around her shoulders. Her violet eyes were staring straight at me as if looks could kill. She did not even glance away when I gaped back at her in shock and surprise.

Worse, the beauty with the coal black locks, that resembled hissing snakes, was surrounded by a table of other gorgeous babes. Maybe they were not as pretty as she was. But they looked like the most pop-

ular senior girls in some high school, the ones that the others envied, dressed in tight-fitting clothes to show off their figures. They were all sticking their noses up into the air, laughing and whispering to each other. They were all giving me the eye.

I looked down at my clothes once again. Maybe I was creating the wrong impression. But I could not help it. I did not know how I had gotten here. And I was very hungry. I had to eat something before I did anything else. Perhaps I should attempt to explain the bizarre situation to the other girls.

I tried to smile a bewildered smile. "I'm — m sorry. I don't come from around here. I — just got here today."

"Yeah, looks like some pimp got tired of you and threw you out of the car when you came to this town." The black-haired beauty with the violet eyes snickered. Lipstick was smeared around her mouth. The others called her Clementine.

"Ah . . . I know I wasn't that kind of girl. You see, I was in an accident or something. I don't remember exactly who I am or where come from."

"The no name girl! Likely story." Clementine shot back as she chewed bubble gum, blew a big bubble, and popped it. "You mean you'd *like* to forget." She tossed her head and brushed her frizzy hair back over her shoulder.

Somehow that remark seemed to be an open invitation for the other girls to pick on me. The girls all swarmed around my booth. Clementine led the way, swinging her jeaned hips from side to side. The girls started tugging at my hair and pulling at my lace dress as if I were a mannequin and not human, perhaps public property or just a toy

"Looks like you slept in your dress." One girl teased.

"Gals of her profession usually do, don't they?" Another girl giggled.

"Say, look at this dress label! Did you steal this somewhere, honey? Saks Fifth Avenue is kinda fancy for a slut like you!" Another girl shouted.

Soon their voices all blended into each other like a hive of swarming, buzzing bees stinging me all over. "Maybe one of her dates gave her the dress instead of money."

"Prostitutes don't get paid that much."

"Some call girls do. Maybe she turned an especially good trick. The guy was real grateful."

"That couldn't explain these diamond and gold rings and this necklace. What did you do, rob a jewelry store, kid?"

"They've gotta be fake."

"Look, this necklace cuts glass!" One girl screeched in amazement.

Clementine grabbed the necklace and took it off. She did a demonstration on her compact mirror. All the girls gathered close to watch as the stone slit the glass. They gasped in astonishment as if they had never seen a real diamond before.

I grabbed the necklace and fastened it back around my neck. I did not know if it was mine. But I was afraid to lose it.

"Who would have given her a diamond, let alone one this big?"

I wanted to scream aloud and run. But Clementine shoved me back down into my seat. She strutted over to the jukebox. She dropped a quarter into the machine. An Elvis song, *Ain't Nothin' But A Hound Dog!* blared across the room.

The song reminded me of the Golden Oldies and the Elvis songs I had listened to while trapped in the trunk of the car. I could not stand this anymore. I leaped up and tried to run out the door. Clementine caught me by my dress. I could hear the lace tearing some more.

"You're not going anywhere so fast! Maybe you're not goin' anywhere ever again."

Again Clementine threw me back into my seat at the booth.

One of the other girls handed Clementine a lighted cigarette. Clementine snuffed it out against my skin. Her eyes glowed with satisfaction.

Two

“Hey, you gals, mind your manners!”

A fat, middle-aged waitress made her appearance. She had been taking a customer’s order over the phone. She chased Clementine and her friends back to their seats. Then she waddled over to the jukebox to cut the volume in half. She came muttering over to my table, complaining about what she called “beep-bop” music and proclaiming that she liked “only classical music, the real quality stuff.”

“You’ll have to forgive Clementine.” The waitress confided in me. “Her dad, Buck O’reilly, runs a lot of things around town. Clementine’s nothin’ if she ain’t spoiled.”

The rotund lady frowned at Clementine. She turned her cherry cheeks back to me and smiled. Her brown hair was going gray. She had it pulled back with an old-fashioned headband with little roses all over it.

“Naturally Clementine’s jealous to see a pretty gal like you pop into town, ‘specially since she and her boyfriend broke up. What’s your name anyway? Can’t say I’ve seen you before.”

“Just got here today.”

“Where are your folks?” The cherry checked lady glanced around the diner. “You look like you couldn’t possibly be anymore than seventeen or eighteen.”

“That’s just it. I don’t know.”

“No doubt they’ll be back real soon.” The waitress concluded with a comfortable smile. “They must be shopping. Not that we’ve got many shops left. Most closed down the past couple years after the mine went bust. What did you say your name was, honey?”

“I don’t —”

"That's a lovely name, I'm sure!" The lady chattered on. "My name's Rose Flannagan. I run the 50's Diner. I'm the waitress and short order cook. Folks around town call me just plain Rose."

Rose's attention was drawn to the travel section of a newspaper on the table beside me.

"Now isn't that perfect!" Rose gushed over an article entitled: VIRGINIA PLANTATION COUNTRY. It had lots of color photos. Her doughboy face dimpled. Her checks glowed bright pink. "I wonder how they get their lawns to grow like that. Ours always dies. Look at those magnolia trees with the waxy green leaves and those beautiful white, fragrant blossoms. They say those pretty pink and white flowering trees are dogwoods and those green bushes are azaleas . . ."

Rose read over my shoulder, turning the pages.

I had not noticed the newspaper before. Something drew me to the photos even as Rose gushed on.

"You know, I'm gonna save my pennies and retire to someplace like that someday. My son's comin' with me. I'm gonna leave this miserable old town with nothing in it — no money, no scenery, *nothing!*"

She nodded.

There were photos of famous plantation houses that were open to the public at various times of the year. Something looked familiar about the broad expanses of lawn and the manicured rosebushes. One of them was called Magnolia Row, one of the grandest spreads of all. I stared at the rows of magnolia trees leading up the main drive. I reached out without thinking and touched the picture.

"Wouldn't it be grand to live in a place like that!" Rose squeezed my shoulder. "I'd just love to motor up that driveway every day after I finish work at the 50's Diner."

"Oh, but they don't actually *use* that driveway. It's just for show." I broke in suddenly.

"Where does it say that, dear?"

What had made me say that? That remark had just burst out of my mouth all by itself. I thought, Have I seen the place before? Have I been on a tour when it was open to the public? Maybe that's why I know that they don't use the main drive. Tour guides love to drop little tidbits like that. It shows that they are in the know. Or maybe I worked there once?

A more alarming possibility occurred to me. Did I steal something from there — like these jewels, this dress? Did somebody else? Did they plant the clothes on me?

A bell tinkled over the doorway. A man in a hunting outfit, along with some guys who were so bizarrely dressed that all I could think was that they looked foreign, entered the 50s Diner. They sat at two different tables.

Rose exclaimed. “My diner’s the meeting place of the town. Ain’t no other. Look honey, what do you wanna eat?”

I opened my mouth.

“Best thing on the menu.” Rose nodded. “One strawberry soda coming up. The cheeseburger galore plate won’t be far behind. Gotta tend to the grill. I’m a one woman restaurant here on Main Street.”

Rose waddled back into the kitchen, only to return moments later with the strawberry soda before she headed off to the other tables.

The middle-aged man in the hunting outfit with the checked jacket and hat was staring right at me. So were the two foreigners talking to each other a mile-a-minute. Were they talking about me? They hadn’t ever seen me before — or had they?

I worried, Surely I wasn’t some criminal in my real life? Surely they weren’t my partners in crime? Or were they the ones who did me in, coming back to claim me?

I could have had any kind of past. Maybe I was really was a hooker, though I could not imagine it. Maybe I was something worse — an escaped convict? Perhaps I was a killer. Why could I not remember? Was it so horrible that I did not *want* to remember?

I looked down at my purple lace dress. I must be a thief. That was why everybody treated me with contempt. A tramp like me naturally could not own such expensive clothes!

I tried to hide myself behind the menu. Then I attempted to prop the travel section of the newspaper up in front of me. Nothing helped. I only attracted more attention.

I twisted the golden bracelet on my wrist. It was set with shiny clear stones that twinkled and looked very much like diamonds. Then I swallowed hard. I wanted to take it off. But I did not dare. People thought that I was acting strange enough.

The middle-aged man with the balding head and the paunch, who had his rifle leaning against the wall, kept on signaling Rose to pour

him a cup of coffee. He mixed it with lots of sugar and cream and watched me while he was doing it as if I were some matinee flick and he did not want to miss a second of the action. Finally he set his cup down on his saucer. He got up and sat down across from me in the same booth. I buried myself in the newspaper. I pretended to be sipping my strawberry soda.

He grabbed my cold, trembling hand in his big, overpowering one. With his free hand he slipped me a wad of greenbacks.

The bills were all hundreds! They looked new and crisp as if they had just been minted and had never been used before. Was this man a counterfeiter? Had he robbed an armored truck? Even worse, was he trying to pay me back for something I had done in the past? I wanted to throw the money down on the table and run.

"Look, doll, you've never seen so much money, have you? You and I both know your clothes were stolen along with those jewels. Money is money. *You look like you need it bad.*"

Help! Rose was in the kitchen. Everybody else was staring at me intently.

"All you have to do is talk to your boyfriend."

"I — I don't have a boyfriend. At least not here in town."

Truth be told, I had no idea whether I had a boyfriend in my other life or not.

"Sure you do, kid! You can't fool old Buck O'reilly here. I'm a big cheese around town. High school principal. Banker. Real estate agent."

"But — but I don't live here!"

"Doesn't matter where Clem dragged you in from. Don't care if you're from San Francisco or Juneau, Alaska. All that matters is that you've been *seen* with him. "

"I — have?" My voice croaked.

"*Don't play stupid with me!*" He squeezed my wrist until I felt like crying out. "You were seen with Clem outside on the street. He gave you money — but not as much as I did."

So that was Clem, the guy who worked at the garage, the guy with the nightmare face in the dark, cavernous, wet room who had threatened to kill me. He no doubt was mixed up in some awful business. Now so was I.

Buck O'reilly hissed. "Tell Clem that I'm making a *bona fide* business offer. He's onto something big. You can see it in his eyes, the way he

acts so secretive. I'm willing to go fifty-fifty with him. He needs somebody of my experience no matter what he's trying to pull off. I'm willing to offer lots more up front money to let him know how sincere I am. Tell Clem I'll offer *whatever he asks*. No sum's too big for Buck O'reilly! No sir!"

The man's eyes shone with greed.

What was Clem up to? He had been anxious not to be seen with me at the garage. He had freaked when he had seen somebody watching us from across the street. That was why he had given me money in the first place.

"Really, I'd like to help. Clem doesn't want any part of me." I wet my lips and whispered back. I cast my gaze from side to side, hoping that nobody had overheard me.

"He's a hot-blooded teenage boy, ain't he?" Buck O'reilly snickered. "Don't think Clem could resist the likes of you. Nice figure. Nice clothes. Nice grammar. Look like a classy dish. Your pimp did real well with you. I couldn't resist you at Clem's age."

Buck O'reilly eyed me up and down in a way that made me flush all over.

"Just strut your stuff! Clem'll come howling round your skirts."

"Really, I—don't think. I—"

"Wouldn't advise you to cause trouble, girlie." Buck O'reilly came around my side of the booth. "Just like I wouldn't advise Clem to refuse my offer. Already caused me enough trouble when he dropped my daughter, Clementine, cold. Girls don't take kindly to that sorta thing, you know."

Buck O'reilly was in my face.

"If Clem doesn't come around, I'll certainly know who to blame. I'll know that you, girlie, didn't put out enough. *Get me?*"

Buck O'reilly showed me something cold, silver, and metal poking out of his pocket. It was a gun! He was gone as quickly as he had come.

With wobbly legs, I headed toward the door. Still that Elvis tune, *Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog*, was playing on the jukebox, though it was turned way down. Suddenly two guys blocked my path — two foreigners.

One goon with a British accent pulled me into their booth. He was wearing a gray trench coat with a collar turned upwards stiffly around

his neck. His floppy hat was pulled down over his face so it was hard to see his eyes. I tried to keep from coughing as he blew cigar smoke into my face.

“All right, miss! We’re worth ten times what Mr. O’reilly is. We can surpass any offer he’s made to you.”

My hand spasmed. I let go of the wad of one hundred dollar bills that Buck O’reilly had given me. It fell onto the table.

The other British gent was bizarrely dressed, too. His long brown mustache was curled upwards at the ends so perfectly that it looked waxed. His hair was short and clipped. Nothing was out of place from his clothes to his classical profile. He wore an expedition hat and a Safari suit. Binoculars hung around his neck.

He turned up his nose at Buck O’reilly’s roll of money and with contempt flicked it aside. Then he got out his checkbook encased in crisp English leather. He wrote me check with a blank in the place for my name and handed the check across the table to me.

I did not want to take it. My hands were trembling so badly that they could not hold onto anything anyway. But the gent insisted that I take it.

One million dollars! I looked at him blankly. My hand spasmed again. The check went fluttering to the floor.

The gent in the expedition hat retrieved the check. “Now if you’ll just kindly tell us your name, miss, I’ll make the check legal tender. All you have to do is take it to your bank, and we shall be in business. Your friend, Mr. Clem Carpenter, will be in for an even bigger share when he becomes partners with us.”

I looked in panic toward the door. I tried to judge exactly how far it was from where I was sitting. Then I sprang up and ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Clementine on the pay phone talking to somebody, still glaring at me very nastily. Rose was coming through the swinging doors from the kitchen carrying a tray with my cheeseburger galore plate. Her mouth fell open in surprise when she saw me.

Just as I ran out the door, I bumped into two uniformed officers coming the other way.

“All right, miss, we’ve received complaints about you.” The first officer declared.

Clementine snickered at me from her table back in the restaurant. She had returned to it. I knew where the complaints had come from.

"We don't want any trouble in this here town. So unless you can tell us where you belong, we're gonna put you in the slammer right now." The second officer announced.

"Why don't you ask Clem?" Clementine purred from her table.

The first policeman stood there holding me by the wrist while the second officer went across the street to the garage to fetch Clem. This town really did seem to be small. Everybody knew everybody else.

"I don't pay my mechanics to get in trouble with the law!" Old Man McDirk shouted as Clem and his friend, Skip, followed the second policeman across the street. "You're both fired!"

Clem stood in front of me in his coveralls. He was wiping the grease off his face and hands with a wet rag. His lips were moving. He seemed to be saying, *Not you again!*

"This tramp's causing trouble around town." The first policeman explained to Clem. "If you don't claim her, I'm gonna throw her in jail."

Skip gave me a "Gee Whiz! What happened?" look. Clem bit his lip. He seemed to be making up his mind what to do.

"Is she your gal?" The second policeman asked.

I certainly did not want to go to jail. It would be dark again. It would be like that car trunk. I looked at Clem pleadingly. Not that I really knew anything about Clem. Not that I fully trusted him. But anything — anything at all — anyone at all — was better than darkness.

The policemen and I both hung on Clem's words. Skip finally elbowed his friend in the ribs. "C'mon, Clem!" He prompted him.

"Yeah, yeah, she's my gal, I guess." Clem growled. He acted as if he were not going to give an inch more than he had to.

The first policeman shoved me against Clem so hard that I hurt my arm, though Clem acted as if he were made of iron, stone, or solid granite. He did not move.

"If we find this here gal wandering the streets again, we'll know who to lock up with her. *You'll both go to jail!*" The second policeman threatened.

Imagine! Locking people up for just walking on the street and wearing the wrong clothes! I did not know what strange town I found myself in. This was all very alien to me.

After both policemen had stalked off down the street, I turned to Clem.

"Look, I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble. Maybe I'm an accident victim, or I've been ill. I really don't know which, or if it's something else that makes me not remember what I'm doing here. I'm sorry for making your boss fire you. And — "

"Don't worry about Old Man McDirk!" Skip laughed. "The old guss fires us both at least once a week. He expects us back at work again the next day bright and early or right after school. Truth is, he can't find anybody else."

"Oh?"

Skip continued. "Most folks who can leave town. Old Man McDirk can't find anybody who knows the difference between an engine mount and an axle boot who hasn't skedaddled a long time ago."

"What town is this anyway?" I asked.

"Hole."

"Hole?" I thought that was an odd name for a town!

Skip shrugged. "Some settler's bad joke a long time ago. Nobody knows what it means for sure. Probably doesn't mean much at all. Just our bad luck for being born here, I guess. "

He grinned.

Never had I heard of a town like this. Everything had been strange today, everything since I had come out of the darkness of the trunk.

Suddenly a hand landed on my shoulder. It took hold of me and pulled me roughly aside. It shoved me up against the side of the diner building. Clem was looking thunderclouds at me. His brows were crossed. His grey eyes were flashing. He spoke in a low, threatening voice.

"I don't know who you are or what you're doing here in Hole, but you've gotta get outta town and outta my life. I don't care if you're a spy and somebody is paying you a lot of money to follow me around, you're gonna be the most sorry gal in the world if you keep on bothering me like this. *Do I make myself clear?*"

"I don't know who I am or where I'm from or what I'm doing here. But I'm — I'm not a spy!"

Clem rolled his eyes toward the sky until only the whites showed. He seemed to be trying hard to keep his patience.

"Name me a town. I don't care how far away it is. I'll take you there. You can't stay with me. Don't like anybody breathing down my neck."

He leaned into my face as he muttered his dire warnings. His hand never left my shoulder. His grip was so hard that he was hurting me.

"Please believe me!" I pleaded with him, trying to make Clem understand. "If you don't believe me, I don't know what I'll do."

He yanked me by the hand across the street. He pulled so hard that I felt as if my arm were coming out of its socket.

"Hey, Clem!" Skip cupped his hands to his mouth. "Not so fast there! Whoever she is, she's a looker. Don't treat here like that."

"Where — where are you taking me?" I pleaded.

"I'll dump you in the very first town I come to. Maybe if I get fed up enough I'll just throw you into some ditch by the side of the road. That's probably where you came from anyway — some garbage heap. Really it doesn't matter. You'd be better off anywhere than Hole."

Tears streamed down my face as I tried to dig my heels into the dusty road and pull back. Skip was even trying to help. He had grabbed onto my free arm. He was tugging me in the opposite direction.

"C'mon, Clem, this ain't no way to treat a lady!"

Suddenly tires screeched. A black sports car zoomed straight for where Clem, Skip, and I were standing in the middle of the road. I gaped at the car, frozen to the spot.

It was the very car that I had seen so often in my nightmares. That car had been like a punctuation mark — a final, ugly, dark slash across the blank page of my memory. While I had been inside the trunk or in that other, wet place, the car had blotted out all other images — the house with magnolia trees, the smiling lady with the blonde updo and the gloves, the man with gray whiskers and the suit with cufflinks, the fat lady who did nothing but wag her finger and scold, the coffin, and the girls in long dresses that trailed along the floor. Stray visions of which I could make no sense had ended with the sports car — visions like the ruddy cat with black points and a black accent mark at the end of his tail who had amber yellow eyes with tints of orange, pointed ears, and long legs.

Sometimes I had even heard disembodied voices and strange sounds in my mind's eye — whispering voices, soprano voices, a cat's meow, someone singing about Valentine's Day, and people clapping. These also had ended in screeching tires.

After the sound of car tires ripping across the pavement, I always saw one final image before everything went black. In a flash a guy in

a three-piece suit with a golden pocket watch held up black gloved hands and wiggled his spider-like fingers. His face was blacked out. He was headless!

That black sports car flew at me for real. It was no dream.
I screamed and screamed and screamed.

Three

The next time I opened my eyes, I was in another strange room. At least this one was not pitch black. I was able to look around me in the gray light. I was lying in a four-poster bed with a night stand beside me. A dresser sat right across from me. On the floor was a throw rug — nothing fancy — made of twisted rags. The furniture smelled musty. It was worn, cracked, and dented.

The room had a high ceiling the way they used to build them in very old homes. There were windows on each side of the room, but they hardly let any light or air in. All were tightly closed. The draperies over the windows were faded, so much so that I could hardly make out the flowery pattern anymore let alone judge what color it had been originally.

I wondered if anybody who lived here ever bothered to open a window for ventilation. After all, it was rather warm. Right now not only were the drapes pulled, it looked like the wooden blinds were down as well. Underneath that there seemed to be a solid wall of shutters. Though it seemed to be early dawn to judge from the tiny amount of light being emitted through the cracks, it was almost as dark as night. Shadows engulfed the room.

A clock on the fireplace mantel in front of me made a ticking sound.

The room grew a shade brighter. A beam of early morning light came from an adjoining room. I could hear water running in the sink. It must be a bathroom.

A bright-faced, cherry-cheeked guy with bright orange hair and freckles suddenly poked his head around the corner. He looked like Skip, though at first he was hard to recognize him without his coveralls and grease all over his face.

He smiled. "Look, Auntie! Sleeping Beauty is awake!" He pointed straight at me. He was clutching a sponge in one hand and scouring powder in the other. A towel was draped over his shoulder.

A middle-aged lady sitting in a plain, wooden-backed chair in one corner of the bedroom put down her knitting needles and looked up at me. The lady had been so quiet that I had not even heard the click clack of her needles until this moment when she decided to emerge from the shadows. Her dark hair streaked with gray was pulled back into a netted bun. She was dressed very conservatively in a plain black house dress and a pair of nondescript dark leather, low-heeled shoes.

"Wonderful!" A rosy-cheeked lady popped her head into the bedroom from out in the hallway. She beamed at me. "I have just enough time to make you a super big breakfast before I rush over to the diner." Rose hurried down the stairs to the kitchen, her footsteps echoing all the way.

Breakfast? Hadn't it been afternoon? Then I remembered the black sports car. Had it hit me? looked down at my arms and legs. I could not detect any new bruises or marks that had not come from the ropes tying me down in the trunk of the car.

Clem! Clem had been holding onto my arm just as the sports car had barreled toward us at top speed. Where was Clem? I glanced around the room. Would he emerge from the shadows, too?

"Clem said to tell you that he might be back later. He had to go out on some . . . *business*."

The lady in the black dress pronounced the word "business" with distaste as if it meant "funeral". She looked very grave, serious, and unsmiling. The corners of her lips turned downwards.

The middle-aged lady in the corner must have noticed my alarmed, lost look. She added in a soft, whispery voice with the ghost of a smile. "I'm Mrs. Carpenter, Clem's mother. Clem brought you home yesterday afternoon after the near accident in the middle of Main Street."

Rose was back with a hot steaming tray of tea, orange juice, and Danish pastries with an assortment of jellies. She had included a little pitcher of cream and a matching sugar bowl. The china had a pattern of faded pink roses. Rose arranged the tray on my lap and set everything up nicely as if this were the Ritz Hotel in Paris. She fluffed my pillows and propped me up in bed. She tried to do everything except feed me.

"Mom!" Skip protested to Rose. "The girl can feed herself. She's got two hands." Skip plopped down at the foot of my bed, his scrubbing chores forgotten.

"My sister Rose is very — *enthusiastic*." Mrs. Carpenter observed quietly as Rose waved good-bye and rushed out the bedroom door. "Good thing. We have to make a living somehow. Her diner brings in almost all our income since the post office put me on part-time wages. Not enough postal business anymore."

"You all live together then?" I asked. Not only was Hole a small town. Everybody appeared to be related. I grabbed a Danish pastry dripping with cherries and stuffed it into my mouth. I was more hungry than I had realized.

Mrs. Carpenter nodded. "We've all lived together ever since Clem's father disappeared ten years ago. My sister, Rose, was kind enough to take Clem and I in. Clem and I used to live in a separate house a little down the street." With the mention of Clem, Mrs. Carpenter's lower lip quivered.

The lady sounded like doom. Suddenly I knew that she was the one who had pulled the drapes and blinds and fastened the shutters.

"C'mon, Auntie!" Skip coaxed. "Clem will be O.K."

Mrs. Carpenter burst into tears.

I dropped my second pastry. Suddenly I was not as hungry anymore. I had not expected that kind of reaction!

Mrs. Carpenter got out a handkerchief and dabbed her eyes.

"Clem could at least have taken you with him wherever he's gone." Mrs. Carpenter addressed Skip. "You're his only cousin. He used to take you everywhere. Now he acts as if he doesn't have a friend left in the world."

"Clem can take care of himself." Skip assured her. "He's a big boy now. Seventeen. All grown up. Just like me."

I got up the courage to ask the obvious question. "Where did Clem go?"

Both Mrs. Carpenter and Skip looked straight at me as if I might give them the answer. Mrs. Carpenter sighed. "You mean Clem didn't even tell you? *You don't know either?*"

It was more of a plea than a question. She rose from her chair and came over to me. She stood there staring down at me as if I might change my mind.

"Why — why would Clem tell me?" The last thing I thought I remembered hearing from Clem, he had threatened to abandon me in a ditch along the side of the highway!

"I—I just thought that since my son was so fond of you and all . . ." Mrs. Carpenter clenched and unclenched her hands. "I mean, since you are his new girlfriend. . . Well, Clem might tell you what he hasn't told anyone else."

"Girlfriend?" I asked. Everybody in Hole seemed to suffer from the same mistaken notion — even Clem's mother!

"You are his new girlfriend, aren't you?" Mrs. Carpenter regarded me anxiously.

"Oh, Clem likes her all night. She's got his dander up. You can just tell." Skip broke in. He grabbed several of the stack of gooey Danish pastries and devoured them one after the other as if they were cookies right out of a bag.

Mrs. Carpenter looked as if she might cry some more. "I — just thought that maybe there was *some* hope for Clem yet. After all, you *are* a pretty girl with that long, soft brown hair." She reached out and touched it. "I thought that he would notice. He used to notice such things."

With a sigh she turned and returned slowly back to her chair as if she were sleepwalking. She slumped down lifelessly and sat facing me like one half awake, half alive.

I tried to explain for the millionth time since I had come out of the car trunk. "I don't know Clem. He doesn't know me. He found me in the trunk of a car that he was repairing down at the garage and —"

"I really found her, but some guys get all the credit and all the luck." Skip talked with his mouth full. He also helped himself to a cup of tea with cream and sugar. "Always say share and share alike. But don't think Clem is gonna want to share this dish when he snaps out of it and starts noticing girls' figures again. I mean, this one looks like a perfect thirty-four, twenty-two, thirty-four."

"The police found the car abandoned by the side of the road and towed it in to the garage." I blushed at Skip's description of my assets. "They figured that they would fix it up and sell it since no one had claimed it."

Something about what I had said had captured Mrs. Carpenter's attention. "But—but what were you doing in the trunk?" Apparently nobody had told her. She was hearing it now for the first time.

"I can't remember a thing about where I came from or what happened to me. I don't even know my name. All I know is that I've ended up here and — "

"I KNEW IT!" Mrs. Carpenter exclaimed as she leaped to her feet. "I knew it from the first moment I saw you. You're messed up in whatever nasty business Clem has got himself involved in." She advanced rapidly toward me.

"What nasty business?" I asked.

"You should know better than me!" Mrs. Carpenter's eyes were wide open and staring. She turned deathly pale. She leaned into my face until I could feel her breath on my cheek. "What have you done with my son? Do you want him to end up in jail? Do you want him to end up dead?"

Suddenly I remembered how the two English gents and Buck O'reilly had tried to bribe me in the 50's Diner. Evidently Clem was involved in some sort of illegal scheme. But I was not going to tell Mrs. Carpenter about that awful experience. The poor lady would totally freak.

Skip leaped up and helped his aunt back into her plain, wooden-backed chair. He patted her on the shoulder. "The poor girl knows less than we do, Aunt Mariah. It's as plain as the nose on your face."

Mrs. Carpenter covered her face with her handkerchief and wept for a long while. The house was quiet. Her weeping was almost the only sound. It was broken only by the ticking of the clock, the sound of water in the pipes, and the creak of the floorboards as the house settled on its foundations. It was kind of eerie.

"I'm sorry, whatever your name is." Mrs. Carpenter suddenly looked up. She wiped her eyes and sniffled. "But you've gotta understand that Clem's the only family that I have left since his father disappeared from home looking for some fool gold mine ten years ago. Nobody ever saw Jeremiah again. If the same thing happens to Clem, I'll — I'll die!"

I looked at both Skip and Mrs. Carpenter in speechless amazement and horror. What kind of town had stumbled upon? What kind of place was Hole?

"It's true, Clem's been acting mysterious for about two months. It was real sudden, too, the way it started." Skip plopped back down at the foot of my bed.

"How was that?" I asked.

"One morning in early April, Clem went to school as usual." Mrs. Carpenter began speaking. "He was laughing and smiling. He even joked with me and said he was gonna take his turn cooking that night."

Mrs. Carpenter seemed to be looking inward and talking to herself, relating a tale not of the living but of the dead. It sounded grim.

Skip obviously thought that his aunt looked as if she needed a cup of tea. He poured her a cup from the tray and handed it to her.

Her hands were trembling visibly as she took the cup. She paused in her narration as if she were reliving the experience and inwardly saw scenes of indescribable horror. What was so horrible about making dinner, I had no way to guess.

Mrs. Carpenter took a sip of tea. Her hands shook so much that she spilled some of the hot liquid into her lap. The tea seemed to fortify her to go on.

"It was Clem's day to make his spaghetti." Mrs. Carpenter tried to keep her voice steady. "We all do what we can to help Aunt Rose out. She cooks all day at the diner and doesn't wanna always have to come home and make dinner. So I have my pot roast and my meat loaf nights on Monday and Tuesday. And —"

"I do hot dogs on Wednesdays!" Skip shrugged. "Not much, but hot dogs and beans are about my limit as a chef."

"Then I do a pork chop night on Thursdays." Mrs. Carpenter continued her narration. "Aunt Rose does something special on Saturday and Sunday nights, so Clem's night was always Friday. It's why I'll never forget that it was a Friday that this all happened."

"What all happened?" I asked, shocked. Mrs. Carpenter talked as if on a Friday two months ago the world had come to an end.

Mrs. Carpenter looked at me sadly and shook her head. Then she sighed. It seemed to take an effort of will to get herself to continue.

"I went to work as usual at the post office. I took time during lunch to hurry out to the grocery store and buy the meat, tomatoes, cheese, and the other ingredients that Clem uses for his recipe. I dashed back to the house as I always do and laid everything out for him. I was so busy that I even left a note with chores for him to do, everything from sweeping the hallway to putting in a load of wash. We don't have a dryer that works anymore, but we still do have an old washing machine."

Mrs. Carpenter sniffled at what was coming next.

"I remember how Clem used to prepare his Friday night dinners. He would lay out a special tablecloth with candles. Then he would pour glasses of ginger ale because we couldn't afford wine, not even cheap wine. Sometimes he would even borrow some Italian music on old 45 records from the library, that was before the branch library closed. We would play them on the old stereo in the living room."

She paused and clasped her hands in front of her as if she could still hear the Italian music in the silence of the bedroom. I strained my ears, too, but I could hear nothing.

"Just little touches." She sniffled again. "But we all needed a lift at the end of a long, hard work week. We had four different jobs among us and rushed about all the time just to make ends meet."

"Aunt Mariah, c'mon!" Skip protested as the tears streamed down her cheeks. "It's not like Clem's dead."

Mrs. Carpenter stared at Skip with accusing eyes. "*Not yet!*" Those two words were about as eloquent as anything that she had yet said.

I swallowed hard. Skip refilled Mrs. Carpenter's teacup and gave her plenty of cream and sugar.

Once again the tea seemed to revive her enough so that she could go on speaking.

"I got home a little before five. I expected to smell the spaghetti sauce simmering as I came through the door. Used to look forward to that on Fridays."

Her lower lip twitched. For a moment I thought Mrs. Carpenter was going to break down again.

"Sorta gave me a little boost to inspire me to do my last remaining chores until Skip and Rose got home and we could all sit down to dinner at six. But Clem wasn't there. In fact everything was just as I had laid it out at noon time. He hadn't touched a thing.

"There was no note, no message on the chalkboard. That was our way — to leave notes, you know. I called upstairs. No answer. I called outside toward the shed. No answer. Then I realized that his old Buick wasn't parked out front. Hadn't noticed that on my way in cause I was so used to seeing it there.

"Before I had a chance to think, there was a knock on the front door. Thought it must be Clem. Didn't stop to think that Clem lived here. He

wouldn't bother to knock. But then your mind likes to play tricks on you at times like that."

"Who was at the door if it wasn't Clem?" I asked.

"It was Clem's girlfriend, Clementine O'reilly. She asked me if I'd seen Clem. He'd picked her up at her house that morning as usual to take her to school. But he hadn't been waiting for her in the parking lot afterwards. Had to walk three miles back home. There was no bus. The school buses had stopped running for lack of money. I was struck dumb with amazement. Clem never forgot to drive Clementine home."

"Yeah, they were practically engaged!" Skip broke in. "Went camping up in the mountains all the time. Everybody expected those two to get hitched as soon as school was out in June."

"I reached for the phone." Mrs. Carpenter continued with her narration. "I was gonna call Clem and Skip down at the garage if they hadn't already left to come home yet. Maybe Old Man McDirk had gotten a big auto job."

"But I walked in right then." Skip volunteered. "First words out of my big mouth were, 'Have you seen Clem?' Then I had two ladies staring at me as if the cat had gotten their tongues."

"I told Skip that he at least must have seen Clem at the garage."

"I told Aunt Mariah no way. He'd never showed up for work after school that day. Old Man McDirk was fit to be tied. He must have fired Clem ten times over that afternoon."

"I told Skip that he must have seen Clem at school."

"I'd seen Clem leaving school a little early." Skip recalled. "His last words to me were, 'Hope you're looking forward to that spaghetti dinner at six!' Didn't say anything about work. Then he drove off. Never saw him again after that."

"Clementine started crying." Mrs. Carpenter picked up the story. "We all figured something bad must have happened. Took our cars out in different directions around town searching for Clem. I went to get Rose at the diner. She closed early and got into her car, too. Buck O'reilly helped after he called the hospital in Eldorado City to make sure that Clem wasn't there."

Buck O'reilly! I wondered if he was the same guy who had tried to slip me the wad of money in the 50's Diner, the guy who had threatened me with a gun. I decided he must be. Hole was a small town. I

would not trust him to search for a corpse. He would sell his own mother. But I kept my mouth shut.

"Skip finally found Clem's car all right." Mrs. Carpenter recalled every detail. "But Clem wasn't in it. Nor did the car show any signs of an accident. It was stashed along the side of some dirt road way out of town. Rose found somebody to drive it home for us. Couldn't afford a tow."

"Yeah, money's awfully short around here." Skip volunteered.

"On the way home, we all stopped at the police station and reported a missing person." Mrs. Carpenter continued. "Old Man McDirk was on duty then as the officer in charge."

"Boy, was he ready to blow sky high!" Skip whistled. "He thought Clem was playing some prank."

"But I thought Old Man McDirk ran the garage?" I asked.

"Around Hole we've gotta double up on jobs. Not enough people to go around." Skip explained.

"When we finally got back to the house, I invited everybody in for a cup of coffee just to be neighborly. Didn't have any other way to pay them back for helping to search for Clem." Mrs. Carpenter sniffled. "We sat there in the kitchen talking kinda like you do after a funeral." She sobbed.

"Boy, was Aunt Mariah in for a shock!" Skip butted in from his seat at the bottom of my bed. "After everybody left, she walked into the living room and flicked on the light. Clem was sitting there alone in the dark just staring at the walls. He must have been there all along. He was white all over as if he'd seen a ghost."

"I ran to him." Mrs. Carpenter recalled. "But he acted as if he didn't know me. Wouldn't even answer me when I asked him about where he'd been and what had happened. He merely got up after awhile and went up to bed."

"She called Doc Jennings to come over in the middle of the night. Doc said that Clem was healthy as a horse." Skip remembered.

"He might be healthy. But I'd lost my boy." Mrs. Carpenter spoke as if Clem were dead. "I didn't know the stranger who was now living with us. He looked the same, but he was totally different. He went around in a gray fog all day long and ignored me as if I weren't there. He acted like a deaf mute.

"I came up with all sorts of excuses for him. Maybe Clem got robbed that day. But nothing was missing. Didn't have bruises on him.

No signs of a fight. Clothes weren't ripped. No dents or scrapes on his car. Tires weren't slashed. I had Skip drive the Buick to the garage and check it over just in case. Couldn't afford to get everything fixed. But we wanted to make sure that there was nothing new.

"I even started getting scared when I was at the grocery store, and I saw stories about aliens from outer space abducting earthlings. I'd never paid attention to those stories before. Thought they were silly. Now I really wondered."

Mrs. Carpenter looked at me as if she saw a space alien right now. I looked over my shoulder. But there was only a wall.

Skip broke in again. "Aunt Mariah's not kidding. Clem acted really freaky. Would sit still as a rock and stare at the walls. You could pass your hand before his eyes. Wouldn't blink. Could snap your fingers in front of his ear. Wouldn't budge. Once I yelled, 'Fire!'. Clem just sat there." Skip shook his head in amazement.

Mrs. Carpenter confessed. "I was so upset that I asked everybody I met if they'd talked to Clem that Friday or if they had seen him after school. I mean, everybody in Hole knows everybody else. Everybody knew how Clem was acting. So they didn't think I was nuts. But nobody had seen him after he'd left school that Friday afternoon. Skip was the very last person."

"We thought Clem had it bad." Skip broke in. "But we hadn't seen anything yet. He stopped playing zombie. Turned into a madman."

"Clem started talking again all right." Mrs. Carpenter wiped the tears from her eyes. "He stopped staring at walls. Now I wish he hadn't."

"What could be worse than that?" I asked.

"Still remember the way Clem came charging downstairs at breakfast time several days later." Mrs. Carpenter related. "Thought at first that he'd snapped out of it. Met him at the foot of the stairs and asked him what he wanted to eat. I was willing to be late for work just to make him anything at all."

"You shoulda seen the way he pushed past Aunt Mariah." Skip continued. "He grabbed the phone in the kitchen and called Clementine."

Mrs. Carpenter winced as if she could see it even now.

"You could hear Clementine's eager voice on the other end of the line asking anxiously how Clem was. He told her flat out that he couldn't see her again. Everything between them was over." Mrs. Carpenter remembered. "Then he hung up."

"I was so flabbergasted that I couldn't flip pancakes right." Skip broke in. "Started flipping them all over the floor. Just gaped at Clem."

"Aunt Rose was the only one who wasn't surprised." Mrs. Carpenter recalled. "Said it was just teenagers. She's been the Rock of Gibraltar through all this mess. Stood there and comforted everybody. Even got on the phone and called Clementine back to talk to her. Then Rose met Clementine at the door when the poor girl came dashing down the street. She was in tears begging Clem to tell her what she'd done wrong. But Aunt Rose couldn't stand there forever. She had to go off to the diner. Show must go on, as Rose always says."

Mrs. Carpenter dabbed her eyes.

Skip's eyes got big and round. "Clem wouldn't listen to Clementine. Took her by the shoulders and threw her out of the house. Slammed the door behind her. You could hear her crying outside and pounding on the door for hours and hours after that. Horrible!"

"Clem called up the school and demanded to talk to Buck O'reilly, the principal. Clem told Buck that he couldn't come to school for the rest of the week. He better keep his daughter home under lock and key." Mrs. Carpenter related. "Didn't have a chance to hear what Buck had to say back. Clem hung up on him, too."

"Clem called the garage and told Old Man McDirk he couldn't make it that day." Skip remembered. "He was gonna say plenty more when I tackled him and knocked him to the floor. Reminded him we needed the job real bad. He had to go to work no matter what. Old Man McDirk was cursing loud enough we could hear him down there on the floor."

Mrs. Carpenter confessed. "I grabbed the phone to talk to Old Man McDirk. But he cursed me and hung up. So I begged Clem to call back and apologize."

"That only seemed to set Clem off even more." Skip looked amazed even now that such a thing could have happened. "My coz shook us all off. He got a brown grocery bag out of the broom closet. He started going around the house stuffing clothes, jewelry, and ashtrays into that bag. Once the bag was full, he got another. He lined them up in the hallway. Same time Clementine was still howling like a Banshee outside the door."

"Called the ambulance in Eldorado City." Mrs. Carpenter admitted. "Told them Clem had gone bizerk. Had to come and get him real

quick. I mean, he was acting so strange putting his Sunday shoes and his neckties and even my best silver in brown bags by the front door.”

“By the time the ambulance and the police got there, Clem was gone with his bags.” Skip related what had happened only weeks ago in this very house. “He went out the back way so Clementine wouldn’t see him. She was still screaming at the front door even then. Aunt Mariah told the police she didn’t know where Clem had gone. They said they’d watch for him. Then they took Clementine home.”

“That night I stayed up real late waiting for Clem to come home, afraid that he’d run away for good this time.” Mrs. Carpenter admitted. “I stood at the front window until I was so tuckered out that I couldn’t stand anymore. Then I collapsed into a living room chair next to the window.

“I woke up when I heard a key turn in the latch. It was Clem all right. I leaped up and rushed over to him. He was counting money and stuffing it into his wallet. More money in greenbacks than I’ve ever seen at one time in my whole life, even more than I’d seen at my wedding when all my kin folk gave Jeremiah and I money to wish us luck.

“Clem, where did you get that money?” I gasped. “He snapped, ‘What does that matter?’ and stuffed his wallet into his back pocket. He was staring at me real defiant-like. I asked him if he’d robbed a bank or stolen something. I wouldn’t have put anything past him. But he just grunted and pushed past me.”

Mrs. Carpenter paused as if she could see Clem pushing past her all over again.

“So I didn’t waste time.” She wet her lips. She took a sip of tea as if her throat were getting really dry. “I ran out to Clem’s Buick. All the brown bags with my wedding silver and Clem’s clothes and Aunt Rose’s porcelain figures and even Skip’s stamp collection were gone. I raced back into the house and caught up with Clem halfway up the stairs. My heart was pounding in my throat at the horror and shame of it all. ‘Clem, say you didn’t! Say you didn’t sell all our things at some cheap pawn shop.’ But all he had to say to me was that he needed the money real bad.”

Mrs. Carpenter looked at me. “Now I ask you, why did he suddenly need money so bad?”

I shrugged.

"It had to be dishonest! Clem's needed money all his life. But he's never sold off my wedding silver before. When I asked him what he need it for, all I got was his bedroom door slammed in my face."

I jumped six inches sitting there in bed. A gust of wind must have slammed a bedroom door shut across the hall. Skip got up to check. He shrugged and sat back down again.

"Rose was the only thing that kept my sanity." Mrs. Carpenter confessed. "She kept on telling me it was a phase that boys go through. But Skip never went through that. Clem was beginning to remind me of his dad as he kept me up night after night waiting for him to return. At least I knew Jeremiah was looking for gold before he ran off. But I didn't know what I was up against with Clem. I asked around at all the pool halls and gaming parlors in town. I even drove over to Eldorado City. But nobody there had seen Clem. Not a soul. When I asked Myrtle May down at the grocery store if Clem had been brown-bagging whiskey, she said heavens no!"

"We went nuts trying to figure out why Clem kept on stealing things from the house and selling them at the pawn shop." Skip continued. "I mean, if it wasn't booze and it wasn't gaming, why could he need money so awful bad? Once I had to fight him off to keep him from selling Aunt Mariah's wedding band!"

"When Clem wasn't home — and that was most of the time now — I started searching' around his bedroom for clues." Mrs. Carpenter explained to me. "But I soon discovered that he had put locks on his dresser drawers. So I called in Skip."

Mrs. Carpenter looked at Skip as if he were her salvation.

"Like I'm an old safe cracker from way back!" Skip tried to joke. "Heck! I didn't know what I was doing. But I got some metal files from Uncle Jeremiah's tool shed out back and whittled away. That didn't get anywhere very fast. So I stuck pins and needles into the locks like people on TV. We had only this one chance. Once Clem noticed anything, the game was up. That didn't work either. Aunt Mariah was desperate. So I turned the dresser around. I got out my screwdriver. We took the back panel off the dresser and broke in that way."

"There were receipts." Mrs. Carpenter's eyes grew big just at the memory of them. "The first one was from some hardware store way beyond Eldorado City near the state line. Didn't recognize the place. Never been there before it was so far away."

"What was the receipt for?" I asked.

"Knives."

"I had to catch Aunt Mariah. She nearly fainted when she saw that." Skip broke in.

"What did my son want with knives? We had plenty of the ordinary sort in the kitchen. But these must be special knives for a special purpose. What purpose I didn't want to imagine. The receipt said hunters' knives."

"That made Aunt Mariah put her hand to her throat. She tottered on her feet." Skip added.

"The next receipt didn't help much either. It was for a shovel and a crowbar from a different hardware store in a different town, beyond the state line. Again, we had shovels and crowbars out in the shed that Clem was welcome to use for any honest purpose."

Mrs. Carpenter broke off talking to dab her eyes again.

"But it was the next receipt that really freaked us out." Skip piped up.

He got himself another cup of tea, which by now was beginning to get cold. It did not steam any longer. We had been talking so long that the sun was now fully up, shining through the window. The clock on the mantel ticked away. It now said seven A.M.

"What — what was that receipt for?" I asked. I had known that there was something strange about Clem from the moment that he had appeared in the garage. I had obviously not been far wrong. No matter what had happened to my brain so that I could not remember who I was, my instincts about such things had not gone batty.

Mrs. Carpenter looked at Skip. Skip looked at Mrs. Carpenter as if to see who was going to tell me. I wished they would hurry up. I was imagining all sorts of awful possibilities. Finally Mrs. Carpenter looked straight at me. She opened her mouth as if to speak. Then she shut it. She got up her nerve again. She pronounced one word.

"Sod."

It took me awhile to understand what they were talking about the word was so unexpected.

"Sod?"

Mrs. Carpenter nodded. "The kind you plant in your lawn, you know, the kind with grass growing on it. It was from a garden center so far away it must have taken Clem six hours to get there one way."

"What could Clem want with sod?" I asked, truly puzzled. He did not seem like the gardening type.

Mrs. Carpenter's lower lip trembled.

"I always tell Auntie that Clem can't be in the obvious business. Even if you consider the receipt that was sticking to that one." Skip explained.

"No! Please don't tell her!" Mrs. Carpenter reached out her hand to Skip.

"We still don't have any proof positive what Clem's up to. Besides, there's gotta be some sort of explanation that we haven't thought of. Maybe she can help us."

Mrs. Carpenter shook her head. "You don't have to put on airs for my sake, Skip. You're a sweet boy. I wish Clem were more like you."

Skip blushed and looked away.

"What is it?" I leaped up and down in bed impatiently. I was leaning so far over the edge of the bed that I was about to land on my face on the bare wooden floor.

Skip got up his nerve first. "Shucks! It was a receipt for a coffin from an undertaker in a different state. But . . ."

"A coffin!" I exclaimed.

"C'mon! I mean, it looks like Cousin Clem is in the business of knocking off people with knives, digging holes with his shovels and crowbars, putting bodies in coffins, and covering them over with grass sod. But that's loony! Why would Clem wanna do something like that?" Skip asked.

"Why did Clem act crazy and treat us all like strangers?" Mrs. Carpenter pleaded tearfully. "You didn't tell her what you found in Clem's car." After a moment, she added. "You don't know how good it feels to tell somebody else all this!" She sighed, turning to me. "Rose doesn't even have a clue about any of this. She was sick in bed last week with a bad cold, probably from working so hard, and Skip was taking care of her. Didn't wanna trouble her even then."

"I went out to the driveway late at night when Clem happened to be in bed. I poked around in his trunk, which I popped open." Skip confessed. "I crawled around inside with a flashlight. I found a map, a crude map that Clem had obviously made himself. I couldn't read it. It wasn't labeled except for a bunch of lines and drawings that seemed

to go everywhere and nowhere at the same time and had no direction to them — you know, no north, south, east, or west.”

“Then?” Mrs. Carpenter prompted Skip.

Skip finished his cold tea in one gulp. He put down the cup. Even his firm mechanic’s hand seemed to shake a little as he spoke.

“TNT. ”

Four

“What could Clem want TNT for?” I could not think of an honest use for TNT.

“What indeed!” Mrs. Carpenter shook her head.

Skip shrugged. “Some of the stuff was used, too. You could tell. The box had been opened.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

Skip continued. “Didn’t have much of a chance to do anything. Heard footsteps coming fast. It was Clem rushing out of the shadows with his gun pointed at me.”

I gasped, putting my hand to my throat.

“Must have been one of the old hunting rifles that his dad left in the shed out back.” Mrs. Carpenter explained. “Haven’t been used in years.”

“Said the first thing that popped out of my mouth, something about looking for a wrench.” Skip added. “Clem said that there were plenty of wrenches back in the shed. He told me to get out.” Skip continued. “I skedaddled. Didn’t stop running until I reached my bedroom. Then I dove under the blankets.”

“I couldn’t help myself.” Mrs. Carpenter admitted. “Kept scanning the local papers from Hole to Eldorado City for news about buildings being blown up or bank vaults broken into after hours. I mean, what else do you use TNT for?”

“Surely Clem didn’t!” I said.

Mrs. Carpenter continued. “I waited for the phone to ring. Expected the sheriff to arrive to arrest Clem for murder, robbery, vandalism, or just about any crime you could name. Even when I was at work at the post office, I got the shakes. Couldn’t stand to see those policemen come through the door.”

"That was before that night about three weeks ago after it started getting warm out." Skip picked up the narration. "Auntie and I had started to sleep with our windows open. I couldn't sleep. Kept tossing and turning. Half the time I didn't know whether I was asleep or awake. Could be why it took me so long to figure out that I was hearing something from outside."

I sat on the edge of my bed. The mysteries associated with Clem never seemed to end.

"It was a faint sound way off in the distance." Skip recalled. "Sorta thing you ignore at first. It kept repeating itself. Made me sit up and take notice."

Mrs. Carpenter broke in. "You see, I own a lot adjoining Aunt Rose's house here. Jeremiah left it to me when he disappeared ten years ago. Never been able to afford to do anything with it. It's vacant."

"Is that where the noise was coming from?" I asked.

Skip exclaimed. "Sure thing! I went to the window and listened. It sounded like a dull thudding. Real rhythmical. Put on some shoes and clothes and went out there. The sound kept on getting louder. Followed the sound across the field in the dark. I found Clem all right." Skip explained. "He was digging. He was breaking up some hard soil and rock with his crowbar."

"Was he digging a hole?" I asked.

"A hole six feet by three feet and big enough for a — " Mrs. Carpenter put her hand over her mouth. She could not continue.

"Clem had the coffin that he had bought." Skip continued with his narration. "He heard me gasp. He threw down his shovel, picked up his rifle, and ran after me shooting. I ran for dear life. I didn't think I was gonna make it."

"Did he know it was you?" I asked.

Skip shrugged. "Wasn't gonna stop to ask him."

"Was there a body?" I pressed.

"Didn't get a chance to see." Skip admitted. "Maybe I didn't wanna see. Let me tell you, I didn't stop until I got back to the house."

"So you think that Clem is burying dead bodies on your property?" I had a hard time believing what I was hearing.

"Don't know for sure." Mrs. Carpenter confessed. "That was one of the last times that we saw Clem at home until now. Don't know where he went after that. Must have lived out of his car. Couldn't afford an apart-

ment. Wasn't showing up at the garage much. Old Man McDirk was keeping him on cause he couldn't get anybody else. Sometimes I'd see him around town. He avoided me and headed in the other direction."

Mrs. Carpenter bit her lip. "I was always getting phone calls in the middle of the night. It got so that I couldn't sleep. Would hear the phone ring even in my dreams."

"Who was calling?" I asked. "I mean, at that hour of the night?"

Mrs. Carpenter shrugged. "Don't have any names or anything."

"What did they say?"

Mrs. Carpenter glanced nervously at Skip. Skip smiled at his aunt to give her courage. She seemed to depend upon her nephew a lot. I guess I would, too. Rose seemed to always be busy earning a living. Clem, of course, was never there.

"It was hard to make out what they were saying. Most of the time they were speaking in foreign languages." Mrs. Carpenter admitted.

"*Foreign languages!*" I exclaimed. "Why would they be calling Clem?"

"They sounded impatient and angry. All I could understand was that they kept on repeating Clem Carpenter's name over and over again." Mrs. Carpenter shuddered.

"How could somebody in a foreign country have found out about Clem?" I persisted.

His mother burst out. "The devil take him! His father was just like that, too. Always doing the impossible, the unexpected, and always letting you down." She groaned. "I tried to make sure that Clem grew up responsible. Not like his dad. I made him take jobs after school instead of chasing pipe dreams like gold mines. Blood's thicker than anything else. It didn't work.

"That wasn't the end of it." She continued. "Some callers spoke in broken English. Sometimes they were giving me figures. Sounded as if they were in dollars and cents. They were trying to offer Clem lots of money for something. No doubt it was dishonest!"

This reminded me of the two Englishmen in the diner and their check for one million dollars. At least they had spoken English! I kept my mouth shut. That reflection would probably distress Mrs. Carpenter more.

"There were the letters in the mail. They came all the time. They had stamps that you'd never seen before. Some of them looked so strange

that you wondered if they were counterfeit. The letters were written in all these languages, too." Mrs. Carpenter complained.

Skip added. "I went over to the school library and borrowed some foreign language dictionaries. You weren't supposed to check them out. They belonged in the reference room. Aunt Mariah didn't wanna bring those suspicious letters to the school, so I hid the books inside my jacket and brought them home. Aunt Mariah and I stayed up real late poring over them."

Mrs. Carpenter nodded. "Couldn't translate much. Just a word here and there. Haven't got much book learning. But it looked like real trouble to me."

"One time I woke up and heard Aunt Mariah on the phone with one of these goons. I picked up the extension in my bedroom, this very room we're sitting in, the one I used to share with Clem. This dude was talking in English, though he had a heavy accent. He was making an offer to Aunt Mariah. She kept explaining that she was Clem's mother and didn't know anything. The goon kept on pressuring her to pressure Clem. I proclaimed that I was Clem. Aunt Mariah sucked in her breath."

Mrs. Carpenter scolded. "It was such a risky thing to do!"

"I figured these goons couldn't be all that familiar with Clem's voice." Skip continued. "I just had to figure out something about what was going on here, or I'd go nuts."

"Wow!" I shook my head at his nerve.

"The goon offered me five hundred thousand dollars." Skip remembered. "Five hundred thousand certainly sounded like more than I would ever see in my life. But I obviously wasn't in any position to strike a deal. Besides, I wanted to see if he'd volunteer some dope about what was really going on. I said that wasn't enough. Of course the man called me a greedy bastard and asked why not. Didn't know what to say, so I said something about telling me what it was really worth and why."

"*You didn't!*" I gasped.

"I did, and that question seemed to stump the goon." Skip continued. "He asked me if I was playing some game since he was making a *bona fide* offer. I stuck to my guns and said I wanted his professional opinion of what he thought it was worth."

"What did he say then?" I asked.

Skip was forced to admit. "The guy bragged that he knew the ropes. He knew how to get around the cops. It was to my benefit to get him as a partner. He was worth more than money."

"Really?" I pressed.

"I had to say something bold to shake information out of the guy. After all, I was supposed to be Clem. I couldn't ask the goon outright what kind of business I was in."

"You certainly couldn't!" I broke in.

"So I said that I could take care of myself." Skip continued. "Didn't need any adult supervision. Sounded like something that Clem would say. The man blasted my head off. He said what? At my age with no experience? No contacts? No buddies? No capital? No equipment? No men to work for me? He emphasized the fact that I needed guys with big muscles. I couldn't afford to pussy-foot around. He'd heard about my operation all the way over in Italy. He was gonna wait it out a few more months. Bragged that I couldn't last much longer. Planned to move in with his men and pick up the pieces after I was dead. Just hoped that I had somebody to bury me. Didn't think that anybody would ever find my body. He hung up."

"I rushed into his room right after that!" Mrs. Carpenter exclaimed.

"We sat there shaking, Auntie and I." Skip continued. "Shucks! All we'd found out was that Clem was in some awful business. He needed lots of money and equipment and men with big muscles. He was so notorious that all the toughs in Italy knew about him. We also learned that he was about to be killed, that we'd be lucky to find his body."

"We were afraid to answer the phone after that." Mrs. Carpenter confessed. "Just let it ring. Don't know how Rose slept through the nights before we started taking the phone off the hook. Then she'd always been a sound sleeper since we were girls. Working in the diner all day must tucker her out something awful."

I nodded.

"I tried to find Clem to plead with him to come to his senses." Mrs. Carpenter continued. "That was, if he wasn't already dead." She wiped her eyes with her handkerchief.

"You don't have to tell her everything if it bothers you so much." Skip spoke to his aunt.

Mrs. Carpenter replied. "I finally saw Clem darting out of the grocery store with a sandwich. I ran him down, waved all those letters

with foreign postage in his face, and begged him to come home again no matter what he'd done. Clem took the letters from me and ripped them to shreds. Stuffed them into a nearby trash bin. Leaped into his Buick and zoomed off at top speed. He returned to the house and tore inside. Thought maybe he was gonna blow it up. He snipped all the telephone wires instead. I stood next to him the whole time pleading with him not to do it."

"I sure wish I could have been them to help you reason with Clem." Skip added. "But once in awhile I try to go to school."

"Clem took off again without a word." Mrs. Carpenter told me. "That was obviously his answer to all those foreign offers! Aunt Rose had to call the telephone repairman when she got home from work."

Skip whistled. "Cost us a fortune, too!"

Mrs. Carpenter explained. "You see, the repairman had to come all the way from Eldorado City. No telephone repair left in Hole."

"Only last week we got another call." Skip broke in. "Came during dinner. That's why we answered it. This dude said nothing but, 'Meet me at midnight out back.' Then he hung up. I was the one who'd been fool enough to answer. Aunt Mariah knew it was trouble by the look on my face. We kept quiet while my mom was there since we'd been keeping everything from her. When we were doing dishes, Auntie and I talked."

"We didn't know where 'out back' was at first." Mrs. Carpenter broke in. "We had to guess. Thought it might be the vacant lot behind the house where we'd caught Clem with a coffin."

Skip continued the narration. "Aunt Mariah told me to get one of Uncle Jeremiah's rifles from the shed. She expected trouble and lots of it. So we made our way through all the brush. Sure enough, we saw a light up ahead. We put our flashlight out and crept low to the ground. When we got closer, we heard voices. Saw a guy with dark hair. It was Clem."

I leaned closer. I was close to failing out of bed.

"There was another person with Clem." Mrs. Carpenter went pale. "It was somebody I had never seen before, a young man not much older than Clem. He had blonde hair and a mustache. His eyes were blue. But there was something weird about them."

Mrs. Carpenter shuddered.

My heart was pounding faster, though I could not tell why for sure. I did not like the mention of a blond-haired stranger with a mustache.

He seemed familiar. Could it be the same stranger who haunted my dreams, the one with no face?

Mrs. Carpenter swallowed hard. "There was something cold about those blue eyes. Cold and frigid." Mrs. Carpenter shivered.

I tried to thrust the haunting visions of the blond-haired goon out of my mind.

"There was a black sports car parked in the grass, one that I'd never seen around town before." Mrs. Carpenter summoned up enough courage to continue. "That caught my attention right away."

"Yeah, everybody around Hole drives a wreck. I oughta know. I fix all the cars in town. This was one mighty fancy set of wheels." Skip whistled.

"Didn't have in-state license plates either." Mrs. Carpenter stared right at me. "In fact, the car didn't have any license plates at all."

At the mention of the black sports car, I shook. A horrible vision of that car that had almost run me over yesterday afternoon zoomed across my imagination. I could even hear the motor running sitting in the middle of the bed. The sound was getting louder by the second. I wanted to clap my hands over my ears.

"Skip and I crept up real close behind a big tree with lots of high weeds around it." Mrs. Carpenter grew paler by the second. "We were crawling on our hands and knees through the underbrush. We stopped when we could hear what they were saying."

Mrs. Carpenter got up and moved her plain, wooden-backed chair up close to the bed next to where Skip was sitting. She wanted the protection of being close to him. They were touching shoulders.

"The blond guy was asking Clem what he had found." Mrs. Carpenter hissed. "The stranger had a voice that didn't sound like he was from around Hole. He sounded like one of them city slickers from back East. He was dressed real fancy, too — in some three-piece suit, the kind with a vest."

A three-piece suit with a vest . . . That was what the goon with no face was always wearing in my nightmares!

"What — what did Clem say?" I clutched the bed frame to steady my nerves. Still the black car seemed to be gunning its engine in the back of my mind.

"Clem had his hands in his pockets. He said real loud, 'I didn't find anything!'" Mrs. Carpenter tried to imitate her son's low, bass voice.

"Then — then what happened?"

Skip took over. "The city slicker said, 'I've seen you poking round here at night. Where have you got it buried?'"

Mrs. Carpenter added. "Clem told the guy that he didn't have anything buried anywhere. The guy hauled off and socked Clem in the jaw. He knocked him cold, then he tied him up against the tree. The goon shined a powerful flashlight along the ground. Skip and I hoped he wouldn't find us. When the creep found a patch of ground that looked as if it had been dug up before, he grabbed a shovel from his black car and started digging."

"Thought the goon would take all night long." Skip continued. "The city slicker hit something about six or seven feet down. Aunt Mariah and I were holding hands and praying as the guy brought it up. *It—it was the coffin!*"

There was something about the swagger and the manner of this blonde goon that seemed all too familiar from somewhere. Not only was I still hearing the roar of the engine in the back of my mind, now I was also hearing his voice. That voice was getting louder as well — that sick, twisted, and perverted voice.

"The city slicker as struggling with the coffin lid." Skip continued. "It was nailed down. Clem was screaming at him to leave the coffin alone. Clem said it was none of the goon's business."

Even Skip was turning as white as his aunt, who now merely cowered in Skip's arms at the memory of this terrible incident.

"The city slicker finally got the coffin lid off " Skip continued. "There was a sheet with a few plain, ordinary rocks to weigh it down. When the stranger exclaimed that there had to be more than this and reached down and yanked the sheet up, there it was."

"There — there what was?" I swallowed hard, holding onto my own sanity by a thread.

Mrs. Carpenter and Skip looked at each other for one desperate moment of indecision, trying to decide if they should let a total stranger in on their secret. After many seconds that seemed to stretch into hours, Skip admitted the truth. "There was a skeleton."

Skulls swam through my head grinning at me. Toothless, leering skulls with vacant black sockets for eyes cackled at me. They swam closer and opened and shut their jaws. They tried to devour me. They spoke with the blond-haired goon's voice — the voice of the

guy with the blacked out face. Now I knew that they were one and the same.

“There was something else, too.” Mrs. Carpenter dabbed tears from her eyes after a long interval while we struggled with the silence. “The stranger did something strange.” She did not seem to have the courage to tell me what it was.

“The city slicker stooped down and touched the skull with his bare hands.” Skip continued the narrative. “He picked up the skull and left the rest of the bones lying there in the coffin. He held the skull up to his nose and said aloud something that’s hard to remember. I think we were reading about it in English class the other week. Oh yeah! ‘Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio.’ Then the queero creep threw back his head and laughed like he couldn’t stop laughing.”

Those dreadful words — *Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio!* — ripped across my mind like a knife drawing blood. I was suddenly lying there in the coffin where the headless skeleton had been lying. I heard somebody mouthing those same words like an echo. That same face whose features I could not remember was looking down at me. The coffin lid was slamming down on top of me. I was pounding on it. I was screaming. Suddenly I was in the car trunk all tied and bound. The darkness was pressing in on me. Again I heard that sad girl’s voice singing the Valentine’s song:

*Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s Day,
All in the morning betime.
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine .*

This time the voice sang the second verse:

*Then up he rose and donn’d his clothes,
And opened the chamber door.
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more . . .*

I screamed and screamed and screamed.

* * *

The next thing knew both Skip and Mrs. Carpenter were leaning over me propping me up with pillows. They were trying to get me to sip a cup of hot tea.

"Are you O.K.?" Mrs. Carpenter asked.

"What do you mean?" I asked, trying to sit up.

"You . . . ah . . . sorta went bizerk." Skip explained. "You were screaming at the top of your lungs to let you out, let you out, please let you out."

"You were even flailing your arms and legs about something awful." Mrs. Carpenter added. "You pounded on my shoulder as if I were just an object or a piece of furniture."

"I'm sorry. I just lost it. That's all. That blonde goon you were talking about . . . I think I must have known him somewhere in the past. I can't remember when and where." I looked at them both helplessly.

"Did he do something bad to you?" Skip leaned into my face.

"He — he must have." I wracked my brains to remember. "Otherwise, why would I be so scared of him?"

"That's your first real memory then." Skip patted me on the shoulder. "That's good. Maybe you'll remember the rest real soon. Maybe we'll know your name."

"I knew from the very first time I saw you that you had something to do with this business that Clem's mixed up in!" Mrs. Carpenter concluded.

Mrs. Carpenter sat down beside me on the bed. She had Skip bring her a bowl of cold water and a washcloth. She dunked the washcloth into the water and squeezed out the excess. She wiped my forehead with the damp cloth.

Mrs. Carpenter continued with her reflections in her own good time.

"There was something in the way that Clem acted toward you. He acted like he felt responsible. I've never known my son to bring home strangers before. So if you stay here, I hope Clem will come home again."

She looked at me wistfully and smiled.

That sounded like a pathetic plea coming from a down and out mother. I felt sorry for her. If I ever had a son, I would not want to be beholden to total strangers to persuade him to come home to visit his own mother!

Mrs. Carpenter went over to the dresser on the other side of the room where she had laid out all my things including my cleaned and pressed dress from yesterday. Even the ripped panty hose was there alongside the rings, the bracelet, and the necklace. The glow of the jewels looked out of place in this darkened room where every window was hiding behind drapes, blinds, and shutters.

She picked up the purple lace dress and brought it over to my bedside. She ran her hand over the material and fingered the baby pearls around the neckline and the waistline. Then she turned the garment inside out and showed me how well it was put together. It was completely lined inside with satin and finely stitched. What she really wanted to show me were the initials C.R. embroidered into the hem of the dress all around the skirt.

Mrs. Carpenter folded the dress back up almost as if it were too fine for her hands to touch. She laid it carefully back on top of the dresser. She brought over the panty hose and showed me the band around the waist. Again there were the same tiny initials C.R. She repeated the same process with each piece of jewelry. She inserted a piece of cloth between her hand and the jewel as if it were definitely too grand for the likes of a Mrs. Carpenter from Hole to touch. Inside the jeweled rings and on the clasps of the necklace and the bracelet were engraved the very same initials C.R.

"I think that must be your name — C.R. — whatever that stands for." Mrs. Carpenter said.

"That sounds neat!" Skip proclaimed. "I like that name. We should call her that. Hi, C.R.!" He hailed me. But it sounded awkward. He was just trying to be nice.

"It's past time for you to go to school, Skip." Mrs. Carpenter reminded her nephew. "You're already late. I'll write you an excuse. Miss Silver in the office is used to excuses from our family." She got out a sheet of paper and started writing with a big sigh.

"Have to graduate one of these days, I guess." Skip moaned.

"Yeah, and work in the garage full time. Not much else for you to do around here. No way folks as poor as us can afford to get out while the getting's good. I guess that's why they called this town Hole in the first place. Once you're in it, you can't climb out."

She tore the note off the pad and handed it to Skip.

"I think the name has something to do with mining." Skip explained.

"Yeah, a copper mine that went bust." Mrs. Carpenter added bitterly. "A few of us stragglers stayed on hoping it would come back. The owners made promises. That's what started Jeremiah looking for his gold mine, when they laid him off. Oh, he worked for awhile as a garage mechanic. But his heart wasn't in it."

"The copper pit is still there, a nice big black hole in the ground." Skip added.

"I guess I've gotta get to the post office." Mrs. Carpenter said. "They would have fired me by now if they weren't so short on workers."

She went to fetch her purse and her jacket.

"I'll leave my phone number at the post office on the dresser here." Mrs. Carpenter instructed me. "I'll leave Rose's number at the diner, too. She'll close early before lunch to come home here and see how you are. She told me that before she left. That's only about an hour from now. As I said, Skip and I are both really late. Do you think you can make it by yourself for that long?"

"I'll survive."

I didn't like the idea of being alone in it strange house in a strange town. I could hardly complain. Mrs. Carpenter had been so nice to me.

"There's food in the refrigerator downstairs. Feel free to help yourself." Mrs. Carpenter got ready to leave.

"Wait! One thing! What happened to Clem that night you saw him with the bones in the coffin?" I asked.

I suddenly remembered that the long narrative had been cut short by my screams. Clem had been left tied to a tree. The whole incident had inspired a memory about the blond-haired goon. I wanted to know more.

Mrs. Carpenter paled as she stood there with her purse.

"That blond goon laughed for awhile." She admitted. "Then he got pissed off. Claimed that Clem was cheating him. Blond guy said he didn't want to know where the losers were buried, the guys that Clem had dispensed with. Didn't wanna know where the poor suckers who hadn't made it had found their rest. Wanted to know where the good stuff was."

"*The good stuff?*" I repeated.

“Those were his exact words. *The good stuff*. He started socking Clem in the face. Then, when Clem still didn’t tell him anything more, he started strangling him.”

Mrs. Carpenter raised her hand to her neck.

“That’s when I got trigger happy “ Skip butted in. “I shot into the air to scare the goon away. City slicker thought it was an ambush and disappeared in that black car faster than a jack rabbit. We came out of the patch of grass and cut Clem loose with my pocket knife.”

“All my son could do was close the coffin, pick up his shovel, and start covering it over with soil once he’d kicked it back into the hole. He eyeballed us and said that if we didn’t run, we’d be six feet under, too.”

“What!” I exclaimed.

“Can you imagine that?” Mrs. Carpenter’s voice struggled to keep calm, to fight back the tears. “My only son threatened to kill his own mother and his only cousin.”

Five

Mrs. Carpenter's concluding remark hung there like some dead thing dangling from a rope, something too horrible to discuss, something too horrible to even look at.

I turned away from her. I could not meet the lady's eyes.

Mrs. Carpenter and Skip quietly left the room and went downstairs to get into their old jalopies. I listened to the retreating clip-clop of Mrs. Carpenter's heels until I could not hear them anymore.

Mrs. Carpenter and Skip had left me with a picture of a lunatic son who was so brazen that he would bury bodies in coffins in front of his own mother and his only cousin. On top of that, he would threaten to kill his mother, too!

I sat there in bed with my arms clasped around my knees, wondering about this dark and mysterious Clem Carpenter whose whole life story I had heard from the lips of those who knew him best. Mrs. Carpenter and Skip had given me food for thought!

Clem had threatened to murder me twice in the short time that I had known him, even if one of those times — the time in the dark, fantastical room with the weird shapes everywhere — might have been only in my nightmares. The second threat Skip had witnessed, too. It had been in the middle of Main Street yesterday. Everybody had been gathered around watching.

Clem seemed to be so obsessed with some dark knowledge that he could not stand to have anybody around him. It did not matter if they were people he had known all his life. He had severed every human tie, including that with his former girlfriend, Clementine O'reilly.

He had been a good guy once. He had had lots of friends. It was hard to imagine what could have happened to make him change. No

matter if he was involved in some scheme to make money, his present life must make Clem lonely. He must be lonelier than I was in this strange town named Hole, unable to even remember my own name.

At least Clem had not murdered me! Instead he had brought me home to the place that he had once lived. Maybe he was capable of only flashes of kindness to remind people of the guy he used to be. I could be grateful for that much. I would not have wanted to end up in a ditch. That could be worse than a car trunk.

His mother had imagined that Clem somehow, for some unknown reason, felt responsible for me. Besides bringing me to his old house, Clem had given me money to get out of town, buy some new clothes, and get something to eat. Old Man McDirk had tried to chase me out onto the streets with nothing. Clem at least had had some small shred of decency left.

Or was it something else? Did he have something to do with why I was in Hole in the first place? Did he know why I could not remember my name? Had I seen something I should not have and did not remember right now? Was he paying me to get out of Hole before I remembered it? Was I too dangerous to have around?

Had he brought me home because, failing to get me out of town, he wanted to shove me off onto his mother? Was he afraid to let me see his face too often? Was there some clue in his appearance, in his swarthy, tanned face with the penetrating grey eyes? Was there some mystery in the curve of his perpetually pouting lower lip? The sweep of his long, aquiline nose? The dark, curly hair that was always falling into his face?

If only I could remember my own name it might help to sort out this mess. I thought hard about the initials C.R., but the initials did not seem familiar. I climbed out of bed to fetch the pieces of jewelry sitting on the dresser where Mrs. Carpenter had laid them out next to the purple lace dress and the stockings. I ran my fingers along the rings, the necklace, and the bracelet, hoping that the jewels themselves would make me remember something.

This jewelry could have been stolen from some rich girl. The jewels might have nothing to do with me. The person who had put me into the trunk might be playing tricks on me.

Who was I? I could be anybody or nobody at all. I could be a trapeze artist escaped from a traveling circus. I could be an orphan from an

orphanage, belonging nowhere and to nobody — someone no one would miss or claim. I could have been the girlfriend of a criminal. The dude might have abandoned me in the trunk. I could have been a movie star who had wandered off the set of some movie and gotten hit by a car. Perhaps I was an ordinary girl who had picked up a hitchhiker who had done me in. Perhaps I was even a princess. Maybe I was a no-good bum who had fallen asleep in the wrong car trunk!

I had to have a name of some sort if I was going to hang around town. The people of Hole could not call me “no name girl” or just plain “you”. So for now I guess C. R. would be my name.

I shrugged, put the jewelry back down on the dresser top, and started to return to bed to try to think about my new or old name, C. R. — I did not know which. But I did not like the idea of leaving the jewelry sitting on top of the dresser for anybody to find. If it was somebody else’s jewelry, I did not want it to get lost or stolen. So I opened the top dresser drawer and looked for someplace to stash the horde.

Old white crew socks rolled up in balls, the kind that had been cleaned so often that the dirt in the toes never quite came out, were stuffed into every available space. I tried to stuff the jewelry under the socks all the way in the back of the drawer. I ran into something else quite unexpected.

It was a photo of the girl I had seen yesterday in the 50’s Diner, the one who had kept on tugging at my hair. Topless, she was sitting backwards on a log in the woods dressed in a long pair of jeans that were not snapped at the waist. The jeans gapped in the back to reveal the beginnings of her derriere. She was looking back over her shoulder at the photographer. Across the lower part of the photo was scrawled the signature “Clementine”.

The photo had been put way in the back as if the photographer wanted to forget all about it. I quickly returned it to the same place and closed the drawer. I opened the second drawer and hid the jewelry underneath a few shirts.

That top drawer must have belonged to Clem. After all, Clementine had been his girlfriend several months ago before he had broken up with her. Skip had said that they had gone camping together often. This photo must have been from one of those camping expeditions.

Why they had broken up was certainly none of my business. Yet this photo made me ponder the mystery that was Clem even

more intently on the way back to bed. If she had meant that much to him . . .

My muscles were very tense as I lay there in bed. I was alert and fully awake listening for the smallest sounds.

Drip! Drip! Drip!

I went into the bathroom where the sound seemed to be coming from. The faucet was dripping. There sat the canister of *Bon Ami* scouring powder that Skip had been using when I had first woken up.

This faucet must have been dripping all morning long, the whole time that Mrs. Carpenter and Skip had been sitting in the bedroom. I had not been aware of the sound then because I had been too wrapped up in listening to their stories. After they had left the house, I had been absorbed in thinking about that dark-haired, grey-eyed guy.

So I shut the faucet off and returned to the bed to take a nap. I rearranged the pillows and pulled the blanket up over my head.

Peck! Peck! Peck!

It sounded like something at the window right beside my bed. I was determined to stay in bed with the covers still over my head and ignore it. It was probably something silly anyway.

Soon my mind was filled with images of fingers in black gloves skittering along the windowsill. I put my hand to my neck, swallowed hard, and rolled over. My back was to the window. I imagined that the fingers in black gloves were moving up my spine. It did not help to pull the blankets up around my neck and to put the pillow on top of my head. That dark, threatening figure without a face, without a head, was standing over my bed looking down at me.

Peck! Peck! Peck!

I hurried over to the window. With trembling hands, I yanked open the drapes, unfastened the shutters, and forced up the blinds. The woodpecker that had been sitting on the windowsill pecking at the wooden frame flew off. I felt very silly. There was no way to stop being afraid when I was lost in a strange town where someone had pulled a gun on me yesterday afternoon and where someone else had tried to run me over in a black sports car.

Once more I returned to bed and tried to take a late morning nap. Perhaps my problem was that it was too warm. So I lay on top of the covers flat on my back with only Mrs. Carpenter's thin wool nightgown on. I let my arms fall loosely at my sides. This time I started to drift off.

Bang!

Something landed on the roof. It must be that blond-haired goon with the mustache wearing those black gloves. He must be leaping down from a tree branch onto the roof, coming for me in any way that he could now that no one else was around to stop him.

I opened the window and leaned out just enough to see what was going on. Several large pine trees grew right next to the house. A squirrel at the top of one of them was biting at the pinecones and letting them fall onto the roof one by one.

It was useless to try to take a nap. I picked up the tea things and the breakfast plates, put them onto the breakfast tray, and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

The rooms were not organized the way I had imagined from Skip's and Mrs. Carpenter's narrative. To judge by their story, the kitchen should be right at the foot of the long wooden staircase. Instead it was all the way on the far side of the house, on the other side of a huge dining room that no one had mentioned.

The silverware kept on slipping off the tray. I had to pick it up. Then everything came tumbling off, dishes and all. It was a miracle that nothing broke, not even one of the teacups which escaped with only a nick.

I had seen Aunt Rose navigate around the 50's Diner with no problem at all. She had even balanced her tray on one hand while serving customers with the other. Her trays had been laden with big plates of food heaped high with burgers, bottles of restaurant ketchup, and lots of fries. She had been carrying large milkshakes and sodas with maraschino cherries. The drinks had not sloshed over onto the trays, not even once! Nor had I seen any french fries on the floor.

In my past life, my past incarnation, my real life, or whatever you wanted to call it, I could not have been a waitress or a short order cook. A small detail but perhaps an important one. Who could tell? I could be anything from some cabby's daughter from New York City to the daughter of an Alaskan Eskimo!

I put the tray down next to the double white porcelain sink that looked as old-fashioned as the rest of the kitchen. There was not a dishwasher anywhere. The refrigerator looked more like an ancient icebox from fifty years ago. The stove did not look recent. The only

kitchen gadget visible anywhere along the counters was an old two slice toaster.

I tried filling up the sink. The water ran down the drain. I searched for a plug. Why I had not thought of that first I did not know. Then I squirted in the dish washing liquid. There were no bubbles. The label promised “lots of bubbles”. Something was wrong.

I stirred up the water with my hand. That produced a few bubbles. They quickly disappeared. It did not seem at all like a TV commercial!

All the bottle said besides promising, “Lots of bubbles!” was, “Softens your hands as you scrub!” This was considered so basic a chore that nobody thought directions were necessary. Any idiot could do dishes — except me, the no name girl from nowhere!

Was I to assume that I also had never done dishes in my life? I must really be different from most people! Maybe I had escaped from an institution for the mentally disabled.

I tried putting the dish washing liquid into the sink first, then the stopper, then the water. This worked much better. There were big bubbles all over the place. When I put the dirty dishes into the sink, the water felt too chilly. I should have used hot water. So I drained the sink again and refilled the sink once more the right way. I hoped that Mrs. Carpenter would not mind her house guest being so clumsy. At least she was not here to watch me.

I thought that I heard footsteps outside. I looked up as I scrubbed dishes. But I could see only the smallest hummingbird at the window. It flapped its wings so fast that I could barely make them out. Then the bird was gone.

I barely could remember what this bird was called. So when another hummer appeared soon after the first, I began to wonder what strange part of the country I was lost in. I must be many, many miles from the place that I had once called home where even the flora and the fauna must be different.

Again I heard a rustling in the bushes. The noise sounded louder this time. When I looked up, there was a squirrel chattering and squealing at the window. He was tapping on the window asking for food. No doubt he was accustomed to getting handouts.

I went over to the refrigerator to look for something to give the squirrel, unsure of where in the kitchen someone would keep a loaf of bread. I did not seem to be too familiar with kitchens from my previous life.

I opened the window. I handed the squirrel the bread. Then I went back to washing the dishes.

Suddenly I realized that I was not alone. Now I knew in my gut that the sound really *had* been footsteps. Eyes were boring into my back, burning their way through the nightgown. The intense hatred there jolted my nerves and made me feel those eyes singeing my skin.

"We've gotta talk, gal to gal." A very unrefined, hick, country-like voice spoke.

There stood a girl about my own age with long, black frizzy hair done in imitation of the high style of movie stars. There was a certain limpness to her waves that signaled she could not do it quite right and could not afford to pay somebody else to do it. Her violet eyes were glaring at me from underneath long lashes. Her lashes were so long that they were either artificial or lengthened by mascara. Even her lower lashes were lengthened so that she looked as if she was wearing spider legs all around her eyes. Her gaze seemed as malicious and poisonous as a black widow spider.

Above her eyes she had caked on a deep blue shade of eye shadow. Nor had she scrupled to brush a lighter, matching shade under her eyes. It lent her whole face a garish appearance. That and the two bright red spots, one on each cheek, with ample white powder applied elsewhere made her seem like a whore. She certainly looked very crude and very coarse as she stared at me with bright red lipstick smeared all over her mouth.

She had plucked her eyebrows into sharp black points of emphasis that brought out the nastiness in her expression. The reek of her heavy perfume made me want to fall back.

Her clothes were as tawdry and overdone as the rest of her appearance — "put on" would be a better word. She was wearing an extra tight pair of bicycle shorts that were fraying around the ends. They fit like a pair of gloves and left nothing to the imagination about the shape of her thighs or her rear end. They were so low in the waist that they revealed her belly button. Her ribbed tank top looked sizes too small. Her nipples stood out in bold relief. The scoop neckline showed off her cleavage. She was standing there in her bare feet, each of her toenails painted red.

Clementine O'reilly! Why, it was the same girl I had seen half-nude in Clem's drawer! It was the girl who had pestered me yesterday at the 50's Diner. What was she doing here?

"What's Clem paying you?" She chewed her bubble gum with her mouth open, her hand on her waist, her hip jutting out.

"Nothing!" I exclaimed.

"Don't lie to me. We all saw Clem handing you money yesterday in the middle of Main Street. Was that for certain services you provided or because you're his Gal Friday?"

She tapped her foot.

"Ser-services provided? Gal Friday?" I stuttered stupidly. I shivered in the thin wool nightgown that Mrs. Carpenter had loaned me.

"Yeah, stupid, services provided!" Clementine showed just how crude she could act. She grabbed the ends of her ribbed tank top and pulled it up over her head. She let it all hang out as she stood there shaking her bosom at me. "You know — *SEX!* "

I blushed scarlet and stepped back against the sink. I was speechless. Now that I had gotten a good night's rest, I was more shocked than yesterday about how freely people around here talked about the crudest subjects imaginable. I supposed that in my other life I had not been accustomed to that either.

"Such a refined little miss!" Clementine cackled. "Such polite tones of voice!" She pulled her top back in place. "Everybody's telling me that you're an expensive call girl from out of town. Hey, I've got my doubts! But I'm sure gonna find out!"

She grabbed for the front of my nightgown. I struggled and tried to push her off, but she was stronger than I was. Clementine yanked open the zipper and ripped it. I had to clutch the edges of the gown together to keep it shut.

"Ha!" Clementine laughed. "Honey, you're way too modest to be a hooker. You've got one of those model's figures, all horsy and slim with not a spare inch of fat anywhere. Real upper crusty. That must be why you looked so good in that lace dress yesterday with all those diamonds."

Clementine's amused smile suddenly vanished.

"So you've gotta be Clem's business partner. You must know everything about what he's been up to these past two months. "

"Me? A business partner?" I croaked. "I — I don't know what you're talking about. I met Clem yesterday. I — I didn't even know his name before that. Right now, if you asked me, I could not find the town of Hole on a map. I don't know what state I'm in."

Clementine smirked. "You're real good, honey. Always heard there were con artists out there. I've gotta hand it to you. You look real innocent and convincing."

"A con artist? I can't con anybody when I don't even know my name. *Honest!*"

I pleaded for some understanding. I could not see why everybody around Hole always wanted to misinterpret everything that I said and did.

Clementine opened the refrigerator and helped herself to a beer as if she owned the place. She took a long swig of the stuff and slammed the empty can down onto the counter. "Look! You and I both know that you must be one of those fancy money people from back East."

I opened my mouth wide.

Clementine held her hand up. "Don't think my dad and I don't know that Clem's getting chased around town by all the money folks from all over the world. Dad and I saw those English dudes write you a check for one million smackeroos. Everybody's been chasing Clem for the past two months cause they want a share in his business. He's turned everybody else down. Obviously you're the one who's won out big time. It's not so much that you have more money than everybody else. It's not because you have the best business offer. It's clearly because you offer the most, shall we say, fringe benefits."

Clementine looked me up and down. I was still wearing Mrs. Carpenter's nightgown.

"Really, I —"

"I may be only seventeen," Clementine said, "but I've been around. You think it's fair to swoop down here like a hungry vulture and pluck up Clem and his business and fly off with them?"

"Fly off with Clem? You've got to believe that —"

"Save your act for somebody real stupid!" Clementine burst out. "I may be flunking out of high school. But if there's one thing I know, it's Clem. I saw the way he looked at you standing there in your bare feet in that fancy purple lace dress. Looked at you like a sick puppy begging for more."

"You're wrong. I don't think Clem even likes me. I —"

"This is a dirt poor town, kid. Nobody has no work no more since the copper mine closed down. Kids have to drive miles to find any job. There still isn't much till you get to Eldorado City. Nobody in his right

mind wants to stay in Hole. It's like being buried in some dark black hole in the ground —*forever!* "

"Where is Eldorado City? I — "

"Clem's the only one from Hole who made it big. Even his own daddy disappeared looking for a gold mine that didn't exist. My daddy's worked hard all his life. Managed to become school principal. What does that mean when you have fewer kids in the school every year? Can't afford to keep it open anymore. My daddy's bank president, but nobody has any money to put in the bank. Next the bank will close. He'll lose everything he ever had — everything he ever worked for. Hole will become a ghost town!"

"I'm sorry. I had no idea. Really I didn't. I — "

"Don't you think you ought to share Clem and his good luck with us folks in Hole? Don't we deserve something? My dad made you the best offer he could. He gathered up his savings and handed it over to you. You spat on it as if it were nothing."

"I — I didn't mean to." I shrank back against the sink. "I didn't know what was happening yesterday. I — I just got here."

Clementine marched up to me. Her cheeks were bright cherry red. Her violet eyes flashed. "Do you think you ought to steal Clem from me without paying me something? Everybody in Hole knew that we were gonna get hitched as soon as we graduated and Clem started working full time at the garage."

"Mrs. Carpenter told me."

"No guy wants to look at me now let alone date me. They think I'm cast-off goods. They're afraid Clem's gonna change his mind. They think he'll come after them with one of his daddy's hunting rifles. "

I did not know what to say to Clementine. Mrs. Carpenter and Skip had warned me about how she had behaved when Clem had broken up with her, how she had howled outside the front door like somebody who did not have any mind left.

"That's stealing!" Clementine shrieked. "Taking something that belonged to me without paying for it. Stealing is cheating. You're gonna pay — big time!"

Six

Clementine knocked me to the floor and leaped on top of me.

“Are you gonna pay for what you stole?”

“I didn’t steal anything.”

Clementine grabbed hold of a pocket knife and pointed it straight at my chin. She glared at me with those wicked, glittering violet eyes.

“If you don’t make up your mind pretty quick to pay for what you stole from me, I’m gonna depreciate your assets. I’m gonna hack off your hair. Then I’m gonna make that little pug nose look like a Jack-O-Lantern. You won’t have such cute baby doll lips that beg to be kissed. Your ivory white complexion won’t look like a Dove soap commercial anymore, honey. Clem won’t want anything to do with you again — *business deal or no business deal.*”

I grabbed hold of Clementine’s wrist and tried to keep that sharp point from carving up my face. My arm weakened. It trembled. Her knife point descended ever closer to my face.

I rolled over. She had not been expecting that move. She lost her balance and fell with a crash onto the floor. The pocket knife got jarred out of her hand and flew across the room.

I scrambled to my feet. Clementine grabbed me around the waist and pulled me down. She went after my face with her fingernails. They were long, pointed, glittering red, and harder to avoid than the pocket knife. There were ten of them instead of one knife point, and she was very adept at using them.

Holding Clementine off, as she sat on top of me, was like trying to fend off a mountain lion. Her eyes were blazing. Her face was distorted into something too horrible to look upon. She was slashing at my

face with her claws like a wild animal, making low moaning noises. She snapped and bit at me. She did everything except drool!

I had to clutch onto both of her wrists. It was hard to have enough strength to keep this up. I would not have been able to sustain the battle if I had not known that my life was at stake. Somebody who was acting like Clementine was not sane.

In my real life I must not have had much practice at this sort of cat fight. It took me forever to think of the obvious — until it was almost too late. When her fingernails got too close to my face, I bit Clementine's wrist.

"Why, you little monster!" Clementine screeched as if he had not expected me to defend myself. "So you are gonna get nasty, are you?"

She started slapping my face. I raised my arms up over my head to protect myself and turned to one side as she flailed away.

Not two feet away lay the bottle of dish washing liquid that I had dropped when Clementine had first surprised me. It was oozing out onto the floor in a gooey, shiny, clear puddle. It was an unlikely weapon. I reached for it, shielding my face with my other arm.

Clutching the bottle of dish washing liquid, I took careful aim, figuring that I would get only one chance. When Clementine was least expecting it, I squirted the dish washing liquid into her face. I think I got her in the eye. But I did not stay around long enough to find out. I crawled out from underneath her and kept on moving.

Clementine shrieked. She rushed for the kitchen sink, turned on the spigots full force, and began throwing water in her face.

I ran for the dining room. It was all too far away for safety in this big, old, Victorian house. I had just gotten the dining room door shut and was trying to figure out how to lock it when Clementine surprised me. She started pushing on the door from the other side.

Leaning into the door with my shoulder, I used all my strength to keep her from opening it. I locked it behind me.

Clementine began to pound on the door. She rattled the brass door knob. She ran against the door.

"You cheat!" She had the gall to scream.

Then it sounded as if Clementine was getting down all the pots and pans hanging on the pot rack in the kitchen. She began to hurl them. They hit the wooden door and fell to the floor with a heavy, metallic clang.

“Pay me back! Pay me back! You owe me big time!” She screeched, possessed.

Next Clementine got down the plates, glasses, and cups. One after the other she broke them and shattered them against the door. Once the supply of crockery was exhausted, she dragged one kitchen chair after another across the floor. She picked them up and sent them crashing against the dining room door as well.

Now I knew what Mrs. Carpenter, Aunt Rose, and Skip must have endured. Mrs. Carpenter had told me how the girl had howled at the front door and screamed for Clem hour after hour when he had broken up with her. She had acted like a raving maniac, making enough noise to wake the dead.

Mrs. Carpenter had thought I would be safe left alone for a few hours while she went to work and Skip went to high school. Boy, was Mrs. Carpenter ever wrong!

Aunt Rose was supposed to come home at lunch time to check on me. I glanced at the old grandfather clock. It was still about half an hour or so before anyone would show up — that was if Aunt Rose remembered. Aunt Rose had better things to do than play nursemaid to the no name girl from nowhere.

Mrs. Carpenter had assumed that I would be better at taking care of myself. After everything that she had endured because of Clem for the past two months, she would certainly be appalled at how helpless I was.

What should I do next? I saw the front door and headed straight for it. I had better get out of here. Anyplace had to be safer than this house that was under full-scale attack by a raging maniac with a knife and long red claws! Perhaps some kind soul — if any lived in Hole — could direct me to the post office where Mrs. Carpenter worked. If not maybe he could direct me to the high school where I could find Skip or even the 50’s Diner where Aunt Rose hung out.

No sooner did I reach the front door than I stopped cold. Through the door glass I saw that horrible sports car parked across the street. It was pure inky black without a scratch. Its polished metal glowed so brightly that my eyes hurt just to look at it. The lines of the car were impossibly sleek, pointed, and architectural, as if it were as much a work of art as a car.

The car's engine was roaring. That car wanted to go forward. Like a horse held back by bridles and restraints, it wanted to gallop off in that direction.

There was some sort of fancy lace grillwork carved into the car. The fine, thin lines strangely resembled the threads of a spider web. This design peculiarity made me shiver. It lent an air of mystery and danger to the vehicle.

Strangely the name for this kind of car popped into my head, though I could not read the logo from this distance. It was a black Ferrari Testarosa Spyder. I knew more surely than I knew my own name (which I did not!) that I had ridden in that car before somewhere at sometime — and more than once.

I did not remember when, or where, or with whom. I just knew that I had sat in that leather cushioned front seat with the engine going full throttle that sounded like twenty horses chafing at the bit. I could see as clearly as if it were before me now the custom wooden steering wheel with the horse symbol carved right into the middle. The memory of it teased my brain. I struggled with it but could get nowhere.

Another memory struck me with the impact of a knife in my heart. This was the very car — I would swear it! — that had tried to run me down in the middle of Main Street in front of the 50's Diner only yesterday afternoon. I could vividly remember that same roaring engine sound.

Even worse — and this memory made me shake all over — this was surely the car of my nightmares. It was the one that I had seen many times when I had been in the trunk of the car. It was the one that I still saw whenever I closed my eyes, the one I dreamed of when I was asleep.

Even now behind the tinted glass of the windshield (actually all the windows of the car seemed to be tinted), I could just barely make out a shadowy figure in the driver's seat. Images of the young man with the blond hair, the mustache, the golden pocket watch, the black gloves, and the three-piece suit swam before my eyes. Suddenly I could see him more clearly than I had ever seen him before — except in the flesh. In the flesh we had met many times, all too many times. I was now positive of it.

There was no other way to explain all the details of his appearance that were suddenly overwhelming me. Horribly I could feel the bris-

bles of his beard against my cheek. I raised my hand to my own face as if I could slap away the memory. A long, pointed nose ended in a hook and jutted out from his face like some sort of gargoyle on a building. There were those yellowed teeth that seemed unnaturally sharp and pointed. I saw cold, lizard-like blue eyes, the color of ice. I could feel them staring at me through those tinted windows even now, making my blood freeze.

I wanted to pick the memory out of my brain the way you would pick a tiny, ugly toad off your clothing. But it would not be picked. I could not get my hands on it no matter how hard I tried. It kept on growing bigger and bigger all the time, and I kept on remembering more and more horrible details.

Crash!

Suddenly the dining room window farthest from me shattered. Shards of glass fell all over the floor. Just outside stood Clementine, her violet eyes blazing. She was pummeling the window glass with a long-handled, stainless steel pot, the kind with a copper bottom. She looked quite a sight with her frizzy black hair going every which way. Her cheeks were fire-engine red. Even her blue ribbed tank top had managed to get ripped under one arm, exposing her entire breast on that side. Her sleeveless strap had come down over the other shoulder, almost exposing the other breast.

That girl never gave up! She must have abandoned the dining room door and decided to break in through the dining room window to get at me. What would she do next? Burn the whole house down?

I could not run out the front door because of the black Ferrari blocking my path. So I locked the front door as the Ferrari still sat across the street with its motor going. The driver was obviously not concerned that a homicidal maniac was after me. He was certainly not willing to help. I just had to keep him out so he would not join in the fray as well!

Red-cheeked Clementine was still flailing away. She had just about broken all the window glass and was ready to climb in through the opening. She'd caught sight of me on the other side of the room and had already started to shriek at me to pay her back for what I had stolen.

Since I could not run out the front door and since I did not dare go back through the kitchen, there was only one way left. I picked up the skirts of my nightgown and dashed upstairs.

Where could I hide? The bedrooms were big, cavernous, and sparsely furnished. There was no obvious place to conceal myself except under the beds. That was just too obvious. Clementine would look there right away. Besides, the old-fashioned, wooden bed frames stood high up off the floor. The bedspreads had seen better days and were rather short and frayed. I would be clearly visible even from the hallway.

I could lock myself in a bathroom. But Clementine in her present mood would throw herself against the door until the hinges gave way. Then I would be cornered behind a shower curtain.

I heard her footsteps coming up the stairs behind me. She was shouting shrilly. "You owe me big time! I'm gonna collect right now! "

I darted into a bedroom closet. I struggled my way through the boys' clothing hanging from the hangers — jeans, T-shirts, sweat-shirts, long-sleeved shirts, and the like — and almost tripped over boys' shoes. I bumped into boxes piled up against each other. Some held boys' stuff — probably Clem's and Skip's old stuff — like fishing rods, erector sets, building blocks, Legos, old Monopoly games, piles of *Sports Illustrated* magazines, and baseball mitts. I squeezed between the boxes and hid myself in the darkest corner in the back of the huge closet. I climbed inside a big, mostly empty cardboard box that I had to share with a few plastic dinosaurs.

Clementine entered the room. She stalked around, moving furniture and muttering to herself about what she would do when she caught me.

"I'll make tinsel of your face . . . You'll wish you were dead . . . I warn you . . . This is your very last chance . . ."

It sounded as if she were grasping hold of the draperies and practically yanking the whole drapery rod assembly out of the wall. She thought that I was hiding behind the drapes. Next I heard a loud squeaking sound as she struggled with the old, wooden double hung window frame, trying to force it up.

No doubt she was checking out the window ledge and down in the yard to see if I had crawled out the window. Of course she was not using her brain. If I had climbed out that way, I would have left the window wide open. I would not have had time to shut it.

Finally her footsteps approached the closet where I was hiding. I could hear her ragged breathing as she started to pick through the

clothes hanging on the racks. Perhaps she imagined that I was like a bat and could fold myself up flat and hang upside-down to escape from her.

She forced herself farther back into the closet. She started to thrust boxes aside. At first she moved them carefully. Then she got impatient. She started overturning them and dumping them out as if I had become a tinker toy or a Lego. If she kept that up long enough, she would discover me in the last empty box against the wall.

I tried not to make a sound. I curled myself up into the smallest ball possible. Every time she overturned another box and spilled out its contents, I cringed. It was easy to picture those long, white fingers with the sharp red nails fixing themselves around my neck and not letting go until I was as lifeless as one of these plastic dinosaurs.

Clementine did not have enough patience to continue searching. At the last minute, when she practically did have her hands on my box, she decided that I was not in the closet. She turned around and headed back the way that she had come.

"I know where you are, bastard!" She cackled. "You must have gone up into the attic! You think you are very clever, don't you? We'll see about that!" She hurried down the hallway and up the creaky wooden stairs to the third floor attic.

I could soon hear her footsteps banging around over my head. I could not escape. Clementine might return at any minute. The black Ferrari must be still outside gunning its motor across the street. I imagined that I could hear the engine up here on the second floor in the back of a closet.

It did not take long for the darkness and the closed-in, cramped space to have its usual effect on my mind. It reminded me of the car trunk — and also of the coffin. I thought of the rope that had tied me down in the trunk rubbing and chafing against my skin, rubbing it raw. I remembered the gasoline smell and the sounds of traffic. I recalled being jounced around as the vehicle zoomed down the highway.

The darkness and the cramped space pressed down on my lungs, making it difficult to breathe. There was an oppressive, heavy feeling in my chest. I breathed harder to get enough air. Panic overcame me. My limbs were rigid, locked in place.

A cold sweat started on my forehead. I shook all over as if I were in a high fever. Delirious images flitted through my brain. At first they were disjointed.

The anxious face of the distinguished, older, gray-haired man with whiskers loomed up before me. He was the one who wore a suit, who had haunted my nightmarish visions before. A blond-haired lady with her hair up on her head, wearing fine, white gloves, was crying. Another short, squat lady was wagging her finger at me. That ruddy-colored cat with black points, pointed ears, a black spot at the end of his tail, and a long, sleek body with yellow, luminous eyes went "Meow!" White, perfumy magnolia blossoms gave off a musky odor. Girls paraded around chattering, dragging the hems of their garments on the ground.

The black sports car did not end the visions and make me black out. I was a spectator to a drama in my own mind, compelled to witness this drama whether I wanted to or not . . .

The lights blinked out. I saw myself in costume behind the curtains backstage. Rather I knew it was me. I did not see my face. I held the hand of the blonde goon with the mustache, the one who drove the black Ferrari. His mustache had been shaved tonight for his part in the play.

I could not see his face anymore than I could see his blond hair because of his wig that made his hair look wild. It was going every which way. I just knew it was him the way I knew it was me. Visions in nightmares do not make much sense!

He was dressed in medieval garb. So was I. So was the rest of the cast. He was wearing padded shoulders. His waist was slim, cinched in by the aid of a band tied around his waist under his costume. His full-shirted tunic was cut so short that it reached only to a few inches below his waist. His shoes were long and pointed. His hose was attached by small laces tied at intervals to his garment above.

He squeezed my hand and smiled down at me in my more elaborate costume. My floor-length gown with tight sleeves boasted fur cuffs at the ends. In the front of my bodice was a V-shaped neckline. My gown fell in pleats to the floor and was gathered up into my bodice. My skirt was of great length. It trailed as much in front as in the back. I had to hold it up just to walk, that is when I was not adjusting my tall, pointed headdress that covered up my long, brown hair completely.

"Even if I were really the Prince of Denmark I would marry you." The blond-haired guy was speaking. He leaned over and kissed me on my lips.

“Is that a proposal, my Hamlet?” I stood on tiptoes to reach his lips.

“You can take it that way, my fair Ophelia, as soon as we graduate in a few weeks.” He kissed me again.

Our kisses were interrupted by a thunderous roar of applause from the audience. Our short, squat English teacher ran backstage. She was wearing a fancy satin dress that she had bought for the occasion. Her hips jounced from side to side. It was all she could do to try to keep her glasses from falling off.

“Hamlet, you’re on!” Our English teacher hissed at the blond-haired guy in the medieval costume.

My lover boy made his entrance as the noble Prince of Denmark, isolated in his uncle’s court and without any friends. I went on-stage on cue and played my part as the girl that Hamlet might have married if his mother, Queen Gertrude, had not married his uncle, who had murdered his father. This one little nasty betrayal had destroyed Hamlet’s trust in women forever. He thought that women were whores, incapable of any loyalty.

But I did not remember feeling unhappy that night. I raced about in my medieval garb, trying not to trip over the hem and fall flat on my face on-stage in front of all those people. The tragedy of the characters did not touch me. I mouthed my lines and listened to my boyfriend make his famous “To be or not to be” speech. I bit my lip and tried not to giggle as Hamlet banished me from his sight and told me to “Get thee to a nunnery!” because he did not love me anymore. In fact, the blond guy and I made eyes at each other the whole time. He pulled me into his arms and whispered “sweet nothings” in my ear as we went on and offstage.

I only vaguely remembered the audience. They seemed to be grownups wearing minks, ermines, and fancy suits. I could barely make out two people seated in the front row that I knew, though I could not remember their faces. They were seated under a festive banner:

RIGGS ACADEMY SENIOR PRODUCTION OF HAMLET

That night my eyes were all for Hamlet, my blond-haired dream beau.

The English teacher applied makeup around my eyes to make me look as if I had been weeping. My eyes were supposed to be puffy and red. The teacher even tore my gown in one place to look more convincing so I could go on-stage and play the crazy Ophelia, bereft of her wits because of her rejection by Hamlet.

She scolded me. "Don't smile so much! Remember, you just lost the love of your life. You haven't found a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Nor have you just had Prince Charming put the glass slipper on your foot."

The teacher pushed me out on stage. I reminded myself not to wave at my boyfriend off-stage as I wandered about in my bare feet with my hair messed up. I carried bunches of flowers and sang mournful ditties. I reminded myself that Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, had just spurned me and driven me to distraction. I sang about how Hamlet had betrayed me as his Valentine:

*Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day,
All in the morning betime.
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.*

*Then up he rose and donn'd his clothes,
And opened the chamber door.
Let in the maid, that out a maid
Never departed more.*

*Quoth she, "Before you tumbled me,
You promised me to wed."
"So would I have done, by yonder sun,
If thou hadst not come to my bed."*

Other characters on-stage openly pitied me as Ophelia for the way that Hamlet had stolen my virginity and then had broken my heart. Actually I was filled with a smug self-satisfaction that I was nothing like Ophelia. No wonder some people in the audience were laughing as I danced for joy.

I was supposed to be making garlands of nettles, daisies, and other wildflowers and handing them out to the Danes in the mad distraction

of my grief. Instead I was running up to the other actors on the stage as if this were a celebration. I acted as if I were giving out flowers because our school had won some contest.

Finally came the scene where Ophelia was supposed to die offstage and be carried on-stage in a coffin. My boyfriend had whispered to me offstage. "Wait until this stupid play is over! You're going to have the night of your life!"

I had laid impatiently down in the real coffin that our school had borrowed from a funeral home for the play. I had done so as casually as you would lay down on a couch in the living room, fussing for the play to be over. All I could think of was what hamburger joint we were going to go to and what late flick we could watch at the drive-in as the other actors carried me on-stage. Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, told everybody how Ophelia had died stark raving mad:

*There is a willow grows beside the brook,
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream,
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
That bawdy shepherds give a grosser name,
But our chamber maids do dead men's fingers call them . . .*

I thought to myself, hardly even paying attention, *Did somebody mention fingers?* I held up my own hand far enough that the people in the audience could barely see it protruding over the top of the coffin. I wondered how a diamond ring would look on the fourth finger on my left hand. I ignored the chuckles from the audience.

Queen Gertrude continued her narration about Ophelia's death:

*There on the pendant boughs her crown-like weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide . . .*

Again I thought, *Clothes? Yes, what shall I wear tonight? I think I'll wear that shimmering purple lace dress with the little white pearls around the neckline and around the V-yoke waistline. And I'll wear the matching shoes*

with the lace sides and the adorable baby pearls. And, oh yes, I can't forget my jewelry that I bought last summer in Europe, the diamond pieces that I had engraved with my initials CR. I'll have to call the house right away and have the chauffeur bring everything around to my dressing room.

Again Queen Gertrude continued to weep:

*And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up
Which time she chanted snatches of old songs,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and accustomed
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with the water . . .*

Still again I thought, *Water? Yes, we've certainly got to have something not just to drink but to celebrate. When I call the house for the clothes, I'll have them bring around a six-pack of beer. No, maybe they should bring a bottle of champagne, the fancy kind that Daddy imported last Christmas from France to ring in the New Year.*

Queen Gertrude concluded her speech over Ophelia's coffin:

*Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death . . .*

Everybody on-stage began to weep, wring their hands, and tear their garments in grief about Ophelia's death. I so totally forgot what was going on that I sat up in my coffin and asked, "Where's the phone?"

The stagehands blacked out the lights as the audience exploded into peals of laughter.

Backstage the teacher read me the riot act. She warned me that my understudy would have to take over my part. I was not paying attention. True to form, I was not even paying any attention to the teacher. I was busy calling up my house on my cell phone and having the chauffeur bring clothes and jewels to my dressing room. I wanted to ask my boyfriend whether he wanted a Loire Valley or a Belle Valley champagne to celebrate our engagement, but he was on-stage making another famous Hamlet speech. That annoyed me. I could not go out there and ask him about the champagne. There were too many speeches in this play!

The English teacher forced me back into the coffin, assuring me that this was the last time. The Danes were about ready to hold Lady Ophelia's funeral. I tapped my fingers on my stomach as the other actors carried me on-stage in my coffin and laid me down in the cemetery. My boyfriend and I could go back to my house to celebrate in the wee hours after being out all night long. The cabana by the pool ought to be vacant. We could have our own little private party complete with an early breakfast for two. Cook would be more than happy to oblige.

Queen Gertrude stood over me at Ophelia's funeral. She threw flowers over my coffin as the gravediggers were preparing my grave. Queen Gertrude lamented:

*Sweets to the sweet, farewell!
I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.
I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,
And not have strewn thy grave . . .*

I thought, *Candy, that's it! The way to a guy's heart is through his stomach. I'll have to have them stock the cabana by the pool with candy. I just love maple creams , cherries, fudge, and —*

At that instant the lights went out on my part of the stage, the graveyard. Someone forgot to move my Ophelia casket backstage. I could do little about it except drum my fingers on my stomach. I planned the rest of my evening as the play came to its conclusion. We were already in the fifth act. It could not take much longer.

I was not attempting to follow the plot. It seemed really boring! How could any play be so long? I yawned and cupped my hand over my mouth. Actors were screaming. There were sword fights. Everyone was dying on-stage. Finally somebody killed off my boyfriend, Prince Hamlet. In the darkness I heard a voice saying,

*Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!*

I thought, *Oh great, he's dead! Now we can scam!*

I heard footsteps coming my direction. My heart was beating fast. It was my boyfriend. I wanted to run to him as the audience burst into applause.

Just as I started to sit up, the coffin lid slammed down in my face.

Seven

It must be a joke. I waited a few seconds, fully expecting the lid of the coffin to go up again, to find myself off-stage, and to see a bunch of giggling faces. When that did not happen, I tried to quell the panic. I could feel it as a hot burning sensation in my throat.

I kicked on the lid with my foot. My long medieval Ophelia dress got in the way. Then I tried screaming. I did not know how much time had passed (probably only a few moments, but it seemed like an eternity!) when I heard my boyfriend's voice.

I called to him as loudly as I could. He did not answer. Instead he sounded as if he were talking on the phone. It was hard to hear over my thundering heartbeats.

"We will get her to your town as soon as possible . . . Right . . . No more than two or three days . . . The driver's standing right here beside me. The car's in Richmond. We didn't want to bring it to the school. Somebody might notice it. Nobody will notice it in the big city . . . I hope you'll be ready with the good stuff by the time we get there . . . I've got to run. Don't want her old man to catch me. There will be hell to pay . . . Clothes? Sure! I'll dress her in whatever's she's got in her dressing room — baubles, trinkets, stockings, a dress, the works!"

An evil laugh.

Click.

My boyfriend hung up. I heard footsteps approaching swiftly. Suddenly the coffin lid flew open. His horrible face loomed over me. He was still dressed in his *Hamlet* costume with a disheveled wig with wild hair flying about. He was wearing black gloves. He clapped his hand over my mouth.

He held out the skull of Yorick that Hamlet found in the cemetery when the grave diggers were preparing Ophelia's grave. He quoted Hamlet's lines to me, "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio!"

He threw back his head and laughed. Then I saw no more.

Once again I became aware of myself crouching in the back of the upstairs closet behind the boxes. I caught myself humming one of Ophelia's songs that she had sung only after she had gone mad with grief. I was now singing with the mournfulness I should have expressed the night of the performance of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*:

*Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day.
All in the morning betime.
And I a maid at your window
To be your Valentine . . .*

Suddenly I realized that I was more like Ophelia than I had imagined. She had been deceived by Hamlet. I had been tricked by my boyfriend. She had died. I had almost died.

I shuddered at my near death experience, all because I had trusted the wrong person. No matter what else happened, I would never make that dumb mistake again.

Another sound broke into my consciousness. It was a car pulling into the driveway. It was not Clementine. She'd already been here. It could be Mrs. Carpenter or even Skip, home from the high school. I had lost all sense of how long I had been sitting in the back of the closet. Perhaps it had been longer than twenty-four hours, and it was already tomorrow at the same time. I had no idea.

I made my way out of the closet in a big hurry, knocking boxes aside in my anxiousness. I wanted to cry out, "Wait for me!"

I stopped at the entrance to the closet to listen. The rest of the house was quiet. Clementine must have left. Probably she had gone home, unable to discover my hiding place, figuring that I had run out of the house. She had not wanted to be in the house when Mrs. Carpenter, Aunt Rose, or Skip came home. She would have a hard time explaining why she had broken in and rummaged through their attic and why she had left the kitchen — not to mention the dining room! —

such a mess. She could not explain to Mrs. Carpenter that she'd been trying to kill me.

I ran for the nearest window and struggled with the drapes, blinds, and shutters to see who it was down in the driveway. Every window in this stifling house seemed to be all but sealed shut due to Mrs. Carpenter's agitated state of mind. I would have done the same thing myself if I had been receiving all those phone calls and letters from abroad.

I finally got a view of the backyard looking out toward the vacant lot which Mrs. Carpenter had been talking so much about. It was the place where she claimed to have seen Clem with the coffin with bones inside it chatting with the blond-haired goon, the place where he had threatened Skip and her with their lives. But no matter how I craned my neck, I was not able to get a view of the driveway. What caught my eye was something moving in the bushes.

They seemed to be shaking about too violently for a mere bird or a squirrel. It must be a pretty big animal. The movement was in the general direction of the house as if someone were crawling slowly but surely toward it. It could not be Clementine. Her style was more direct and confrontational. She would come running right in rather than creep around and try to surprise you.

It could be anybody else. It could be her father, Buck O'reilly. It could even be the two guys from England who had shown up at the 50's Diner yesterday. It could also be some creep that I had not yet met. According to Mrs. Carpenter, there must be scores of goons and creeps that I had not yet met. Half the weirdoes in the world seemed to be interested in Clem's business — whatever that was. They were all zeroing in on Hole.

I heard a noise from the driveway. It sounded like an engine cutting off and going silent. I raced to still another bedroom. This one must belong to Mrs. Carpenter. Everything was very plain. There was not much furniture, only what was absolutely necessary. The double bed with a homespun bedspread looked a hundred years old. A dresser sat in one corner. A throw rug in the middle of the floor was made of woven rags.

A framed eight by ten photograph on the plain wooden nightstand caught my attention. The man bore a strong resemblance to Clem. He had the same dark hair and dark eyes, the same long, sensitive nose.

Perhaps it was Clem's father who had run off ten years ago when Clem was only eight. The man was dressed simply enough. He seemed to be wearing the same coveralls that Clem had been wearing only yesterday at the garage.

I did not have time to study the photo. I headed for the window. Behind the drapes and blinds, this window was boarded up. I had no idea how much money new windows cost, but the Carpenter family seemed to be very short on spare cash.

Or there was a more sinister possibility. Had one of the creeps who'd been stalking Mrs. Carpenter, Skip, and Aunt Rose actually crawled through the window and threatened Mrs. Carpenter one night after she had gone to bed? No wonder she had boarded up the window!

Br-r-r-r-ring!

I stared at the telephone sitting on the nightstand beside the photograph. It was one of those old-fashioned phones that I had not known existed anymore with a rotary dial. It was very plain with a boxy shape. It looked as if it had been put into service years ago.

Br-r-r-r-ring!

The phone had not rung all morning long until now — assuming that it was the same day. Maybe Mrs. Carpenter was calling or even Aunt Rose. Perhaps Skip had a study hall break at school?

"Hello?" I answered breathlessly. "Whoever you are, somebody has just tried to murder me."

There was a pause.

"Hello! Hello!" I begged. "Is anybody there?"

Probably it had been somebody trying to sell something, and I had scared him away with my talk of murder. But I was not in a position to observe the social niceties. Maybe I could persuade the credit card salesman or the car insurance agent to help me anyway.

"I don't know where I am. But you can call the police and give them the number. Tell them to come here at once and — "

"Who is this?" A gruff, bass, masculine voice demanded. "Is this one of Clem's gals?"

Was this one of those harassing phone callers that Mrs. Carpenter complained about? Was this another stalker coming after Clem Carpenter? Would these goons never quit?

"No, I'm not Clem's girl! I hardly even know him. I don't know who I am or what I'm doing here. All I know is that I got here yester-

day in the trunk of a car. I don't even know where in the country Hole is. I'm totally lost. So there's no use trying to bribe me."

The man on the other end of the line started talking to somebody else standing in the background. They seemed to be arguing with each other.

Finally the other man got onto the phone. "Are you Camilla Riggs?" He asked. He talked in a very sophisticated, educated tone.

"I don't know who I am!" I screamed. "Don't you get the message? Something bad happened to me, and my brain won't work right. SO LEAVE ME ALONE!"

I slammed the receiver down and raced out of the room. The phone starting ringing again almost immediately.

I finally found a window in what must have been Aunt Rose's room with a clear view of the driveway. I managed to get the blinds up and the shutters open. I peered down.

There sat an old beat up wreck of a car. It looked like an ancient Buick with the front windshield cracked. Two of the side windows were gone, including the one on the passenger side in the front. The back door on my side was horribly dented as if it had been in an accident. The whole car was stained with mud and grime, so ingrained into the finish that it was impossible to tell exactly what color the Buick had originally been when it had been built. Even one of the windshield wipers was missing!

The car was scratched up as if it had endured horrible abuse. I had never seen such a mess of a car in my whole life, though I could not remember much of my past.

In the driver's seat sat a dark-haired guy. His hair looked kind of bushy. Long curls fell down into his grey eyes, even down to the end of his long, aquiline nose. He kept on brushing his long curls back from his eyes and smoothing his hand along his cheeks that were covered with dark bristles. He leaned out the driver's side window and fiddled with the side view mirror, which seemed about ready to fall off. His high cheeks and his brow with the overarching eyebrows looked as if it had been chiseled into intense lines of concentration. He bit his lower lip, which stuck out as if frozen into a perpetual pout.

His lips moved. Though I could not hear what he was saying, he seemed to be cursing under his breath at the stupid side view mirror that would not do what he wanted it to.

I had not seen Clem since yesterday afternoon. It was hard to sort out my feelings for him. Yesterday Clem had seemed like an enigma. He threatened me with one hand and gave me money with the other. Since then Skip and Mrs. Carpenter had told me so much about Clem that I could begin to understand why he went around with a perpetual scowl. If I had been living with goons pursuing me for the past two months — for whatever reason — I think I would feel that way also. It seemed irrelevant what sort of “business” Clem was in. I could identify with his “hunted” feeling. I was “hunted”, too.

Besides, right now I could not afford to be choosy. Clem was the only other person around. He had not been the one on the phone. He had not been the one climbing through the hedge. So I had to take a wild chance and trust him.

“Clem!” I shouted down to the driveway.

He did not answer.

There was a pane of glass between us. It was one of those old wooden, double-hung jobs that had seen better days. It was stuck in place. No matter what I did it could not be wedged loose. It squealed and protested. Old paint flecked off the squeaky frame every time I tried to move it. If I tried any harder to force it up, I might break the glass.

All the while somebody was probably still creeping through the hedges out back. I pictured the nameless, faceless creep carrying a machete or perhaps a long scimitar of the kind that I had seen in movies. He might wait until I was asleep. He might creep into the house on cat-like feet, so no one could hear him. He might pull the sheets down. Then he would slit my throat. My imagination had no limits.

I knocked on that pane of glass.

No response. Clem was not even looking in my direction.

I knocked even harder.

Something hard landed on top of my shoulder. It must be a hand. That goon who had been crawling through the bushes must have reached the house.

I moaned aloud. “Please don’t hurt me!”

I broke free and headed toward the door. Something landed on the floor behind me. I craned my neck. It was only a wooden broom after all. But at that moment it was enough that a hand *could* have landed on my shoulder.

The plain, floor-length, thin wool nightgown that Mrs. Carpenter had loaned me caught on a sharp wooden projection on the door that had not been repaired. My whole nightgown, that had been unzipped down the front by Clementine, came off in a flash. I did not stop to retrieve it. All I could think of was Clem — and safety. He was the only refuge left in this mad world.

“Clem!” I shrieked at the top of my lungs as I raced down the stairs stark naked.

I ran through the dining room to the locked door between the dining room and the kitchen. I struggled with the door to open it once more, gazing warily at the broken dining room window with the jagged glass. Every second of delay made me nervous. Clementine could be out there ready to break through the window a second time.

“Clem!” I yelled even more loudly. Was he still in the driveway? Was he gone already?

I looked toward the front door that led directly out onto the street. I was about to dart out that way when I remembered the blond-haired goon in the black Ferrari parked along the other side of the road. Would he still be lying in wait for me, ready to snatch me up, figuring that I had to leave the house sometime?

“Clem, help!” I shouted as I finally broke through the dining room door into the kitchen.

I raced through the messy kitchen that had been left just as I last remembered it. The chairs were overturned. Pots and pans lay everywhere. China plates were broken on the floor, leaving glass shards that I avoided only at the last moment with a big leap. The tea service was still soaking in the sink, the bubbles all gone now. Then I knew for sure that it had to be the same day. No one, not Mrs. Carpenter, Aunt Rose, or Skip, had returned to clean up the mess.

At that moment I broke through the kitchen door. There was Clem’s car! He was still parked in the driveway fiddling with the side view mirror. I raced down the driveway, not caring about the feel of the rough stones against my bare feet.

I screamed, “Clem! Clem! Help me! Clem!”

Clem stopped fiddling with his side view mirror. He looked up aghast. The side view mirror dropped out of his hand and cracked on the gravel driveway. He seemed to forget about the gadget altogether.

Clem's normally tawny, tanned complexion went white. Then it went whiter still. As I approached closer, it grew as pale as chalk and finally lost its color all together. His mouth fell open. His eyes grew wide. They looked as if they were about to pop out of his head. He seemed as if he were gapping at some unbelievable apparition.

My long brown, shoulder-length hair flew wildly around my face, streaming around me like points of exclamation. My eyes were wild. Tears were coursing down my cheeks, dripping onto my heaving bosom that bounced freely about without the restraints of any kind of clothing. Perspiration had formed a thin, sheeny film over my fair complexion that made me perhaps look like a supernatural creature darting from nowhere. Sweat dripped from under my arms and down my forehead, over my pug nose, over my lips and chin, down my bosom to my belly button, and down my long legs—all clearly and starkly in view.

Clem forced open the car door with a loud squeak. He leaped out and just stood there for a second. His knees did not seem any too steady. He took several steps toward me and stumbled over his own feet.

"What—what in hell . . ." was all Clem got out.

I flung myself at Clem. In a few seconds I had wrapped my arms and legs around him more effectively than an octopus with all those tentacles. I held him to me so tightly that he must have been in danger of being squished even with those big muscles everywhere.

"What's going on?"

"Everybody's trying to murder me. I've got to get out of here somehow, or I will be dead." I moaned, tears coursing down my cheeks.

Suddenly Clem burst out from the confines of my arms and legs. I fell to the ground on my butt. Before I got a chance to react, he grabbed me by the hand and hurled me into the front seat of the Buick. I landed on my stomach. He climbed in. He forced the rusty hinges of the door shut and fell on top of me. He lay there, keeping low. His heart was beating against my back as he pressed down against me along the whole length of my body.

After we lay there like that for a few seconds without speaking, I gasped. "Clem, what are you doing?"

"Sh-h-h-h!"

"But—"

He clapped his hand over my mouth. His body tensed all over. I could feel his muscles wound up and ready to spring just as I could feel his heart. The beat was getting louder as if there was something going on that I did not know about. He seemed to be focusing his energies upon listening to something.

Then I heard it, too. A car was coming down the driveway toward where Clem's car was parked. The other car did not seem to be in any hurry. It could not be going any faster than five miles an hour. It seemed to be taking forever to get here. A cold sweat started up on my forehead and under my arms. I shivered underneath Clem's body.

Even worse, the other car's radio was blaring. That made my heart pound so fast that it was ready to explode. I suddenly remembered myself buried in that dark trunk listening to the Elvis song, "Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog." This was not the same song at all. In fact, it sounded like classical music.

The car got so near that it seemed as if it must run right into us. At last it stopped. The engine cut off. The car radio went dead. A car door opened. I could hear footsteps on the gravel driveway.

"So, it's you, Clem!" A chirpy, cheerful voice sang out.

Aunt Rose! That was right. Mrs. Carpenter had said something about her checking on me around noon time.

Clem sat up at once.

"Why don't you come into the kitchen for lunch? I've just shut down the diner early so I could check on C.R. Skip called me from the high school during study break. He told me that C.R. is what we are gonna call the new girl until we find out what her real name is."

I started to sit up, too, when I hear the name "C.R." It was good to have a name, any name, even if it was not your real name. Anything was better than being the no name girl.

What was the other name that I had heard on the phone? Cam . . . I did not have time to remember.

Clem pushed my head down onto the seat. At first I wondered why. In all the confusion, I had totally forgotten that I was naked.

"Oh, so C.R. *is* all right!" Aunt Rose gushed in that cheerful, lilting voice of hers. Aunt Rose must have seen the top of my head. She could not have seen much more. "You two young people look as if you have gotten much, *much* better acquainted."

There was a note of teasing in her voice now. When I glanced up at Clem, color seemed to be rushing into his cheeks.

“Why don’t both of you come in for lunch? I stopped at the grocery store to pick up a few things. Should be finger lickin’ good.” Aunt Rose crushed a grocery bag against her chest.

Aunt Rose plodded her way into the house, heading in the direction of the kitchen door. She was humming a tune.

Clem waited until the kitchen door shut behind Aunt Rose. “Look, I dunno what kind of game this is. But I’ve gotta go!” Clem picked me up and shook me by the shoulders. “Can’t hang around here. Just stopped by to see if you were still here or if you had run off somewhere else. I — ”

“But, Clem, that’s the point! I don’t have anywhere to go!” I burst into tears afresh. I sniffled and wiped my eyes with my balled fists as I knelt there on the front seat, strands of my brown hair curling around my heaving bosom. “Besides, I don’t dare go anywhere. People are following me. They are trying to murder me.”

“Who?” Deep furrows creased Clem’s brow.

“Clementine was just here. She tried to carve up my face with a pocket knife. She said I owed her money or a cut of your business — whatever that is. She chased me around the house. I hid in your closet. Then awful creeps were crawling through the bushes out back. Somebody even called on the phone. They were asking about you again. They even called me some name I don’t remember. Oh, Clem, I think we’re in this thing together!”

I again wrapped my arms around Clem and held on for dear life as I trembled all over. I shook so much that I could feel the seat moving.

“Clem, you comin’?” Aunt Rose popped her head out of the kitchen. Her merry cheeks always looked rosy. She was tying an apron around her thick waist. “Lunch’ll be ready shortly. Don’t want it to get cold.”

Clem once again knocked me down onto the seat. “Here, put this on!” Clem unzipped his big, oversized dark blue cotton jacket. He threw it at me. When I merely acted “out of it” like a hopeless, helpless zombie, he forced one of my arms through a sleeve, draped the jacket around my back, and then forced my other arm through the second sleeve.

The front of the jacket was hanging wide open. He cursed under his breath, grasped hold of both ends of the zipper, and zipped the coat up the front. My hands seemed to have been swallowed up, so he rolled up the sleeves at the ends.

The jacket came down to my mid thigh. It was not perfect, but it was better than nothing. It was certainly not much shorter than a mini-skirt.

Clem opened the door and yanked me out behind him. He started to pull me along. He realized that I was not coming as quickly as he would like. He turned around and noticed for the first time that my feet were bare.

He cursed. This time he picked me up in his arms and carried me inside the kitchen. My legs dangled in the air as I clutched my arms tightly around his neck.

I marveled at the neatness of the kitchen as Clem shoved open the unlatched door with his big shoulder and kicked it shut behind him with his foot. Aunt Rose had made short work of the mess. One would never guess that a life-and-death battle had raged here only a short while ago. The pots and pans were back on their racks. The chairs were upright. All the broken shards of glass were in the wastebasket. Aunt Rose had scrubbed the tea things and put them away.

Most amazing, all she said about the matter was, "You young people these days! Then I suppose you have other things on your mind more important than cleaning up."

Clem dumped me into a chair at the kitchen table. He glanced back over his shoulder as if he were thinking of darting out of the kitchen and back to his car. I braced myself, ready to run after him. But he sighed and took a seat at the kitchen table as far from me as possible.

I wanted to scoot my chair up close to Clem. I needed to feel safe. So far at least he had not tried to kill me.

Aunt Rose was rolling each hot dog in a slice of American cheese, then in a triangular shaped piece of dough. She fastened the whole with a toothpick and put six of these creations on an aluminum cookie tray. She had pre-heated the oven, so she slipped them in.

Aunt Rose busied herself setting the table. She continued to hum classical music.

"Don't make nothin' fancy. I've gotta go." Clem was quick to say. He glanced at his wristwatch as if he were late for an important appointment.

"You're always rushin' off, Clem Carpenter." His aunt scolded him. "That's the problem with kids these days."

Clem shifted in his seat and sighed.

Aunt Rose was undeterred. She laid the hot dog relish, ketchup, mustard, and pickles out on the table. "I was talkin' to Buck O'reilly this mornin'. Says you're not gonna graduate. In fact, if you keep missin' all these days and never showin' up at classes, you're gonna be expelled."

That was stern coming from Aunt Rose. It made me wonder if I was missing any school. After all, I seemed to be the same age as Skip and Clem.

Clem did not meet Aunt Rose's eyes. He picked up his can of Coke and guzzled it down.

"I'm glad that influence hasn't rubbed off on Skip. Your cousin is tryin' to get his diploma while workin' at the garage. I hear you were fired there."

Again Clem ignored Aunt Rose as she served the piping hot cheese dogs on crusty white rolls.

"I wish you'd give up whatever nasty business you're involved in and become a human bein' again."

Clem devoured a hot dog. He did not meet her gaze.

Clem did not come home often, so Aunt Rose wanted to get all the family's complaints in at once.

"Oh well!" Aunt Rose sighed with the smile that was so characteristic of her. "I'm glad I'm rollin' my pennies. I'm gonna retire in Hawaii in style someday." She went back to humming her tunes as she returned to the sink to do the dishes.

I was only nibbling at my hot dog. I had caught sight of something.

"What's goin' on?" Clem whispered so low to me that he did little more than move his lips.

My hair was standing straight up on my head. All this time whoever it was had not gone away. He was lying in wait.

"*The bushes!*" I mouthed the words, pointing toward the window.

Eight

“What?” Clem whispered harshly. “What did you say?”

“The bushes!” I hissed, wagging my finger in the direction of the kitchen window.

Aunt Rose had her back to us as she did a few dance steps in time to the Viennese polka music on the radio, swinging her portly frame from side to side. She was finishing up scrubbing the sink and cleaning the few pots, pans, and dishes that remained from lunch.

“Well, dears!” Aunt Rose untied her apron with her chubby little fingers. She hung the apron up next to the sink. “Have to get back to the diner. My customers will be hungry. Last time I closed when I went to the dentist in Eldorado City, I came back and there was a line half a block long!”

She picked up her big leather purse and waddled over to the kitchen table. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. Then she kissed Clem, who drew back.

Aunt Rose pinched my cheek, ignoring Clem’s reaction.

“Now you eat the rest of your lunch!” She gushed. “We’ll have you back to bein’ yourself before you know it. We’ll put some color in those cheeks and a twinkle in your eye. Guaranteed!”

She waddled toward the kitchen door. I wanted to warn her about the prowler climbing through the hedges. But I felt silly trying to explain everything that had been going on when I did not even understand it myself. After all, she seemed like the most normal person in the family. Weird things were going on around her. She did not notice a thing — not Aunt Rose!

Aunt Rose turned toward us, her hand on the door knob.

"If I can get away from the diner in time, I'm gonna make you my homemade roast chicken and mashed potatoes. Get raves about it at the diner. None of that boxed stuff for Rose. No sir! I'll bring home one of my apple pies for dessert. Ought to put the weight back on you."

With a self-satisfied nod, Aunt Rose made her way over to her car in defiance of all prowlers, murderers, and thieves. I got the idea that if she caught one in the garden, she would have him in the kitchen fast. She would feast him on homemade apple pie *a la mode!* Eating seemed to be her solution to all of life's problems.

Clem stood up as soon as his Aunt Rose was gone. He looked toward the bushes where I had been pointing. To judge by the look on Clem's face, he was not as reluctant as his aunt to believe in prowlers, killers, and thieves. His face grew more ashen as he stared at the bushes that seemed to move of their own accord. His eyes widened. His grip on the back of his chair tightened. His knuckles turned white. Soon he was going to snap the back of the chair frame.

"Who — who is it? Do you know?" I hissed. Mrs. Carpenter had told me that Clem had all sorts of sneaky, creepy associates who did "business" with him at the oddest times and in the most secret ways.

"I've — I've gotta go!" Clem snapped.

"I'm coming!"

I had visions of being left alone in the house once again with a bunch of maniacs following me around trying to murder me, including the goon in the bushes. That I could not face.

"You . . . Come with *me*? Why, that's — that's impossible!" He gaped at me.

"If I stay here by myself somebody will kill me."

"If you come with me, somebody certainly will." Clem spat right back.

"At least — at least I won't be alone. That's the worst thing."

"If you think I have time to baby-sit, you've got another thing comin'."

"I won't be any trouble. I promise I won't."

"That's like Typhoid Mary saying she won't be any trouble. You seem to carry trouble with you."

"Please!" I touched his arm.

He quickly withdrew it. He glared out the window, then back at me.

"All right." He suddenly agreed all too quickly. "I'll wait in the car. Get dressed. No more runnin' around naked!"

Some deep-seated instinct warned me not to trust him as I watched him dash out of the kitchen into his car. He sat there getting his motor warmed up. I stood there by the door watching him instead of going upstairs. It was a good thing. He suddenly put his car into gear and started to back up. It had been a trick to get rid of me! He had no intentions of taking me along.

I dashed out the door as fast as my legs would carry me. Before he knew it, I had thrust myself part way through the passenger side window. There was no glass there anymore.

Just at that moment he reached the street. He straightened the car out and started to zoom away.

"Clem, stop!" I called. I was in a very awkward position. My torso was hanging in the window. My legs were hanging out of it.

He slammed his foot down on the brake. He glared at me as I scrambled the rest of the way into the front seat.

He did not say a word as he took off again. His anger was seething. It was like sitting beside a smoking volcano ready to erupt at any moment.

Finally Clem snapped. "Nobody rides with Clem Carpenter. NOBODY! Do I make myself clear?"

"Sorry . . . But as I tried to explain, I — I don't have any choice."

He grumbled something I could not make out.

The old car was jerking and bumping about. I moved closer to Clem to have somebody to hold onto if the car went around a sudden bend.

Clem spoke after awhile. "Didn't anybody tell you that I'm down-right dangerous? That I'm a killer? That everybody in Hole avoids me?"

"But Aunt Rose — "

"Aunt Rose is about as close to being a senseless baby as any grownup could be! So answer me — didn't anybody tell you?" He pounded on the steering wheel for emphasis.

"Your mother and Skip told me about the coffin in the backyard with the bones in it." I started ticking off stories on my fingers, trying to remember everything. "They told me how you threatened to kill your mother and your cousin. They told me about what mean company you keep. Guys are always calling you on the phone, making offers and death threats, and — "

"None of this stuff bothers you?" Clem held the steering wheel so hard I could hear his knuckles crack. He was not looking at me. But I sensed he was watching me out of the corner of his eye.

It was true. My reactions to Clem were as mysterious as everything else that had happened since I opened my eyes in the garage yesterday and popped out of the trunk.

"I was terrified of you yesterday. You kept on threatening to kill me and dump me by the side of the road. Your mother scared me even more with her stories — at first."

"Well?"

I was piecing this all together for the first time. It was news to me as well as Clem. "Nobody has ever actually seen you murder anybody. Right? It's just guesswork and inferring things — you know, finding you with a coffin with bones in it."

"So you claim you're not terrified of me anymore?" He pressed.

"Killers seem after me from every direction. I took a chance and ran to you. And — and you helped me."

I turned toward Clem. Was that a blush I detected? Hard to tell. Clem remained stonily silent as he drove farther and farther out of town.

"I guess it isn't so surprising that you helped me just now, I mean. Yesterday you saved me from that black Ferrari running me down in the middle of the street."

"Oh?" He raised his eyebrows. He was making a point of not looking at me.

"But you *must* have saved me! There wasn't anybody else standing next to me except Skip. You had the stronger grip on me. I would have been killed if you hadn't grabbed me."

I tried to visualize what must have happened.

Clem did not help with my recollections. He was not about to volunteer a single thing.

One memory led to others. Now they came rushing through my head. They fit together. They made at least some sense of the enigma that was Clem.

"And then — and then you took me home to your house." I moved closer to him in my enthusiasm. "Your mother said you did. She said you hadn't been home in weeks. That was the first time."

Clem moved as far away from me on the seat as he could. He was leaning against the door as he drove.

"Yes! You came back to your house this afternoon to check on me." The words rolled out of my mouth. I was really excited. I was onto something, and I knew it.

"How do you know what I was *really* doing?"

"*You said so yourself!*" I practically leaped on top of him. "Don't you remember?"

Again I had the impression that he was blushing. He had forgotten that he had told me.

"Besides, what other reason could you have had? There was nobody else in the house except me. You couldn't have known that Aunt Rose was coming home to make lunch. Now that's not something that a vicious killer would do, is it?"

He was holding himself very rigid. My leg was pressing against his. I could feel the tenseness in his muscles.

"Then when I ran to you . . ." I swallowed hard, realizing for the first time that I had not been wearing any clothes. "You — you gave me your jacket. You even carried me into the house. That was after yesterday when you gave me money to buy food and clothes."

Clem slammed on the brakes and came to a screeching stop along the side of the road. His eyes blazed. "Believe me, if there was some place I could dump you, I'd dump you right now. Gal like you is a nuisance. Takin' you places is like travelin' with a death wish."

"Why don't you just dump me?" I challenged him. "Why don't you just knife me like the big, bad hood you're supposed to be and leave my body lying along the side of the road? I'm a nameless person belonging nowhere. No one would care. They would throw me in an unmarked grave. Maybe you could just buy another coffin and bury me in the vacant lot!"

Normally I would have been terrified to provoke somebody like Clem. I was desperate to make sense of my senseless circumstances. I had to know what was really going on.

All Clem did was grumble under his breath. He started up the car. We were off, headed down the dusty country road.

"So you think you have me figured out, do you, down to what makes me tick?" Clem burst out. "Well, if I'm not a ferocious killer, what am I?"

Suddenly it occurred to me that the reason he was so standoffish was that he was scared himself. Everybody thought he was a killer. Maybe he was a victim like me.

"Maybe — maybe you're like me. You're scared stiff and confused. You just won't admit it."

He did not appear to like that answer to judge from his grimace.

"Maybe the goons are after you for the same reason they are after me. Maybe for a different reason. I don't know. *Maybe you don't even know.*"

"I know." He spoke grimly. "Believe me, I know as well as I know my own name, Clem Carpenter."

"Do you really know *everything*?" I grabbed onto his arm and shook it even though he was driving. "Perhaps if I tell you everything that I can remember and you tell me everything that you know, we can both put this whole thing together and figure out the mystery right here and now. Maybe we can even figure out who I am and what I'm doing here."

Clem seemed obsessed with something in the rearview mirror. He did not take his eyes off the road long enough to glance at me. He swallowed hard.

"Well?" I pressed. I deserved a better answer. What I had said was important.

"*Get down! Quick!*" Clem barked. Clem shoved me down onto the floor. He smashed his foot down onto the gas pedal. The old jalopy, with a shudder and a groan, leaped forward.

"Hey, what's going on?" I shouted to make myself heard over the roar of the engine. It seemed to be rattling, shaking, and making a ruckus, protesting at having to go so fast.

Clem remained stonily silent.

I did not like being crouched down on the floor. It reminded me of being inside the car trunk. The space was small and cramped. It was dark. I felt the same bumps along the road that I had in the trunk. They were more pronounced down here than when riding on the seat. The smell of gasoline assaulted my nostrils.

Even worse, Clem kept on pushing the car past its limits. The car was shaking as if it were about to split apart at any second. He took a sudden, sharp left. The car almost tipped over. It must have been riding on two wheels for an instant.

"Shit!" Clem burst out.

Another car crashed into Clem's back bumper. The old bumper clanked to the road.

Clem gripped the steering wheel. He kept on glancing back over his shoulder, then yanking at the gear shift. He bit his lip, morbidly determined. No matter what he tried to do, the Buick would not move faster.

The pursuing vehicle came up alongside us on the passenger side. The roar of its engine was so loud that it sounded as if it was inside my head.

I moved as far as possible away from that lethal side door. I wrapped my arms around Clem's right knee and ducked my head down low.

Clem attempted to lurch his car sharply to the left. The other car came crashing into the passenger side door. The impact sounded so loud it seemed to be colliding with my brain.

I felt a breeze and spun around — still while holding tightly to Clem's right leg — just in time to see the passenger side door swing open. In the driver's seat of the other car sat one of the English gents that I had met at Aunt Rose's 50's Diner. This was the gent with the long brown mustache that curled upwards at the ends as if it had been waxed. He had a classical profile that looked as if his every feature had been carved by a sculptor. Everything was too perfect. No detail from his short-clipped brown hair to his Safari outfit with the big expedition hat to the binoculars that hung around his neck was out of place.

Next to him sat the other English gent, the one who had written me a check for one million dollars. This one still wore the gray trench coat with the collar that turned upwards stiffly around his neck so that I could not make out much of his face up to his jowls. His floppy hat was half pulled down over his eyes. He was smoking a cigar. The smoke blew out the window of their dark blue Jaguar.

The gent in the gray trench coat extinguished his cigar in the ashtray. He turned toward us. As I watched in horror, his gun hand went up. He took aim. He pointed a pistol at us! There was no place we could hide. We were sitting ducks with that door swinging wide open.

"No, C.R.! no!" Clem shouted at me. "Don't do it! It's too dangerous!"

I thought, *And waiting for somebody to shoot us isn't?*

I crawled across the front seat on my belly toward the open door. Clem clutched my ankle with his right hand to hold me in the car. He was leaning way over and driving blind. I reached out of the moving vehicle to

grab the window handle, the only thing I could get hold of. I slammed the door shut with a bang at the same instant that the Englishman's pistol fired. The door handle broke off and fell onto the seat.

Without raising my head one inch, I crawled back across the seat and threw my arms around Clem's waist. I held on as if my arms were made of cement and would not let go no matter what happened.

Clem drove at top speed for what seemed endless miles. Now he swerved one direction around a sharp bend. He leaned into the wheel, turned on a dime, and headed off in the other direction. His tires screeched. All the black rubber must be coming off. I expected a tire or a wheel to roll off at any moment!

We must be getting farther out into the country. The road was not smooth. In fact, I was not sure if it was paved the way we kept on bouncing up and down every single moment. My rear end felt as if it were touching the ground in place of the wheels.

Still I held onto Clem for dear life. I was digging my fingernails into his waist like a cat holding onto a tree trunk.

Clem stomped down on the brake. He put his car into a skid. He spun around. I peeked up over the dashboard. All I could see was a big cloud of dust that the tires had kicked up.

Finally we stopped. When the dust cleared sufficiently, I could make out the Englishmen's dark blue Jaguar parked sideways in the middle of the dirt road. Clem's front fender was only inches away. The English gents were no longer inside the fancy sports car. At that moment they sprang out of the surrounding bushes. They were both holding pistols, which they had pointed straight at us.

Clem must be well-practiced at these maneuvers. He forced his wheels to the right and slammed his foot down on the gas pedal.

Clem went back the way that he had come. He soon turned off the main dirt road onto a side road through the pine forest. Now we were jouncing along over an even more bumpy surface, going more slowly. Branches were hitting our windshield and slamming into our side windows.

"Where are we going?" I got up enough courage to ask Clem as I sat up and looked ahead of me. "Is this some shortcut that you think the Englishmen don't know about?"

"Don't ask!" He spoke sharply. "Remember, I warned you not to come with me."

So I did not say another word as we bounced along forever in this fashion. We came to a junction with another dirt road that looked a little smoother than the one that we had just traveled. Perhaps it was a dirt road that led somewhere this time, though it seemed to run alongside a dangerous drop off on the other side of the road.

"Now we can get back to Hole." I breathed more easily. "Surely all these roads must connect up somehow. When we get back, we can call Aunt Rose, Skip, your mother, or — "

"Think again!"

I followed the direction of Clem's gaze. About fifty yards away in what must have been the direction of town, sat the pitch black Ferrari Testarosa Spyder along the side of the road. It was my worst nightmare come true.

The car's super engine with all its horsepower was humming away like a wildcat waiting for its prey. Clem's car seemed to be about ready to fall apart at any moment. Maybe he could keep it going somehow because he was a garage mechanic. But even he could do little against a Ferrari!

The evil black car pulled out onto the road. I ducked, hunkering down on the seat again with my arms around Clem's waist.

Clem headed the other direction at top speed. Top speed for an old Buick with a revamped, souped-up engine was nothing like top speed for a Ferrari. The car with the sleek lines and the fine lace work ran rings around Clem's wreck. The blond-haired guy that I pictured in my mind's eye in vivid detail, down to the feel of his fingers creeping along my arm, started doing figure eights around us. He zoomed way ahead, came back, and cut so close in front of us that he nearly caused us to crash. He acted like a shark coming in for the kill.

"Yes," I whispered aloud, "that goon put me in a coffin. He must want me dead." I spoke to myself as Clem kept to the middle of the road, trying to keep control of his car. "Somehow I escaped from death once. I've got to escape again."

The blond-haired creep was taking his time about finishing us off. I could hear him zooming ahead and then slowing down in front of us. He nearly forced Clem to crash into his rear bumper. Then he took off again, leaving us coughing in a cloud of black smoke.

Though I was down on the seat, I did not have my eyes shut. I could see Clem approaching a wall of rock on the driver's side. The cliffs seemed to rise up and up, looming over us. He was being forced nearer and nearer. I could hear the goon in the Ferrari approaching closer to the passenger side of the car.

Bump!

I braced myself as I felt the impact that rattled my teeth and threatened to knock my brain out of my head. We skidded closer to the wall of rock. Clem righted his car and kept on going.

Bump!

Clem lost control of the wheel for a second. We were forced back against the cliffs. I could hear them scraping along the driver's door, taking off all the paint. Clem recovered the car right away, pulling back into the middle of the road.

Bump!

No sooner did Clem recover than the Ferrari was at us again, shoving us back against the cliffs. A projecting rock smashed the windshield, causing Clem to duck. It took off the remaining windshield wiper before Clem could move to the right.

The Ferrari was right there hovering on the other side of the passenger door. He was hogging the middle of the road, more than keeping up with Clem. His only difficulty was slowing his car down enough not to pass us up. He was forcing Clem to drive in a boxed in, cramped space inches from the rocky cliffs. He was squeezing him closer to that final, fatal collision.

Clem slowed down, trying to shake his pursuer. The Ferrari was far more maneuverable. The goon anticipated Clem's every move — probably because Clem did not have many moves left! — and slowed down faster than Clem could.

"Damn him!" Clem hissed.

The engine was dangerously hot. As if Clem needed more trouble right now, the red needle kept on climbing. It seemed that we had the choice between being thrown up against the rocks or burned up in an engine explosion!

I heard something and looked up. The Ferrari's tinted driver's side window was coming down. A gun was poking out, aiming straight for Clem. Clem ducked just before the bullet would have hit him. It put a

hole in his driver's side window. Again I got the idea that Clem had done this sort of thing before.

Something hit my foot, which was hanging off the side of the seat touching the floor. It was one of those old-fashioned Coke bottles with the fluted green glass and the kind of metal lids that you needed a can opener to pop off. No doubt some bottlers in some out-of-the-way places still manufactured them.

"We've gotta jump for it!" Clem announced. "The engine's about ready to blow."

The wall of rock disappeared. It gave way to a pine forest. I peered up over the dashboard. Straight ahead the dirt road seemed to dead end at some cliffs — the kind where if you plunged off it would be a long way down to the bottom of the canyon.

The little red needle had climbed into the red zone. The Ferrari was ready to take the paint job off the passenger side door.

It was do or die time.

Clem thrust open his driver's side door. The scenery was racing past so fast that I could not imagine how we were going to save ourselves. I could not tell the difference between a rock and a patch of bushes or tall grass — or even a tree! I hoped that Clem could.

Had he done this before, too?

Another bullet sped across the front seat. We ducked to avoid it. No one was steering now. Clem had the cruise control locked into the automatic position.

"I'm gonna count three." Clem grasped me around the waist. "At the count of three — jump!"

"ONE . . . TWO . . ."

Suddenly I remembered the little green glass Coke bottle, my little bomb. I lunged for it. I hurled it through the tinted driver's side window of the Ferrari. I had the satisfaction of hearing the blond-haired driver groan in surprise as my little bomb scored a direct hit.

"THREE!"

Nine

At the count of “THREE!” Clem yanked me out of the Buick. His timing must have been perfect, perfect from practice. We landed in a stream of cold, trickling water. It was not much of a stream, but better than no water when you leap from a vehicle at fifty miles an hour.

CRASH!

The explosion was loud enough to make me throw my hands over my ears. It made the ground tremble. It was Clem’s old Buick that had gone over the cliffs. In my mind’s eye I could see it lying smashed in a pile of rocks right now. Flames were leaping up where I had been sitting, curling around the driver’s seat. Clem and I were lucky we didn’t go up in smoke, too.

“Let’s scram!” Clem hissed.

He yanked me to my feet. He followed the stream downhill, picking his way over boulders. He lifted me over fallen logs and made me duck under pine tree branches. He did not stop for anything.

We reached a cubbyhole in a wall of solid rock concealed by a bush and some pine trees growing right up against it. He forced me into the hollow ahead of him. He climbed in beside me.

We huddled there, shoulder to shoulder, in the semi-dark hollow in the rocks. I was aware of no sound except the thundering of my heart against my ribcage and my ragged breathing. I just had to say something.

“That blond-haired guy wants — ”

“Sh-h-h-h-h-h!” He hissed very low. “We could have been followed.”

I whispered low. I had to speak. “That blond-haired goon wants me dead. I know it. He was the one who put me in the coffin and brought me here.”

"What?" Clem whispered back, surprised.

"I remember, I'm sure of it now. I think he was even my former boyfriend." I confessed.

"Well, he's been hangin' around town and won't go away. He follows me. I guess that explains what you're doin' here, too." Clem reasoned aloud.

"And those Englishmen . . ." Now I wanted to make sure that I told Clem everything. "They offered me a million dollars yesterday. They wrote a check at the diner. They wanted me to persuade you to give them a share of your business."

Clem shook his head in disbelief. "I've heard big offers before, but never that high."

"Everybody thinks we are linked. We must be."

"How?" Clem asked. "We never met. We have nothing in common. I never let you in on any secrets . . ."

"I guess that's the key — how? If we stick together, maybe we'll figure out how."

"Yeah, and maybe we'll get killed!"

"Clem, I was helpful, wasn't I? In the Buick, I mean?" I put my hand on his shoulder. "I shut the door fast enough to keep you from getting gunned down. I threw the little Coke bottle bomb through his window."

"You might attract more trouble than you prevent."

We heard footsteps. Clem clapped his hand over my mouth and fell on me to keep me still. The blond-haired goon strode passed our hiding place with a gun in hand.

I hid my face against his Clem's chest. I had gotten a good look at the blonde goon's face, unconcealed by tinted glass. This time I was saw it in the flesh.

His face looked just as I had imagined it (or remembered it) — with more details. He had a sharp, pointed nose that jutted from his face. His chin was pointed, too. His eyebrows formed a ridge over his blue eyes that shadowed them.

There was a grotesqueness to the lines and angles of his face that frightened me. How did I endure it when I knew him before? I must have been in love with him.

His hair was straw colored— and lifeless. It went in all directions as if not combed, ever.

There was something about his limpid blue eyes. They were not clear. They seemed behind a film. Was it the light or did I imagine it? There *was* a soulless, horrible evil aura there, like Mrs. Carpenter had noticed.

His sneering face . . . He looked like a nasty dog about to bite, a nasty dog who was tracking us down.

Even worse, along with my glimpse of his real face had come a rush of images from the past. They were not related to the *Hamlet* play. In my mind's eye I saw this blond-haired goon lying on a white sand beach. He was half-clothed. He was kissing me as I lay stretched out on a beach towel. In another mental image we were making out in the front seat of that same black Ferrari that was now following Clem and I. I could feel the press of the black leather against my skin. In another image, the blond-haired guy and I were all alone underwater in some large swimming pool, neither of us wearing bathing suits.

I shuddered. I felt soiled, polluted. I wanted to wash those pictures out of my head. Instead more and more were coming.

"Clem, help me!" I turned my face up to him. I reached out for him with my lips. I tried to bring his head to mine.

"Damn you anyway!" He grumbled.

He took my cheeks between his hands and stared down into my eyes. "I wanna believe you're innocent. But you might be another trick that those creeps out are using to get information from me. Paying a pretty girl to climb into bed with me. Real authentic looking, chasing after us both."

"No, no, no!" I grabbed fistfuls of his shirt in my hands, closed my eyes, and offered my lips to him again.

"Bitch! Is this the way you come onto a guy?"

But there was desperation in his voice. How could he not be tempted after what we'd been through together? His heart pounded against my chest the closer I wriggled against him. All this I could feel through his thin oversized jacket, which was all I was now wearing.

I could not help myself. I started to kiss his chin and his cheeks. I kissed his lips.

"There was only the blond-haired guy before you." I breathed. "Nobody else ever. I swear it. I don't remember much. But I'm sure of that much. And it makes me feel sick to remember that goon. Help me get the bad taste of him out of my mouth."

Clem was starting to soften. He was not fighting. He was beginning to run his fingers through my hair. When I kissed him, he had a hard time not kissing me back.

"It would be easy for you to wiggle your ass, find out everything, and make a damn fool of me."

I kissed his lips again and again with little jabs. I would not let go of him. I took big handfuls of his dark hair in my fists and forced his head down so I could reach his lips. I nuzzled my nose against his cheeks.

Now Clem was kissing my neck. He had to.

"Clementine said you were going to marry her, then just broke up one day for no reason at all."

Clem cursed Clementine under his breath. He had ceased to like her, but I did not know why.

"Somehow I trust you." I told him. "You see, I've got to. There's nobody else. If you trust me, we can make it. If you don't, we're dead. I sense it."

After that, neither of us spoke. Everything was groping hands. It was hard to find room to move about without running into a rock in this tight, cramped space. I hit my head. He hit his head. It was hard to keep track of whose hands were whose and whose feet were whose. Hands, feet, arms, and legs ended up everywhere in a knotted tangle of limbs.

Who knew how many minutes passed? We had no watch. I could have measured only heartbeats, mine or Clem's, but actual time did not matter. Then Clem suddenly stiffened. He listened, every muscle at once alert.

Footsteps coming our way.

"We've gotta get out of here!" Clem hissed after the footsteps had come and gone. He extracted himself from the tangle of arms and legs. He sat me up and zipped up my jacket. "We've gotta hide where nobody can possibly find us. Above all, we've gotta make sure we're not being followed."

I nodded. He was beginning to open up, to trust me. He was not pushing me away.

Clem climbed out of the nook and searched carefully around us before we were off. He took my hand as we ran over rocks and leaped over logs. But Clem seemed to be headed for a solid wall of rock con-

cealed by a row of pine trees. There was no nook this time. There was only a hole in the rock — a gaping black hole.

Clem looked swiftly from side to side. He shoved my rear end, pushing me ahead of him into the narrow opening in the stone face. Before I had a chance to say anything, Clem forced me ahead of him down a shaft where there was no daylight. We were soon enshrouded in complete darkness.

“Are you crazy?” I asked. I hated the darkness. It was like being entombed in the car trunk without the smell of gasoline or the feel of ropes.

“You were the one who insisted that you wanted to follow me come hell or high water.” Clem pushed me onward.

True, but I had never conceived of this. The dirt scraped against my knees. The rocks bruised my toes. My arm kept running into projections that stuck out from the side of the tunnel. My head bumped into things in the dark.

Clem kept on pushing me ahead into the void. It seemed as if the underground tunnel would go on forever. At last the passageway was big enough to stand up. Strangely enough, there was a warm, dank atmosphere of humidity all around. Water dripped from overhead into a pool at my feet. Soon we were splashing through it.

I stopped short. *Deja vu*. I had been here before. Now I also knew that experience had been real, not another nightmare.

“C’mon!” Clem urged. “Don’t stall on me right now.”

He was beside me, not behind me. His arm was around my waist coaxing me onward.

Still I hesitated. “Clem, is this where you found me the first time you ever saw me? You shined a light in my face. There were fantastic, colorful shapes everywhere. You told me that you were going to kill me. You seemed surprised that I should be here.”

“You bet I was!”

He had admitted it! “But, Clem, if that experience was real, if you really found me here, how did I get here? I don’t even know where I am let alone how to get here by myself!”

“I don’t know, but I thought you were after treasure, too. I thought you were more clever than the others. You had discovered my secret.”

I shut my eyes, though it hardly mattered in the total blackness of this underground chamber with water dripping all around us. I

pressed myself against Clem. His lips brushed the top of my head. He ran his hands through my hair, playing with each strand and winding it around his fingers. Another memory was forcing itself into my consciousness.

Suddenly I heard that twisted, perverted voice that belonged to the blond-haired goon. It had a sophisticated veneer. He was not from Hole. More likely the deepest pit of hell.

"Good work, partner!" I remembered his voice speaking. "Stash her here. If her old man won't pay, we'll put her where she's not found again. There's a hole over there. It leads straight down to hell. Her old man doesn't deserve better for her."

I heard his cruel laughter assaulting my eardrums even now with only the silence and the sound of dripping water overhead. I clutched onto Clem. He was all I had to protect myself from those dark thoughts.

"What is it?" Clem asked. He was beginning to be able to read my mind the way that I could read his. It was part of the mystery between us.

"Clem, I've remembered something important about how I got here!" I said in a panic.

Protectively, he hugged me close.

We were in cool water up to our mid-calves. I did not have anything on my legs to prevent my shivering. Water was dripping onto our heads and running down my neck like cold, chilly fingers of memory. Not even the humidity and heat of the cavern could keep them out.

Clem urged me. "What do you remember?"

"The goon . . . He — he kidnapped me from my parents for ransom! He — "

Suddenly someone else quite close to us spoke out. I thought I heard for real this time that perverted, twisted voice trying to conceal itself behind sophisticated tones. The voice seemed to be speaking lines from the *Hamlet* play:

*I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not with all their quantity of love
Make up my sum . . .*

Could this underground chamber be playing tricks on me? Did I actually hear that voice? It did not sound far away, perhaps only a few yards.

“What the hell . . .” Clem cursed under his breath.

Clem’s muscles felt like stone. He was rigid as if he had been turned into one of those formations that I remembered from this underground chamber.

He had heard the voice, too. It was not just me and my crazy mind!

“What kind of trick is this?” Clem demanded.

“In short, my poor Ophelia,” said the twisted, perverted voice behind the veneer of education and sophistication, “you should have stayed in that coffin after all. Now you’ll have to be buried without one.”

Ten

Suddenly a flashlight shone into our eyes, illuminating the entire underground chamber. All around us the fantastic formations that I had thought might be a mere figment of my imagination, appeared once again. Some seemed to sprout up from the floor. Others grew down from the ceiling. They were in the strangest shapes. They were all sheeny and wet, reflecting the light from the powerful flashlight. Each formation was encased in a thin stream of shiny, dripping water.

My imagination went out of control. The formations turned into monsters. The one nearest to me appeared to be a gigantic dragon with red eyes and jagged teeth breathing fire. One next to Clem seemed like a giant mastodon of prehistoric times with a cavern-size trunk, long ivory tusks, and long, thin strands of hair all over him. The mastodon seemed to let go with an elephantine bellow in the darkness and silence of this place underground.

A unicorn that looked like a striped zebra with a single tusk on his forehead threatened to charge from across the cavern. There seemed to be dinosaurs, too. A tyrannosaurus seemed to roar at me from the darkness just beyond what I could see.

Weird maidens, looking like water nymphs or mermaids, sprang up from the small underground lake in which we stood. They reached out toward us to draw us back into the water with them. Behind me stood a tall, sinuous creature who seemed to be lunging at us like a snake — though forever frozen in stone.

I groaned, and Clem held me fast. I focused on the blond-haired young man, not much older than we were, perhaps nineteen, twenty at most, who was standing in front of us in his three-piece suit with his golden pocket watch just as I had remembered. He was holding the

flashlight in one hand, a gun in the other, and he was even wearing those black gloves! Now that he was so close and we could not escape from him, his name finally popped into my mind.

"What are you doing here, Ru — Rupert?" I asked. "Yes, Rupert Ranassaleer!"

He gave me a little mock bow.

"Time's up!" Rupert looked straight at me. "Your daddy won't cough your ransom. He had until today. Maybe his zillions of dollars make your daddy semi-divine. Well, I wonder how Mr. Semi-Divine reacts to losing his only daughter? No sense in letting you live. You're my personal walking time bomb. And I'm gonna kill you *before you remember more*. That is, unless you help me out."

"You'll have to kill me before her!" Clem announced.

I knew why I had felt safe around Clem, even if my head was spinning at the mention of zillions of dollars.

"That shouldn't be any problem." Rupert pointed the gun at Clem. "You've just about outlived your usefulness now that you've led me to your buried treasure. Of course, we might still strike a deal if you would actually dig the treasure up and share it generously."

"I've gone to all sorts of trouble not to have anybody know where this place's located. You know how when you came after me, cornered me, beat me up, and everything else, I wouldn't say anything. How did you find it this time?"

"Simple!" Rupert grinned. "I followed you today when you left your house. I kept well behind you until you were way out of town. Then I decided to have a little fun. I wanted to put the fear of God into Camilla. You weren't on my list of favorite people either, Clem."

I remembered how I had seen the black Ferrari parked across the street when I had tried to go out the front door of Clem's house. So Rupert had indeed been following us the whole way!

"You followed me before, and you didn't find the cave." Clem stated flatly.

Rupert chuckled.

"This is the first time I followed you while you were dragging Camilla along." Rupert explained. "Believe me, Camilla can be a pretty hot lay and mighty distracting, with all those fancy curves in the right places. You weren't exactly paying attention, were you, Clem. She distracted me enough. I tried to get engaged."

“Oh?”

“Mr. Riggs had me investigated and told me to get lost. So I tried the second best way to get at Camilla’s money. You ought to try holding a gal like her for ransom. It’s a lot easier way to make money than hiding treasure in a cave — if you can find a more cooperative millionaire than Mr. Riggs. That guy’s on the list of the richest men in the country.”

Camilla Riggs? C.R.? So that was really my name! I could not remember myself as Camilla, despite trying and trying.

“You were more concerned about Camilla than whoever was shadowing you every step of the way.” Rupert acted superior. “Didn’t see me, did you, until it was almost too late? After you escaped from your car in the nick of time, I knew you’d head for your treasure. So I patiently bided my time while you guys made love in the hollow.”

My revulsion for Rupert grew. I wondered how I could ever have been fooled by him.

“So tell me where the goods are buried. Save me the trouble of having to blow this cave to smithereens looking for them. Then maybe I’ll let you live. That’s my final offer.”

Rupert clicked the trigger.

I knew he was lying. If everything he had said was true, he didn’t dare let me live. Besides, I could see it in his eyes. He wanted to kill me. He was trying to hold his cold rage in check, but I felt it all the same.

“Blast — blast the cave to smithereens?” Clem seemed more alarmed at this threat than he had when Rupert had threatened to kill him.

Rupert shrugged. “Why not? I see you did a little blasting work at the cave entrance yourself.”

“That — that was only to get into the cave more easily after I almost got stuck the first few times.” Clem explained.

“Well, finders keepers, losers weepers!” Rupert proclaimed with an expansive gesture that took in the whole vast room of the cave. “Now this cave’s mine to do what I want with.”

While Rupert was making a bragging gesture, Clem threw a rock at Rupert’s flashlight. He knocked it out of his hand. The light went out. Clem grabbed me by the hand and propelled me to the other side of the cave where he must have known of another exit.

Other flashlights shined into our faces from across the passageway. There stood a cherubic-faced middle-aged lady with two bright red spots on her cheeks. Beside her stood a young lad with fiery red hair and bright orange freckles that made him look years younger than he really was.

Aunt Rose and Skip! They were each holding a flashlight in one hand and a gun, pointed at us, in the other.

"Aunt Rose? Skip? How could you?" Now it was Clem's turn to be stupefied.

"Remember what I always say, coz, share and share alike?" Skip spoke first. "Well, you weren't doin' much sharin' keepin' your treasure all to yourself. We're family. You didn't care if we starved."

"Remember what I always say about my Hawaiian retirement?" Aunt Rose chirped in. "Skip and I have to save for it. Can't just keep rollin' pennies forever."

"Yeah, Clem, you should have let us in on your secret from the beginnin'. Then we wouldn't have had to become partners with out-of-towners." Skip explained.

"Skip! Aunt Rose!" I exclaimed. "You were both nice to me. Skip, you stayed with me when I was recovering in bed. Aunt Rose, you made lunch for me just a few hours ago and yesterday at the diner, too. I — I don't understand. I would never have suspected either of you."

"No harm treatin' you like folks if you don't remember nothin'." Aunt Rose explained. "I served you a strawberry soda yesterday. You didn't even remember that it was me drivin' that stinkin' car with you in the trunk all the way from Richmond, Virginia to Hole, feedin' you only when I had to through a straw. Thought at first that we were gonna have to lock you up in a shack in the woods while we waited for your daddy to hand over the ransom money. But you helped us out by not even knowin' your own name."

So that was how I had gotten all the way to Hole! I had known that I had been inside the trunk of the car, but I had not had the slightest idea who had been driving it.

"Richmond, Virginia? Is that where I came from?" I asked wistfully, remembering the scent of magnolias.

"Nearest city." Rupert admitted. "I drove you there myself to pick up Rose's car that she had stolen. You were lying in Ophelia's coffin attached to my Ferrari's roof carrier. I drilled a few air holes in the cof-

fin myself after Rose arrived and I called Skip on the phone from backstage to let him know what was going on. The coffin was covered up by a tarp. But you didn't notice. You were too far gone."

"I remember Rupert calling somebody from backstage. I remember 50's songs and Elvis . . ." I thought hard. "You kept on playing them over and over again in the car on the way to Hole. And then I heard them again in the diner, too."

"You mean like, *Ain't Nothin' But A Hound Dog*?" Aunt Rose asked. "That's my favorite Elvis song. Always felt like an underdog or a hound dog myself. Just pretended to like classical music."

I remembered how Aunt Rose had always been humming and dancing to a tune.

"How did I get into this cave the first time?" I pressed. "I remember being here before."

Aunt Rose looked at Rupert. "We had just gotten you here to Hole. We didn't have any place to put you. You're father wasn't cooperatin' none. Rupert here wanted to stash you someplace fast until we could find a room for you. That was before we knew that you didn't remember nothin'."

"Yeah, we drove you out to the countryside." Rupert added. "We found a hole in the ground and stashed you there for what was supposed to be a few hours. We didn't know it was the entrance to Clem's treasure. When we got back, you weren't there anymore. We thought you had run off."

"Boy was I ever shocked to find her in the back room of the cave! Hadn't ever seen anybody else down here before. I guessed she had wandered there by herself. So when she blacked out, I carried her over my shoulder out of the cave." Clem confessed. "Just left her by the side of the road and hoped she wouldn't come back. Don't know where she went after that."

"I woke up in the car trunk in the garage." I remembered. "Clem and Skip said that the police had picked up the car somewhere and towed it."

"Camilla must have stumbled around in the dark and found her way back into the trunk." Rupert calculated. "Maybe it was the only shelter from the elements that she could find. We searched for her the rest of the day and couldn't find her. Thought she'd gotten lost. Didn't think to look back inside the trunk. We didn't care about the kidnap-

ping car getting towed. We had abandoned it anyway. Thought it was the safest way to get rid of it."

"Sure was surprised to see Camilla stumblin' into the 50's Diner the next day!" Aunt Rose broke in. "Called up Rupert real quick. Thought maybe Camilla had phoned her daddy and squealed. But when I talked to her in the restaurant and found out she didn't remember nothin', I called Rupert back to say it was O.K. But his cell phone was busy. Couldn't get through until it was too late. That was why he tried to run you down in the middle of Main Street."

I remembered Rose on the phone as soon as I had walked into the diner. She had been sly about it, pretending that she was taking an order from a customer.

"Was it you who left that newspaper in the booth?" I asked.

"Smart gal!" Rose exclaimed. "I bought that paper in Virginia when we kidnapped you. All that stuff about Virginia Plantation Country. Put it there to test your memory."

"Yeah, Camilla's lapse of memory gave us more time. We sent another ransom note to Mr. Riggs." Rupert added.

"Still don't get it!" Clem shook his head. "If this Rupert dude's from some fancy place back East in Virginia, how did he meet Skip and Aunt Rose? And Aunt Rose, I thought you were sick in bed with a cold last week — not out on the highways!"

"Skip was the only one who took food up and down the stairs to my room — and then ate it himself or promptly flushed it down the toilet. He knew I wasn't in my room. He put on an act for me. He talked to me real loud to make sure other people in the house heard. He mussed up my bed sheets. He picked up a fake prescription from the doctor. He did my laundry, pretendin' that it was dirty — you know, stuff to make it seem like I was in my bedroom."

"Mom taught me real good!" Skip smiled.

Rupert grinned. "It's a long story how we three got acquainted. You could say it started when I snooped. A certain gentleman was meeting with Mr. Riggs. That man was trying to get Mr. Riggs to invest in some hot opportunity out west. People were always trying to get Mr. Riggs to invest in something. He had so much money that he made a career out of it. He was an investment capitalist and a philanthropist rolled into one."

This was my father! I tried hard to remember him.

"I was all ears." Rupert continued. "I'm always interested in money-making schemes. I lifted this guy's address book. I called the number labeled 'home'. Rose Flannagan answered the phone. Skip got on the extension. I explained what I was after."

"We understood each other right away!" Skip broke in.

"I told them about Camilla and how rich an heiress she was." Rupert revealed. "I convinced them that if we held her for ransom, we could use the ransom money to finance this hot western find — whatever that find was. They told me that you, Clem, were onto something big. We figured it was the same hot prospect the dude was bragging about, probably a gold mine or buried treasure. We needed Camilla's money to extract the ore."

"Who — who was this gentleman from out west?" Clem turned pale. His mind was starting to put two and two together.

Rupert handed him a photograph from his wallet.

Clem's lower lip trembled. "Why, it's — it's my dad!" Clem gasped. "Mom and I thought he was dead. Haven't seen him in ten years!"

Eleven

Clem studied the photograph carefully. He held the flashlight that Rupert had provided close to the picture.

"It's so much like the photograph that my mom keeps on her nightstand. Only the hair is different. Here it's almost all gray. In the other photo he still had black hair like mine."

Even I could tell that it was Clem's father. His face was like Clem's. They shared the same basic good looks. They both had the same rugged lines and the jutting jaw, the same sensuous lips, and the lower lip that stuck out as if they were both perpetually pouting. They had the same angular cheekbones, as if their faces were made of weather-beaten rock.

The differences between the father's face and Clem's, however, were more pronounced. The father's was full of tired lines and deep crevices. This was true particularly of those cutting through his forehead. They strangely resembled gullies washed out by mountain streams. There was a scar on his left cheek. Tired dark bags smudged the skin under his eyes.

Hardest to look at were Mr. Carpenter's eyes. Those grey eyes, Clem's eyes, stared straight ahead into nothingness, even though he was faced forward toward whoever was taking the photo. He had added a huge, yawning gulf of experience to his face. That experience, whatever it had been, had deadened him. Nobody else back in Hole had known that he still existed. He had never sent so much as a postcard.

His clothes looked as down and out as he did. He appeared not to have changed them in the past ten years, the whole time that he had been gone. He wore old jeans, patched at the knees and still fraying.

He had his hands thrust deep into the pockets of a thin jacket of a nondescript, faded color. It was full of holes. Even his tennis shoes were held together only by patches. His big left toe protruded.

"Where — where did you get this photograph?" Clem pressed.

"I took it myself." Rupert volunteered proudly, thrusting out his chest. "Told the old geezer that I was the official party photographer. Didn't think he'd buy me being a representative of the Riggs Academy school newspaper wanting to do an article on him and whatever he had found. He and Riggs were meeting in secret. Riggs had told him to come by that afternoon to talk to him after the party broke up. I'd heard him invite the old geezer over on the phone earlier in the day when I was hanging around the house cozying up to Camilla. The old guy really looked out of place, as you can see."

It was true. The deck beneath his feet was made of fancy tile matching the tile at the bottom of the crystal clear pool. There were cabanas set up for the guests in the back of the picture. Tables laden with crystal punch bowls and silver trays sporting delicate water cress and cucumber sandwiches set the atmosphere. Butlers in white jackets and black slacks carried trays on one hand. Ladies circulated about in cocktail dresses, gentlemen in suits.

There in the background I thought I could make out an orangish cat with black points and a black spot at the end of his sleek tail. It was the same cat with the angular face, the tall, slim legs, and the mysterious amber eyes that I had seen so often in my dreams. He was perched deftly on a glass poolside table with an umbrella over it. He was gobbling what looked like a nice juicy shrimp from the fingers of a blond-haired lady who was smiling at him. She was the lady of my visions.

"Why do you happen to have the photo on you right now?" Clem asked Rupert. Clem was still mesmerized by the photo. He could not take his eyes off the father that he had not seen in ten years, the father that he had thought was dead.

"I brought it with me in case I needed it." Rupert admitted. "I knew I was coming to Hole."

Clem spoke as much to himself as to us. "So — so that's why I found a strange map wedged in the back of the glove compartment one Friday after school two months ago when I was cleaning it out. The Buick used to belong to my dad when it was new. He didn't get himself killed looking for a gold mine. He found this place instead."

The truth was beginning to dawn on me. "Is that why you suddenly went searching for the place on the map? Why your mother said she couldn't find you that day, why you didn't come home on time that night?"

Clem nodded, still staring at the photo. "I found the entrance right away and started to explore it. My mind was blown big time."

"Your mother said you wouldn't even talk to anybody for the first couple days. You acted like a zombie. Skip said you wouldn't respond when people talked to you. You stared at walls."

"Yeah, coz!" Skip agreed. "You sure acted suspicious. That's when Mom and I got the idea that you were onto something big. Don't know how many times I tried to follow you. You always got away from me."

"I'd started to explore every room of the cave." Clem explained. "I didn't know what I was gonna do. I couldn't breathe a word about it. Didn't want anybody hanging around me."

"That was why you broke up with Clementine?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yeah, didn't want her hanging around. Didn't like the way her dad was trying to breathe down my neck either."

I could understand what he meant about Buck O'reilly!

"That's why you wouldn't go to school or to work most days?"

Again he nodded. "I was too busy."

"That's why you threatened your mother when she followed you and asked you questions?"

Again he nodded vigorously. "I wasn't in a very good mood with all that stuff on my mind."

Now it was all beginning to make sense, now when it seemed to be too late for us! Clem was not the dark, dangerous character that he had appeared to be at all.

"What were you doing putting all your mother's stuff into brown paper bags and selling it?" I asked.

"Just raising money for tools and equipment."

"You didn't want anybody around you. I can see why." Rupert broke in. "There's something real, real valuable buried inside this cave. I can just smell it. So, where is it buried, Clem? Huh?"

Rupert stuck his pistol butt into Clem's ribcage. He grabbed the photo of Mr. Carpenter away from Clem and stuffed it back into his wallet.

"I can assure you that you don't have much time." Rupert added.

I watched Clem's face. I could tell that he was thinking fast. Then I seemed to have some sort of link to what he was thinking and feeling, a link that had been deepened today because of what had gone on.

"Follow me!" Clem announced to everybody.

"Now you're being reasonable!" Rupert handed Clem a flashlight. He allowed Clem to go in advance of everybody else, but not too far in advance.

Clem led the way, pushing me in front of him. We crawled through narrow passageways. We walked through magnificent chambers. This cave seemed to be infinite and without end. We came to the largest room of all with an even bigger underground lake than the previous chamber. It had larger cave formations and many more "doors" or passageways leading off in a variety of other directions. I supposed that Clem alone knew where they went. He said he'd been exploring this cave the past couple of months.

Rupert, Aunt Rose, and Skip did not suspect the same ruse that I did. They seemed to be overwhelmed by what they were seeing. They shined their flashlights on the stalactites and stalagmites and "oohed" and "aahed" over everything.

But they were not "oohing" and "aahing" over the beauty of the formations, which seemed to come in all the colors of the rainbow. They were "oohing" and "aahing" over all the gold and mineral wealth that they imagined to be concealed behind the stone facades.

"This has got to be it!" Rupert proclaimed. He was fondling the formations hanging from the roof of the cave, the ones he could reach that was. "This glitters like gold. There must be gold inside it."

"Imagine!" Aunt Rose gushed. "A cave made of solid gold! And it goes on and on forever. I always said your father, Gold-Eyed Carpenter, was a clever one, Clem. He certainly knew what he was doin'."

"Wow!" Skip exclaimed with eyes as big as saucers.

Clem grabbed me by the arm. While the others were staring at the formations, he yanked me toward one of the "doors" out of the underground room. We had almost made it to one of the underground passageways when Rupert grabbed hold of my arm. He engaged in a tugging match with Clem for a few seconds while Aunt Rose and Skip caught up to him. I felt as if my arms were being pulled right out of their sockets.

Skip pinned Clem to the wall of the cave with Aunt Rose's assistance. She was no pansy. Aunt Rose did not hesitate to kick Clem if she had to. Rupert grabbed me roughly around the waist and held me up against his chest. He then pointed his pistol toward my head.

What made me really shiver were those awful hands, those cold hands, that I so well remembered. I could shut my eyes and imagine them skittering all over my naked skin. They seemed like the tether to death itself.

"All right, Carpenter, give! Where's the valuable stuff buried?" Rupert demanded.

As Aunt Rose and Skip pinned Clem back against the wall of the cave, Clem was at war with himself, debating whether he should say anything about what he had risked his life so often to keep a secret. He bit his lip. He sighed. He shook his head. It almost seemed for moment that he was willing to take his secret to the grave.

Even I felt more than a tinge of curiosity about what had prompted my kidnapping, what had turned Clem into a desperado anxious to keep a secret, what had made Aunt Rose and Skip turn criminals, and what had made Rupert put me inside a coffin. Somehow I sensed, with my new connection to Clem's inner thoughts, that Clem's secret was not going to be what everyone else expected.

"C'mon!" Rupert urged, pushing the barrel of the pistol into my temple so hard that it hurt. "How could somebody like you have any scruples left? You already killed a guy. We both know. I saw you burying his bones in a coffin in your backyard."

"Aunt Mariah and I saw it, too." Skip added. "You told us to get lost. You looked like you were gonna kill us."

Clem shook his head.

"That was a skeleton that I found down here in the cave one day. Poor guy must have gotten lost exploring the cave all by himself. I thought it was the only decent thing to do to bury him. That's why I bought the coffin at a store out of town. Didn't have nowhere to bury him except in the vacant lot behind our house. Put a stone over his grave as a marker. Even bought sod to cover up where I was digging."

"Yeah, you're so noble, buddy, that it makes me sick!" Rupert spat. "You're a greedy bastard like the rest of us — and a damned clever one, too, to elude us for so long. But you're not going to trick me into believing a boldfaced lie like that. *I saw the bones with my own eyes!*"

"I'm telling you the truth. Don't believe me if you like." Clem shrugged.

"I'm getting impatient!" Rupert clicked the trigger of the gun pointed toward my head.

Clem looked from side to side as if he were trying to figure out another way to escape, another way out of this predicament.

"Do you think Santa Claus is going to save you?" Rupert snickered. "And don't think that Buck O'reilly, Clementine, or that pair of English gents are going to show up in a pinch and rush in here. They're just Johnny-Come-Lately's. They smelled something big going on around Hole. They wanted a piece of the action. Can you blame them? Word about gold travels fast — around the whole globe!"

They were not his partners then. I had thought differently, considering how many times I had run into them coming after me. Then dividing things even three ways probably seemed too many to the greedy Rupert Ranassaleer.

"Who was it crawling through the bushes outside the house then?" I asked. "I thought for sure it must be one of them."

"It was me." Skip volunteered. "I never went to school. Just kept watch on the house."

"Very well, I'll tell you!" Clem finally said in a rush.

"Yeah, but remember — no tricks this time!" Rupert warned him. "Otherwise, I'll shoot first and think later."

Skip and Aunt Rose leaned toward Clem, though they still kept their hands on him to hold him down.

"Can't you see it?" Clem tried to gesture around the cave. "Are you blind? It's all around you."

"What are you talking about?" Rupert protested. "What's all around me except a bunch of rocks?"

"My secret's nothing but the cave itself." Clem revealed. "That's all there is to it."

"*What!*" Aunt Rose and Skip shrieked at the same time. Aunt Rose's jaw fell. Skip's eyes looked as if they were about ready to pop out.

"*Liar!*"

Rupert let go of me and lunged at Clem. He whipped him in the jaw with the butt of his pistol. I quickly slipped behind the nearest formation and ducked down. I would not run away and desert Clem.

Clem held his hand up to his jaw, rubbing. He glared at Rupert.

"Maybe you're too greedy to see it, Rupert. This cave's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life. And life's been pretty ugly the last few years here in Hole since the mine shut down and my father left town. Maybe life isn't ugly where you were back East with all those fancy people. But I thought it was worth risking my life to keep the cave pretty like this, to keep out people like you who just wanna destroy things."

"I'll break every last formation in this cave if I have to. But I'll find what you've hidden!" Rupert shrieked. As if to prove his point, he raised his gun hand and smashed the nearest formation hanging in front of him. The thing splintered all over the floor of the cave.

"No!" Clem shouted in horror. "That formation took thousands of years to grow like that. You just destroyed it in seconds."

"Translation!" Rupert announced. "We've discovered the Mother Lode! We're rich!"

Aunt Rose, Skip, and Rupert forgot about me. They forgot about Clem. They got out their pick axes and hammers and started smashing everything apart that they could find. They worked with frenetic energy. Their faces were distorted with greed.

Clem ran from Rupert to Skip to Aunt Rose. He tried to pull them away from the delicate formations. He was screaming at them. "There's no gold! There's no gold!" But they would not listen to him. They were convinced that he was hiding Fort Knox under the ground in Hole.

I came out from where I had been hiding behind the formation.

"C'mon!" Clem hissed at me. "Let's get outta here."

We headed down one of those passageways in the side of the cave with which he was so familiar. Again he shoved me in front of him so he would not lose track of me.

"Where are we going, Clem?" I asked, unable to hear Rupert, Skip, or Aunt Rose behind us. No one seemed to be pursuing.

"There's another, smaller entrance to the cave just up ahead." He explained. "I've left through it several times."

Daylight! That was just what I needed right now. I thought I was going to be forever lost in darkness. Now I knew my name, Camilla Riggs. But it still sounded like the name of a stranger. I knew next to nothing about myself except that I had once had a boyfriend named

Rupert who had taken brutal advantage of me in my other life and then had kidnapped and tried to murder me.

In the distance I began to see a dim light. That quickened our footsteps. But soon I saw a dim shadow of a human form at the end of the long, dark tunnel. I stopped cold, afraid to go forward.

"What's wrong?" Clem leaned over my shoulder and whispered into my ear.

"I—I see somebody." I whispered back. "And I don't know who it is."

It could have been Buck O'reilly. It could have been Clementine. It even could have been one of the English gents who had been pursuing us in the Jaguar before we had run into Rupert. Any or all of them could have seen us and followed us just as Rupert and his minions had. Or it could have been somebody entirely new who had just heard rumors about the fabulous riches to be had in Hole if he only followed Clem Carpenter, son of Gold-Eyed Carpenter, twenty-four hours a day.

I heard a faint voice. I could not make it out. The person at the end of the long tunnel seemed to be saying something.

We crept a little closer to hear better.

"Camilla? Camilla, are you in there?" The man's voice called.

That voice sent strange chills and sensations through my body. I had heard that voice before. Then I remembered. It had been on the rotary phone in Mrs. Carpenter's bedroom. That voice had called out of the blue. There had been two voices on the phone. One had asked after Clem. Then this voice had asked after me. He had said my name, Camilla Riggs, before Rupert had. That had been the very first time that I had heard it today. That had been the voice I had been running from when I had streaked naked out of the house and had thrown myself into Clem's arms. That voice had frightened me terribly.

That voice sounded like someone from faraway, not somebody from Hole. It had a cosmopolitan, urbane air about it, an air of sophistication and education. In that respect it was like Rupert's voice. But it was not so cold and forbidding.

"That dude, whoever he is, knows your real name." Clem was impressed.

"It could be a trick." I warned. "Maybe he's another one of Rupert's buddies."

"Camilla! I flew here to Hole as soon as I heard your voice on the phone! The airport wasn't big enough to land my jet, but we came

anyway." The voice outside the cave pleaded. "Mr. Jeremiah Carpenter led me right here to the cave. He thinks this is where you might be hiding."

"Jeremiah was my father's first name!" Clem broke in.

"Is this man your father?" I asked, amazed.

Clem whispered into my ear. "No way! My dad was a miner. Then he worked as a garage mechanic just like me. This dude sounds like some city slicker — and how! He sounds as if he comes from a different planet made of money — not Hole! Never heard all this talk about jets before. Heck! Some dude from around here's lucky enough to have a wreck that runs."

"Camilla, Camilla, are you there? Please answer me!"

The voice was beginning to gnaw at the back of my mind. It sounded very familiar from somewhere else and not just from the anonymous phone call at Clem's house. But right now I would not have trusted another living soul except Clem. He was my lifeline. I remained frozen in place. I would not budge an inch.

Now the voice of the man outside the cave began to sound hoarse. He seemed to be crying and choking on his tears. "The last time I saw you they were carrying you away in a coffin. I don't want it to be true. I don't want you to end up like Ophelia! Not my little girl! Not my Camilla!"

At the mention of the name "Ophelia", my brain started to explode within me. Images from the past rushed through my mind so fast that I felt as if I were going to fall over. I saw a pool. I saw a row of magnolia trees with fragrant white blossoms blowing in the breeze — yes, Magnolia Row! That ruddy looking cat with the pointed ears and the yellow eyes seemed to be rubbing against my legs. The face of the gentleman with gray hair grew larger and larger. In the distance a lady was crying somewhere and screaming my name over and over again, louder and louder, "Camilla! Camilla!"

Clem seemed to sense that my mind was convulsing. He grabbed me around the waist and held me against him. "What's wrong?" He asked.

The man threw something into the cave and then sadly staggered away from the entrance. I could not walk. My legs would not support me. I fell to my hands and knees and crawled toward what the man had dropped as if my very life depended upon it.

It was an old, dried up flower! It still retained a faint aroma. It smelled like daisies. Where had I last smelled daisies? Suddenly I saw myself lying in the coffin on stage as the dead Ophelia. Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, was throwing daisies on top of me. One of them landed on top of my nose. She was saying, "Sweets to the sweet . . . "

I held that dried up daisy to my nose again. My head suddenly felt as if its lid was being lifted off. It exploded into a thousand fireworks. The whole past, my past, came rushing back and overwhelmed me.

"Daddy!" I screamed aloud before total blackness overtook me. "Daddy! I remember! I remember! Daddy! I remember!"

Twelve

When I opened my eyes I lay in the backseat of a police car. Its blue and red lights were flashing. That was the first thing I noticed.

Clem had my head propped up in his lap. My father, still in one of his business suits, knelt on the floor. He was leaning over me, holding my hand. There was another, older man standing just behind Clem outside the police car. He looked a lot like Clem, like the photo I had seen.

“Camilla!” My father grabbed me in his arms and hugged me for joy. “I’ve just called your mother on the police radio. She’s coming right away. She should be here in only a few hours. She’s even bringing King Tut with her. He won’t be left behind.”

“Father!” I sat up and threw my arms around his neck. “I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize you at first. Honestly I didn’t!”

“And I’m sorry, too, my girl. I took a chance. I didn’t deal with the kidnappers. I didn’t send a ransom. I didn’t publicize the kidnapping. The detectives I hired advised me not to. So did my friends at the FBI. They said that the kidnappers would only kill you off as soon as they got the money. Your best chance was if I kept silent.”

“This is the sort of dramatic story you can expect to hear, ladies and gentlemen, if you tune in tomorrow night at eight to CNN’s exclusive interview with Clem Carpenter and Camilla Riggs.” The reporter announced. “They are the discoverers of the new cave that is convulsing the world with excitement. You will hear in their own words their exciting story of personal danger, survival, and ultimate triumph. That is what we are all gathered here to celebrate today at the opening of Carpenter Caverns. Mr. Clem Carpenter is standing next to me right now. Well, Clem, how does it feel to be the person who discovered one

of the greatest natural cave systems in the whole world? That's what the scientists are telling us."

The reporter shook Clem's hand. He was young himself and looked awed.

"But I'm not the only Carpenter." Clem explained calmly. After defending the cave against all comers for months, Clem hardly thought it a challenge to take on the reporters. "My dad here should get the real honor. After all, it was his map that I followed."

The elder Mr. Carpenter, dressed in a new suit for the occasion and not looking at all like the tawdry fellow in the photo, stepped up to shake the reporter's hand. He had shaved and gotten his hair cut. He looked almost like a new guy all together if it were not for those grey eyes and that long, sensitive, aquiline nose that reminded me so much of Clem.

Mrs. Carpenter, eyes aglow, stood beside the husband that she had lost for ten whole years and had now found again in a very special way. She clung to his arm as if she never intended to let go and beamed at everybody. She had shed her "widow's weeds" for the occasion. Instead of her perpetual black house dress, she had donned a shift made of a bright flowery material. She had fixed her hair in soft curls instead of pulling it back into a severe, netted bun.

Mrs. Carpenter took Clem's hand and squeezed it tightly. She winked at her son. She still had not gotten over the happiness of discovering that her only son was not a murderer, a drug dealer, a thief, or a criminal of any kind — but a real hero and the co-discoverer of a now famous cave.

"To give our audience a preview of tomorrow night's interview live from the little town of Hole, I want to ask you, Mr. Jeremiah Carpenter, how did you discover Carpenter Caverns ten years ago?" The reporter asked.

"As everybody knows by now," Mr. Carpenter glanced at his son, "I was always lookin' for a gold mine. Once the copper mine gave out, I thought there had to be some kind of mineral wealth around Hole. Went out into the hills every day with my pick and shovel. I'm afraid I neglected my family doin' it, though."

He pressed his wife's hand.

"I suppose that's how you earned the nickname Gold-Eyed Carpenter?" The reporter asked.

Mr. Carpenter laughed. "Guess so. But I never found any gold. Instead I found somethin' better than gold. And I knew I'd need some financial backing before I told the public about the cave. Otherwise, there would be a rush to destroy it. So I went East to find somebody rich. It took me a little longer than I thought it would."

"Ten whole years!" The reporter announced. "Yet I understand there was no communication between you and your son all that time. He discovered the cave independently."

"My son and my wife thought I was dead." Mr. Carpenter confessed. "And unless I made good with my discovery, I wanted it that way. Didn't wanna return home empty-handed. But I forgot that I'd left a map about where the cave was located in the glove compartment. Sure didn't mean to cause all this trouble back home here."

"Yes, trouble that led to a kidnapping and several attempted murders. But that's part of the drama of the cave that we'll all hear more about tomorrow night." The reporter continued.

"What made you think that there was trouble back in Hole when you were all the way over in Richmond, Virginia? How did you guess that Miss Camilla Riggs had been kidnapped and brought back here?" The reporter looked curious.

"It was a wild guess." Mr. Carpenter admitted. "I was at Mr. Riggs's house. People had recommended him to me as the man I should see. But Mr. Riggs was goin' nuts. His daughter was missin' right after the *Hamlet* play. Nobody knew where she'd gone. Her boyfriend, Rupert, seemed to be missin', too. Nobody knew for sure whether he was a fellow victim or a kidnapper."

"Oh?" The reporter commented.

"Riggs didn't like Rupert. Didn't trust him. Young man had just moved to Richmond all by himself after being kicked out of some other exclusive school for runnin' a crime ring. He'd even been disowned by his parents. Really he was twenty, but he was pretendin' he was younger just to prey on high school kids, especially girls. Riggs had found all this out when he'd had the young man investigated."

"Really?" The reporter prompted.

"But Riggs didn't want to believe the worst until I told him that some cards were missin' from my wallet, cards about Hole, includin' my home phone number." Mr. Carpenter continued. "Thought it wouldn't hurt to call back home and find out what was goin' on."

Camilla herself answered the phone, though the gal didn't seem to remember who she was. Riggs talked to her. He said we were takin' off on his private jet that minute, and we did."

Old Man McDirk stepped up in his police officer's uniform. As usual in Hole, the garage owner doubled as a policeman.

"And you, Officer McDirk," said the reporter, "I understand that Clem Carpenter used to work for you."

"That's right." Old Man McDirk cracked a smile at Clem. "He was my garage mechanic before he got so famous. He can have his old job back any time he wants, though. Have lots more cars than I can handle on my own now that Skip's gone."

I elbowed Clem in the ribs even as he blushed about getting his job back after causing Old Man McDirk so much trouble.

"Will you tell our audience what you mean about Skip being gone?" The reporter prompted him.

"Skip Flannagan was Clem's cousin, another one of my mechanics. But looks as though he's lost forever in that cave along with Rose Flannagan and that rascal Rupert Ran . . . ass . . . ah . . . oh *whatever!*" He struggled in vain to pronounce Rupert's last name. "My men searched for a whole week. We couldn't find any trace of them except for some guns lyin' beside some broken formations."

"I guess that some would say that since they were trying to destroy the cave looking for gold, it's only fitting that they should be entombed in it." The reporter suggested.

"Yep!" said Old Man McDirk. "That's what we in Hole here call frontier justice. But things are changin'. Gonna be lots of new jobs and businesses sproutin' up just to take care of all the tourists who want to see the Carpenter Caverns. Yessir, we're changin' the name of the town of Hole to Carpenter Caverns City. City Council voted in favor of it just yesterday."

Clem blushed at the announcement and gave me a hug. I hugged him back.

I heard somebody clear her throat. I glanced over at Clementine O'reilly who seemed to have found herself a new boyfriend. She wanted to show off to make sure that Clem and I noticed. She was wearing a dress this time with high heels and stockings. But the way she was rubbing against the guy's arm made me think that after the ceremony

they were about to go camping in the mountains together just as she and Clem had once done.

Clementine was standing beside her father, Buck O'reilly, the school principal and banker. He waved. Once they had heard what happened to Skip, Aunt Rose, and Rupert, they had started acting like model citizens. They did not want their reputations trashed on the national news. So Clem and I kept quiet about their part in the scheme.

I guess they were lucky.

I even noticed the two English gents at the ceremony. I had heard that they were staying on in town to finance a new hotel franchise. Clem and I were not about to snitch on them either if they continued to behave themselves. I waved at them. They waved back, looking sheepish.

I looked around. I wondered how many of the other faces in the crowd today standing under the giant banner that said: CARPENTER CAVERNS GRAND OPENING had come here looking for gold. How many of them had made those calls that Mrs. Carpenter had received in the middle of the night? How many had written letters with offers to Clem to cut them in for a share of "the business"? No one would ever know for sure, but I had my suspicions.

"It's rather ironic, isn't it," said the reporter, "that those who lost their lives looking for gold in the caverns failed to recognize its true source of wealth — its beauty?"

"Sure is!" Old Man McDirk agreed.

Clem spoke up. "I tried to make them see it. But they were blind. They wouldn't believe that I didn't have a treasure chest buried somewhere in the cave. They just kept on attacking the formations and tearing them apart as if they had gone bizerk." There was a wistful sadness in his eyes and in his voice.

Suddenly a murmur ran through the crowd. Everyone in his Sunday best moved toward the mouth of the cave. Reporters from all the major news stations focused their cameras on it. Three men were coming out.

My mother in her most elegant dark suit dress was standing at the entrance to welcome the explorers. She was wearing a Sinamay straw hat with a narrow brim and organza drapery. Her blonde hair looked elegant pulled up on top of her head. She sported a shawl collar jacket in navy blue with princess seam shaping and bias stripes with

striped pockets. Four solid gold buttons buttoned down the front. Her mid-calf length skirt was slit up one side to just above the knee, revealing a matching striped skirt liner.

On a baby pearl-studded harness she held a sleek ruddy Abyssinian cat named King Tut, who thought he was a dog the way he just stood there and gaped at the explorers. My mother kissed the cheeks of one of the cave explorers, my father. She shook the hand of the other. She looked just as if she were hostessing some elegant reception back East instead of standing on the outskirts of Hole.

“What’s the word, Mr. Secretary? Mr. Riggs?” All the reporters pressed the two men who stood there with their guide, a professional spelunker.

But both men remained mum as they came smiling over to where Mr. and Mrs. Carpenter, Clem, and I were waiting. My mother and King Tut followed them.

My father looked distinguished with his gray whiskers. He made his announcement first. “The Riggs Foundation will be making a generous donation for the purpose of setting the cave up as a major tourist attraction in this state. And I will add, it’s the most magnificent cave I’ve ever seen.”

The other man was my father’s friend. Dad had lots of friends in government. This man was lean, tall, and just as distinguished-looking in his own way. The Secretary of the Interior was positively beaming. He did not just shake Clem’s and Mr. Carpenter’s hands. He was so enthusiastic that he spoke to the gathered crowd.

“When I was a kid growing up out west here,” he said, “I always dreamed of finding a cave like this. You two have found it for me. It’s the only cave of its type in existence. It’s not just dried up and dead like most caves with stalactites and stalagmites that formed millions of years ago. There’s water everywhere dripping on your head. The humidity’s over one hundred percent. The temperature’s a warm sixty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. The cave is growing before your eyes as if it were alive and breathing. It’s fascinating to watch. I’m thrilled to be here today just as if I were that little kid all over again.”

Just then the Secretary’s cell phone rang. He answered. “Yes, we’ve completed the tour, Mr. President. Yes, Mr. President, it’s everything that we expected — and more.”

“Clem,” the Secretary announced, “The President of the United States wants to talk to you.”

Clem looked more than a little taken aback by the announcement. I had to hold the Secretary’s flip phone up to Clem’s ear.

It was nice to have my memory back so I could remember how to act around lots of important people. The doctor had assured me that the loss of my memory had been only temporary, the result of a sudden, traumatic shock that was now thankfully over.

“Well, Clem, I’m seeing digital photos of the cave you and your father discovered coming up onto my computer screen right now.” The President spoke. “Absolutely beautiful! This afternoon in my radio address I am going to declare Carpenter Caverns a national monument. That way nobody will be able to harm it for all time. Everyone from around the world will be able to come to your town and enjoy it.”

Everyone cheered and applauded at The President’s announcement, which was being broadcast live by satellite at the same time.

Finally after all the hoopla at the conclusion of the ceremony, Clem gave a tug to my hand. I understood at once as he led me away from the crowd. We hiked some distance back to that little protected nook in the hillside, the one guarded by the pine trees and the dense brush. We had once hidden from Rupert there. From here we could see a tow truck over on the country highway finally getting around to towing Rupert’s Ferrari Testarosa Spyder away from the place where he had parked it the last time, near where Clem’s Buick had gone off the cliffs. The Ferrari was going to be put up for auction. The proceeds were going to benefit Carpenter Caverns. I thought it was really ironic.

I took off my high heels, and we climbed inside the nook.

Clem crushed me in his arms as he kissed me and I kissed him back. I certainly did not mind despite the new two-piece jacket dress that my mother had bought for me at Saks Fifth Avenue. The jacket with shoulder pads and a screen print rose design was getting in our way, so I took it off and threw it aside. I did not care if the sheath tank dress underneath was getting dirty all over or if my pantyhose was getting snags as Clem’s fingers were working their way under my bra straps.

It was getting really awkward, though, the way my diamond bracelet and necklace kept on getting caught in Clem’s tie when I had

my arms wrapped around his neck. It had been much easier the last time when all I had been wearing was Clem's jacket!

"So," Clem breathed into my ear, "you turned out to be a million-aireess all right. I'm surprised that you still want anything to do with a country hick like me."

Clem was not going to be a country hick much longer. He was going to be attending college next fall back East in Virginia where I lived. He was planning to study geology and cave science so he could become a famous cave explorer someday.

There was a girl singing Ophelia's Valentine's song in the back of my head:

Tomorrow is St. Valentine's Day . . .

But I did not feel sad any longer. I had found my Valentine.

"You're not a country hick!" I kissed his nose as I undid his tie and took it off from around his neck. "You're famous. You've got a whole town and a cave named after you. That's more than I've got."

Names were something that I had new respect for, more than the average person could imagine. After all, I had been the no name girl for real!

Biography

Linda Cargill

Linda Cargill attended Bryn Mawr, Duke, and the University of Virginia. She graduated magna cum laude and received graduate degrees in English and in English Education. She has written thirty-three young adult horror novels and murder mystery thrillers for Scholastic, Harper Collins, and the German publisher, Cora Verlag. School Library Journal called *The Surfer* "a taut and evocative story" and said that the "readers will become immersed in the challenge between good vs. evil." It also said of *Pool Party*: "YAs who love thrillers may enjoy mysterious twists. The story has romance, a weeping ghost, a doll that changes facial expressions, a buried treasure, and more."

The Virginia Ledger Star called *Pool Party* and *Hang Loose* "Artfully horripilate Halloween fare!"

Linda lives in Tucson, Arizona with her husband, Gary, her son, Kenny, and her cats --- Happy, Ramses, and Spooky. When school is out she travels around the country looking for ghost stories. Some of her favorite spooky places are the haunted lighthouse at Saint Simons Island, Georgia, the setting for *Hang Loose*. Another is Amelia Island, Florida, the setting for *Pool Party* and the home of many haunted Victorian mansions. Virginia Beach has creepy swamps and a Norwegian monument with a story to tell, the subject of *The Surfer*. The waterfalls of the Sierra Nevada have suggested many a tale as has the crashing surf along the central Oregon coast. When the thermal features at Yellowstone hiss, Linda listens. Even a cave in southern Arizona has been featured in a novel.