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Night Shade

Prologue

There were seven men seated at the long table in the austere dining room. The host, at the head of the table, was flanked by three men on each side. There was an air of tenseness prevalent in this room because the half dozen men knew something substantially wrong had caused their host to call them together. There was also the matter of individual consciences, all but one of which were uneasy and fearful.

The meal had been a virtual banquet, beginning with caviar and ending with thirty-year-old brandy. The entree of pheasant and rare beef had been elaborately prepared and served. There'd been different wines with each course, all of them aged estate wines.

Clifford Dalton, the host, pushed his chair back and rose slowly. He was a tall, spare-looking man with cold, calculating eyes and a thin mouth. He studied his guests with a certain air of malevolence, as if he reproved them silently for being alive.

With a single exception, the guests sat rigidly braced against whatever unpleasantness was going to come. They wore blank expressions overshadowed by an inner worry that gleamed in their eyes.

They had no idea of what was going to happen, why they had been imperiously summoned here. They were all

executive types, representatives of the good life. They'd known all along, even before they went to work for Clifford Dalton, that he was the most unpredictable of men.

The single exception did not work for Dalton. He was a neighbor and an old friend—if Dalton could classify anyone as a friend. Yet, Oliver Hayden did feel a certain amount of tension. It was impossible that some of the atmosphere in this room hadn't been transferred to him, even in small part.

Beside Dalton's plate rested a recording machine with a cassette in place. Everyone had wondered what the machine meant and their first impression was that every word spoken at the table would be recorded and played back at some future date. They had no idea why, but nobody questioned Clifford Dalton's mode of life or way of doing business. One of the guests raised his small brandy inhaler to drink from it and managed to spill half the contents because his hand trembled. He proceeded to increase his embarrassment by hastily wiping up the brandy with his napkin. It was an unnecessary gesture because nobody noticed. All eyes were on Dalton—all attention was paid to him and nothing else.

Dalton's gray eyes swept over his guests coldly. Nobody had ever seen them warm except when Dalton was laughing furiously over some joke he had just made that had gone over well.

Dalton said, "Well, my faithful employees, you have done me a great honor by being my guests. It exhibits the confidence you have in me, for I don't doubt that you expected to be poisoned."

He paused and laughed, and five of the guests laughed too, because they were afraid not to. Oliver Hayden didn't laugh or smile. He folded his arms across his thick chest and waited.

Dalton went on. "I enjoy jokes. I like to see people mortified, frightened and embarrassed. It's a strange quirk in me that I must satisfy occasionally. Tonight there will be no jokes, no tricks. This is a most important evening in

your lives, and in mine. Now let me make a few pertinent comments."

His eyes roved over the table again, challenging anyone to make a remark. Nobody did. He fastened his gaze on a portly, nervous, red-faced man who had drunk too much wine for the comfort of his blood pressure.

"Charlie DeWitt," Dalton said. "My true and faithful corporation secretary, who keeps his books impeccably, with a few small twists to cover a few large losses that run to the degree of a felony."

DeWitt didn't say a word, but his face grew redder.

Dalton singled out another—a middle-aged man, balding, vain enough to resort to a badly fitted hairpiece, dressed in a style more suited to a far younger executive.

"Marty Barclay," Dalton said. "The money man! He holds the key to the corporation fortunes. I am grateful that he does not hold the key to my personal fortune—because, Marty, the little cover-ups that Charlie does in tie books are to protect *you* so that he can share in your unpardonable and constant thievery."

"Now see here . . ." Marty Barclay began irately.

Dalton held up his hand. "I want no comments from anyone. If there is a person here who cannot control his anger, let him get up and leave this room now. Let me add this. The man who does automatically loses his job." He peered about the room. It was illuminated with two large candelabra placed at his end of the table, so he could see well enough to detect any true rebellion burning in the eyes of the guests. "Well, no one seems anxious to leave. Good! We'll now proceed. Lambert Willis, ah, Lambert, who worked his way up in my corporation to become its president. All he did to get there was trample a dozen good people in the process, intimidate half a dozen others—and, Lambert, you seem to have suddenly decided *you* own the corporation, not me. Decisions I should make, you are making in my name. But that's all right. Shows initiative, in an underhanded sort of way. You could have come to me for advice, however."

Someone coughed loudly; the sound annoyed Dalton. He had been speaking to a room in which breath was drawn carefully and noiselessly. A little more intense silence and he thought he might have heard the beat of half a dozen hearts.

"My friend and once my partner, Bert Wagner, who now chooses to live like a hermit. Shall I tell you why? Or would you care to relate the story, Bert? No? I can't say I blame you. Bert trusted me once too often and I managed to ease him out of the firm. Gracefully, painlessly, to be sure, but Bert has taken up residence here in a crude sort of way—he lives very near my home so that I will be constantly reminded of the way I cheated him out of his share in this business. Bert, your living this close doesn't annoy me. I like it. I am reminded of the position you once held, and seeing you doesn't affect my conscience. Only my ego is affected, for I am also reminded of the clever way I gypped you. Ah, yes, I do think that was one of the smartest bits of business I ever accomplished."

"May I say something?" Bert Wagner asked. "Though why I ask your permission I don't know, because I'm not beholden to you."

"You still depend on my largesse, Bert. But we're old friends. Of course you may speak."

"I've got only three words for you, Dalton. Go to hell!"

Dalton threw back his head to indulge in loud, raucous laughter. His laugh was a notable part of the man. Anyone who knew him, even remotely, shuddered when his mirth began to make itself evident, for his laugh had the quality of a tuba that was being played by an amateur. It could be heard a quarter of a mile away and in the confines of four walls it resounded with ear-splitting volume.

He looked down the table. "Perhaps I shouldn't group you with these other insignificant people, Walter Thorpe. After all, you *are* my attorney and the lawyer for the corporation. As such you have displayed acumen, sagacity, professional efficiency and—larceny. We'll let it go at that."

Walter Thorpe had once played center for Dartmouth and he'd never forgotten it. He'd stayed in trim, all two hundred and thirty pounds of him. He was solid muscle. He golfed three times a week, ran around the YMCA indoor track twenty laps every Tuesday and Friday. He prided himself on the fact that he had to arrange for tailor-made suits because the sizes of average stock never fit him.

He rose slowly, almost casually. "You've maligned all of us, Cliff. You've called us anything you wished without any reference to the truth of what you were saying. In other words, we're all libeled, and I am going to suggest that we sue you for slander. I assure you I can make it stick."

Dalton gave one short laugh. "You heard him, gentlemen. Will any of you join him in this attack upon my integrity? No one? Come now, he may be right. If you sue me and win there could be a fortune in it for you. Join Thorpe if you wish—if you don't mind losing your jobs, as Thorpe has just done."

Nobody stirred. Thorpe sat down with an audible sigh, as if he'd shot his last bolt and what was to come would happen despite him.

"You're a bunch of rank cowards," Dalton said, "but don't let it worry you. Not for a moment, because I do have a surprise for you. A pleasant one, I'm sure you'll agree."

He reached into his pocket and produced a small, red capsule. He held it between thumb and forefinger, moving his arm from left to right, as if he were exhibiting some merchandise he expected a bid on.

Then he picked up his half-finished glass of wine. He placed the capsule carefully on his tongue, took a drink of wine and swallowed it. He sat down again and turned on the cassette. Its mechanical whisper was the only sound to be heard until Dalton spoke again.

"It will no doubt delight all of you to know that I have just committed suicide."

The gasps and exclamations of disbelief made him smile.

"The capsule contains potassium cyanide. It will kill me ten seconds after the gelatine dissolves and releases the poison. I have thought this all out, my friends. I'm sick and tired of deception and lies, larceny and petty theft. I've lost faith in humanity and in my own resolve to control it. Therefore I've chosen to die quickly and painlessly. I wanted all my good friends to be here."

"It's another of your lousy jokes!" Thorpe shouted. "You're getting corny, CM. You haven't the nerve to destroy yourself."

Dalton looked at his wristwatch. "I have timed this, and I know exactly when the poison will strike." He glanced at the whirring cassette. "When I am dead, you will all remain where you are and hear my benediction. There are," he looked at his watch again, "thirty seconds left. But even though I die, you will not have seen the last of me. For the time being, good-bye."

He stared at them for what seemed an eternity and then he suddenly fell forward, his head and arms landing on the table, upsetting a glass of wine and almost knocking over the candelabrum near his elbow.

Walter Thorpe, with a sneer on his face usually reserved for hostile witnesses in court, stood up.

"Come off it, Cliff!" he shouted. "What the devil do you think we are? A bunch of idiots? You're not fooling anybody."

The answer to the lawyer's sarcasm came from the cassette. Suddenly Dalton's voice filled the room again. It startled everyone into immobility and made Walter Thorpe drop back into his chair as if his legs had given out. Slowly, as the taped words emerged from the machine, everyone in the room became subject to a strange and terrifying fear. A dead man lay sprawled across the table while his voice spoke.

"You have just seen me die, gentlemen. Of course you don't believe I'm dead. Without question you regard this as another of my little jokes. Even now, there are those of

you who are telling me to stand up and take a bow. I am dead! Let me assure you—I am dead! For use by the authorities, let me say that I died by my own hand and no one should be blamed in any way for my demise. It is suicide, pure and simple. A painless way to be rid of life, for I am sick of being cheated and robbed. My wife and daughter have left me, and I've been knifed in the back so often there are scars upon the scars.

"I have long studied this condition of death. I have been interested in spiritualism for years. I know I can come back, and I intend to do so, for the express purpose of putting all of you in your place—or, in other words, putting you all in jail. In this house I have concealed documentary evidence of your guilt. When I am ready to do so I will return and lead you to the spot where the evidence is hidden. At that time you will not be able to destroy or alter it.

"I have played many a joke on my friends—and my enemies. I laughed at the results and enjoyed them, but when this is finished I shall laugh louder and longer than ever before. I shall laugh all the way to eternity. That's all, gentlemen. Once again, for the benefit of whatever legal probe is made into my death, I declare unequivocally that I have taken my own life. I am perfectly sane and no one should be blamed for my death unless—"

The sentence ended abruptly and the only sound to be heard was the hum of the machine as silent tape ran through it. It was Walter Thorpe who regained his wits first.

"Some joke! Cliff, this is the worst one you ever tried to pull."

Oliver Hayden didn't say anything, but he approached the head of the table and bent over the man to peer intently at a face that had paled and was now beginning to show the first signs of the blue of cyanosis.

"He *is* dead!" Hayden exclaimed in awe. "This man is dead!"

"You're in this, too!" Thorpe shouted.

"I've had all of this I want," Barclay said. "Cliff, you and your job can go to hell."

"Wake him up," Bert Wagner said. "He drank too much."

Oliver Hayden shook his head. "He's dead!"

Hayden gave the man in the chair a hard shove, almost a contemptuous one. The body sagged slightly. Hayden grasped the body by the shoulder and heaved. The body toppled out of the chair and fell to the floor, its weight pushing the chair back far enough that the dead man slid clumsily down between the chair and the table.

Thorpe instantly picked up the cassette. "I'm keeping this for evidence. It proves the idiot killed himself. No telling what he planned. This tape will put the he to any papers or other tapes he left behind."

Martin Barclay was still seated, his face ashen. "He said . . . he would come back. He will! I know damned well he will! This is his idea of a joke."

"The biggest one he ever played," Charlie DeWitt agreed. "It has to be a joke."

"Some joke," Bert Wagner said. "Killing himself to play it? You're all quite mad, and I suggest we telephone the authorities right now."

"There's no phone," Thorpe said. "Dalton turned his nose up at them. There's not even electricity in this house. Somebody take a car and drive to the village." Thorpe was taking command in his capacity as a lawyer. "If he had anything else planned, we'll want an outsider as a witness. Personally, I think the old man flipped."

"I think he's been a madman for years," Bert Wagner commented.

"He really is dead?" Lambert Willis didn't look like the president of a large corporation now. His face was beaded with nervous perspiration and his voice had become so high it was almost falsetto.

"He's dead," Oliver Hayden said vehemently. "This is not a joke, my friend. It's an occasion we should celebrate."

"Oliver," Thorpe suggested, "I think you should go to town for help. If there's any trouble about this, you are less connected with Dalton than the rest of us. We worked for him, but you're only a neighbor and friend."

"The same goes for Bert Wagner," Oliver said. "Let him go."

"Not me," Bert said. "I'm going to stay. I haven't done business with him for years, but he cheated me to a fare-thee-well and I hated his guts with more reason than any of you. Besides, this calls for the best tact of an attorney. You go, Thorpe. I think we'll all vote for that. As a lawyer you're in the best position to handle this."

Thorpe had placed the cassette on the table. He picked it up again. "All right, but this goes with me. I'm not taking any chances. The words on this tape clear us, and nothing must happen to it or we're all in trouble."

"Maybe you have a special reason for wanting to take it," Martin Barclay said with an evident note of suspicion that surprised the others.

"There will be no arguments," Thorpe said sharply. "The cassette goes with me."

"Let him have it," Bert Wagner said. "The safety of it is as important to him as it is to any of us. I guess we all had reason to hate Dalton, and I'm not going to be ridiculously naive and say I'm sorry he's dead. I'm glad he's dead—and that's the truth. I wish I'd had the nerve to kill him long ago. I'm satisfied now, though, and I'm not in any trouble for it."

Thorpe looked about the room, eyeing each man. Noting their nervousness and anxiety, he gave one curt, explosive laugh.

"I'll tell you something, boys. Clifford Dalton will have the most meagerly attended funeral you ever saw."

They followed him to the front door of the mansion, leaving its master lying in an undignified heap on the floor where he'd fallen.

"Stay here, all of you," Thorpe said, pausing at the door. "And remember, we don't have to lie about this. We

don't have to try to furnish an alibi. We hated Cliff's guts and we can tell that to anyone. We're all innocent."

"That's fine," Oliver Hayden agreed, "but there's one thing. It's true that Cliff is dead by his own hand and we can prove it, not only because we were all witnesses, but because we have the tape. However, can we be certain his prophecy—or his threat—will not come true?"

"What prophecy?" Thorpe asked.

"He said he'd be back and he'd show somebody where the evidence of our guilt is hidden. Proof not of murder, but of the other charges he made. Not having been employed by Cliff, I'm not involved and I don't know how many of his accusations were truth. That will have to lie on your individual consciences. But I do wonder if he can come back."

"It's nonsense," Lambert Willis said.

"But it does worry you," Bert Wagner said with a smile.

"Well... in a way, I suppose. Though nothing of what he said is true."

"Then why should you worry?" Bert Wagner asked.

"Relax, Lambert. Nobody here is going to tell the authorities about the rash and untrue statements Dalton made before he killed himself."

"Yes," Thorpe said. "That's how it must be handled. Cliff invited us for dinner. His last, although we didn't know that. It was a pleasant dinner up to the final minute when he took the capsule and turned on the cassette. Agreed?"

They were all eager to agree. Thorpe surveyed the group for a moment and felt that his words had sunk in. He walked out and began to drive toward the town to make his report on the strange suicide of an eccentric man who had thrived on jokes. This possibly was the biggest joke of all. In what way, no one was sure. And that was what worried them.

It had been a long drive from Boston and I was tired and somewhat confused, mainly because I had found myself temporarily lost on two occasions. These narrow, winding, black-top roads had a habit of suddenly branching off in two different directions, often without any informative signs. It was a bleak, forlorn coastline area, yet beautiful as only this part of Maine can be.

I knew when I agreed to come here that I would find myself in a weird isolation, improbable as that might seem in 1975. My reason for coming here was wrapped up in the sudden and strange demise of a man named Clifford Dalton, an eccentric, if the reports I'd read about him so far were accurate. His death had been shocking, unusual, and almost eerie.

Quite unexpectedly, after my car had roared up a steep incline, I looked down at the castle, or mansion, or crazy-house that Clifford Dalton had built for himself out of what must have been a twisted imagination. It was backed by a hillside that sloped gently down to the rocky beach where the Atlantic swept in, sometimes ferociously.

I'd been half convinced I should turn back even before I reached this scene, and, after studying it, I was more convinced than ever that I could not stay in a place like this regardless of the importance of my mission. It was

impossible to classify the architecture. The house was three stories high, probably of brick and stucco construction, but at this distance I couldn't be certain. Its rooftop maintained a minaret, a widow's walk, a steeple, and battlements. It looked like something that had been inspired by a nightmare, and the plans for it must have been drawn by a man not in his right mind. I learned later that except for the widow's walk, the other features were fakes—merely shells meant only as decorations.

There was a considerable estate around the house, with a well-manicured lawn, boxwood, and strange trees that looked like pines but likely were not. There were gardens, colorful at this time of year and apparently well-tended.

The main part of this monstrosity of a building curved outward, and from it two long additions had been built, two wings that were bigger than the original house. The windows were tall and narrow. There was a sort of chubby little porch in front of the enormous nail-studded door.

These features became clearer as I drew closer to the structure. I looked in vain for Professor Paul Garvin's car, knowing we should have come here together. He'd suggested it, but I planned to stay on for some time so I'd driven up in my own little Porsche. I wished now that he were with me.

I pulled up in the parking area in front of the steps leading to the porch. As I did so a man in overalls, a peaked cap, and a dirty undershirt approached me. He carried a spade in one hand. I judged him to be about sixty-five; he was bandy-legged and gnarled like an old tree. A scraggly gray beard sprouted from his thin face. He removed his cap, which surprised me, for I had doubted he knew anything about etiquette.

"So you'll be the lady who's going to find out who killed Clifford Dalton?"

"My name is Alison Craig, and yes, I'm that person. I expect to meet Professor Paul Garvin here. He will work with me. I take it you are the gardener."

"That I be and I'm not that ornery a man that I won't warn you to turn your car around and go home."

"That's interesting," I said calmly. I wasn't going to rile this old man. I might need his help before I was done.

"Because the master said he was coming back and back he'll come. When he does, he'll play the biggest joke he ever played on whoever killed him."

"Joke?" I asked. I felt I might as well begin my work now, since the opportunity seemed to present itself.

"You never knew Mr. Dalton, did you, Miss? 'Course you didn't, or you wouldn't be wondering what I meant by saying he would pull his biggest joke. Mr. Dalton, Miss, loved to play tricks. Some of them were mean ones, some were funny, and some were just crazy. Got so his wife and his daughter couldn't live here any more. So they left him, like all his friends left him, until that last night when they came back. That's the night he was murdered, and you'd think they all knew he was going to die and came to enjoy the evening."

I got out of the car. Alongside him I felt like a giant. He couldn't have been more than five feet one or two. Yet I had the feeling that, for his size and age, he was a powerful man physically.

I also thought he was slightly mad.

"Mr. . . . what is your name?" I asked.

"Eric Emmet. My folks been livin' around here for two hundred years and better."

"How interesting, Mr. Emmet."

He smiled for the first time. Not a sunny, wide grin, but a faint movement of thin lips that nevertheless could not be mistaken for anything but an attempted smile.

"First time I can recollect somebody called me *Mister* Emmet. Kinda like it too."

"I can't blame you, Mr. Emmet. Can you tell me who lives in the house now?"

"Olga. She's housekeeper and a mean one. Since the master died and nobody cares to live here, she acts like

she owns the place. She's an old biddy, and one to watch out for. That's a friendly warning."

"Oh, I doubt she can be as bad as that!"

"You don't think so? Kinda look to your left right now. There's a drape pulled back just a little. She's had her eye on you ever since you appeared down the road. And keeping an eye on you will be her aim in life as long as you're here."

"Mr. Emmet," I said, "you mentioned that you believe Mr. Dalton was murdered. Does this Olga think so too?"

"You bet she does. You won't get much out of her, though. When it comes to talkin' she's tighter'n bark on a tree. But she'll be thinking. She does that real well, though I doubt any of her thoughts are kind and charitable. Want me to put your car away? Lots of room in the garage. Ain't nothing there since Mrs. Dalton and her daughter drove everything away right after it happened."

"The death of Mr. Dalton, you mean?"

"That's right. Wonder to me they left the house with anything inside it. The house itself they wouldn't have, even if it was wrapped in gold. 'Nother thing, seeing as you been nice and polite to me and treat me like I was a man, 'stead of a worm grubbing in the soil, the master loved jokes, like I told you. That house is full of 'em. Watch out! They can be as mean as Dalton used to be."

"I'm obliged, Mr. Emmet," I said.

"Pleasure," he said. "You're a mighty pretty girl. If Mr. Dalton comes back he'll head straight for you. He had an eye for a pretty girl—but then who don't? Good luck with the witch."

He turned away to go back to his gardening, apparently having forgotten that he was to put my car away. I lifted two suitcases from the trunk—I'd expected I'd remain here a time. As of this moment, though, I no longer thought so. I didn't care for the atmosphere.

Olga—her full name was Olga Bevin, I learned later—was everything Eric said she was. A heavy-set woman,

probably born with the frown she exhibited on all occasions. She must have once read Dickens or the Brontes, because she seemed to be trying to emulate the housekeepers of those days. I'd never really seen a dress so high around the neck, or so long and flowing. A couple of more inches added to the width of the skirt and it would have been a caftan. It was regulation brown, the color those legendary housekeepers used to wear, and there was a large black apron tied around her ample waist. She wore her thin hair pulled tightly back, and you couldn't get any more austere than that. I decided, on the spot, that I didn't care for Olga. No doubt she didn't care for me either.

"I am Alison Craig," I announced. "I am here at the request of the coroner, the superintendent of state police, and the district attorney. I'm here to investigate Clifford Dalton's death. I am authorized to do whatever is necessary to fulfill my mission, and I intend to fulfill it. In a short time—any minute, I hope—Professor Garvin of MIT will arrive to join me."

"What do you expect of me?" she demanded.

"The usual care of the house, whatever you're paid to do. I'm not sure if you also do the cooking."

"I am a housekeeper, not a cook."

"I see. Well, it happens that I'm a pretty good cook, Olga. You may now go about your business of house-keeping."

"Pick out any room upstairs," she said sullenly.

I secured a grip on my suitcases and then stood there, somewhat idiotically I suppose, for it came to me that I hadn't even glanced at the interior of the house. Being so preoccupied with the antagonism of Olga, I hadn't paid any attention. So I set the suitcases down again.

The entrance hall was round, conforming to the middle front of the mansion. There were five chandeliers—four small ones and a huge center one. All were decorated with crystal pendants and all were clean, a tribute to Olga's

capable housekeeping. The staircase was not elaborate. Merely a way to reach the upper floors.

There were two red-leather-covered benches facing one another and flanked by high-backed chairs upholstered in the same red leather. One of them seemed a bit wobbly, but I paid little attention to such inconsequential matters. A grandfather's clock, its pendulum still, occupied one corner.

I stepped into the drawing room. It was fantastic. The entrance was part of the rounded main portion of the house, but the drawing room extended the full length of one of the long additions, making it one of the largest drawing rooms I'd ever seen. It was well furnished—the contents of this room would have amply provided for five or six ordinary homes. Everything was of dark mahogany, glowing with the patina of age and good care. The rug was Oriental, one of those of myriad colors and random design. It must have taken months to produce, for it extended the full length of the room.

There was really too much to see at one time, but a single feature did stand out. This was the summer of 1975, and yet there were no signs that the house was wired for electricity. On the walls were mirrored sconces containing candles. The table lamps were of the oil variety—some of them looked like genuine Tiffanys. There were chandeliers as well, and these held candles. It might have been a very romantic room by night, with all this soft light, but I reminded myself that a man had either been murdered or had taken his own life here in this ghostly palace, and my idea of the charm of the lighting faded.

I remembered that Dalton had died while seated at the head of a banquet table, so I went in search of the dining room. I found it right across the hall; it, too, was huge. The table could seat forty with ease. The heavy, high-backed chairs were padded in tan-colored leather, beautiful candelabra were placed along the table—together it was a fine setting for a ghostly company. The room contained

a few upholstered chairs and a divan, but was not otherwise decorated in any way, and its very austerity lent a chill to my bones.

I returned to where I'd left my suitcases and carried them up the stairs. Any room, Olga had said. I decided to check the row of doors and select a good, comfortable room in case I had to stay awhile.

I thought I heard Olga at the foot of the stairs, but when I looked down nobody was there. I walked past three doors and decided to stop at the fourth one on the left. I opened it and stared into a room as dark as pitch.

There was a small table outside the door with a candleholder and a tall black candle in it. I also found matches, modern-day book matches, beside the candleholder. I lit the wick, waited until it flamed well, and then carried it into the room.

As I cleared the doorway, the door closed behind me with a soft click. It frightened me, but I was here to examine this room and I meant to do so. As I raised the candle higher I saw that it was a very small room, and a very strange one. The walls were painted with slanted stripes, the floor was a wild pattern of colored tiles. When I took a step forward I felt that I was actually climbing a steep incline. I couldn't maintain my balance. I started to sag sideways, to my right, and it required a great effort to straighten up. When I managed to do so, I thought the wall to my left was moving. I tried to reach it, but it was like trying to walk up a wall. I knew I stood on a perfectly flat surface, that the wall was not moving, and yet to me it seemed that it did.

I took a very firm grip on my nerves, did a neat pivot on one heel and made a dive for the door. I half expected it might be locked, but it yielded easily and as I stepped out I thought I heard a muffled laugh from the vicinity of the stairs.

I knew what I'd been through. Such rooms were sometimes used in experiments, to test the reactions of individ-

uals confronted by dazzling stripes, crazy tiles, wild paintings on the ceiling. It was all an effect brought on by deceiving optics. An illusion chamber like this could make anyone quite dizzy. It was, I suspected, one of Clifford Dalton's cute jokes. No doubt there would be many others ahead, and if they were all as well-contrived as this, I was in for some surprises that might do more than merely annoy me.

I entered another room, with care, but it seemed quite ordinary; a pleasantly furnished suite consisting of a parlor and a bedroom and an oversized bath. It rather surprised me that there was running water in this house of candles and oil lamps. I chose this room for my own. I was about to unpack when I heard Professor Garvin arriving, so I left my bags for later, and hurried downstairs to greet him.

He was gray-haired, gray-bearded, and the finest man and educator I had ever known. Somewhat shy, he was rather stiff when I kissed him, but he smiled and I knew he had appreciated it.

"Have you been here long?" he asked.

"Perhaps twenty minutes," I said. "Professor, this is what might mildly be called a unique home. It's booby-trapped."

"Really?" he asked, with great interest. Anything unusual was like a tonic to him.

"Mr. Dalton was given to practical jokes. I found a room upstairs that's the absolute limit in psychedelics. The room is painted and built so that it seems to move, making it almost impossible to stand upright in it. All an illusion, and an expensive joke."

"The man was quite a character," Professor Garvin said. "Wait until you hear the tape he made."

"Come inside and tell me the whole story," I said. "I'm really flattered that I was selected to help you with this project, though I can't say I fully understand what is expected of me."

Garvin followed me into the house and gaped with

undisguised amazement at the circular reception hall, its chandeliers, and the drawing room.

"You could easily play football in that room, with the addition of a little fake turf. What on earth makes a man want something like this, Alison?"

"That, I take it, is what we're going to try to find out, Professor. Please sit down. Were quite alone. There's a housekeeper living on the premises and a little gnome of a man who does the gardening. But nobody else is here—at least, not that I know of."

The professor seated himself in one of the high-backed chairs. "We are going to do a psychological autopsy on Clifford Dalton," he said. "In other words, we're going to find out what made him tick. It won't be easy, but there are circumstances that make this probably the most interesting study of a human being I'll ever have a chance to do. Do you want to hear the whole story now?"

"I'd appreciate it," I said. "All I know is that Mr. Dalton possibly committed suicide, and possibly was murdered."

"When we get through here we'll know which theory applies. Settle back now and I'll give you the details. After that I'll play a tape for you that Dalton made that could throw some light on the truth we're seeking."

"I'm comfortable," I said. I kicked off my shoes and curled up in the corner of a divan that could easily have seated ten. The size of it and the spaciousness of the room made me feel quite insignificant, something I hadn't experienced as fully before.

"Clifford Dalton," Professor Garvin began, "was fifty-five years old, a slender, almost too-thin type of man. He was self-made, which also made him arrogant and greedy. He was a manufacturer with far-reaching influence. His business was in the field of electronics. It's been hinted that some of his dealings were not quite the kind that takes place on top of the table, but I have no definite information on that. It doesn't much matter anyway, except as a point of interest.

"He was married and he has a nineteen-year-old daughter who does nothing for a living—quite successfully, I understand. His widow is a socialite who stayed with him as long as she did mainly because he had so much money, all of which she will now inherit. There is no conflict of heirs here."

"I'm glad of that," I said. "Other benefactors would complicate matters too much."

"Yes, I agree. Now—a week ago Clifford Dalton sent invitations to several people, all male. They were to attend a dinner that he promised would be the most interesting in their lives. These people came—I think he would have broken some of them financially if they'd rejected the invitations and they knew it. At any rate, a fine banquet was served, with lavish pourings of wine. No doubt some of the guests have no more than a hazy recollection of what actually went on.

"After the meal, Dalton stood up and addressed his friends—so-called. At the climax of his bitter and insulting speech he produced a red capsule. He filled a goblet with wine, swallowed the capsule, and announced that he had just killed himself. He indicated it would take a few minutes before the capsule dissolved, and requested their patience. He sat down. Presently he fell forward, his head and shoulders crashing to the table, spilling what was left of the wine. Everybody waited, expecting him to rise again, for they knew of his addiction to jokes. When he didn't move, someone examined him and pronounced him dead."

"He took the capsule," I said. "Therefore it must have been suicide."

"Not necessarily, my dear. If it was not originally poisoned—incidentally, the drug was potassium cyanide, which kills in a wink—and he was playing a joke, then somebody substituted a really lethal capsule for the one he thought he was using in his little diversion. That's where we come in. To determine if he did or did not know he was taking a deadly poison."

"That's not going to be easy to determine, Professor." I was vastly interested in this case now.

"Perhaps not. Now you, Alison, are one of the most astute and naturally gifted people I have ever met in the field of psychology. That's why I asked you to help me in this. It may take some time. We're not, at least directly, hunting a murderer. That's up to the police. We're only trying to determine what made him kill himself—if he did; or why was he murdered—if that's what happened. The recorder and tape are in my car. I'll fetch them."

I was still mystified, though I knew I was entering upon a most serious study in an undeveloped field. A year ago, what was now termed a "psychological autopsy" had never been imagined, let alone attempted.

I looked forward to this, for I was intensely interested in the subject of psychology, especially as it differed from psychiatry. I might eventually consider going for my M.D., but as of now I hadn't made up my mind.

Mom and Dad were all for it. They lived in Des Moines; we got together on the telephone quite often, but I hadn't been home in almost a year now; my time was too taken up by study.

I had my master's degree. I was doing research with talented people and learning every day. There was only one unfortunate angle to this career business—I had little or no time for dating. Consequently, I had no regular male friend and I knew of nobody I was even attracted to.

I had often been told I didn't look like a scientist, whatever that meant. I was blonde—my hair was flaxen, not golden or yellow, and my eyes were blue. I regarded myself as being reasonably attractive, but doubted I could win ribbons, medals, or tiaras on the basis of my looks.

Sometimes I really missed good masculine companionship, but right now I had too much on my mind to give more than a passing thought to any young man. I had to determine whether a wealthy, important, perhaps slightly addled man had committed suicide, and, if so, why he

had taken his life under such exceptionally bizarre circumstances.

The tape was going to tell me a great deal, and I waited impatiently for Professor Garvin to return with it.

I sat on the edge of the dining-room chair listening intently to the words of a dead man. The tape ran out and Professor Garvin turned the machine off. It was battery operated, a fortunate circumstance in this house without electricity.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked me.

"My first impression is that Mr. Dalton was an egotistical, cruel man with a fine instinct for making people afraid of him. He also seemed vindictive. He would take pleasure in watching his victims squirm while he slowly destroyed them, knowing that his smile would make their pain even more difficult to bear."

"A good diagnosis. Prior to this tape, which, of course, had been prepared beforehand, Dalton made a speech to his guests during which he accused many of them of being crooks and cheats. I don't know how true these accusations were."

"Why would a man contemplating suicide do such a thing? Especially if he enjoyed it, as you said. What pleasure would he get from it when he knew he was about to die?"

"I don't know, Alison. There's no doubt he was abnormal in some way. Mind you, not that it interfered with

his business acumen. I know for a fact that he manipulated some very profitable deals not two days before his death."

"Do you think Dalton was paranoid?" I asked.

"The act was certainly in the realm of madness, but Dalton exhibited no outward signs of paranoia—not even in a minor degree. No, I believe it was all carefully planned."

"For what purpose?" I asked. "What could a dead man get out of it?"

"Nothing that I can think of."

"Then we must assume that he was murdered," I said as casually as if I were in a laboratory discussing some imaginary problem in psychology.

"Alison, the tape was made beforehand. He knew he was going to die. A man who believed he was going to be murdered would have done more than make a taped speech for post-mortem use."

"So, we conclude that Dalton didn't think he was going to be murdered. He was actually planning some kind of a joke. He intended to feign death so he could listen to what his fooled dinner guests said about him."

"Yes, but certainly someone was bound to examine him, so the joke wouldn't have lasted long."

"True, unless he had an ally who would pretend to examine him."

Professor Garvin looked off into space. "Then someone who knew about the joke, and was to have been the ally to swear that Dalton was dead, switched a lethal capsule for the harmless one Dalton would have taken."

"That's how I see it right now. Another thing, though—the tape ends in the middle of a sentence, as if Dalton was about to say more and never had the chance."

"I noticed that too. What do you think about his threat to come back and prove that ghosts exist by providing someone with a lead to a cache of incriminating papers?"

"Do you believe in ghosts, Professor?" I asked seriously—this was far too crucial a matter to be taken lightly.

"My dear girl, I am a scientist of some fame. I deal in

facts. In things that respond to mathematical formulae and can be created in a test tube. Yes—I believe in ghosts."

"You're a fraud, Professor! You do not."

"Let me put it this way. Some say if there are ghosts, show me one. I say if there are no ghosts, convince someone who says he saw one that he was dreaming."

"I still say I'm being had," I told him good-naturedly.

"You will take on this assignment nevertheless?"

"Oh yes. It's going to be interesting and perhaps scary. Tell me, how do I get witnesses to talk? Suppose I wish to assemble the same group of guests here. How do I accomplish that?"

"It's quite simple. You have been designated as an assistant coroner on a very special basis. You have the power to subpoena and to threaten imprisonment for anyone who won't cooperate. All you have to do is call a cop and show him this affidavit."

He handed me a legal-looking paper that, in the twenty long paragraphs that lawyers would call a short statement, assured me of the powers Professor Garvin had indicated. I tucked it into my handbag.

"I'll do my darnedest," I promised. "Will you be staying over?"

"My dear, I have classes. Anyway, this is your assignment. Incidentally, you're going to be paid for it, so no shirking."

He was kidding and we both laughed, but not heartily. He closed the tape recorder, leaving the cassette inside it.

"I'll have to take it back," he explained. "We're going to do a voice study on it and some other detailed work. You won't need it, I'm sure. If you do, you know where it is."

The heavy door knocker resounded through the house. I began to rise to answer it, but Olga beat me to it. I wondered if she'd been listening to our conversation—I believed it likely, for when the door knocker sounded she answered so promptly she couldn't have been more than a few feet away.

She stepped into the drawing room. "It's that Eric Emmet, Miss. He says it's important."

"By all means, let him in," I said.

Eric came in with his hat clutched in both hands. He bobbed some kind of greeting to Professor Garvin when I introduced them.

"It's the professor I need a word with," Eric said. "I ran your car into the garage, Miss, and I tried to run yours in, too, Professor, but I can't get it started."

"Oh, drat the luck," Garvin said. "I'll go out and have a look, though I admit I don't know any more about an automobile than I do about the sleep habits of the Zulus. Come along, Emmet. Maybe I'll need a push."

I went out with them, and Eric was right. Nothing could make the car respond. The professor was a woeful-looking man when the realization came to him that the car wasn't going to budge.

"Professor," I said, "take mine. I won't be going back for at least a couple of days and I'll have a mechanic come out here and get yours running. Then, when I return, or you come back, we'll exchange. Mr. Emmet, would you bring my car from the garage?"

"Why Alison, that's decent of you," Garvin said gratefully. "I really must get back. You're sure this won't be an inconvenience?"

"Why should it? As I said, I'm not going anywhere immediately."

"Thank you then. I will take advantage of your offer. Good luck, and keep in touch."

"I'm just beginning to wonder how. This place has no electricity and I'm betting it hasn't got a telephone either."

"The village is four miles away, my dear. This will be an imposition. Do you really wish to stay here?"

"I do indeed! I want to find out why a man who was either about to be murdered or planned to commit suicide would make a tape to be played seconds after his death. And by himself, at that, for he did turn the machine on just before he died."

"That's what we've been told. He evidently had it timed so the tape would begin right after the poison capsule melted and killed him. A strong indication of suicide."

"There's another reason I want to stay. Dalton said he'd be back. In ghostly form. I want to be present if he makes it—though I won't say how long I'll stay if that happens! Here's Emmet with the car, Professor. Have a good trip back, and don't worry about me."

He climbed into the little car and sank down in the leather-covered bucket seat until he was barely visible. As it roared away, the Porsche looked like a driverless car that had suddenly developed brains.

I walked back to the house. Olga stood on the little porch. I stopped and spoke to her. "Is there any coffee on the stove, Olga?"

"Yes'm, I always keep a pot on the back of the stove."

"The back of the stove? What do you have here, an old-fashioned range?"

"Burns anthracite or wood," she said in an almost friendly tone. "It does well by my cooking, I will say."

"I'll have coffee with you, in the kitchen. I have to ask you a few questions."

"It ain't likely I'll want to answer 'em," she said, growing sullen again.

"Olga, you *must* answer these questions. If you don't, I have the authority to haul you before a judge."

She scowled. "I ain't saying yes or no. I'll listen, anyway."

"That's a good beginning," I said.

In the kitchen I admired the huge combination range that used hard coal or wood. A coal hod, something I'd seen before only in antique stores, stood by the range. A short-handled, flat little coal scoop was half buried under the nuggets of coal.

Olga not only had coffee on the back of the stove, she had a tray of homemade cookies. They inspired me to like Olga a trifle more than I had up to now.

"You were here the night Mr. Dalton died?" I asked.

"Likely I would be, since I made the dinner."

"Very good. Now, did you help serve?"

"I do not do a maid's job, Miss. I supervised, but I didn't serve. We had girls from the village to do that. They went home early."

"You did observe the people at the table?"

"They were there."

"Was there anything happening that night to make you suspicious something was wrong?"

"No."

"In other words, you saw no signs of a quarrel? Mr. Dalton appeared to be in good spirits?"

"Yes, that he was. Fine spirits."

"Had he recently been dejected? Out of sorts?"

"Not him. 'Less you figure it counted when his wife and daughter walked out. He wasn't dejected then, but he surely was mad."

"Why did they leave him, Olga? I'm not prying for the sake of gossip. I have to know all I can about Mr. Dalton."

"He made himself a brand-new joke. Out back there's a big pool with a high board. Now, Mr. Dalton would go out to the end of the diving board, pose, and dive. He was very good at it. His wife was going to show off, too. She walked out, stood on the edge of the board, lifted her hands for the right formation for diving—and the board dropped away beneath her and she went into the pool feet first. Clumsy as could be. That was enough to make her mad, but she was hit by the end of the trick board and knocked out. That made her madder."

"I should think it *would* upset her, Olga!"

"What made her maddest was when she was hauled out of the pool and found Mr. Dalton laughing himself sick at the results of his joke. Mrs. Dalton, she just packed up and walked out, taking Valerie with her."

"Valerie is the daughter?"

"Yes, and a fine girl she is, too. Not bright, but pretty, and she draws boys. Never wants for lots of 'em."

"Thank you for this information," I said. "Tell me this—did Mr. Dalton drink?"

"A little wine mostly. If you mean did he get drunk, no, never. He wasn't a hard-drinking man and he didn't gamble."

"Was his health good? Did he ever complain of headaches, or did he take to his bed for a few days at a time?"

"Never a sick day I know of."

"Who were his closest friends? I mean by that, who came here to visit him often? Or perhaps he went to see some special person?"

"You're real nosy," Olga said with a toss of her head.

"I have to be if I want to find out what happened to Mr. Dalton."

"There'd be Walter Thorpe, his lawyer. He came often enough. To get himself half potted on Mr. Dalton's liquor. Then there's Oliver Hayden. I'd say he was the master's best friend, and he was welcome any time."

"And do you know who he is? Anything about him?"

"He's a neighbor. Wife died some years back. He lives alone. No kids."

I thought I was making a rather good beginning and I felt a little proud of myself. These were important facts.

"Who else of consequence was here that night, Olga?"

"Bert Wagner came. He swore he wouldn't. I heard the others talking about him. But he came. He knew the food was going to be good and they were mostly freeloaders, if you ask me."

"And who is Mr. Wagner?"

"Don't know much about him. He's got a cabin a little way from here. They say he's a hermit."

"Anyone else?"

"You're asking too many questions! . . . There was Lambert Willis to the master's right hand, where he was supposed to be. Mr. Willis is president of the firm the master owned. He hated Willis, and Willis said the master was the hardest man he ever met. They surely didn't get along."

"What of the others at the dinner?"

"Nobody much important. Just people who worked for him. The one I figured would be there, wasn't."

"And who would that be?"

"Young Dennis Marley. Now there's a likeable young man, not crazy like so many others his age. Mr. Dalton took him in hand when he was just a tyke. He put him through college and gave him an important job with his firm when he graduated. That was less than a year ago, but from what the master said, he's been doing all right."

"Isn't that an unusual thing for a man like Dalton to do? Taking a young man in hand?"

"I don't know if it was unusual or not. But Mr. Dalton always wanted a son and I guess Dennis became, in his mind, the son he wanted."

"Did Dennis inherit anything? I know the will hasn't been filed for probate yet, but was anything ever said about it?"

"Not that I heard of. Mr. Dalton was all for Dennis courting Valerie. That's Dalton's daughter, like I said. He wouldn't do it, and anyway I think Valerie didn't like him because she figured he was out to get all he could from Dalton."

"It was not, then, what you'd call a pleasant household with happy and loving people living in it?"

"They were fighting all the time, if that's what you mean."

"Yes," I said with a little sigh, "that's what I mean."

I didn't want to go poking into the intimate family affairs of a dead man unless it became necessary—although, in this case, I was afraid it might. To determine Dalton's frame of mind before his death and to determine whether he'd taken the poison intentionally, I would have to know *everything* about the man.

It seemed Olga was finished answering questions, for she rose abruptly and cleared the table. I made my way back to the long drawing room, but the place now gave me a mild case of shivers. I walked out into the late after-

noon sunlight and found it warm and welcome. I strolled around the estate and saw Emmet tinkering with Professor Garvin's car, which he'd apparently pushed down the gentle slope to the garage. He was so intent on his work that he didn't even look up. I walked down the path to the beach. Unlike most of the Maine coastline, which was characterized by jagged cliffs, this descent to the sea was along a path through a green and lush lawn. There wasn't much of a beach, and what there was proved to be so rock-strewn as to be crossed only with some difficulty. Apparently no attempt had ever been made to remove the rocks and clean up the area. Maybe Mr. Dalton hadn't liked the sea.

On my way back I spotted a small, cabinlike structure not far from the water's edge and quite well shielded by a grove of pines. I guessed this must be where Bert Wagner lived. If, as I suspected, he lived there by the grace of Clifford Dalton, it was essential that I talk to him. So I walked over to the cabin.

The door was wide open, but nobody answered my knock or my call. I didn't go inside, but I saw through the door that the cabin was clean and very orderly. There was a cot, Wagner's bed no doubt, made up and covered with a colorful spread. There were also a table, two kitchen chairs, and an old recliner; and I could see part of a fairly large kitchen that was the second room of this two-room cabin.

I did notice that there was a rifle propped in one corner. I called Wagner's name again, and finally turned away with the intention of coming back in the morning.

It would soon be dark anyway. I was hungry and I was also tired from the long drive; I would retire early. I directed my steps back to the house.

I wasn't looking forward to spending even one night in that mansion, let alone the several I supposed I would have to spend there. It wasn't the fact that a man had either killed himself or been murdered in that house that made me apprehensive—it was something else, an in-

definable sense of fear or menace. This feeling was alien to me and perhaps that made it all the more difficult to endure. Yet I knew I must stay, because I was to try out a brand-new technique that would, one day, become an important part of the practice of psychology.

I entered the house and found it to be as quiet as a tomb. Olga was not in the kitchen and I had no idea where she might be. There would certainly be servants' quarters—though perhaps she would have chosen not to occupy a room there, but to stay instead in the main part of the house. It didn't matter to me. I was privileged to be here, but I had no right to give orders or to resent what someone else did.

It was almost dusk and the interior of the mansion seemed drearier than ever. I went directly upstairs to my room. It was provided with a deep upholstered chair set close by the window, and I sat down to relax before I unpacked and changed for dinner—a meal not even arranged for, as far as I knew.

The view from the window provided me with a fairly good panorama of the entire front of the estate. Outside the mansion things were far more pleasant and agreeable to look upon. I fell to wondering what could have made a man like Dalton subscribe to the dreariness of a house like this. And, equally important, was it only money that made his wife put up with it for so long? Until one of Dalton's tricks finally made her angry enough to leave?

I would have to talk to her and to the daughter before this was over. They might give a picture of the man that would help me come to some conclusion about the affair. I was determined not to lose sight of my mission here—to learn why Dalton had died and who was responsible.

I went into the bathroom, first lighting two oil lamps on the dresser. Another oil lamp gave me fair illumination in the bathroom; I washed my face and prepared to change clothes.

I unpacked and hung up my things. I hadn't brought much. I selected a yellow dress for dinner. It was new, the

skirt was medium length, and it sported an amber jeweled belt. I moved over in front of the dresser mirror to adjust the belt.

The oil lamps gave a none-too-bright light, and the room was full of shadows; some dark corners were not illuminated at all.

When I turned toward the dresser mirror I thought I saw a face reflected in the glass. A long, narrow, and incredibly evil face. I cried out and whirled about. There was no one in the room, no one but me in front of the mirror. I picked up one lamp and moved about the room. It was impossible anyone had been there. I put the lamp down again, looked in the mirror—and the same leering face peered out at me.

By now I was almost frantic with fear. If there was no one to reflect in the mirror, then what I saw had to be some sort of apparition. I took a step to my right. The face vanished. I stood directly before the mirror again. The face leered at me. I took a step to the left and the face was gone. It appeared only when I was standing directly in front of the glass.

I brought the two lamps closer together and studied that evil reflection. I soon realized it was not really a reflection at all, but that someone had devised a devilishly clever way of getting that image in the glass itself so that it became visible only from one certain position.

It was a joke, probably one of the dead man's best, but I didn't fancy it. I'd been scared half to death and I felt more like breaking the mirror than admiring the skill and craftsmanship of the man who had created that horrible illusion.

Presently I went downstairs and found that Olga had set the long table in the dining room. This, to me, seemed like an unnecessary effort—why should I be seated alone in this oversized room at an oversized table? I noted that the plate set for me was at the spot where Clifford Dalton had made his final speech and then sat down to die.

Olga entered the room with a tureen of soup, enough for half a dozen people. But it was good, savory, and

freshly made. I enjoyed it and complimented her by asking for a second serving.

This didn't dull my appetite for the small but tender, well-broiled steak, the baked potato, the simple salad, and, finally, the homemade tarts with good coffee.

"That," I said to Olga, "was one of the finest meals I have ever eaten. Why did you tell me you were not a cook?"

"I didn't say that. I said I wasn't going to cook for a lot of people. There's a difference."

"Well, thank you anyway, Olga. It was fine. Oh, I meant to ask you, there's a dresser mirror in the room I selected—"

"I know about it. Gives me the shakes every time I see that face in the glass. But that's what it is, a face in the glass. There's nobody standing behind you when you look in the mirror. Many a guest ran screaming out of that room. One of Mr. Dalton's jokes. There are others, plenty of them."

"I'd like to be warned," I said, "if you know where these jokes are placed."

"I don't, not all of 'em."

"In my opinion it will take a mighty fearful thing to beat that face in the dresser mirror. It's a face that looks like a devil peering out of the smoke of hell."

"It's Mr. Dalton's face," she said. "Don't look much like him, but it's his face."

"I'm going to change my room. Well, let's do the dishes."

"You going to help me?" she asked in surprise.

"Yes. We can even take turns doing the cooking. You're not paid to wait on me."

"Well, now, I never heard the like, but I ain't turning down the offer."

We were on our way to the kitchen when there was a heavy pounding on the front door. This strange house had inflicted itself upon me to such an extent that I gave a

brief cry and was filled with fear until I realized there was merely someone at the door.

I hurried to open it and I stared at a state trooper carrying a flashlight. There was a police car out front, its lights on.

"Are you Miss Alison Craig?" he asked, consulting a small bit of paper in his hand.

"Yes," I said. "What's wrong?"

"Do you own a 1973 red Porsche?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. A friend of mine was driving it. His car broke down—"

"I'm very sorry to have to tell you that your friend is dead."

"Professor Garvin? But he was fine when he left here—"

"What time was that?"

"Half past three," Olga said from behind me. "I looked at the clock when he drove away."

"What happened?" I asked. "The car was in good condition—"

"It wasn't an accident. Not involving the car, anyway. We found him in the car. It broke through some brush and wound up against a small tree. The car's not badly damaged."

"The professor!" I exclaimed. "What was it?"

"This is the deer hunting season, Miss. It seems that a stray bullet killed him. Instantly—through the head."

I brought my hand to my face and turned away. Olga enveloped me in a sympathetic hug. Sympathy was something I hadn't believed her capable of showing.

The state policeman wasn't abrupt or unkind, but he had a duty to perform. "We need you to identify him before we remove him. I've been sent to bring you to the scene."

I nodded and dried my tears on a handkerchief. "How did you know where to find me?"

"Well, frankly, we didn't at first, but he was killed on a road that goes just to one place—right here. Then we

found the registration certificate in the glove compartment."

"I'll be ready in a moment," I said. "It's . . . almost unbelievable. . . . He was such a kind and gentle person. . . ."

I went upstairs to wash my face and put on a light coat. When I came down the state policeman was waiting in the car, which he had turned around. Olga was at the door.

"I felt when I came here that this was an evil house," she said.

"No house is evil itself," I told her. "The people who live in it provide the evil. I'll be back as soon as I can."

The Porsche had a bent fender, but I wasn't interested in that. They had removed poor Professor Garvin and his body was now in an ambulance. I was helped into the vehicle and the red blanket lifted enough so that I could make the identification.

I had steeled myself against this necessary ordeal and I did not give way to tears. I got out of the ambulance and approached the car. A lieutenant repeated the facts that had already been relayed to me. On the seat lay the case that contained the recorder and the cassette. I asked permission to remove it. This granted, I opened the case and instantly saw that the cassette was not there.

"Lieutenant," I said, "do you believe this to be an accidental death—someone firing carelessly at what he thought was a deer?"

"Unless you have anything to prove the contrary," he said, "we believe that, yes. Because it happens."

"This was no accident, Lieutenant. In this recorder was a very important cassette. It was there when Professor Garvin left the house where I'm staying. I doubt he had any reason to remove it—and if he did not, someone else did. A thief would have stolen the whole thing—case, recorder, cassette, and all."

"Mike," the lieutenant called, "go through his pockets. Tom, make a thorough search of the car."

"Thank you," I said.

"We'll handle it from here on," the lieutenant said. "I'll have one of my men take you back."

"Not on your life," I said vigorously. "This may be a very important matter, Lieutenant."

"Perhaps. Leave that to us, Miss. Please—accept a ride back."

I opened the handbag I'd thought enough to bring with me. I took from it an envelope inscribed with the name of the county coroner and I handed it to him. He read the letter, folded it, and handed it back.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Craig. We'll cooperate in any way possible. I notice there is a phrase in the coroner's letter about a psychological autopsy. I know what it is, but I've never encountered this type of investigation before."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." I replaced the letter in my handbag. "It's a new term and a new device, I'm sure. I'm a psychologist. The dead man was an expert on the subject, knew far more than I ever hope to. . . . What we do is establish facts that may show why a man killed himself or killed someone else. It helps sometimes."

"You think the professor was murdered?"

"I have to think that. And from this act of violence I'd say that Clifford Dalton was murdered too. I don't know why the professor was killed. All he knew was what was on the cassette and the few facts given us by others. I'm afraid that this murder—done without reason, as I say—may have been done to intimidate me."

"Perhaps." The lieutenant was a graying, middle-aged man and it was easy to see why he had attained his rank—he was understanding and he was clever. But what came next was wholly unexpected.

"The car was yours. The professor had borrowed it because his car broke down. But was this bullet aimed at him? He was not a big man, not tall. In that low car it

would be hard to tell who was driving—a man or a woman."

I gasped aloud. "Do you think the bullet was meant for me?"

"I can't say, but the possibility exists, wouldn't you think? It is your car."

"But the motive? I've been here only a matter of a few hours. I haven't even met anybody except the housekeeper and the gardener. Besides, if Mr. Dalton was murdered—but I've uncovered no concrete evidence that he was or if he was, by whom, so why me? Or the professor, for that matter?"

"I wish I could answer that, Miss Craig. Now, is there any way we can be of service?"

I thought a minute. "I've been wondering, Lieutenant, about the coincidence of the professor's car breaking down. He would then be compelled to use mine. . . . But that doesn't add up either. We can't determine if a murderer was after the professor or after me."

"Look at it this way, Miss Craig. If it was you a killer was after, he might disable the professor's car so you'd have to drive to the village for help. He would assume you'd use your car."

"But the cassette that was stolen. It was taken, so the murderer must have been after it. If I'd gone for help to repair the professor's car, I wouldn't have been apt to have the cassette with me."

"Miss Craig, a prospective murderer might not have known that. But before we complicate this any further, suppose I drive you back and we have a look at the professor's car."

"All right," I said. "What about my Porsche?"

"We'll have to check it over for prints or anything else we might decide to look for. I'll have it delivered tomorrow at the latest."

"That's fine," I said. "Shall we get at it, then?"

He escorted me to one of the police cars and we headed for the Dalton mansion.

"Do you know anything about the death of Mr. Dalton?" I asked.

"Not much. I wasn't assigned to the case. It's more a job for the detective division. I've heard there was never any question but that it was a suicide. Say—wait a minute—the cassette that was stolen—was it the one Dalton made just before he died?"

"That's the one. The professor brought it with him and played it for me."

"If we find the car sabotaged I think we can prove it was murder and not an accident with the professor. Someone wanted one car to leave because he thought that car would be bound to have the cassette in it. He didn't care who was driving."

"Excuse me if I shiver a bit, Lieutenant. You have to be right."

"I'll make a full report. Might change the minds of the whiz kids in the detective division. You'll be all right in that house?"

"Oh yes. Nervous, but all right."

He drove straight to the garage, where Emmet was still fiddling around with the professor's car. He seemed startled and more than a little nervous when he saw the uniformed trooper get out of his car.

"Somebody," he said, "cut a couple of wires under the hood. I got them together again and the car runs okay now. Wasn't much of a job."

"Show me," the lieutenant said, and, after a few moments checking on Emmet's statement, the lieutenant was satisfied.

"This was sabotage," he told me. "I'd be very careful about moving around too much, Miss Craig. If you need help, give us a call."

"It will have to be by smoke signal," I told him. "There's no phone. Not even electricity."

The lieutenant shook his head. "I heard Dalton was a little nuts, but imagine a rich man in a house like this

and no electricity? The lack of a phone I can understand. It would cost a fortune way out here."

"Well," I said, "thank you for the warning anyway. I'll be careful."

He drove off. Emmet looked at me with plain curiosity shining in his eyes.

"When the professor drove away in my car," I told him, "somebody shot him. He's dead."

Emmet uttered a low moaning sound. "What's next? This house is damned. Always been trouble . . . trouble . . ."

"Keep an eye out," I warned him. "Do you have a gun?"

"Mr. Dalton wouldn't let anybody keep a gun. He was dead against them. He once horsewhipped a man for shooting a deer on his property."

"Who was the victim?" I asked. There might be something to this. Any man horsewhipped would be a mortal enemy.

"He's a man who lives down by the water. He used to be in business with Mr. Dalton some time back. His name is Bert Wagner. Don't do anything for a living. I don't know where he gets money enough to get by on. He was hurt pretty bad from what I hear. Mr. Dalton got swinging that whip like he enjoyed it—so they tell me. I wasn't there."

I recalled the rifle propped in a corner of Bert Wagner's cabin. I thought Mr. Wagner was going to have to answer a few questions. There seemed no better time than now. I left the garage area for the path leading down the slope toward the sea.

This time I found Mr. Bert Wagner at home. He was seated in an old kitchen chair propped up against the outside wall of his cabin. He watched me approach with considerable interest, but he made no move to rise and greet me.

"I'm sure," I said when I faced him, "that you are Mr. Wagner."

"Was last I knew. What kind of a nuisance are you?"

"I'm detailed by the county coroner to look into the death of Mr. Dalton, but I'm not here for that reason now. I passed your cabin earlier in the day and I happened to see a rifle in one corner of the room."

"You're a snooping female," he said, but without any trace of anger. "You didn't just accidentally see the gun, you went in and looked."

"It happened I did not. But I would like to look at the gun now."

"Why?"

"Mr. Wagner, I don't have to give you a reason. I can order you to produce that rifle. I'm here in an official capacity and the police and courts will back me up."

"I still ask why you want to see the gun."

"I'm not sure I choose to tell you," I said. He was beginning to irritate me.

"Then no look. On your way. You're a very pretty girl, but when you get armed with the law you don't look quite so attractive. I'm not answering any questions—"

"Mr. Wagner, within the last few hours a man was shot to death by a bullet fired from a rifle."

The chair tilted forward and the legs banged against the cement pad on which the chair rested.

"Who was killed?"

"A man you don't know. Professor Garvin, a psychologist."

"I didn't kill him."

"Then why not let me see the gun? I think I can tell whether or not it's been fired."

"You think? That's like a woman. You don't know a damn thing about something, but you think you do. For your information, the gun has been fired. I killed a deer with it last night when I was hunting by torchlight. It's against the law and I could go to jail for it, but that's how the gun got fired. I haven't taken the trouble to clean it yet."

He jumped up and seized my hand. With considerable force he propelled me through his cabin to the rear of it,

where he opened a large refrigerator. Inside it hung choice sections of fresh deer meat.

"Well?" he asked.

"You have electricity." I commented in surprise.

He closed his eyes before he suddenly burst out laughing. 'Til come quietly. How can a man stay mad at somebody like you? These are modern times. We all have electricity."

"Except the Dalton place," I said.

"Oh—yes. That fact escaped me for a moment. It's true. Dalton refused to install any wiring. I beg your pardon for the sarcasm I inflicted on you. But I'll say this. I didn't kill anybody. If the cops want my rifle to make comparison tests, they're welcome to have it. I've nothing at all to hide—except that deer carcass."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll speak to the lieutenant when he comes tomorrow. It might be well to let him examine the rifle so there will be no suspicion lodged against you."

"Yes, I know that, Miss . . . what the devil is your name?"

"Alison Craig."

"Alison. Not a common name, but it rests easy on the tongue. Alison . . . it's as pretty as you are. May I offer you a glass of cider? It's strong, there's a definite head on it, but always good."

He seated me at the round table, which was neatly covered with a perfectly white linen cloth. He placed a stone jug and two mugs before me and filled them with the amber, slightly sparkling juice. We toasted one another silently with raised glasses. The cider was tart, strong, and excellent.

"It's good," I said. "Thank you."

"You'll likely want to ask me some questions," he said. "Go to it. I'll try my best to make up for the ridiculous manner in which I treated you when we first met. I'm really not a sarcastic man. Especially where very attractive girls are concerned."

"Were you present when Mr. Dalton died?" I asked.

"I was there. I've often wondered since why it all happened, but I was there."

"Why do you say that, Mr. Wagner?"

"It's a long story...."

"I'm accustomed to them. They often help more than short stories."

He seemed amused at the situation. "Just what are you after, Miss Craig?"

"As a psychologist I intend to study the character of the dead man and try to determine if his death was suicide or murder."

"I see. Six people saw him die, heard him say he was going to kill himself. He made a tape beforehand and turned on the machine just before he died so we would instantly hear what he had to say those few seconds after he was dead. Isn't that proof he killed himself? So why the need for this investigation?"

"Mr. Wagner," I said, "you're a well-educated man. I think you know the answer to your own question."

Wagner nodded. "Somebody substituted a poisoned capsule for the harmless one Dalton thought he was taking."

"That's right, Mr. Wagner. So you may now answer my questions about this being murder or suicide."

He shook his head. "I can't, because I don't know."

"That's being honest, at least. You were once in business with Dalton, were you not?"

"We were partners, sort of. There was no legalized agreement between us. I thought he was a gentleman. I found out differently as soon as we had the business worked up into the multimillion-dollar bracket. That was when he dumped me. Oh, he did it cleverly. I knew I didn't have a chance when he began proceedings. I didn't back away from it, but I didn't pursue it either—there was just no use. He was fairly generous with me—a lump sum settlement and an unsecured annuity. I took it in anger, but I've learned since then that Dalton actually did me a favor."

"You discovered cabin life, hunting your own food, was more satisfying?" I asked.

"Exactly that. At first my hatred for him caused me to buy this bit of land and build this cabin so I could be near Dalton. I wanted him to see me every time he took a walk. I thought his conscience would bother him. It didn't, though. Now, because somebody is bound to ask it, I hated Dalton enough to kill him. However, I didn't. You may believe me or not."

"I'm inclined to believe you, Mr. Wagner. You're a straightforward man. I would say that if you killed him you'd make no secret of it. But that's only my opinion and it probably wouldn't be shared by anyone else, so I would advise you not to talk this way to others who might ask the same question."

"I won't. I don't even know why I opened up to you, except that perhaps I'm lonely and you're attractive—intelligent.... How about more cider?"

I pushed my mug across the table. "If you don't mind." I drank a little of the cider; I was not about to end this conversation yet. "Have you any idea who might have substituted a poison capsule for a harmless one?"

"No. Not the slightest. If you asked me if anyone else present had a motive and the desire to kill Dalton, I would have to say all of them did."

"Even Mr. Hayden?"

"I see you've done some homework. No, maybe not Mr. Hayden. . . . I would say that Oliver Hayden was, most likely, the only friend Dalton had. Not that they were fast friends, boon companions, drinking mates. No—they were more like friendly neighbors. I think that was partly due to the fact that Hayden didn't work for Dalton and was under no obligation to him. Otherwise Dalton would have driven him into the category of haters."

"What about opportunity, Mr. Wagner? Who might have been in a position to substitute the capsule?"

"I wouldn't know that. All of the other people at the table that night were his employees. He would call them

to his home often, and I know that several were there the day before he died. I think Lambert Willis was there. He was president of the corporation. In his case it was an empty title because Dalton managed everything, Lambert Willis included. . . . And the treasurer, Martin Barclay, saw Dalton the evening before he died. I think Dalton had called them there and probably dressed them down."

"He called them thieves. Was there anything to that statement?"

Wagner finished his mug of cider. "The books are being audited now, so we'll soon know. I would say it's quite possible they were all stealing. Dalton drove them hard, paid them little, and made them the butt of his sarcasm to a point where they might have found it pleasurable to steal from the man."

"Would you care to describe Mr. Dalton as an individual? A man?"

"It would be impossible to. If you accumulated all the information you could get about him and fed it into a computer its components would fly into a thousand pieces. In other words, Dalton was a strange and unusual man. Bluntly, he was a miserable specimen of manhood."

"I encountered a couple of his so-called jokes," I said. "I didn't think they were very funny."

"If he'd been alive to see you fall for them you'd have heard his laughter ringing in your ears for a week. How he could laugh! It was a cross between the braying of a mule and the wild hysteria of a mental patient. The only man I ever knew who could laugh uproariously at someone else's pain. His jokes were meant to hurt—to startle you so much that you lost a few days' growth. You'll encounter many more of them if you stay at the house very long."

"My job is to determine if he killed himself, or if he was murdered. I'm staying."

He exhibited genuine interest. "How will you go about that? Dalton was his own man. He didn't tell his plans to anyone. What will you look for?"

"Somewhere in his character I'll find the key. There

always is one. Can you tell me anything about his wife and daughter?"

"They're both shallow and not trustworthy. They live to spend money. Dalton was a rich man, but I'll give you good odds they spend every dollar he left within two years. Now Janet—that's the widow—isn't man-crazy or unfaithful. No questions of morals with that woman. Valerie—the daughter—is a sexpot, but mama watches her closely and with jealousy. Valerie doesn't have many dates. How do you do in that department?"

It was an impertinent question, but asked in such a droll sort of way I had to answer it. "I like dating, but I've had no time. Psychology and Mr. Dalton interest me more than any young man."

"You're honest, anyway. Ask that question of Valerie and she'd deliver twenty-five big names to impress you with the company she keeps. They'd all be lies. How about another mug of cider?"

"Thank you, Mr. Wagner, but I have to get back to the house. While I'm there, please feel free to call on me whenever you like."

"Thank you, Alison."

I smiled. "Frankly, Mr. Wagner, I expected to meet a heavily bearded, long-haired recluse who would resent my being here. Thank you for being neither of those things. And I'll make a strong guess—from my knowledge of psychology—that there's no streak of meanness in you, and you would be quite at home in the Waldorf Astoria or the United Nations."

"I'm flattered," he said. "Good evening, Alison. My days are mostly monotonous, but not this one. Wherever you are, there is no monotony."

I smiled and preceded him out of the cabin. On my way back I reflected that he hadn't denied my judgment of him and everything I'd said was therefore likely the truth. He was a rather handsome man of forty or so, even dressed in the casual clothing I'd seen him in. I could still taste the tang of the cider. I liked that, too.

There was a red-and-white bicycle propped against the side of the mansion when I returned. Olga had been watching for me and opened the door as I climbed the half dozen porch steps.

"Got a visitor," she said. "Oliver Hayden. He lives half a mile down the road, closest neighbor we got."

Mr. Hayden emerged from the drawing room where he'd been waiting and I greeted him happily.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Hayden," I said. "Perhaps, as a neighbor, you can help me."

He was a distinguished-looking man with white hair and a dark pencil mustache which, I thought, had to be dyed. There was the appearance of the aristocrat about him—he looked like a man who was accustomed to giving orders and being waited upon. He was possessed of a generous mouth and a rather large nose, neither of which distracted from a ruggedly handsome appearance.

"Miss Craig," he bowed slightly, "Olga has told me of your reasons for being here. I find them very interesting. I might add that you seem quite young for a psychologist."

"Perhaps I am," I admitted, "but I have been told I know my subject. Please come into the drawing room where we can talk."

"Thank you," he said.

I sat down on one of the small loveseats. Mr. Hayden carried a straight-backed chair over to face me.

"Back problem," he said. "Overstuffed chairs give me trouble."

As his weight descended on the chair, all four legs promptly fanned outward and Mr. Hayden wound up sitting practically on the floor, his face a study in amazement and embarrassment.

"What in the world—" I began.

"A trick! A joke! Damn him! His foul tricks live after him!"

"So that's it," I said. I offered him my hand to help him up, but he managed without me. This time he sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs, taking no chances

with any of the others. The one that had collapsed under him was already upright again, looking as sturdy as any regular straight chair.

"The legs are on springs," Hayden said, still angry. "Dalton could think of more ways to plague a person, or actually hurt him, than any man I ever knew. And he enjoyed watching his jokes take place."

"Yes," I said, "I've been told that—"

I stopped short because a loud, raucous laugh rang through the room—it seemed to come from everywhere. I suspected each room of the entire house was filled with it. My ears began ringing from the loudness and the grating quality of the laughter. Hayden, on the other hand, pulled himself back into the big chair and moved his arms in front of him as if he expected to be attacked. His face had gone very pale.

The laughter died away quite abruptly. My composure wasn't going to return for some time. I sat there, as frozen in fear as Mr. Hayden seemed to be. A door slammed. Olga appeared with a huge cooking spoon in one hand, raised as if to be used as a weapon.

"What was that?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"It was Dalton!" Hayden managed to say. "That was his laugh if I ever heard it."

Olga gave a loud gasp. "Yes . . . that *is* how he laughed! I remember! He would laugh and laugh. . . ." She paused. "But he's dead!"

"Not all of him," Hayden said in a voice that trembled, for the shock had not yet worn off.

Olga retreated to the more familiar kitchen; she probably felt safer there. I got up and investigated the contents of an ornate sideboard, and presently discovered what I was looking for. From several bottles I selected one filled with cognac. I poured a stiff drink for Mr. Hayden and a smaller one for myself. I think it was the first time in my life I felt I needed a drink.

"Thank you." Hayden accepted the glass, but he didn't

drink immediately—his hands shook so much he was unable to raise the glass to his lips right away. I managed to sip my drink.

"Do you actually believe that was Dalton's laughter?" I asked.

He seemed annoyed by the question. "You did hear it?"

"Of course."

"Is there anyone in this house who could laugh that way?"

I had to admit there was not. He managed the glass and drank thirstily of the potent brandy.

"There was laughter. Nobody else could have taunted us that way. It was Dalton's laugh. Therefore it was Dalton. Or his ghost."

"I have to agree it cannot be explained," I said.

"At the dinner he told us he'd come back."

"I understand he did. Do you feel up to talking about the dinner, Mr. Hayden?"

"Why not? Though I doubt there's any more to talk about than you already know. Dalton informed us his physical and mental health was perfect and that he intended to kill himself."

"Do you believe he was murdered, Mr. Hayden?"

"I don't know. He loved to play his damned jokes, but I doubt very much he'd go so far as to kill himself to pull one of them."

"Then you regard his death as murder?"

"Yes, I do, but you're going to ask me now if I suspect anyone. I suspect everyone. Dalton was a universally hated louse. I can tell you this—there wasn't a tear shed when we discovered he was dead."

I said, "A little while ago a friend of mine, taking Dalton's tape back to the city, was killed by a rifle bullet. The state police regarded it as an accident—a hunter's stray bullet. But I discovered Dalton's cassette had been taken from the recording machine. Nothing else was missing. In my opinion, this was also murder."

He nodded. "Olga told me. I can't account for that."

"Do you know of any reason why someone would kill to get possession of the cassette?"

"I do not. It seems fantastic that this has happened. All of it, from Dalton's speech to this moment when you're questioning me."

"Well, Mr. Hayden, I appreciate your cooperation."

He rose and looked askance at the chair that had collapsed under him. "I'd like to add that bit of furniture to my fireplace," he said. "Please be careful that no one else sits in it."

"I'll take it upstairs and put it in one of the extra rooms," I said.

"Turn it upside down. Someone could get hurt by that unfunny joke. Good night, Miss Craig. You can find me at home almost any time, and if there is a way I can help, call on me."

I accompanied him to the door and watched him put clips on his trouser cuffs, mount his bike, and ride off. Fortunately the bicycle had a light; it was quite dark by now.

When I closed the door Olga announced that she'd fixed a bit of a bedtime snack for me. I insisted she set the kitchen table and dine with me. I had no desire for formality, especially if it meant I'd be alone in any one of these rooms. I could still hear that wild laughter ringing through the house.

In my room I bathed in warm water heated only by the boiler in the old-fashioned kitchen stove. It sufficed and I felt better. I was in bed by ten-thirty and I picked up the book I'd carried from downstairs. I moved the lamp table closer, turned up the wick as far as I could, and settled back to read.

My mind was not on the words. I scarcely knew what the book was about—I couldn't pull my mind away from the horrors that might erupt in this house at any time.

I kept wondering if the laughter really was that of a dead man. Or was it some trick set up by Dalton prior to his death? I tried to forget this puzzle and the fear it created by concentrating on the reason I was here. Had Dalton killed himself or had he been murdered? A great deal depended on the answer to that question.

Dalton was a jokester, reveling in causing embarrassment to others, but to kill himself as part of a joke didn't make sense. What would he have to laugh at then?

More and more I became convinced he'd been murdered. At first we'd all been sure he had committed suicide, probably because of some terminal illness he'd mentioned to no one. However, an autopsy had been done on him—and most carefully—and it had proved he'd been bodily

sound. There had been no indication of any illness that might give him pain or cause him to contemplate death.

But a murderer must have a motive, and I'd found none—if I discounted the fact that Dalton had been universally hated and feared. Six men had been seated at the table when Dalton died, but if a lethal capsule had been substituted for one that was to be part of his joke, that substitution must have been made prior to the beginning of the banquet. No one seated at the table at the time of death could use that fact as an alibi.

In the morning I would have to contact the coroner and the district attorney and have them send Dalton's widow and his daughter back here, along with anyone else who might be able to throw some light on what had happened. I also made up my mind that even if I was scared half to death half a dozen times a day, I would not give up until I had definitely determined the truth about Dalton's death.

I finally began to doze off, and, being unfamiliar with the possible danger from a lamp left burning all night, I raised up on one elbow, turned the wick down, and then blew out the lamp. I felt I'd just gone back in time fifty or sixty years.

It began right after I settled down for the night. At first the sound didn't alarm me. I knew that most old houses did creak and groan during the silences of the night. But this sound began to develop into something far more concrete. There were footsteps in the corridor, approaching my door. They went on by and I heard someone going downstairs. It was not Olga. She was heavy-set and already I knew the sound of her footsteps. Presently the steps came back up the stairs. They stopped outside my door and I thought I heard the heavy breathing of someone affected by the climb to the second floor. I was reaching for the lamp when I realized that to get it lit required the use of a match and I had none. At the same time that I realized I was confined to darkness, the laughter began—very softly at first, but it grew into the laughter of a man who might have been so amused he'd be slapping his thigh

about now. Was it the same laughter that Oliver Hayden and I had heard earlier? I couldn't be sure.

It was certainly laughter that did not spread mirth to anyone else—it filled me with terror and I refrained from screaming with difficulty. I finally slipped out of bed—it required all the nerve I could summon to accomplish this. I moved softly across the floor, trying to think of something I could use as a weapon. There wasn't a thing, and if there had been I'd never have been able to find it in the darkness.

I reached the door, closed my fingers around the knob. The laughter sounded as if the man stood inches away. I didn't know what I'd find, but I was going to surprise him by opening the door. The knob was turned as far as it would go now. I took a silent, long breath, pulled the door wide—and I looked out into a corridor as dark as my own room.

The laughter had died abruptly as I pulled the door open and it did not resume. I felt my way back to the lamp table, opened a drawer, and found matches. I lit the lamp, turned it all the way up and carried it into the corridor.

There was no one in sight. Of course so much time had elapsed while I was getting the lamp lit that whoever had been out there had had time to get away. I marched along the corridor, carrying the lamp. I opened several bedroom doors without seeing even a shadow.

I stopped by my room to find my slippers and to put on a robe. Then I went downstairs and searched—without result. The front door was not only locked, it was bolted—and so was the door from the kitchen. Nobody could have gotten inside by either door. If a window had been used the intruder must have left the same way. I toured the first floor and tested the windows. Every one was locked.

I returned to my own room; I was half tempted to waken Olga so I might have some company, but I decided against it. But I left the lamp lit when I returned to bed.

I don't know when I fell asleep, but it must not have been long afterward and it was daylight when I awakened. The lamp was still burning. I sat up, trying to orient myself.

Then I remembered the weird footsteps and the laughter.

I got out of bed and walked to the dresser to pick up a comb. That evil face leered at me when I was in the precise position where it could materialize. I felt like breaking the mirror and I made my mind that I'd change rooms as I'd told Olga I would. Then I thought how silly that would be—every room in this house probably had one of Dalton's jokes arranged in it, and this might be the least awful of them. At any rate I knew it was there, and harmless, and I was determined that it would not frighten me again.

If Olga had heard the steps and laughter during the night she didn't mention them as she served me a robust breakfast. I ate heartily—fear seemed to give me an appetite.

Shortly after I finished breakfast my Porsche drove up, followed by a state police car. I signed for the vehicle and the trooper who drove it went off in the other car as a passenger. The only damage was a slightly bent fender, and if there'd been any bloodstains the police had carefully removed them. Still, I hesitated to get into the car. Professor Garvin had died behind that wheel. Perhaps I'd be the next target.

I told Olga I'd be gone for awhile and I drove to the village, shuddering slightly as I passed the spot where Garvin had been killed. In the village I used a pay phone in the drugstore to call the coroner.

"What's going on up there?" he asked. "Was the professor killed by accident or was it deliberate?"

"It was no accident," I said. "The cassette was stolen from the car he drove—I don't know who was responsible. But listen—this house of Dalton's seems like the playground of a demon. It's full of tricks and jokes and somebody I haven't been able to find or even see keeps roaring with laughter."

"Are you serious, Alison?" he asked.

"Never more so. There are a number of unexplained things here. I hate to bring in the supernatural, but if I

wasn't scientifically trained, that's what I'd think it was. Dalton did say he'd come back, you know."

"Yes, that's so. I'm intrigued, Alison."

"Come on up," I suggested, "and the intrigue will turn into fear."

"Will you stay under those conditions?"

"I'm staying under any conditions. I'm not only scared, Doctor, I'm mad. Can you arrange for Dalton's widow and his daughter to get here as soon as possible? I've been trying to get a line on Dalton and what happened here the night he died, but I can't get much out of the people I've talked to so far."

"I'll have them there as quickly as possible."

"They'll be frightened, too," I said. "I haven't started a report yet because I've got very little to write about, but I'll file something today or tomorrow. Thank you, Doctor, for helping me."

"It's a wonder you can actually thank me for sending you up there. Professor Garvin will be buried on Wednesday. If you wish to come to the funeral, by all means suspend your work there."

"He'd prefer me to find out who killed him and why. I'll remain here, if you don't mind. And something has just come up. There's a man staring at me. I'm in a phone booth in the village drugstore and this fellow hasn't taken his eyes off me since he came in."

"I don't blame him. Is he young and handsome?"

"That he is, Doctor. Young and handsome, and he's smiling at me now because he knows I've been talking about him. I don't think he's dangerous. Thanks again. I'll keep in touch."

I hung up and opened the phone-booth door. The young man approached me. He was at least four inches taller than I. He looked too citified to belong in this village; he wore a dark gray business suit with a white shirt and a modest tie. I liked the way he smiled. And I liked his blue eyes that brimmed with good humor.

"Good morning," he said. "I'm Dennis Marley."

"The foster son!" I exclaimed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to use that word."

"Doesn't matter. I guess I *was* sort of a foster son, come to think of it. I heard someone was in town looking into Dalton's death, but I'm surprised to learn this investigator is a very attractive girl."

"I'm Alison Craig," I told him. "Would you like to come out to the Dalton house?"

"That's what I'm here for, to try and be of some help. I heard there was a murder yesterday."

"A well-known and brilliant scientist was shot. He accompanied me here. I loved the man, and before I leave I'm going to find out who killed him and why."

"If I can do anything..."

"Thank you. Possibly you can. If you lived in that . . . that house of Dalton's, perhaps you have information I'll find useful. My car is halfway down the block."

"I came in my own." He indicated a low-slung Ferrari, black and sleek. "I'll follow."

When we reached the house his car purred smoothly as he pulled alongside. Emmet was hurrying toward us. Dennis Marley greeted him with an affectionate hug.

"I'm back," he said. "I thought I'd left here forever, but . . . here I am."

"I'll take care of your car, Mr. Marley, and I'll give it the same kind of a polish I used to. It's good to see you again." He passed fingertips over the surface of the hood. "It ain't been well polished in a long time."

"Not the way you do the work. Okay—shine it up. Now, Miss Craig, shall we go in?"

Olga greeted him warmly, too. It was easy to see that he was loved here as much as Dalton had been hated. We made ourselves comfortable in the drawing room—I made certain he didn't pull up a chair that might collapse beneath him.

"Now," he said, "where do we begin?"

"Let me explain that I'm doing a psychological autopsy

on Mr. Dalton. By this means we hope to determine if his death was suicide or murder. We know it could not have been an accident."

"It was murder, Miss Craig."

"Tell me how you're so sure of that."

"It's easy. Dalton was a rich man with everything to live for."

"His family had just left him," I reminded him.

"All the more reason why he didn't kill himself. He'd been trying to get rid of them for years."

"Then there was no despondency when they left him?"

"There was nothing but secret happiness. He didn't like his daughter, and his wife was a nag and a spendthrift. Dalton might have stood up under the nagging, but not the way she was spending his money. However, he did resent the fact that they just walked out."

"Tell me what your position in this household was, exactly, Mr. Marley."

"My dad died when I was about five. A few years later—when I was getting out of high school—Mom died. I was left a little money, but not enough to finance college, so I made up my mind to go to work. Then Dalton sent for me. He told me he and Dad had been good friends and he didn't intend to see that I failed to get an education for lack of money."

"Wasn't that peculiar, when you think of the way he resented his wife spending his money?"

"Perhaps. I can't be sure—and certainly I resent nothing. I got through college, majoring in electronics, and went to work for Mr. Dalton. I owe his memory a great deal. I will not stand by and see his reputation blackened, even though I know he was universally disliked—and I can't say I really liked the man either. That is, I don't care for what he considered to be amusing. Once he took me fishing and told me to row my own boat onto the lake. It began to leak. There was a hole in the bottom, plugged with something the water quickly melted. I tried to row ashore and bail frantically too; meanwhile the boat filled and Dalton

was on the bank rocking with laughter. It was no joke to me—I'm not a good swimmer. I made it and I felt like punching him in the nose, but common sense told me to join in his laughter and be the big hero. That's the kind of man he was."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Marley?" I asked.

"Are you kidding?"

"Mr. Dalton told his dinner guests he'd come back if he could."

"Yes, that was to be expected. He was a student of spiritualism, but in my opinion he only studied it to find some new wrinkles for another joke. I don't think he believed in it."

"Last evening a neighbor, Mr. Hayden, visited me. He sat down in a chair that collapsed under him. One of Dalton's jokes. And immediately afterward, the house was filled with ear-splitting laughter—and there was no one here to provide it."

"Oh, come now, there must have been some answer...."

"Then last night I was awakened by footsteps in the corridor, and then someone started toughing outside my door. When I got there, nobody was in the corridor. And no outsider could have gotten in the house because everything was bolted and locked."

Dennis pondered that for a moment. "I don't know what to think, Miss Craig. I'm not denying your word...."

"Talk to Mr. Hayden. He was here too. Ask Olga about that episode. It was early in the evening. It happened just as I told you. And I do *not* feel at ease in this house."

"I don't wonder. Olga stays all night?"

"Yes, thank heaven."

"May I occupy one of the rooms? I'd like to be of whatever help I can. After all, I once held Dalton in the same regard I'd have for my father if he'd lived. Mother trusted him. I benefited from his charity and I owe him something. I'd feel better if I was instrumental in learning who killed him."

"Then you're really convinced it was murder?"

"Without doubt. Being a psychologist you know that certain types will never take their own lives no matter how great the pressure becomes. Dalton was one of those. He was not a soft man."

"So I've already concluded. And I hope you can convince me he could not have killed himself. Anyway, I'm here to learn the truth, and I shall be delighted to have you stay. I'll feel much safer in an occupied house, especially after what's already happened. Mrs. Dalton and the daughter will be coming here, probably tomorrow.... May I ask you one more thing?"

"Ask me anything you wish, Miss Craig."

"What will you do now that he's dead? Or has he provided for you?"

"I don't know. The matter was never discussed. I intend to stay on in his firm. It's too big an enterprise to dissolve just because he's dead. I'm sure Mrs. Dalton will consent to the firm's staying in business. After all, it will bring her a very good income."

"Did you have any prior knowledge of what Mr. Dalton intended to do at the dinner? Or even a hint of it?"

"None. You'll have to accept my word for it. I wasn't invited. I must say that when I did hear what had happened, I didn't believe it."

"It's true, all right," I said. "Do you know of any reason why he might have taped those last words of his?"

"No. I'm certain he was never given to taping any of his speeches. Not that he made many of them, but he didn't use a tape machine. You said the tape was stolen?"

"Professor Garvin was found dead and the tape was gone—stolen. That means the tape is important to someone."

"I can't understand this. I was told the tape had been checked."

"It was," I said. "I heard it too, and so far as I can see there was nothing on it to make the tape dangerous to whoever killed him."

"Maybe," he said with a smile, "his ghost came back for it."

"Mr. Marley, don't laugh about this. It isn't one of Dalton's practical jokes."

"I'm sorry." He was instantly apologetic. "You did hear footsteps and unexplained laughter."

"I must say that if you'd heard it, Mr. Marley, you'd begin to wonder as I did. As Mr. Hayden did. I've never believed in ghosts. I find it almost impossible to believe in them now. But I would like to know how a dead man's laughter can come from nowhere days after his death."

"It was rude of me to make that foolish crack."

"You *do* believe I heard the laughter and the footsteps?" I asked.

"Yes, I do. It isn't necessary to ask Hayden to confirm what you said. You're far too intelligent a girl to make statements like that without something to back them up. Maybe the laughter can be explained somehow. I don't know. However, I will not question but that you heard it."

"Thank you, Mr. Marley," I said. I was happy that he believed me. I'd wanted him to, though I wasn't certain just why.

"It's incredible," he said. "A place like this haunted! I don't go for it, Miss Craig."

"Mr. Marley, in my opinion the atmosphere of this house is absolutely conducive to becoming a playground for the ghost of the man who once lived here."

Dennis looked about the drawing room. "Well, it could be you're right. I've grown used to the place, but it is dreary. However," his voice brightened, "the outside is perfect. Have you used the pool yet?"

"I've never even seen it," I said.

"It's on the west side of the house. You can't see it from the front or the rear, even though it's Olympic size and you can row a boat on it. One thing about Dalton, he had big ideas—and the money to indulge himself."

"I really haven't had too much time to investigate the

grounds," I admitted. "It's just as well. I didn't bring a bathing suit."

"Well, I doubt that you thought the work you were sent here to do called for one. Lets go see what the pool looks like anyway."

He led me to a French door on the west side of the drawing room. There was a tall thick hedge there, and behind this lay the well-sheltered pool. The near end of it came almost up to the side of the house; the entire thing was hidden by the hedge.

"Dalton had the diving board tricked up," Dennis said. "He could make it fall away when someone was just ready to dive."

"Yes, I heard about that. And about how his wife left him because she became a victim."

"That's right. Of course there were a lot of other things that bugged her, but the diving board was the last straw. I can't say I blamed her."

"What's she like?" I asked casually as we strolled around the concrete apron of the pool.

"Janet? It's difficult to say. She's a handsome woman, and she knows it. She enjoyed her husband's money to an extent I never believed he'd tolerate. I don't think there was any hanky-panky on her part. She isn't the type. Now, Valerie is somewhat different. She dates as often as she gets asked, which is plenty."

"Have you dated her?" I asked.

"Sure, but not often. She's too possessive. And demanding. Whatever she wants to do her escort had better want to do it too, or she'll walk away from him. By that I mean she'll be at one party and suddenly decide she's bored and wants to go to another. Which is bound to be equally boring, but no matter. Valerie is on the move and that's what she wants. I'll be sorry for the man who marries her."

My watch indicated it was lunchtime so I led him back into the house. Olga had set the dining-room table with place mats for two and she provided us with an excellent

salad and hot breads. I found Dennis Marley easy to talk to and I already liked him. We agreed that I should buy a swimsuit the next time I was in town.

After lunch we went up to the widow's walk atop the house; from it we could look down at the patently fake battlements and the minaret, which looked tawdry at this close distance. Directly below the widow's walk we could see the pool, with part of the house beautifully reflected in its artificially blue water. In the distance the sea rolled in calmly upon the rock-strewn beach.

"Up here," I said, "you lose the eerie feeling you get when you're confined by the walls. I wonder why Mr. Dalton built such a strange house."

"He was a contrary man. He liked to make people wonder at everything he did, but under all that wild laughter and his psychotic desire to play tricks on people, he was a shrewd man. Nobody could fool him for long. Take me, for instance. If I'd ever decided to try to get something out of him by being very clever, he'd have sensed it right away...."

"I don't believe his motives toward me were entirely charitable. He often said he was going to live a long time, and my guess is that he planned to educate me and eventually install me as a big man in his firm. I'd be a man he could trust and when I was well entrenched he'd be able to release some of the strong grip he had on the business. ... Whatever his motives, I'm grateful to him."

"I don't blame you, Mr. Marley," I said. "And you strengthen my belief that Mr. Dalton did not kill himself."

"I do?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

"You just said he used to tell you he intended to live a long time. A man who says things like that usually means them, and would never let himself be brought to the verge of suicide. Not even financial reverses, a terminal illness, or family trouble could make him take an easy way out. He was murdered, Mr. Marley, and I'm going to prove it if I possibly can."

"I'm glad you've come to that conclusion. And I've

just come to one. We shouldn't be so formal. My name is Dennis. Call me that so I can call you Alison. We may be together for some time if we try to prove that Dalton was murdered."

"Of course," I said. "Shall we go down now?"

He led me to the roof door and on down to the drawing room. "I've never known a deputy coroner before," he said. "And you're such an attractive one."

"Thank you." I said.

"I can forewarn you of one thing. Valerie isn't going to like you. She dislikes anyone who is more attractive than she."

"Oh, I hope not. I need the cooperation of everyone, especially the family. But speaking of my being a deputy, I'd better begin working at it. I've got a report to make, so I'll have to ask to be excused for a couple of hours."

"That's all right. I'm going down to the garage and see how Emmet is coming along with the car."

I elected to write my report in the upstairs library. Apparently Dalton had made good use of the room, for the leather chair was comfortably indented and the edges of the large desk needed polish. On the desk were a clock with large numerals, a leather desk pad, and a lamp with two wicks under a wide, green glass shade.

I began writing the report in detail, but presently I found I was having trouble concentrating—my mind kept slipping from the formal language of the report to idle thoughts about Dennis. Idle at first—and then I realized I missed him. We'd known each other only a few hours; I had no knowledge of who he really was or where he came from; and he knew no more about me. He had left me an hour ago and he was not more than a few hundred yards away. Still, I missed him. The feeling was an alien one to me. I discovered I had to restrain myself from going down to the garage for the simple purpose of being with him again.

With some effort I completed the report and got it

ready for mailing. I tucked the envelope in my handbag so I wouldn't forget it the next time I went to the village.

... I wondered if he felt the same way about me. Or was I no more than a silly girl whose ego was inflated because I possessed official documents making me more important than I really was, or wanted to be?

At least Dennis was close by and he was going to remain in the house, which was comforting. If Dalton had managed to return to haunt this house, I'd have someone to run to.

It was late afternoon when the first of our visitors arrived. A large black sedan brought Janet Dalton and her daughter Valerie up to the house.

Janet Dalton was a woman with a fine figure for her middle years, an unwrinkled face, and, unless it was cleverly dyed, not a trace of gray in her hair. She was a somewhat small person and her features were small to the point of being almost dainty.

Valerie, on the other hand, had inherited her father's height and his lean face. She was about my age, and was slim and attractive without being really pretty. If she'd possessed an even temper and a sense of humor, she might have been a charming young lady. I discovered promptly enough that she lacked charm to the point of being impudent, and she struck me as being irresponsible.

"I'm Alison Craig." I introduced myself after they'd stepped out of the car, which Valerie had driven. "Thank you for coming up here."

"You don't have to thank us. We came of our own accord," Valerie said tartly. "What I'd like to know is, who gave you the authority to take over our house?"

"Valerie, there's a question as to the cause of your father's death," Janet said quietly. "This young lady is supposed to determine just what happened."

"There were a dozen witnesses. Who doubts what happened?" Valerie was challenging the whole concept of my being here.

"I haven't submitted a final report yet," I said, "because I'm still not sure what happened. I'm here to find out and I have the authority to remain as long as it is necessary. If I inconvenience you, Miss Dalton, I do beg your pardon."

"Are we the only ones who showed?" Valerie demanded.

"Mr. Marley came this morning. He's down at the garage now."

"Now that," Valerie said enthusiastically, "is worth coming back for. Help Mama with the bags, will you, Miss Craig?"

She hurried back to the car and drove it down to the garage. I didn't wait to see her pull up, nor did I witness her reunion with Dennis. I did help Janet with the seven large bags that had been crammed into the back seat and the trunk of the car.

"Valerie is an impulsive and spoiled child," Janet said. "I apologize for her rude manners. May we have a talk soon, Miss Craig?"

"The moment we're inside," I told her.

Olga appeared to help. Her greeting to Janet was quite cool; she made no effort to be cordial.

"Olga doesn't like me," Janet said. "She thinks I'm responsible for most of my late husband's troubles—and, I'm sure, for his death."

"I'm sure it's not that, Mrs. Dalton. Shall we use the drawing room?"

"Of course. What, then, do you think makes her so hostile?"

"She believes you shouldn't have gone off and left your husband alone."

Janet settled herself in one of the large chairs. "I'm sorry I did now. Of course I'm sorry. He might be alive now if I'd remained. I don't know what you have discovered about my husband, Miss Craig. I do know that you were sent here for the express purpose of digging into his character, and I'm certain you've found it to be quite an assignment. My husband was not an ordinary man."

"Yes," I said. "I've come to that conclusion!"

"I sometimes think he was slightly mad. He was a serious, well-intentioned, and highly successful businessman. But he was also a mischievous child with his jokes. What he should have done was put on clown make-up and joined a circus for awhile."

"I agree that that might have rid him of his desire to laugh and, possibly, to be laughed at."

"Have you reached any conclusion about the manner of his death? I would appreciate knowing, if you're permitted to reveal any results of your investigation."

"As of this moment I am inclined to believe he was murdered, that he did not commit suicide."

"You're going to have a difficult time, Miss Craig. To find a murderer you undoubtedly need a motive, and there are so many people with so many motives. . . . It's going to be an impossibility."

"Perhaps," I said. "Have you heard that your husband said he'd try to come back from whatever spirit world he found himself in?"

"He was interested in mediums and ghosts. I think he might have made some such statement more than once."

"We have reason—nothing definite—to believe that he may have actually come back."

Her face grew suddenly white with fear. "What do you mean by that? Why do you say such an awful thing?"

"Because there have been certain happenings in this house that seem to be the work of a ghost. Mind you, I said 'seem,' and . . ."

I jumped up to try to prevent her from completely slipping out of the chair. She'd given a small, hoarse cry and begun to slide to the floor.

Janet Dalton, stretched out on one of the oversize divans, propped up against a mound of pillows, was feeling somewhat better. I had provided her with a small portion of brandy, which she accepted and drank like a veteran.

"Where is that daughter of mine?" she complained. "She's the most remiss girl in all the world. Pays no attention to me. Absolutely none. Here I am, feeling wretched after my fainting spell, and she's nowhere about. I have to depend upon strangers like you, Miss . . . whatever your name is."

"Alison Craig," I said. "Your daughter went down to the garage to meet Dennis Marley, remember? . . . I take it they are old friends."

"They are old sweethearts," she corrected me. She managed to wriggle into a more erect sitting position. "You did mention ghosts, didn't you? Before I fainted? I don't enjoy even *talking* about ghosts. The idea frightens me."

"That's what made you faint," I said. "But there have been strange things happening. I can't account for them, and we should be prepared for more."

"You believe in the supernatural, don't you?"

"I *didn't*, Mrs. Dalton."

"Clifford said he would come back. . . . Do you really think he has?"

"I don't know," I replied vaguely. I was getting worried about Dennis and Valerie. I wandered over to a window from which I had a view almost all the way down to the garage. I didn't want Mrs. Dalton to recognize my concern. Dennis and Valerie were walking back toward the house, arm in arm, moving slowly and evidently enjoying one another's company. I hated Valerie at that moment.

"Your daughter is on her way back," I told Mrs. Dalton.

"Well, I'm grateful for that. Now I want you to stay here, Miss Alison. Or is it Craig? Whatever—I want you to stay with me because Valerie and I want to hear the full story of how you've come to be here."

"Very well," I said. "I shall be happy to explain."

She swung her legs off the divan to sit on the edge of it. "And tell me more about those manifestations. The things that happened that you can't account for."

"Your husband," I said, "as you know only too well, was addicted to playing practical jokes and laughing uproariously at the results. Mr. Hayden was here yesterday and sat on a trick chair that collapsed under him. This was followed by loud laughter that rang all through the house. Mr. Hayden felt certain it was your husband's laughter."

She looked about the huge room apprehensively, as if she expected the laughter to begin again. "Oliver Hayden knows very well what my husband's laugh sounded like. He would not be mistaken."

"Then if that is true," I said, somewhat grimly, because I was beginning to feel grim, "we have a ghost in this house."

"I don't think I can remain," she said. "I'd be scared to death."

"So far the laughter hasn't been harmful," I said quickly. "It's not in the same category with the murder of Professor Garvin."

"Murder? Professor Garvin? What's that about?"

"You haven't been told? Professor Garvin met me here when I came here to begin work—he briefed me on the details of the case. There was a cassette your husband

left, and Professor Garvin was taking it back to the city with him. On the way back he was shot and killed instantly, and the cassette was missing from the recording machine when he was found. It was a murder, Mrs. Dalton. The wanton killing of a sweet, inoffensive, and wonderful man whose importance in the world of psychology was well known."

"No one told me about that. What was the meaning of it?"

"I wish I knew the true meaning, Mrs. Dalton," I said.

I could elaborate no further, for Dennis opened the door and let Valerie sweep through. She glared at me and paid no attention to her mother.

"Valerie," Mrs. Dalton said, "I fainted a few moments ago."

"Miss Craig." Valerie addressed me without answering her mother or showing the slightest interest in her statement. "I want you out of here immediately."

Dennis watched me with an utterly bland expression. It was impossible to tell whose side he was on.

"I presume you know why I am here," I said.

"Dennis told me, and a more asinine reason I have never heard. You may pack at once."

"I have legal authority to investigate the death of your father," I said. "If necessary I shall exert that authority, Miss Dalton. I should think you'd welcome such an investigation, in view of the strange way your father died."

"My father killed himself," she said. "What's there to investigate? My mother and I inherited this estate. We can determine whom we wish to visit us here—and you are not included, Miss Craig."

"Do you mind if I get a legal opinion on that?" I asked.

"Don't bother. Our lawyer is on his way—he should arrive any moment. His opinion is the only one I'm interested in."

"Miss Dalton," I said, "more than the death of your father is now involved. An important scientist was murdered moments after he left this house. That mystery is

going to be investigated too, and I'm sure you can't stop it."

Why didn't Dennis say something? I'd have respected him even if he'd taken Valerie's side. I wouldn't have liked it, of course. . . . But he remained mute and impassive. It was an attitude I couldn't have expected of him.

Valerie seemed to think she'd exhausted the subject. She went to stand beside Dennis—very close to him—and slid her hand under his arm.

"Dennis, let's take a swim. I want to get away from the stuffiness of this house for a little while."

"If you wish," Dennis said, and he gave a mild shrug of his shoulders for my benefit. They left the room and I heard them going upstairs. Apparently Dennis had a swimsuit on the premises. I sat down, angry, frustrated, and in a quandary—what I should do about this situation? Perhaps Valerie could order me out of this house. She couldn't compel me to cease my work, however, and if I was ordered to leave I'd continue my investigation from the village. I intended to get some answers.

"She's a headstrong girl," Mrs. Dalton commented.

"What?" I asked. I'd almost forgotten her presence.

"My daughter—she is willful. I can't do anything with her."

"Yes, I noticed that. She ordered me to leave. I doubt she has the authority to do that, but perhaps you have. What is your attitude in this matter, Mrs. Dalton?"

"Oh . . . I don't know. I have to go along with Valerie. She's most unpleasant if I defy her. Yes, I think you will have to leave."

"Well, I won't go before your lawyer arrives and reads the documents I have authorizing me to make this investigation. Meantime, I'm going back to your husband's study—I've been working there."

"I . . . don't think you should, Miss Craig. Valerie will be very angry."

"Mrs. Dalton, I don't care if she's angry or not. I won't

be intimidated by her, and I will not leave until I'm convinced that I have no right to be here."

She sighed and relaxed. "Whatever you wish, Miss Craig."

I flounced out of the room, almost mad enough to go out to the pool and confront Valerie. But instead I went up to the widow's walk and looked down into the pool. Dennis was swimming the length of it with long, easy strokes. Valerie sat on the edge of the pool, letting her shapely legs dangle in the water. Her bikini (and scanty it was) was not even wet.

I went down to the library, sat down behind Dalton's desk, and again tried to decide what to do. If there'd been a phone, the answers would have been easy to obtain. A call to the coroner or the district attorney could settle the matter. . . . Idly, I began sifting through Dalton's papers. He had apparently thrown little away—small bits of paper, sometimes scribbled upon, were crammed into all the drawers. There was an address book that I flipped through at random; I found it totally uninteresting until I came to the last section, the listings under the letters XYZ. There I found the name of one Elvira Zebow, with a phone number and a note that she was a medium and a spiritualist. I'd had no idea he'd gone so far as to contact a medium. Perhaps there were others in the book.

Downstairs the front door opened and closed. I got up to look out the window. A large white sedan had pulled up—I hadn't heard it, possibly because I'd been too intent on studying Dalton's papers. I heard a man's voice and then that of Mrs. Dalton. Presently I heard another door open and close. Valerie's voice joined that of her mother.

When I heard someone approaching the library I knew who it must be: attorney Walter Thorpe must have been the driver of the white car.

It was Valerie who opened the library door without knocking. She glared at me! "You have no right to go through my father's papers," she said. "Mr. Thorpe agrees with me."

"Let's allow your lawyer to tell me that himself," I said. I left the library and went downstairs, followed by Valerie. In the drawing room Dennis joined us. I addressed myself to Mr. Thorpe, the lawyer.

I said, "Mr. Thorpe, my name is Alison Craig. I was sent here to study the death of Mr. Dalton. I am a psychologist and I was working in conjunction with Professor Garvin, who was murdered soon after leaving this house. I presume you are aware of that?"

"Yes, it's all over the village. I'm not concerned with that, Miss Craig, reprehensible as his death might be. I am concerned with your status in this house."

I opened my handbag and presented him with the documents furnished me by the coroner. He studied them carefully and handed them back.

"I'm impressed," he said, "but as an attorney, I can tell you that you have no right to take over this household. Valerie and her mother desire that you leave the premises as quickly as possible."

"May I get my own legal opinion, Mr. Thorpe?"

"Of course, but you'll have to go to the village to use the telephone. Mr. Dalton would have no phone in this house."

"I know," I said. "I'll drive there immediately."

"I'll drive you," Dennis said. "My car is right outside."

"Thank you, Mr. Marley," I said in my best chilly manner. "I prefer . . ." I happened to glance at Valerie, whose eyes were shooting a combination of dismay and anger at Dennis. I changed my mind abruptly. "Thank you. I was going to say I prefer to drive myself, but I've been to the village so little. . ."

"Let's go then," Dennis said, "so we can settle this question of your right to stay in the house."

He led me out to the car and we were soon traveling at a modest rate of speed toward the village. There was a turn-off on this lonely road, and, quite unexpectedly, Dennis headed into it and shut off the motor. I didn't know what to make of this.

"You're angry with me," he said. "I don't want you to be."

"Dennis, I'm not angry. Really. But Valerie exhausts me with her combination of arrogance and dislike for me."

"It's true she doesn't like you."

"I've done nothing to rate her anger. I barely know the girl. Yes, I moved into the house, but with serious purpose and intent. I've done no harm there, and I may be able to clear up a mystery that affects Valerie and her mother—and a number of other people."

"She's sore at you because of something I told her."

I faced him squarely. "What could you have told her to make her angry with me?"

"I told her I was deeply in love with you," he said. His manner was so casual it might have infuriated me under other circumstances. At the moment I was too dumbfounded to do anything but stare at him, as if I wasn't certain I'd heard him correctly.

"I'm in love with you," he repeated. "She doesn't like that, because she thought she could make me fall in love with her. An impossibility, even if you hadn't come into my life."

"Dennis," I said when I finally found my voice, "why didn't you tell me?"

"I just did."

"But before now ..."

"I was afraid you'd think I was an idiot. We've known one another only a few hours."

"Then I'm an idiot, too. Because I've fallen in love with you."

"How could you?"

"You fell in love With me in just a few hours," I reminded him.

He gave one long sigh and I was in his arms. We kissed for the first time and I knew I'd made no mistake.

"I am an idiot," he said. "I was sure you couldn't be in love with me."

"You're crazy," I said with a silly little laugh. "I was so

jealous when I saw you with Valerie, saw you swimming and her in that devastatingly brief bikini."

"String type," he said.

"Whatever it was. I . . . think it's the silly season for me, too. I went up to the widow's walk to look down at the pool because I didn't want to be seen snooping. And I was. I admit it. If you'd made a pass at her I'd have looked for a loose shingle or something to throw at you. Dennis . . . what are we going to do? She's bound to make things unpleasant for me—and you."

"I don't much care what she thinks or does. Do you—really?"

"I suppose not," I said. I settled comfortably in his arms. "Not as long as I feel the way I do now."

"If she throws one of us out, she throws both of us out," he said with a grin. "And that reminds me, we'd better go get an opinion on this before the Augusta office closes for the afternoon."

I kissed him again and then moved away so he could drive. We were both silent during the rest of the brief ride. I suppose we were too engrossed in digesting these statements of love and getting used to the idea. I did love him—I knew that now. With this man I would have a happy and wonderful life, cherishing the warmth and comfort he could grant me. My whole being soared at the thought. I moved closer to him and let my head rest against his shoulder.

I used the telephone in the lobby of the village inn. The coroner was upset and angry when I told him what had happened.

"I'm not a lawyer," he said, "but I'm not accustomed to having my orders interfered with. It's important that we establish whether Dalton killed himself or was murdered. Hang on while I get the D.A. on another line. Be right back."

I waited three or four minutes. Dennis, watching me from outside the booth, began to look nervous.

"Alison." The coroner came back on my wire. "You go back there and tell Thorpe to get in touch with the D.A."

You do have authority to examine any possession of the deceased and Thorpe will be told just that. You just stay on in the house until Thorpe talks to the D.A. Go back and go about your assignment."

"Thank you, Doctor. I wouldn't mind being thrown out so much if it wasn't for the murder of Professor Garvin. I know his death is directly connected with whatever conspiracy surrounds the death of Dalton. I'm sending a report as soon as I get out of this phone booth. A detailed one. And I'll compile another this evening if possible."

"What's your opinion so far, Alison?"

"I haven't taken up any psychological factors yet—not enough time—but I think Dalton was murdered. My report lists several reasons why I think so. I'll keep in touch, and thank you."

Dennis led me to the bar, where two tall, cooling drinks were waiting for us at a corner table. "Time to relax a little," he said. "I can tell by your face you were told to defy Thorpe, and when we get back any idea of relaxing will be hopeless."

I nodded and felt at ease. "You're right. Even though I've got the law behind me, it won't be easy to make them realize that. But Thorpe is going to get the word from the D.A."

"Good. If they convince him you have the authority to stay, the rest of them won't try so hard to get rid of us."

"The rest of them?" I asked. "Are there others besides Valerie and her mother?"

"Everyone who was at the table when Dalton died. They'll be back. They have to come back because of Dalton's statement that hell supply directions from the spirit world that will lead someone to a hiding place where evidence to prove they're all crooks is concealed. It's Dalton's idea of a morbid joke all right, but those men he accused must be terribly worried."

I said, "Dennis, I found a phone number in Dalton's address book for a woman who seems to be a medium."

Dalton believed in the supernatural—I wonder if he contacted her?"

"Where's she from?" he asked.

"I don't know. There was just her name and a phone number. I jotted it down in case I was forced to leave the house." I found the small slip of paper in my handbag.

"It's 561-3402, no area code...."

"That's a local number. Covers this village and a couple of others close by. I wonder if we'd get anything out of her. In fact, I wonder if she could contact Dalton. Maybe he had things set up so he could reach her after his death. It's a crazy idea, but I think it's worth a phone call."

"I agree. If Dalton attended seances conducted by this woman, maybe we could get her to come to the house and hold another for the benefit of all of us. I don't believe anything would happen beyond the hokus-pokus of the usual seance tricks, but we ought to give it a try."

"I'll see what I can do. Be right back."

He walked briskly to the phone booth. It was a weird idea, but the whole case was out of the ordinary. I seemed to be getting nowhere, and it hadn't been once possible to utilize psychology to determine what had actually happened. Of course, I might find something among the documents I'd not yet examined. . . . Dennis came back with a broad smile.

"She said she sat for Dalton several times and he was always satisfied that she had contacted people who were dead. She'll be happy to conduct a seance for us tonight."

"I'm getting scared already."

"Darling, there is nothing any medium could do that I could not duplicate with the use of electronics. Mediums are all fakes, all rigged."

"What's electronics got to do with it?" I asked.

"I'm an electronics engineer, remember? That's what Dalton insisted I study and I found myself a natural for the subject. What I mean is that if this woman brings voices from the dead, I can do it too—with speakers,

amplifiers and other gadgets. If she materializes a trumpet or a tambourine, I can do that too."

"Nobody else knows this" I said thoughtfully. "It might be someone will become so scared we'll get some sort of a clue as to what happened or who may be guilty."

"It's worth the chance. Want another drink?"

I shook my head, and we went out into the afternoon sunlight and drove back to the mansion.

Oliver Hayden had arrived during our absence and had no doubt been well briefed about why we'd gone to the village. Dennis knew him well and they shook hands. In the drawing room, Valerie sat beside her mother, and Thorpe doodled at one of the tables as if he were passing time in court while the opposition charged a jury.

I said, "Mr. Thorpe, the district attorney in Augusta asks that you contact him at once. For an explanation and a talk about my duties here."

Thorpe stood up. "All right, but I want to point out that I still believe I'm right—you must leave the house. I'll attend to it immediately."

After he'd driven away Dennis made an announcement concerning the medium he'd asked to come over.

"Dennis, that was unkind and rash of you," Janet Dalton protested. "You know I can't stand the idea of someone returning after death. I don't want anything to do with the subject. You might have asked me first."

"Oh, Mother," Valerie said sharply. "It's all nonsense. But I do agree that *Miss Craig* had no right to ask that woman here."

"I asked her," Dennis said blandly. "Are you afraid she might produce something?"

"I'm not afraid of anything and you know it! Well, bring her then. Let's see you make an ass of yourself, Dennis Marley. Even if I know who persuaded you to try this fool stunt."

Oliver Hayden had listened in silence, but now he seemed to be taking my side. "Let me assure you, Valerie, that your father had an abiding faith in mediums. He was

sure there could be contact between the living and the dead. I sometimes think . . . let it go. I've said enough."

"Oliver," Janet Dalton said, "what *do* you think? If you know anything about what happened, we're certainly entitled to share in the knowledge...."

"It's nothing—just a wild thought, Janet."

"I want to hear the wild thought," Valerie broke in. "What is it, Oliver?"

"Well, I've wondered if Clifford's attitude toward death and the return of the spirit became so strong that he wanted to find out for himself...."

"You're out of your mind," Valerie said. "My father would never have done anything as silly as that. He was a hard-headed businessman. He believed in facts, not theories, and he wouldn't give up his life just to prove something. Would he now, Miss Craig? You're the great psychologist."

"He might be tempted," I said. "I don't believe it myself but it is possible. You just brought out one fact that makes it seem unlikely: you said your father was a hard-headed businessman. That's true, he certainly was. It does seem to me that he wouldn't take his own life."

"He said he was going to kill himself. He bragged about it," Valerie said angrily. "Do you contradict the words he spoke before he died—and afterward?"

"Yes, frankly, I do."

"Let it go," she retorted. "There's no sense talking to you. Go ahead and bring on your seance so we can all laugh at it. What concerns me more at the moment is dinner. What's that lazy Olga doing about it? Anybody know?"

"Val, take care with Olga," Janet warned. "We don't want her to leave, and she's threatened to do so."

"If she does," Valerie said, "Miss Craig can do the dishes and sort of earn her keep. Call me when everything is ready."

She strode out of the room and went up the stairs

two at a time. She was angry and so was I, though I managed to hold my emotions in check.

"I'll go see about dinner," I said. "Mr. Hayden, will you be staying?"

"If I'm invited," he said with a smile.

"You're invited," I said. "Valerie would say I didn't have the right to invite you, but we'll be glad of your company. Dennis, will Mr. Thorpe be back in time?"

"I'm sure of it, Alison."

I made my way to the kitchen and found Olga sweating over the old-fashioned stove filled with glowing, red-hot coals. It was stifling in the kitchen. I told her who'd be staying for dinner and she gave me a bleak nod. Apparently she'd cooked enough food for all of us. I then busied myself setting the dining-room table. I refrained from seating anyone at the head of it. I thought Mrs. Dalton might be a bit sensitive about sitting where her husband had died, though that would have been her normal place at this dinner.

Thorpe returned a few minutes before Olga swept out of the kitchen with her enormous tray laden with the first course. I sent Janet for Valerie, and we waited for them to come down. It took some time—a little annoyance no doubt engineered by Valerie. Nobody made any comments except Olga, who stepped into the dining room from time to time to see if she was needed to serve and grunted in exasperation at the delay.

"Well," Valerie asked at the beginning of the third course, "what did you learn, Mr. Thorpe?"

Thorpe looked up. "Miss Craig is authorized to conduct any reasonable search. She can order people to appear and answer her questions. We can't argue the point unless we go to court. Frankly, it's not worth that. And if it expedites her investigation to stay here, I think we should let her. Her purpose is to help us, after all."

"It seems sacrilegious to me, prying into the affairs of a dead man," Janet complained.

"Mrs. Dalton," I said, "I'm prying with a definite purpose. We have to know whether he killed himself or was murdered."

"And you're a specialist in getting such information?" Valerie said acidly. "It's a silly concept. If I want you out of here, Miss Craig, you'll get out. For the time being I won't insist. I want to see you make a complete fool of yourself with this seance."

Oliver Hayden changed the subject smoothly and dominated the conversation from there on. He was a brilliant man, an interesting speaker, and his theories about ghosts intrigued all of us, though there was nothing different in his ideas. He was sure there were no ghosts, but he ad-

mitted he had a hard time disbelieving some of the important people who'd professed to have seen them.

I thought Thorpe seemed unduly nervous. He suggested brandy with coffee and he poured generous portions for himself, Hayden, Dennis, and Valerie. Some of the brandy spilled because his hand trembled as he tipped the decanter.

Hayden, still acting to soothe the emotions that constantly threatened to get out of hand, kept an innocuous conversation going by the sheer strength of his charm and his will.

Thorpe finally rose. "I've got to go back," he said. "I've got two important appointments this evening and I'm late already. Forgive me, Janet. I am grateful for this splendid dinner. I'll be back tomorrow, and perhaps we can iron this out. Good night, all."

Valerie saw him to the door and chatted a few moments with him in the reception hall, no doubt complaining about my actions. She didn't look very happy when she returned.

"What time is this ghost lady supposed to show up?" she asked.

"She said about nine. Suggested that time so we'd be able to finish dinner," Dennis replied.

"A seance," Valerie grumbled. "Of all the fool things..."

I said, "Miss Dalton, since I've been here several things have happened that cannot be easily explained. For instance, someone laughed when Mr. Hayden fell victim to one of your father's built-in jokes. Now I never heard your father laugh, but Mr. Hayden did. Ask him what he thought of that."

"It was uncanny," Hayden said. "You recall how he used to bray like a mule when someone fell into one of his joke-traps. I sat on a chair that collapsed beneath me and this laugh boomed all through the house. Let me tell you this—no human being could have laughed that loudly. It seemed to come from everywhere and ... it was Clifford

Dalton's laugh, the one he always used to laugh at someone else's discomfiture. I can't explain this, but it happened. I was here."

Hayden's description of the incident must have gotten to everyone, because when the door knocker sounded, everyone jumped, including me. Dennis admitted a plump, motherly looking woman with straight, graying hair; she was wearing a nicely fitting housedress and low-heeled shoes. Over her shoulders she wore a black sweater.

"This is Elvira Zebow," Dennis said. "She's kindly agreed to hold a seance similar to those she held in Mr. Dalton's presence several times in the past."

"Tellus about the seances," Oliver Hayden said, "so we can be prepared for what may happen."

Elvira sat down in the chair I held for her. "Well, I don't exactly know what does happen, sir. I'm sort of not here at all. It's like I go away and whatever control reaches us takes my place. That's a funny way to explain it, but that's how I feel."

"Tonight," Valerie said, "you won't be leaving, because we're not the same sort of trusting soul that my father was. If you're a faker, Elvira, we'll soon know it."

The medium's face reddened. "Well, Miss, I'll do my best. I don't make contact all the time—conditions have to be just right. But I'll do my very best for you."

"That might be wise," Valerie said. "If you want to be paid."

"No, Miss, I take no money from anyone for whatever I am privileged to do. There will be no talk of payment or I shall refuse to move out of this chair except to leave the house."

"Not bad grandstanding," Valerie said.

"Miss, if I were you I wouldn't deride things I didn't understand."

"I'll deride whatever I think is an out-and-out fake," Valerie said angrily. "And I don't care to argue with you. This was not my idea in the first place. I'm against it."

"You're afraid," Elvira said calmly. "You're scared to death, Miss. Because your father tried to reach you already and you wouldn't let him. You hated him and he wanted to tell you . . ."

"That's a lie!" Valerie shouted. "You're a crazy old woman!"

"He wanted to tell you that you've been wrong. It happened early this morning, shortly after midnight. You woke up and he was there, standing beside your bed. . . . I saw it all happen. In my mind only—but it did happen."

Valerie closed her eyes tightly as if to shut out everything and dropped heavily into an overstuffed chair. She didn't make any more comments. Elvira seemed totally unaffected by the angry scene.

Janet got up and went to stand beside her daughter's chair. She placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. Valerie angrily brushed it away; Janet grew pink with embarrassment and returned to her own chair.

As no one else took the initiative, I said, "Mrs. Zebow, do you wish us to do anything so you may conduct the seance properly?"

"Why, no," she said, as if the question surprised her. "Please understand that I am not a professional medium. I don't do this for money and I never will, under any conditions, I don't need the trappings other mediums insist on. I'll just sit down—I'll sit where I am now, in fact. I don't care if the lights are on; nobody has to hold hands or wait for table rappings. Hopefully I will slip into a trance—when I do I often make contact. But sometimes it doesn't work; I don't know why."

"Mrs. Zebow," I said, "you just told Valerie a strange thing, and you made so little of it. Did you really have knowledge that Valerie's father had returned?"

"I awoke from a sound sleep," she said, weighing her words carefully, as if she knew they'd be hard to believe. "I never do that. Almost at once I felt clear-headed, not foggy from sleep. I instantly thought about Mr. Dalton."

I had conducted seances for him before, as you know. Not all were successful, but enough were that he had faith in my ability—or power—or whatever you wish to call it."

"Did you have any audible or visual contact?" I asked.

"No, not the least. It popped into my mind that Mr. Dalton was back and that he was trying to make his daughter realize he was back. It was as if he had something very important to divulge, but he couldn't reach his daughter. I didn't see it happen. It was only in my mind—but it was real."

"That was shortly after midnight, you said?"

"Yes, Miss Craig. I looked at the bedside clock."

I turned to Valerie. "Is Mrs. Zebow right, Valerie? It's rather important that we know."

"She's a liar." Valerie avoided looking at me. "She's making it all up. At midnight I was fast asleep. I don't believe in ghosts. Anyway, my father hated me so much he'd never come near me if he did manage to come back. There was no one. Mrs. Zebow dreamed the whole thing."

"I do suppose that's possible, but it was so real," Elvira said.

I was inclined to believe her, and, from the expressions on the faces of the others, I thought that all of us believed her and knew that Valerie was lying—perhaps because she was afraid of the truth and was trying to eradicate it from her mind.

"I'm far more apt to believe in a spiritualist like you, Mrs. Zebow," Oliver Hayden said, "than one who insists on darkness and the rest of the silly flapdoodle that goes along with this."

"She's got to convince me," Valerie said, still rankling from the silence that had greeted her claim that Mrs. Zebow had dreamed the strange story involving her.

Elvira Zebow rearranged herself in the large chair. I turned down the table lamps a bit, thinking they might bother her, but there remained all the light that four other lamps could produce, and the room was not dim.

Janet, somewhat timidly, carried her straight-backed chair closer to the medium so that she might not miss anything. With some reluctance Valerie also moved closer; she contented herself with sitting on the floor, Indian fashion. Dennis and I sat side by side on a small divan and Oliver Hayden remained where he was, in a chair facing the medium.

She closed her eyes, and remained silent for several minutes, but nothing happened. She looked to me as if she'd merely fallen into a contented sleep.

"What fools you are!"

The voice was strong, loud, and it seemed to come from everywhere, just as the laughter had. Janet gave a short scream of terror and brought both hands to her face, as if to shut out the voice and any visual manifestations that might occur. Valerie drew in a sharp breath, but didn't move. Hayden leaned forward in his chair. My hand sought and grasped Dennis' in a grip that must have been painful to him.

The medium hadn't moved. She didn't even seem to be breathing. To me she appeared to be in a genuine trance, and through her came a voice I somehow knew was that of a dead man.

"I have never left this house," the voice said. "I never shall leave it. Worry, you earthbound idiots. Worry hard, because I shall be back soon with the message that will prove to the world what a pack of scoundrels you all are. The golden bough. Remember the golden bough."

The voice ceased, but its echo appeared to linger on. Janet was quietly weeping. Valerie slowly got to her feet. Oliver Hayden sat rigid with fear. It was the medium who broke the silence by opening her eyes and giving vent to a piercing scream that tore at our nerves even more than the voice of the dead man had.

Dennis hurried to her side. She was weeping loudly and without control. I went to her side also. It seemed a strange way for the seance to end.

"Mrs. Zebow," I said, "everything is all right. You did very well. There was contact with someone. . . ."

"The first time." She began to moan as her weeping ceased. "The first time. It was real. There was a manifestation. It happened. Tell me it happened. Tell me I'm not crazy."

"What do you mean?" Dennis asked.

"I'm not a medium. Miss Dalton was right. I'm a fake. I never brought forth a ghost before in my life. I pretended to because it was fun and it made me feel important. This time it happened. I used to wonder how I'd feel if a ghost did come back, and this time one did. I want to get out of here. This house scares me."

Dennis grasped her hands and pulled them down from her face. "Are you saying you're *not* a medium? You *cannot* bring back the dead, or make contact with them?"

"I'm a fake. A real fake," she said. "Until now. And I'm scared."

"Mrs. Zebow," I said in a voice I hoped was soothing, though under the circumstances I wasn't sure it could be, "this time it was real? There was no faking?"

"I *swear* it was real! I'll never do this again. Never! I don't want to bring back a ghost."

"You faked the voices before?" I asked. "During the other seances?"

"Yes . . . I faked the voice of a control. It was easy to do."

"What about the story you told us? How you woke up and you knew Mr. Dalton was trying to contact his daughter?"

"I don't know. It's all so mixed up. Please don't ask me any more questions."

"Mrs. Zebow," Dennis said, "we have to. This is important. If there *is* a ghost we have to know that."

"She told the truth," Valerie said quite unexpectedly. "I wouldn't admit it before. But it's true. Just after midnight I woke up with the feeling there was someone in my

room. I couldn't see anyone, but the feeling was overpowering. It was as if . . . as if a message was trying to get through to me. Maybe I wasn't receptive. When I woke up I thought I'd dreamed the whole thing."

"Tell me, Valerie," I said. "You denied the truth of Mrs. Zebow's story before, but now you admit it was true. What made you change your mind?"

"The voice . . . that voice was my father's. I'd know it anywhere. I refused to believe in ghosts or a spirit world before, but I don't any more. My father has found a way to come back, and I'm terrified about what he'll do."

"So far he's only been trying to get through to us," I reminded her.

"He hated me. And I hated him. If he is able to come back he will do me harm. I know it! I think the only reason he'd come back would be to hurt me."

Oliver Hayden had moved up beside me. He took a surprisingly different tack. "What do you know of his death, Val? Did you see him just prior to the dinner he gave before he died?"

"No . . . no, I wasn't here, Oliver! I was in New York with my mother—you know that. Don't accuse me of being implicated in his death. I couldn't bear that. Besides, he killed himself. There's no question about it."

I thought there were grave questions about it, but I didn't voice them. Valerie had been through enough for one evening. I addressed Janet instead.

"Mrs. Dalton, do you agree that was your husband's voice?"

"Yes," she said in a small, terrified voice. "Yes, it was Clifford. It was Clifford!"

I turned back to Mrs. Zebow. Nobody was asking her any questions, leaving that to me. "You heard the words 'golden bough'?"

"I don't even know what a golden bough is. How could I say those words when I don't even know what they mean?"

I looked around. "Does anybody know what was meant by a golden bough?"

"Not me," Hayden said with a slow shake of his head.

"It has no meaning to me," Valerie said. She wasn't showing any of her former belligerence now.

"I don't know," Janet moaned softly. "I don't know anything about it."

"Remember the golden bough," Dennis said slowly. "It must mean something important."

Mrs. Zebow got up and stood still for a moment, as if to test her sense of balance. "May I go now? I don't want to stay here. Please don't ask me to come back. There's a curse on this house. It's haunted and I want nothing more to do with it."

She walked a few steps toward the door and then moved much faster, casting looks all about her as if she expected a spectral hand to seize her shoulder and bring her to a halt.

"What do you make of it?" Hayden asked me.

"I don't know...."

The slamming of the front door startled all of us and almost brought back the near panic that had held us right after we'd heard the voice of Clifford Dalton.

"If that medium had taken credit for bringing the voice to us," Dennis said, "I'd be inclined to believe it was somehow faked, like one of Dalton's jokes. But she says she didn't bring it back, and she's more scared than we are."

"If that is possible," I said. My voice still had a tendency to quaver.

"Please ... please ..." Janet begged, "don't talk about it any more. Valerie, come and help me pack. I won't remain in this awful house another instant."

"I'm not going," Valerie said. "You can go if you wish. Take the car—I'll find a way to get back. But I'm not going to leave this house until I know what's going on."

"Good heavens," Hayden said to Janet, "you heard what was going on, didn't you? Instead of taking that attitude I

should think you'd try to discover what he meant by the golden bough."

Valerie said, "I'll find out what he meant somehow. But I don't need anyone here to hold my hand. I still insist—more than ever—that you leave here, Miss Craig. And don't come back. Dennis, you feel you're responsible for her. Get her out of here. Quickly!"

I disregarded Valerie's outburst and turned to her mother. "Mrs. Dalton, I'd advise you to rest a bit before you make preparations to leave. If I can be of help . . ."

"I do feel that I must lie down. It's very kind of you."

"Mother," Valerie said loudly, "she's playing on your sympathy and good nature! I want her out!"

"I'm afraid, Valerie, that you have nothing to say in the matter," Hayden said. "We've already gone into that."

"I don't care what Thorpe said. He's a lousy lawyer anyway. I'll find another one, and I'll get her out of this house if I have to go to court to do it."

I helped Valerie's mother to her feet. "Come along, Mrs. Dalton."

For a moment I thought Valerie was going to try to stop us physically. Dennis must have too, for he stepped in front of her and quietly urged her to calm down, but what he was really doing was blocking any attempt she might make to move. Mrs. Dalton and I went upstairs to the suite of rooms she'd used many of the years she'd lived with Clifford Dalton.

I turned down the bed and helped her take off her dress. She refused to disrobe any further than that, saying she wouldn't stay long and she was going to drive away from this house tonight. I didn't blame her.

I stayed at her side until she drifted off, which she did rather quickly for so distraught a woman, I thought. I closed her door and made my way to Dalton's library. I closed the door, sat behind the desk, and tried to sort things out. First and foremost, I had to convince myself that the voice we'd heard had truly been that of a dead man speaking from somewhere beyond the realm of the

possible. While I was hearing the voice I'd been sure, but. . . . Next I had to determine what was meant by the words "golden bough." It seemed that trying to guess this ought to be relatively simple, so I leaned back and concentrated on the words. If I discovered their meaning I might solve the problem of the return of Clifford Dalton as a ghost.

There was, in my opinion, nothing in nature like an actual bough of gold. It seemed more like a name for something else. Or the designation of a place.

I was startled by the sound of a clock striking the hour. I glanced at my watch. It was twenty minutes past ten, no time for a clock to be striking.

I hadn't counted the hours it tolled off, but I was becoming aware that it had long passed twelve and was going right on. I heard excited voices downstairs and I hurried to the head of the steps. Oliver Hayden, Dennis, Olga, and Valerie were gathered around the grandfather's clock in the reception hall; it hadn't stopped its loud chimes.

By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs Dennis had opened the glass door of the clock and was endeavoring to stop the wild chiming, which now had become faster and louder. The din was enough to drive anyone mad.

"I can't stop it!" Dennis cried out. "The clock isn't even going!"

"Let me," Hayden said. He picked up one of the reception hall chairs and smashed it against the clock. He broke off one chair leg but the clock continued to chime. He struck the chair against the clock half a dozen times—finally the mechanism of the clock lay exposed. He reached in and pulled wires; small metal parts fell to the floor and the clock finally stopped. Hayden stepped back, put the chair down as if it had four legs. It promptly toppled over.

So far I hadn't said a word. Neither had Valerie, and, in her sudden terror, she had come over to me, a pleading look in her eyes that overcame all the distaste I had for her. I put my arms around her. All we could do was stand there until the wrecking of the tall clock was complete.

Hayden held up several lengths of wire. "Did you ever see a clock, a grandfather's clock, wired? That damned thing was one of Dalton's jokes. There must have been some kind of a timing device in it. The thing went off and you couldn't stop it without breaking the clock apart."

Valerie shuddered and broke away from me to run half-way up the stairs. There she turned and looked down.

"That clock hasn't run in ten or fifteen years."

"It was one of your father's jokes," Hayden called up to her.

"If it was, what set it off? Dad's been dead for days! How could he set the mechanism to go off at this late date? To go off when we were all here and would be scared to death?"

"I don't know," Hayden admitted. "Your father was mighty clever about most of his jokes. If he'd spent as much time making good friends, he'd have been better off. . . . I was almost driven mad by this thing. I thought my skull was going to pop."

Olga, who had so far remained mute, raised her apron and used the hem of it to wipe perspiration off her face. "Me, I had enough. It ain't part of my job to be around ghosts. Not the kind that mean man would make. I'm getting out."

We didn't contradict her statement or beg her to stay. I guess we realized nothing would bring about a change of mind, and I didn't blame Olga for wanting to leave. There were moments when I wondered just what I was doing here and why I was compelling myself to endure this madness.

Dennis reached for my hand. "Let's go up to the library and try to think this out."

"Don't include me," Hayden said. "I'm going home. Not that I'll sleep, but I've had enough for one night. Good night, Alison. See you tomorrow, Dennis. If anything happens and you need me, come running. I'm not backing out of this. I'm just exhausted from it."

Dennis and I went about locking up. We bolted each

door, examined every window, and then glanced at each other and broke into brittle laughter.

"All we're doing is trying to keep out something that's already inside the house," Dennis said. "Come on, before something falls on us."

Chapter 7

We settled ourselves in the library with the door closed. I sat at the desk, Dennis in a leather chair drawn up nearby. Two green-shaded oil lamps provided the only light. I adjusted the wicks on both; the flames were flickering badly.

"It's wild," I said, "but after electricity, neons and all the rest, you can accustom yourself so easily to the lighting of a hundred years ago."

"Don't say it's romantic," Dennis said, smiling. "Not in this house. That was some joke—the grandfather's clock that wouldn't stop sounding off. If Hayden hadn't smashed the thing into silence, I would have."

"It must have been one of Dalton's jokes," I said, "but how *was* it triggered to go off now? Unless . . . and you know what I'm thinking."

"Dalton's spook set it off. Yes, after what's happened here I suppose that's possible. However, the seance was of far more importance. That, at least, brought out something substantial."

"The golden bough? It might be substantial if we knew what it was and where it could be found. It could also be another of Dalton's posthumous jokes. It might blow up in our faces.... What could he have meant?"

"I don't know," Dennis replied, "but still, those words

strike a vague chord. And it must be important, because it was the only thing that spectral voice gave us."

"I don't know, Dennis. We sit here talking about a ghost as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I'm supposed to be a hard-headed psychologist—I'm supposed to regard things in the light of reality, and not think about the gossamer-thin unreality of ghosts."

"How about me? I'm an electronics man. I work with slide-rule, mathematical precision."

"Maybe," I said, "we ought to do some studying about ghosts."

"Might be," he said. "Certainly Dalton accumulated a large library on the subject, and it's lining the walls all around us." He frowned and came to his feet. "Wait a minute. Let's have a look here...."

He walked over to the nearest set of bookshelves and began running a finger under the titles on the backs of the books. I joined him, somewhat mystified by the intentness of his search. I held one of the lamps to help guide him.

"Alison," he said, "unless my mind is slipping, there should be a book about religious rites ... magic... things like that."

"*The Golden Bough!*" I exclaimed. "Dennis, I used that in college as a reference book. What's the matter with me, not remembering?"

"What about me? I knew of its existence, but I didn't associate it with directions given by a ghost. He's sure to have a copy here. It's fundamental to anyone interested in the occult."

We found it a few moments later, on a dusty top shelf. Dennis handed it to me after blowing off the dust. He stepped down from the stool he'd used to reach the shelf and we carried the volume over to the desk where the light was better. It was a thick book with a dilapidated dust jacket. When we opened the book at random, a folded paper between the pages popped out. Dennis unfolded it, read it, and handed it to me without a word.

It was an insurance policy. A quick scan revealed that

it insured the life of Clifford Dalton for two hundred thousand dollars. It was dated less than a year from today.

"Well, that's a rich find for Valerie and her mother," Dennis observed. "Two hundred thousand not even subject to taxes. Wait'll we tell them."

"Were we directed to the book just so we'd find this policy?" I wondered.

"I've no idea, but I think we ought to tell Valerie and her mother about it—right now."

"Yes, if I were the beneficiary . . . hold it, darling. The beneficiary is Dalton's estate. No individual is named."

"They can still claim it. They're the only heirs that I know of. By the way, has anybody seen his will?"

"I don't know. Even if they aren't named, Valerie and her mother should know about this. I'll see if Valerie is awake. Her mother ought to be waking up from her nap by now. I'll meet you downstairs in the drawing room."

Valerie answered my knock promptly. She hadn't gone to bed, but I was almost reluctant to invite her downstairs. She wore a very brief nightie with a see-through pink peignoir over it. She hadn't removed her makeup and her hair looked as if she'd just come out of a beauty parlor. Dennis was going to be impressed. Any man would be. I felt actually dowdy in my yellow slacks and blouse.

"I have to tell you how fetching you look, Valerie," I said. "Can you and your mother come down to the drawing room? Something important has come up."

"Mom is out like a light. When I came upstairs she was waking up from her nap and I gave her a sleeping pill. She's been sleeping badly and I wasn't about to let her drive all night long the way she intended to. What happened?"

"Come on down and Dennis will explain."

"Only," she said, "if I can come as I am."

"By all means. He'll enjoy it. Valerie, I'm not angry at you. I was, but that's all over. This is your house and I'm an intruder. We'll talk about it further in the morning, but what Dennis and I found is far more interesting."

"You're in love with Dennis, aren't you?"

"Yes, Valerie, I'm very much in love with him."

"I know. He's in love with you. The big lug told me so. And I thought I had him in the bag. Just goes to show how little you know about a man. Okay, Alison, let's call a truce. Maybe tomorrow, if you refuse to leave, I'll get nasty again."

We walked down the corridor toward the stairs. "What do you think was meant by the golden bough?" she asked me.

"Dennis tracked that down. It's a book. A classic your father was bound to have, with his interest in the occult."

"Just a book?"

"Dennis will tell you all about it."

We were descending the stairs by now. "Alison, are there ghosts? Did my father come back?"

"It does seem so," I said. "Everyone appears to believe he did."

"If he's managed to unlock the secret of returning after death, I'm scared stiff what he'll do. My daddy, bless his heart, was one of the most cruel, tyrannical men I've ever known. I often thought he was so mean he had to adopt this policy of playing jokes on everyone so he'd have something to laugh at. Otherwise he might never have laughed in his life."

We turned into the drawing room. "There are many things we don't know about," I said. "The world is full of mysteries. But what Dennis will tell you has no connection with a spectral world."

Dennis admired her. I didn't wonder, and Valerie basked delightedly in the admiration his face betrayed. She sat down and crossed her legs quite decorously. Her posture didn't have to be unduly revealing. The transparency of the robe was revealing enough.

"We've got some good news," Dennis began. "In a way it's good, and then again it may mean some trouble. 'The golden bough' referred to a book. In it your father had

concealed an insurance policy taken out . . ." he studied the paper "... nine months ago."

"How much?" Valerie asked.

"Two hundred thousand."

"That'll help," Valerie said. "I know he wasn't poor, but even so, that amount is nice to get."

"There's a hitch—maybe only temporary. The beneficiary is your father's estate, not you or your mother."

"Well, what's that mean? We're the heirs. There must be a will."

"There probably is, and it'll turn up sooner or later. The two hundred thousand goes into the assets of the estate, and you'll have to wait until it's divided by probate."

I said, "Dennis, let me see that policy again. It's so new I wonder..."

I found the clause easily. I rested the policy on my lap. "There's a second hitch, Valerie. The policy is void in the event of suicide within two years after issuance."

Valerie's face wrinkled in dismay. "Oh, damn! Everybody swears he killed himself."

"Everyone except me," I said. "Shall I leave in the morning, as you ordered me to do?"

"Stay, Alison. For heaven's sake don't abandon us now. If you say it was murder—or even an accident—we get the money. I know I've been a rat in the way I've treated you. It's my delightful nature to be mean. I got that from Papa, and no question about it. I beg your pardon. I implore you not to leave us. I'll even arrange some kind of a substantial reward...."

"I'll stay," I said, "because it's part of my job to hunt down the truth. But no reward, no pay. I'm on salary at the coroner's office and that's enough for me. I will have to have your help—and everyone else's."

"I'm glad to see you two girls being friends," Dennis commented. "As I told Alison, I'm deeply in love with her, but that doesn't mean I don't admire you, Valerie. I do—"

and in that outfit more than I mean to. Pardon me, Alison, darling."

"You can tell your mother about this latest development in the morning," I said. "Good night, Valerie."

She rose and posed for Dennis' benefit before she bent down and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Good night," she said. "I know when I'm not wanted. Just pray Papa doesn't decide to move in with us."

"I am pleased that you made up with her," Dennis said after Valerie left. "She's right about inheriting that streak of obstinacy and meanness from her father. She certainly didn't get it from her mother."

"Speaking of the will, darling, *is* there one?"

"Yes. He told me there was. I think Thorpe has it—as Dalton's attorney he would keep it in his safe. If he has it I'll have him bring it here tomorrow."

"Are you in it?" I asked.

"I don't know. He never told me. It's immaterial anyway. I'm not his son, no blood relative at all. The estate belongs to Val and her mother. I'm sure that was what Dalton intended."

"I wonder if anyone *knows* what that man intended. Which brings to mind the thought that I'm here to get at the truth, and I don't seem to be getting very far."

"With all these manifestations and troubles I don't see how you could have found the time," Dennis said. "Besides, what's there to go on? How can you make the determination between murder and suicide? Especially in the face of Dalton's insane tape saying he was taking his own life?"

I said thoughtfully, "That cassette could have the explanation of the whole thing. There has to be a reason why Dr. Garvin was killed and the tape stolen. There was certainly no other reason for Garvin's murder."

"Darling," Dennis pointed out, "may I remind you that what was on that tape was heard by many people? After Dalton's death, Thorpe handed it over to the local police,

who gave it to the district attorney at the county seat. From there it went to the coroner for use at the inquest. The cassette cannot contain any secrets."

"Yet it was stolen—a man was murdered for it," I pointed out.

"I can't account for that. Nor can I be as certain as you are that Garvin was murdered. But that tape was played out, both sides, several times, just to be sure there wasn't anything else on it. I can assure you there was not."

"Maybe we're too tired to think properly."

"It's been a long day," he said. "And tomorrow we may need our wits about us. One thing I'm glad of—that all of this brought us together. I can't see myself going through life without you, and even if I'd never discovered your existence, there'd be something lacking. I'm very much in love with you, Alison."

I went over to kiss him fondly, and as we made our way to our rooms I took his arm. It was late and I knew I should be weary, but I didn't seem to feel the strain of the long hours as much as I might.

"Darling," I said, "are you sure you want to give up Valerie? She's attractive, she can be charming, and you've known her so long. In fact, you were practically a member of the family. And I'm sure she adores you."

"She's a strange girl. Actually, she's two people. One of them is warm and lovable; the other is a cold, calculating person given to sarcasm and suspicion. Frankly, I never was serious about her, even though Dalton would have liked to see us marry. He didn't like his daughter, but he did like me, and he wanted me in the family legally. If he'd lived I don't know how I'd have avoided Val, and I shudder slightly at the thought."

I kissed him good night, but as I prepared to enter my room, he went in ahead of me and searched it thoroughly.

"Just so Dalton isn't lying in wait for you, or one of his practical jokes isn't primed to go off. Good night again. I love you."

"I'll never tire of hearing you say that, Dennis. Don't worry about me. I'll be all right."

I locked the door after he'd left. Two lamps were lit and I left them burning, but I didn't prepare for bed. I sat down beside the window that looked out onto the estate. Nothing was visible because no light came from any window and it was a moonless, starless night, heavy with cloud formations.

I began to realize that while I was tired, I'd never be able to sleep. I was kept awake partly by thoughts of my new-found love and partly by thoughts of the fact that I'd grown lax in pursuing the problem I'd come here to solve. I told myself that if I couldn't sleep, I might as well try to make these wakeful hours productive.

I blew out one lamp, picked up the other, and went downstairs very quietly. I didn't want to waken anyone else. My journey down the corridor and the stairs was not a happy one—I was nervous every step of the way. And entering that vast drawing room was even worse.

I went into the kitchen and put on a pot for coffee. I wasn't certain whether Olga had already left, but if she had she'd thoughtfully seen to it that there was a slow coal fire in the range. By opening the vents I quickly brought up the heat, and in a few minutes the water was boiling. I made the coffee and supplied myself with a tray, a cup and saucer, and a small pitcher of cream. I set the coffee percolator on the tray and carried the whole thing upstairs, somehow balancing it while I held a lamp at the same time.

I let myself into the library, lit the green-shaded lamps, and settled down for a night of hard work. The coffee revived me and I soon was engrossed again in studying the papers and documents of a dead man.

Dalton had not been an orderly man—his desk was quite disorganized. Much of what I found was worthless. But I did find a small calendar pad in one drawer that was interesting: it listed appointments for three weeks after his

death, and some of these seemed to be important. Sandwiched between the pages of this calendar pad was an invitation to attend the thirty-fifth reunion of his college class. Across it he'd scrawled the word **ACCEPT**.

I also came across notes concerning a business deal that apparently involved the purchase of an electronic invention he'd been dickering for. The notes seemed to be reminders for use when he dictated the terms of the contract. As the deal involved a great deal of money and the papers were to be signed two days after he'd died, I was again impressed with the idea that Dalton had had no thought of taking his own life.

Slowly, more and more details turned up. If this man had committed suicide it must have been an impulsive gesture. Yet that wasn't possible either, for he'd planned the dinner party at which he'd insulted his guests. He'd made a tape beforehand and set it up to confuse and frighten these men who worked for him.

As a psychologist I would have taken an oath that night that Dalton hadn't killed himself, and I would have provided the alternate explanation that his death was a carefully planned and executed murder.

But this automatically brought up the necessity of proving a motive, and there I could make no headway. It was true that everyone at the dinner party had detested Dalton, probably to the point where thoughts of murder had entered the minds of those present, but that didn't provide me with a definite motive for killing him. His death was bound to reveal any dishonesty on the part of those employees he had accused of crookedness.

So I was still mystified about the motive, but I was now certain that Dalton had not taken his own life—therefore, he must have planned all this as one colossal joke, the biggest of his career. If only I could prove that. . . . As matters stood now, I knew I'd have a difficult time bringing any one around to my way of thinking.

I assembled all the notes and the evidence I'd acquired

during my two hours of work at the desk. There were still two drawers to go through and innumerable notes scattered about. Most had no meaning, yet I couldn't be sure that something else significant might not turn up.

I thought I heard the sound of a car motor starting up. It was somewhat distant—it sounded like it was coming from the garages behind the mansion. I wondered who might be driving away at this hour of the night, and I got downstairs in time to peer out of the drawing-room windows at a dark sedan with only its parking lights on proceeding slowly away from the house.

It was Janet Dalton's big sedan, no doubt about that, and my first impression was that she'd wakened and decided to take off immediately. But Valerie had given her a sleeping pill, the effects of which must be still making her at least groggy. In that condition she was liable to kill herself—or kill someone in another car.

I hesitated about calling Dennis. I wouldn't need any help in overtaking and stopping her if she was in a half-awake state. So I left the house and ran down the drive to where my Porsche was parked outside the garage. Not more than three or four minutes had passed since Janet had driven away, so I was confident she couldn't be too far ahead, especially since the road was rough and narrow. There was only room for one car at certain places; there were turn-outs so one car could get out of the way of another if necessary. And the road was all downhill to the village, a series of curves, some of them very sharp. One in particular had impressed me as being almost a horse-shoe turn. Janet would be bound to drive slowly in her condition.

I left the estate and speeded up. The area was very dry at this time of year, the road was dirt, and the dust from Janet's car had not yet settled. I knew she wasn't too far ahead of me.

I braked to maneuver my way around one of the sharper curves. My headlights swept away the dark and I

could see the road for about a quarter of a mile—this was perhaps the only really straight stretch of road all the way to town.

I had just passed a turn-out on my left. My headlights, sweeping around the corner, did not illuminate this turn-out—so I didn't see the car that must have been parked there, like some predatory animal ready to pounce.

I drove past it, hit the straighter stretch; I was looking for any sign of Janet's taillights. My eyes shifted to the rear-view mirror and I saw two yellow parking lights coming toward me at a furious speed. There was a car behind me—it obviously wanted to pass. As no other cars had left the estate I wondered where this one had come from.

I accelerated and tried to maneuver out of the way. The car behind me crashed into my rear and the Porsche wobbled dangerously. I knew that on my right all the way to town were cliffs, gullies, ditches, brush, and big trees. This was no place for an accident, and whoever was driving the car behind me must have known that very well.

I pulled to my right as far as I could. The other car came alongside; soon I could see it beginning to creep past me. I twisted my head for a tenth of a second to get a better look. It was Janet's car, no doubt about that, but the darkness prevented me from seeing who was in it. In fact, I had the weird impression that the car was without a driver—yet someone expert at the wheel must be driving it.

The right front of the heavy sedan nudged my little Porsche with a grinding and tearing of metal. I pulled sharply to the right. The Porsche tried to climb the steep bank; it couldn't make it, of course, but the big car behind me had to brake almost to a stop to avoid an accident that might have ended with both of us spinning out of control down the steep bank.

As soon as my four wheels were back on the road, the chase began again. I was struck in the rear, hard enough to make me almost lose control.

I heard my right rear fender screech as it was all but broken off in another crash. Ahead of me was a very sharp curve. Here, if the driver manipulated the murder car well enough, he could easily send me down the incline, which, as I recalled, was very steep and very rocky. I braced myself, trying to determine whether I should jump or stay with the car in the event we were sent crashing down the hillside.

The heavy car bumped me again, this time so hard I did lose control for a few seconds. The Porsche headed straight for the curve—it would be impossible for me to make it at this speed. I managed to slam on the brake in time, but the car teetered over the edge, it was that close, and I had to turn the wheel furiously to keep from going over and to get away from that spot where I was so vulnerable.

There were other curves, I knew, some of them even worse. At one of these I was going to be killed—I knew it. I tried to think of a way out. My headlights showed me a good straight road for about a quarter of a mile. To the side of it was a more gentle slope. There might be big rocks and substantial trees, but ramming into one of those was preferable to catapulting over a steep cliff.

I was roaring along that straight stretch with the big car gaining on me, and I knew if I was to have any chance at coming out of this I must act now.

I applied the brakes hard. They squealed, and the tires kicked up a great amount of dry dust. Well and good—in the dust the driver behind me would probably lose sight of the Porsche, at least for a few seconds. I turned the wheel to the right, felt the car leave the road. It was doing almost sixty as I sailed down the grassy slope.

This was a maneuver a light car might get away with, but that big sedan, which had become an instrument of murder, couldn't handle it without great risk to the driver.

I was able to steer, after a fashion, and when my headlights picked out a stout-looking tree dead ahead, I managed to avoid it by a hard tug on the wheel. I crashed into

a series of low bushes that slowed me, and then taller brush stopped the car completely.

I hadn't turned the car over, but I wasn't inclined to stay in it because of the possibility of fire. I got out. My headlights were still burning. I started to move away from the car.

Something struck the side of the Porsche. Another metallic sound made me drop automatically to the ground. From the road I saw the flash of a gun and the Porsche was hit again.

With the headlights still on, I didn't dare stand up, for I might be seen. So I wriggled to the right, heading for the rear of the car. But the rear lights were burning and they'd give me away too—as another bullet testified.

I squirmed and wriggled some more. Crawling across that medium-tall, dry grass was like slowly swimming through some kind of morass. But the grasses did hide me and as I drew away from the car I was no longer in danger of being an illuminated target.

Finally I had to stop, for I was exhausted and out of breath. I turned on my back and looked up at the sky. I realized that I'd just escaped a most deliberate attempt to kill me. It looked as though the person who had killed Dr. Garvin was now after me. The car had been the sedan Janet and Valerie had arrived in—but who had been behind the wheel? I was in no mood to try to guess; I was far more interested in escape. Several minutes had gone by, so I rose warily. The Porsche's lights were still burning, so I stayed away from it. I began moving up the slope, hoping I might reach the road safely and flag someone down—though if any car came by between now and late morning it would be a miracle.

I hadn't heard the big car drive away, and it was too dark to see it if it was still on the road, so I had to assume it was. That meant someone was waiting for me. I turned quickly and began to run in the other direction, downhill toward the thicker forest growths.

The headlights of the car on the road came to life. They were aimed well and their beams were powerful enough to bring me into bold relief. At the same moment I heard the crack of the rifle.

The sound came to me as I was diving for cover; luckily, the bullet just whizzed over my head. But those lights were still sweeping the slope. The grass wasn't high enough here to hide me. If I fell flat I'd be seen sooner or later in the glare of those lights. All I could do was keep running—bent over, so as to be a smaller target—and pray.

Twice more the rifle cracked, but either I was going too fast or the light and shadow made me a difficult target, because I wasn't hit. I ran until I couldn't take another step. I fell to one knee, gasping for breath. Then I realized I was no longer being flooded with light from the car—I was out of range. Unless the murderer was coming down to finish me off, I was now safe.

I knelt, listening intently for any sound of a person coming my way. Then I heard—faintly, for I'd covered a great deal of ground—the sound of the car as it was driven away.

I sat down and tried to relax. I didn't dare go back to the Porsche while its lights were still burning. Driving away might have been a ruse on the part of the murderer; it was even possible he had a companion who would drive off and leave the killer with the rifle lying in wait for me. I resolved not to make a move for at least an hour.

About thirty minutes went by—with agonizing slowness. I couldn't stand it any longer. I began to move back toward the Porsche.

By now I was chilly and damp with dew from the grass. The night was not warm, though it was the middle of summer. I decided to risk danger for the sake of comfort. I made a mad dash for the Porsche and slid into the seat through the door which I'd left open. I turned off the lights, and literally fell out of the car in case the rifleman should begin to open fire.

Nothing happened. I was now certain the killer had driven off. I wished I knew which direction he'd taken, whether he'd gone to the mansion or to the village. I got back into my car and sank weakly onto the seat. I stayed there until dawn.

Dawn was gray and cold. I had endured the longest night of my life—I would have tried to walk back to the mansion if it hadn't been so dark. But I was afraid of getting lost, stumbling or otherwise having an accident that might disable me, or running into that murderer with his rifle. So I stayed in the car.

With morning light I began to struggle up the slope. I'd examined the Porsche and found that it would run, but I couldn't possibly drive it off this field without wrecking it even further. The rear end was badly damaged and the fenders were quite crumpled. I found two bullet holes in the side of the car, so I knew I hadn't been dreaming.

I was getting fairly close to the road when I heard the first car of the morning come by. It was a light truck of some kind. I shouted and waved my arms, but the driver didn't pay the slightest attention. I thought it must be some kind of delivery truck from the village, probably one with groceries.

Frustrated, cold, so weary I could scarcely put one foot ahead of the other, I kept going up that hill. It had seemed rather a mild slope at first. Now it resembled the side of a cliff.

I heard another car. I was closer now, so I waved, and instead of yelling I threw back my head and screamed.

The car, a white sedan, came to a fast halt, and it began to back up. A man got out and stood at the edge of the road peering down at me. Then he began to stumble and slide down the slope until I was able to recognize him. Walter Thorpe may have opposed me in a matter of law, but I'd never seen a face so welcome.

He drew an arm around my waist to steady me. "What in the world happened? How'd you come to drive off the road? That *is* your car down there?"

"Yes," I said. "I drove it off the road because another car was trying to *force* me off the road at some point where the car—and I—would be demolished."

"Let me understand this. Someone tried to kill you?"

"Yes, that was the general idea."

"It couldn't have been a prankster?. You know some teen-agers get so belligerent sometimes they do try to play tag with other cars . . . kids high on beer and wine—or drugs."

"It was hardly a prank, Mr. Thorpe. After I got out of my car and started to run, I was shot at. At least seven or eight times. There are two bullet holes in the Porsche."

"You have no idea . . . ?"

"It was dark. I don't even know what kind of a car it was, though it certainly looked like the heavy black sedan that Valerie and her mother arrived in. It was a big, dark car, anyway, and hard to see."

"Don't tell me you think either of them tried to run you off the road and then fired a rifle at you?"

"I *said* I didn't know who it could have been. I can't even guess, because I don't have one thing to go on. It might even have been you."

He nodded and we resumed our slow walk up the slope. "I see what you mean. Just for the book, it wasn't me, I assure you."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Thorpe. I shouldn't have made that back-handed accusation. I'm tired, I was awake all night, I think I ran a couple of miles. And being shot at doesn't make one cheerful. So I'm not quite myself, but I am so

grateful that you came along and lent me a hand. I surely needed one."

Before we got to the road, Hayden and Dennis drove down from the mansion and stopped where Thorpe's car blocked the road. Dennis came plunging down the slope to help me.

Before we reached the top, with me supported by both men, I was able to explain most of what had happened to Dennis. Hayden reached down to give me a hand and pull me up. I got into Dennis' Ferrari and Hayden joined Thorpe. We drove back to the mansion. Valerie met us and listened with the greatest concern as I described what had happened.

"That's awful!" she said. "I'll get something ready to eat. Olga left this morning. I'm a lousy cook, but I think I can fry eggs, and my coffee is passable."

It seemed like fine coffee and the eggs were done exactly right. So was the toast, even though it had to be held by a fork as it was toasted over hot coals.

"The question is," Hayden said, "what are we going to do about this?"

Thorpe said, "I've got no answers, but I'm going down to the garage and see if any other car is damaged. Alison thought it might be the car you and your mother arrived in, Valerie, and the way she says her car was bumped, whatever car did the bumping has to be at least scratched. I'll be right back."

"Thorpe," Hayden said, "if you have time, see what Bert Wagner was doing last night."

"I'll bring him back," Thorpe said.

"Mom is still sleeping off the pill I gave her," Valerie told me. "You'd better get some sleep yourself, Alison. You look beat."

"That's how I feel, but I would like to know who was responsible for what happened last night. I'd like to know *now*."

"It could have been anyone," Hayden said. "Dennis, Wagner, Valerie, even Thorpe. Or me."

"I'm mainly worried about the fact that whoever it was may try again," Dennis said. "Do you have any idea why the attack was made?"

"Not the least," I told him. "So far as I know, I've learned nothing from my work that involves anyone yet. I'm at a total loss to explain it."

"The threat is there," Valerie said. "Alison, maybe you'd better get away from here."

"No," I said. "If someone is so afraid of me he wants to kill me, then going away won't stop him. He'll simply follow. I feel I'm safer here, among friends who understand the situation."

I carried my second cup of coffee into the drawing room and we all sat down to wait for Thorpe to return. We continued to talk and think about the possible identity of a murderer.

Thorpe had a little news when he came back. "First of all, Bert Wagner is not in his cabin. His bed is made up, so I don't know if he slept in it last night."

"He keeps a rifle propped in the corner just inside the door," I said.

"I don't recall seeing a gun, though I must admit I wasn't really looking for one. The car that did the damage was yours, Valerie. The front of it is dented and quite badly scratched."

"I didn't leave the house!" Valerie said. "Don't try to blame me for this."

Dennis asked, "You didn't get even a glimpse of whoever was driving the big car?"

"How could I?" I asked. "It was very dark, and the big car's lights would probably have prevented me from seeing the driver even if my car had been standing still. It could have been a man or a woman, or anybody."

"It wasn't me," Valerie said again, angrily this time, as if my mention of a woman had been aimed at her. "And Mom was sound asleep before you left. She's still sleeping off the pill I gave her, as I just told you. Look somewhere else, Alison, not my way!"

"I never expressed a shred of suspicion concerning you," I said.

"What I'd like to know," Hayden broke in, "is what we can do about this situation. We have a man apparently dead by his own hand who has, perhaps, found a way to come back from the dead. We have a scientist murdered because he was carrying a tape perhaps fifty people had heard. Now we have someone who is trying to kill Alison because she's investigating some of the background of all those events. Yet we sit here and do nothing."

"Suggest something," Thorpe said curtly.

Hayden shook his head. "Unfortunately I'm no better than any of you at forming an opinion about how, why—or who is responsible."

"My father started the whole thing and he's likely behind everything that's happened," Valerie said.

"There's someone very much alive and far more dangerous than your father," I said. "Unless ghosts have taken to driving fast cars and firing guns."

Attorney Thorpe was engaged in opening a brown leather briefcase. From it he took an envelope, sealed. He was about to explain what he intended to do when someone banged the front door knocker. As we expected no company we regarded one another mutely for a moment; then Valerie got up, went to the door, and brought back Bert Wagner. He wore faded jeans, a hunting jacket over a red shirt, and riding boots. A floppy, ancient fedora was pulled down on his head.

"Good morning," he said. "I came to find out who the casualty was. I saw the Porsche down the side of the hill just beyond that bad curve. Somebody must have been hurt."

"You were up mighty early," Hayden said.

Wagner chuckled. "So somebody has been to my cabin already. Yes, I was up early. I get up early every morning and I always take a long walk. Now will you tell me how that car got into such an awkward spot—for an automobile?"

"Someone forced me off the road last night," I said.
"And—shot at me with a rifle."

"I see. And I, as the well-known owner of a rifle, am suspected."

"Mr. Thorpe said he didn't see the rifle in your cabin," I informed him.

"Mr. Thorpe might not have seen it, but it is in the cabin; it's just not in full view. It's in the clothes closet. After being suspected once before because I owned a rifle, I thought I'd best put the gun away."

"Can you tell us where you were last night?" Dennis asked. "And prove it?"

"No. I'm aware of where I was, all right, but nobody saw me and I saw no one, spoke to no one. From eight last evening until dawn this morning I was in my cabin. Reading part of the time, sleeping the rest of the time."

"All we draw are blanks," Thorpe commented. "I think it's time to stop trying to solve this matter by questions and vague accusations. You people aren't aware of it, but there's something more important to do." He tapped the edge of the envelope against the arm of his chair. "I have here the last will and testament of Clifford Dalton, and I'm prepared to read it as soon as someone brings Janet down here."

"I'll get her," Valerie said quickly. "Don't you dare open that before I'm back."

She hurried upstairs while we prepared ourselves for whatever shock was coming now.

"Do you know what's in it?" Hayden asked.

"No," Thorpe said. "He came to me and asked me how to draw up a will. I provided him with forms and he wrote it himself, sealed it, and told me not to pry into the contents until after he was dead. I've got no idea what's inside. He gave me no hint at all."

It was a full half hour before Janet and Valerie came down. Apparently Janet had been in a heavy, drugged sleep, for she was still a bit woozy as she sat down and stared, somewhat blankly, at Thorpe. Valerie seated her-

self and, collectively, we all drew a long breath as Thorpe opened the envelope.

He unfolded the document and examined it briefly. "It's a standard form," he said. "Not much on it. The usual stuff about being of sound mind and not influenced by anyone . . . that's how it starts off. I'll get to the meat of it right away. That is," he looked up at Valerie and Janet, "if you two ladies won't object. What Cliff had to say isn't complimentary, as nearly I can tell from a brief scanning."

"Read it," Janet said.

"You've got my permission, too," Valerie added. "My father couldn't hurt me any more than he has already."

"Here goes," Thorpe said. He began to read.

"Before I dispose of my estate I wish to get certain things off my mind. My wife has led me a life of perpetual agony with her demands, her spendthrift ways, her foolish social ambitions that I never shared. During our long marriage I've been true to her without exception. I'm not so sure the same can be said about her. No man will greet death happily, but I will have few regrets when it happens to me. I shall be rid of her and I shall no longer be forced to watch my daughter make a mockery of a life that could have been so rewarding. I will not malign her by definite accusations, but she knows what I mean. I have not been the sublimely blind idiot she has believed.

"Furthermore, I am convinced that it will be possible for me to return after I am dead. I intend to follow this up and study it from every angle. I believe in it.

"Therefore, I now declare that my wife, Janet Dalton, and my daughter, Valerie Dalton, be excluded from my will to the greatest possible extent. If the will is contested, I order that a strong defense be arranged and prosecuted no matter what the cost or what the humiliation my wife and daughter are bound to suffer.

"I now provide that Bert Wagner is bequeathed the sum of one hundred thousand dollars for the wrong I did him. I did cheat him unmercifully.

"The remainder of my estate, person and real, in its entirety, is bequeathed to Dennis Marley, the young man I wish could have been my son.

"I further direct that my attorney, Walter Thorpe, see to the execution of this will, to the payment of all debt, and to the disposition of my estate as indicated."

Thorpe set the will to one side. "That's it," he said. "And I'm as surprised as the rest of you."

"He left me a hundred thousand?" Bert said in awe. "I can't believe it."

"You'd better," Valerie said acidly, "because it certainly gives you one fine excuse to kill him."

"Valerie," Janet said, "you've no right to make such a statement."

"She's angry," Bert Wagner said gently, "and I don't blame her. In my opinion that will is an outrage and it should be contested."

"You heard what Clifford's instructions were," Thorpe said. "To use as much of the estate as is necessary to fight any attempt to contest the will."

"But Clifford certainly could not have been of sound mind when he killed himself in that spectacular way," Janet said. "If he was crazy then ..."

"This will was written two years ago," Thorpe reminded her. "Your husband was then very active in business and his dealings were of a magnitude that would require a perfectly sound mind. Insanity is no defense, even if his death was bizarre enough to indicate it."

I was mute, because none of this concerned me. I was no more than a spectator, or, at most, an investigator who might glean something significant from the will of the dead man.

Dennis spoke up for the first time. "All this controversy and the beginnings of some solid hatreds are unnecessary.

I will not accept the bequest and I will go before any court of law and ask that it be set aside for the benefit of Janet and Valerie. I don't want any of Clifford's money. He did enough for me, and, by his generosity, I now hold an important position in his business."

Thorpe gave a short, mirthless laugh. "You no longer hold a position in the business, Dennis. You own it. Clifford issued no stock, had no investors. It's all yours."

"Then I'll administer it under terms Janet, Valerie, and I can agree upon, with all the profits going to them. They can pay me a salary. Thorpe, I want you to arrange this. If, as executor of the will you can't, then I'll find somebody who *can*."

"We do have all that money from that insurance policy I never knew Clifford had taken out," Janet said. Valerie had apparently told her about the policy this morning.

"Mother," Valerie said tardy, "can't you understand? The insurance policy was made out with the estate as beneficiary. We can't touch a dime of it."

"I'm so ignorant in these matters," Janet said. "I don't know what to do."

Hayden moved to stand beside her chair and he placed a hand lightly on her shoulder. "Don't fret over it, Janet," he said. "We'll straighten it all out some way."

Janet looked up, raised her hand, and patted Hayden's, which still rested on her shoulder. "You are a dear man, Oliver, as I have always known."

I was somewhat surprised at the warmth I thought I heard in her voice—but it could have been my imagination.

Thorpe was in charge again. "Now let me say this, even if I do represent the late Clifford Dalton. Under the law the will can be broken—to a certain extent. The widow is entitled to a share unless it can be shown that she is totally unworthy of it. I don't think this is the case with Janet. Anyway, nothing substantial will come of the bequests now. It'll take me weeks, months, to assemble all the assets, prepare all the documents, and try to straighten out any agreements you make between you. Whatever

happens, I'm sure the outcome will be favorable and fair. You have my word that I'll do all I can."

"Thank you, Walter," Janet said. "I won't worry."

"I will," Valerie said. "What was the matter with this man I had to call my father? He couldn't have been in his right mind."

"I'm beginning to think," Dennis said, "that he did have a certain motive behind it all."

"Well, if you see a motive, you're cleverer than I am," Valerie said with some of her former impatience.

"Perhaps your father was set on my marrying you. Leaving you without his money, leaving it all to me, he may have figured we'd have to get married. He did have some unique thoughts, Val."

"And would you marry me if I needed the money? If he had that in mind, will you carry it out?"

Dennis looked at me with a smile. "I think everybody here knows that I'm in love with Alison and that as soon as this is over we're going to be married. I'd rather turn the entire estate over to you, Val, and to your mother than lose Alison. I might add that this is the first time I've asked her to marry me."

"What chance do I have against that kind of competition?" Valerie said, but in a lighter tone than I might have expected. As for me, I came closer to crying than I had in a long time. I got up quickly and ran the few steps to Dennis' side.

Then the house rocked with the laughter of a dead man!

The laughter seemed to come from every room in the house, every corner, every nook. The loud bray of the laugh descended like a tidal wave and it increased in intensity until it made my eardrums ache.

Janet huddled in a corner of the divan and pressed her hands hard against her ears to try to shut out the sound. I tried that too, but it was impossible to close it out. Hayden, still standing close to Janet, seemed to be frozen in terror. Wagner and Dennis appeared the most relaxed, though it was apparent they shared in the fear that threatened to overcome all of us. Walter Thorpe may have been a cool, calculating man in a courtroom, but he stood shivering visibly, his face pale and his body wilting under the impact of this spectral form of torture.

Valerie came to her feet and began to scream. Both sounds merged into something impossible to bear. Then only Valerie's scream could be heard. The laughter had been abruptly cut off.

I hurried to Valerie's side and put my arms around her. "It's all over," I said.

She had stopped her wild screams as I reached her. She looked at me like someone in a partial trance. "It's over?" she asked.

"Yes. You don't hear it now, do you?"

"No. He came back again, Alison. He's here now. I can feel him near me. I'm afraid he'll do something . . . I'm afraid he may touch me . . ."

"There's no one here," I assured her. "Sit down, Valerie. There's nothing to be alarmed about now. The laughter is finished."

"It was my father!"

"Yes," I said. "I never knew him in life, but I am sure that was his laughter. It happened before and I didn't doubt but that he was back."

"He's going to harm us. I know it! He's going to kill us. Oh, how he hated me and my mother. It's remarkable he didn't murder us when he was alive. I think that's what he's trying to do now."

"All right, Valerie," I said soothingly. "We're all here, and if your father comes back he certainly can't take on all of us. This is the safest place you could be. Just lean back and relax. There's nothing to fear now."

I left her to go over to Dennis. "What do you think of it?"

"I'm not smiling," he said. "In fact, I just had the day-lights scared out of me. I want to say that this was not a ghost—it was something quite human. But what human voice could laugh as loudly as that, or as grossly as that? Or imitate Dalton's laugh so perfectly? Frankly, I don't want to hear it again."

"Nor I. We were all scared."

Bert Wagner, without a word, slowly left the room and the house. Janet, weeping bitterly, was helped upstairs by Valerie. Thorpe began putting papers into his briefcase. I noticed that his hands still trembled, and he seemed incapable of speech. Twice he glanced up at me helplessly, not knowing what to say. Hayden still seemed to be in a state of shock; finally he walked out of the house without uttering a word.

Dennis took my elbow and piloted me to one of the divans, where we sat down. He said, "It has to be explained. Somehow we have to find out what this is. I know

it's Dalton's voice. I know he'd dead. I know that laugh could not be duplicated. And it happens at times when his laughter would be called for—when he's accomplished some triumph, like disinheriting his widow and daughter."

"That's why it can't be mechanical," I said. "It has to be spectral. It must be that Dalton *is* a ghost. He's in this house and he knows what's going on. He hasn't become an apparition yet, though I fully expect he may. He laughs at the right times, not at times that were programmed."

"You've had ideas this laughter was a part of his big joke?"

"All along—until now. The laughter was spontaneous, not like some record set to go off at certain intervals. But there's also a human element involved—the kind that drives me off the road and then tries to shoot me. The kind that murdered Dr. Garvin in order to steal the cassette. Whoever's doing this, he'll go to any lengths to get what he wants—which seems to be the elimination of me."

"It all began with that dinner party. The only suggestion I have at the moment isn't much, but it might develop into something. Why not have everybody at the dinner come here again? We might even repeat the meal, if we can get someone up here to cook it."

"I've been thinking along those same lines. I can use the telephone and ask the coroner to contact those people and order them to return. I'd like to make it for tomorrow night."

"We certainly can't delay it. Shall we go into town so you can make the phone call? I have to get a wrecker to come and haul your car out of the field anyway."

"Yes, I want to start things going right now. Dennis, does Oliver Hayden have a telephone? It would be much quicker to go there—he's only half a mile away."

"I don't know. Telephone lines can be brought out here, but the cost is pretty steep. I think Dalton refused to install one as much because he was cheap as because he wanted seclusion. . . . But probably Hayden isn't that

cheap, and I don't think he has such a desire to be alone. Anyway, we can drive over there in five minutes."

"Give me ten," I said. I hurried upstairs and tapped on Janet's door. Valerie opened it. "Dennis and I are going to see if Oliver Hayden has a phone. Do you know if he has?"

"No. What do you want with a phone?"

"I'm going to assemble everyone who was here the night your father died. Someone may know something."

"I agree it's worth a try. I'll ask Mom about Hayden's phone. She used to go over there a lot and she'd know. I won't be a moment."

She returned in half a minute. "Mom says that Hayden does have a phone. I'm sure he'll be glad to let you use it."

"Thank you, Val. Honestly, I'm sorry about the way things went. I mean the will. It was so unfair."

"What gets me," she said, "is that Dennis would give up a couple of million dollars because he's in love with you. I guess I don't really deserve a guy like that. Imagine, two million or so to *not* marry me?"

"Now, Val, there was no direct statement in the will about that, and you know it."

"Sure I know it, but I also know how Dad thought. What Dennis surmised must have been foremost in Dad's mind when he wrote the will. And if you hadn't come along, Dennis would have married me so he could restore the family money to its rightful place. That's what my father planned."

"That's what Dennis intends to do anyway," I reminded her. "I mean about the money."

"Yes, I know. I guess I'd rather have the money at that. . . . No, I'm kidding. But listen—if that laugh comes again, I'm leaving. Mom is still so scared she can hardly speak. She's arranged to go riding with Hayden, though. She thinks a ride will settle her nerves."

"We'll see you later," I said.

I went to my room. The face in the mirror leered out at me, but it amused me now more than it frightened or

annoyed me. It did seem the face was leering with somewhat more vigor, though. Or was it glee?

I changed into a clean pair of slacks, gathered up a light sweater, and ran down to join Dennis. I told him Hayden had a phone.

"That's strange. I'd rather assumed he didn't. Why didn't he invite us to use it before?"

"I've no idea, but it's there, so we might as well ask permission to use it."

"Might as well. Maybe I can haul your car onto the road myself."

We drove to the main road, turned left, and proceeded a short distance to where the road ended and the driveway to Hayden's house began. It was the first time I'd seen the place. It was large, but rather plain-looking in comparison to the monstrosity Dalton had built; it was a two-story, Tudor-type house with a great deal of ivy and plantings close to the building. There were a garage and what seemed to be stables beyond the house. Two horses were contentedly moving about in a fenced pasture.

Dennis helped me out of the car and we walked onto the spacious porch. Dennis rang the bell and we heard its chimes sounding inside. We waited a few moments but no one came. We were about to turn away when Dennis noted that the door was not tightly closed.

"I wonder if anything has happened to him."

"In view of what's been going on, I think we should have a look," I said.

Dennis pushed the door wide. "Oliver!" he called out. "Mr. Hayden!"

There was no answer. We went into the house, and Dennis called out again. I walked into the drawing room. It was much smaller than Dalton's, and it seemed sparsely furnished. There was a ceiling-high fireplace; beside it the wallpaper was badly faded where large pictures must have once hung. I noticed more of these faded spots. The furniture was well-worn, and the draperies were fading too; when I pushed one aside to look out behind the house, I

could feel the fabric give way slightly—it was so old that it had become brittle.

Dennis called me and I found him in a study on the first floor. There was a phone on the desk.

"He's not here, that's for sure. I'm going to take the liberty of using the phone."

He began to dial, frowned, hung up for a moment, and then listened carefully before he hung up again. "No wonder he didn't invite us to use it. The phone is dead."

"That's odd. You'd suppose in view of all the trouble around here he'd have been sure to get it fixed."

"It *is* odd," Dennis said. "However, I don't think we'd better ask him about it. In fact, I think if we can slip out of here without his knowing we've been here that might be the best thing to do."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"I looked into the dining room. He used to have an elaborate silver service. And he had a china cabinet full of priceless china. It's all gone."

"He's taken down paintings from the living room walls, too. You can see the faded wallpaper."

"I wonder what this is all about. . . . Well, if it's what I think, we'd only embarrass the poor guy. Let's get out fast."

We hurried out to the car. Dennis had the motor started when he saw Hayden and Janet ride out on a path through the forest that separated the estates.

"Well, seems we got here just in time," Hayden said. Apparently he hadn't even entertained the thought that we'd already been inside his house. He must have believed we'd only pulled up this moment. We did nothing to change his mind about that.

"Oliver and I often go riding," Janet told us. "He brings a horse over for me. It's a wonderful tonic and a way to relax. Heaven knows I'm in need of something to soothe my nerves."

"What can we do for you?" Hayden asked.

"We were wondering," I said, "if you had a telephone

that I might use to call the coroner's office. I want him to order all the men who were here the night your husband died, Janet, back to the mansion so we can all get together."

"I have a phone," Hayden said, "but it's out of order. Takes days to get someone out here to fix it. I'm sorry."

"We'll drive to town," Dennis said.

"Have a good ride," I called to them.

Dennis drove away from the estate. When we reached the point where my red Porsche was visible at the bottom of the slope, he decided against trying to pull it out. In town he arranged for a wrecker to do the job and told the men that if the car proved operational to tow it to the Dalton estate and turn it over to Emmet.

I then entered a phone booth and called the coroner. I gave him a brief rundown on what had happened, and assured him that I could take care of myself and that I did not need the police yet. He agreed to see that the members of the dinner party were at the mansion the next evening, but he was primarily worried about me.

"Doctor," I said, "I'm protected by a wonderful young man I intend to marry soon. And everyone else is being kind and cooperative. I'm not afraid and I want to clear this up."

"Have you come to any firm conclusion about Dalton's death?"

"Yes—he was murdered. Psychologically speaking, I'm satisfied that he did *not* take his own life. Perhaps he might have on some strange impulse—that's been known to happen. But I don't think so. This whole thing was staged and it took a long time to prepare everything."

"What about the ghost angle? Good Lord, if the newspapers ever get wind of this ..."

"Keep it top secret, Doctor," I said. "The whole thing would cave in if it got that much publicity. I can handle it. If I find I can't, or there seems to be too much danger, I'll ask for help."

"See that you do. I admire your courage, Alison. Keep in touch."

When I hung up, I took time to consult the phone book and take from it the number of Oliver Hayden's phone. I dialed it and got a recording. It said service had been discontinued.

I told Dennis about it. "That's what they say when the phone is cut off for nonpayment of the bill. Do you suppose Hayden is as broke as that?"

"He's putting on a mighty good front if he is. But all signs point to that."

"He's probably too proud to ask for help. If he was living in the hope that Dalton would provide for him . . ."

"I doubt that. He and Dalton never had much to do with one another. Their personalities would clash under any conditions. I don't know what it's about, but I think I know who would."

"Bert Wagner, our modern hermit. Let's drop by and talk to him."

"Sure. One thing about Wagner, he's no fool. He knows what's going on—probably knows more than anyone else. If we speak to him alone he may come up with something."

Our next stop was at the Dalton garage, where my car was already in the hands of Emmet. He was looking at it woefully and kept shaking his head in dismay. Dennis and I walked down the path toward the ocean until we came to Wagner's cabin. There was smoke coming from a barbecue in the backyard, so it was evident he was at home.

"Hello there!" he called out when we approached the cabin. "I'm smoking some of that deer meat to try and disguise it into what looks like beef. In case the game warden comes by. As he sometimes does. Anything new happen up there?"

"Not since all that laughter scared the wits out of us," I said. "We've just come from town. I'm having everyone who was here the night of the murder come back. We're not going to recreate the events, but with everyone together

we might get some questions answered. I think you'd better be there too, Mr. Wagner."

"Sure, why not?"

"Bert," Dennis asked, "what's happened to Hayden?"

"What do you mean?" Wagner's bushy eyebrows came together.

"Alison and I rode over there to use his telephone rather than drive all the way to town. He wasn't there, but his door was ajar and we were a bit apprehensive about him so, frankly, we just barged in."

"Under the circumstances I think that was called for," Wagner said.

"Okay. So the phone is disconnected, likely for non-payment of his bill. The house shows ample signs of having been stripped of paintings and silver. . . ."

"Hayden's been broke for four or five years. He trusted Dalton too much. He bought stocks Dalton recommended and most of them nose-dived. Hayden had borrowed to pay for the stock so he took a shellacking. Had to sell out at a considerable loss."

"Did Dalton give him a bum steer purposely?" I asked.

"Who knows? Hayden would have no way of finding out. Everything was open and on the level far as anyone could tell. But I wouldn't have put it past Dalton to wreck Hayden financially."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, Miss Craig."

"Would it be that Hayden and Dalton's wife took too many horseback rides together?"

Wagner shook his head and smiled. "No, I doubt it. Janet's not the type. She likes riding; Dalton wouldn't have any part of it, and Hayden just filled in for him. There was nothing clandestine about it. Hayden's not the sort to try and steal another man's wife, and Janet was a faithful, much-abused wife. You're on a wrong lead if you try to develop anything out of their companionship—for that's just what it was. A couple of lonely people being

friends. Hayden lost his wife years ago; Janet might as well have lost her husband before she really did."

"Well, I'm glad to know that," I said. "We don't need any more complications."

"Anything new on that attempt to kill you?" he asked me.

"No, nothing."

"Let's hope it doesn't happen again," he said. "And I'm happy to congratulate both of you. Let me know when the ceremony takes place so I can send you a gift. It seems I'm a rich man now."

"How do you account for that change of heart on Dalton's part?" I asked.

"You're the psychologist. You tell me. I can only surmise that his conscience must have bothered him. You know, I said I built this cabin near his estate so he'd be constantly reminded of what he'd done to me. That wasn't exactly the truth—I put down my roots here because I like the ocean; I like being close to it. I'm a single man with not the slightest intention of getting married. I hated being confined to an office, and when Dalton kicked me out I was secretly happy about it, because I could start to live as I'd always wanted to live. Dalton didn't owe me a thing, but he might have thought he did."

"You're a remarkable man, Mr. Wagner," I said. "I hope you enjoy yourself with all that money as much as you do now without it."

"I expect I'll find a use for it," he said. "Drop by whenever you have the chance. Sometimes I do get a bit lonely."

Dennis and I walked slowly back to the mansion. We didn't speak much for half the walk because we were too occupied with our individual thoughts. Dennis broke the silence.

"As a psychologist, what's your opinion of him, Alison?"

"Wagner? He's a happy man. The bequest couldn't increase his contentment if it was a thousand times what it is. His needs are simple because that's what he really is—a simple man with no jealousy to bother him. In a way

Oliver Hayden is something like him, but Hayden has a need for luxury, people, a full and exciting life. Yet I'll swear that of the two, Hayden's by far the lonelier."

"Tell me, do you have any goal set for the night everyone returns here?"

"No, not exactly."

"Could it be that you hope Dalton might fulfill the promise he made on the tape that he'd come back and prove he could return from the dead? And inform everyone where the proof of guilt is hidden?"

"Something like that," I admitted. "We have to bring this to a head somehow. If Dalton *can* come back, that's when he'll do it. All I'll be doing is giving him the chance."

"And if he does come back?"

"Don't even suggest it again! What I'd do if he materialized or otherwise made his presence known, no psychologist could answer. The only thing I can say is probably I'd get out of there fast."

"Not you," Dennis said. "Oh no, Alison, not you."

I spent the remainder of the afternoon working at Dalton's desk. I'd need another week to go through everything it contained, and there was metal filing cabinets in the supply closet, all crammed with papers.

I was most interested in what had happened just prior to Dalton's death, and I kept on concentrating on that period. The only reward I got for examining hundreds of papers, canceled checks, and appointment sheets was a check made out to Elvira Zebow, the spiritualist. It was for five hundred dollars; it seemed an excessive sum for a seance. Especially extravagant considering Dalton was not prone to paying large fees for any purpose.

The check intrigued me to such an extent that I decided to drive to the village, find Mrs. Zebow, and try to learn from her what she had done to earn this kind of a fee from a man as tight-fisted as Dalton.

I didn't tell anyone about it. Dennis had driven to town on business of his own, attorney Thorpe had long ago left us, Hayden had brought Janet back from their ride and gone off. Janet was now resting in bed and Valerie was likely keeping her company. I had no idea where Bert Wagner was.

Emmet had managed to unbend the Porsche's rear fenders and straighten out some of the accordion-pleated

trunk. The little Porsche was much the worse for its encounter with the big car, but at least it ran. There was nothing wrong with the engine.

I drove to the village, alert every moment of the journey for a possible attempt to kill me. I met no other cars, no people, until I was within the village itself. I stopped at the drugstore to phone the coroner again and make a brief report. After that I got the address of Elvira Zebow from the druggist.

Her house turned out to be a small, pleasant cottage surrounded by a white fence; the gate creaked. The yard was neat, the plantings were modest but showed care, and flowers were in bloom. The house itself was typical of houses in Maine coastal towns—one story with a large porch for the size of the cottage. Everything was painted white and sparkled with cleanliness.

Mrs. Zebow came out to greet me before I reached the porch. Evidently she'd been alerted by the frantic barking of the dachshund that welcomed me through a screen door.

"Why it's the lady from the Dalton house," Mrs. Zebow said. She quieted the dog and held the door open for me.

"Do you have a few moments?" I asked. "It's rather important."

"I don't think you'd have called on me if it wasn't," she said candidly, "but I'll help all I can. Mr. Dalton was nice to me and I owe him something even if he is dead."

"First of all, you probably know that I work for the state as a sort of investigator and I'm looking into the death of Mr. Dalton."

She inclined her head slightly after we sat down in the cozy parlor. "I'm willing to help if there is a way."

"Now you told us your seances were—well, to be frank—not genuine."

"That's right. I won't lie about it, but I hope you won't make that public. There are a lot of ladies in this village and surrounding ones who like to come here and get messages from their departed dear ones. I give them solace

and hope. That's not evil, surely not a sin. I don't take any money. Or not very much."

"You also claimed that the seance you held for us frightened you as much as it did all of us."

"That's the truth." She settled back and folded her hands in her lap. "You know, I've been doing this for a long time. I used to half believe in it, but gradually I knew all I did was tell the ladies a few facts I'd learned and made them think I had contacted a dead person. Now and then—not often—I had a strange feeling that maybe I was getting closer to being a real psychic. I'd hear faint voices in my ears while I pretended to be in a trance. It scared me—but at the seance I held for you, I heard Mr. Dalton laughing. I heard his voice. I could almost feel his presence in the room."

"Did you manage to make any contact? Even remotely?"

"I don't know. That's the truth. I don't know."

"You sat for Mr. Dalton several times?"

"Yes—several."

"Did you fool him as you did the ladies who come to you for comfort?"

"Sometimes I think I did. Other times I think he was laughing behind my back. But silently, not like he laughed at the seance."

"Did he pay you?"

"I think that's a personal question," she said, hedging for the first time.

"Mrs. Zebow, I don't care if he or anyone else paid you. I will not make any trouble. It is an important question and may help to discover what happened to Mr. Dalton the night he died."

"Yes—I took money. Not much . . ."

"Don't you consider five hundred dollars a substantial sum?" I asked.

"How'd you know that?"

"I found the canceled check among his possessions. Again, let me say that whatever business you and Mr.

Dalton transacted is really none of my business. All I want to know is why you were paid such a large sum."

She sighed. "I didn't want to get mixed up in his crazy jokes, but I'm not rich and I needed the money."

"No doubt. Go on, Mrs. Zebow."

"You won't make any trouble for me?"

"You have my word."

"I was to go to the house and tell his widow that I had known Mr. Dalton and that I could bring him back from the dead. I was to hold a seance with all the trappings and make her think I had contacted him."

"And what were you to say? That is, what was he supposed to say through you?"

"I can't tell you. He made me swear never to tell."

I had an idea water torture wouldn't make her talk. There was a look of intense obstinacy on her face. In cases like this it was better to change the approach.

"Mrs. Zebow, I will not ask you to betray any confidences Mr. Dalton insisted upon. But let us suppose I hadn't come here, I hadn't asked you to sit for us. Mr. Dalton left you instructions to go to the house and persuade his widow you could make contact with him. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that's right," she said, with considerable suspicion in her voice.

"Mr. Dalton paid you to do this. Don't you consider it necessary now to carry out his instructions and earn the five hundred dollars?"

She regarded me in silence for a moment. "I don't know what you mean, exactly."

"Why don't you go to the house, ask to see Mrs. Dalton, and tell her what her husband paid you to say? Pretend the seance and whatever he told you to say—just say it. You won't betray his confidence—you will, in fact, carry out his wishes. Doesn't that make sense to you?"

"Sort of, I guess. I was paid and I haven't done anything yet."

"All right. Forget that we enlisted your help before, that

you did come to the house and hold a seance. Pretend it never happened. All you have to do is carry out Dalton's instructions."

"That's right. It was what he wanted me to do. If you promise there won't be any trouble ..."

"You have my word."

"But... but suppose I find out I can make contact with him? What'll I do then? I'll be so scared I'll faint. I know I will. I almost did before."

"Mrs. Zebow, there will be a number of people present. Nothing can happen to you."

"All right. When do you want me there?"

"Tomorrow evening after dinner. Just act as Mr. Dalton wanted you to."

"After dinner. I'll be there. This time I have to have the lights out... all that sort of thing."

"Good. It will be a more realistic performance on your part."

She followed me to the door. "If only it doesn't become too realistic. I remember that awful laughing."

"I was there. I know what you mean."

"You're a nice young lady. Some folks would have made fun of me for putting on the crazy stuff I used to do in my seances. They'd even turn me over to the police. You're very fair and I like you."

"I'm glad of that," I said, wondering what was coming next, for all this flattery was leading up to something.

"Did you ever hear of a man named Monroney?"

"No—never. I'm sure I would have remembered the name if I had."

"He's a mortician."

"Oh? I didn't know that, of course."

"Yes ... I think you ought to talk to him."

"Why?" I asked, suppressing the excitement building up in me. I was rapidly forming an idea that I'd played with before but had abandoned as being too impossible.

"Just talk to him. He's in the next town—Maryville. Got a nice place there. I used to know him before he went

into that business, but I haven't seen him since because I . . . don't like to be around those people. Of course somebody has to do that work...."

"It's certainly not a dishonorable profession," I said. "Tell me how he's involved in this."

"Mr. Dalton asked me if I knew of anybody in that business. That he could trust."

"When was that?"

"Oh, a few weeks before he died. Mr. Monroney didn't bury him, of course. A local man did. I don't know why Mr. Dalton wanted the name of a mortician. He made me promise never to tell that I'd asked him."

"How far is it to Maryville?" I asked.

"Oh, maybe ten miles. Not too far, I guess."

"If I go to see Mr. Monroney, may I use your name? By way of introduction only, of course."

"I guess so. Won't do any harm far as I can see."

"Thank you," I said. "We'll expect you tomorrow evening. I'll even see if I can't arrange for an additional fee. Something to make it worth your while."

"I'd appreciate it."

I walked away from the cottage wondering what I'd stumbled into. It was still only midafternoon and I had time to visit the next town. I considered waiting until Dennis finished his business, but I didn't know where he was.

Then again, the mortician named Monroney might not have any connection with the death of Clifford Dalton. I couldn't afford to pass up a lead like this, but perhaps it wasn't so strong that I should involve anyone else.

So I drove to Maryville. Finding Mr. Monroney was extremely simple—his place of business sported a huge neon sign in colors. I parked the car and hesitated a moment while I wondered if I was a fool; but having come this far I decided to finish it.

Mr. Monroney was a cheerful, rosy-cheeked little butterball of a man who exuded cheer and good will with every breath. It was probably his stock in trade.

"Mr. Monroney," I said, "I am a psychologist working

for the county coroner and the district attorney. I have credentials you might examine before I tell you what brought me here."

He read the letters authorizing me to exert whatever authority was required and he was impressed.

He handed the letters back. "It's a novel idea for a psychologist to be employed as a detective."

"I'm not a detective, Mr. Monroney. Now. Not many days ago a man named Clifford Dalton died under very peculiar circumstances. Do you recall the case?"

All his good cheer promptly faded at the mention of the name.

"How did you get wind of my connection with him?"

"Through Mrs. Zebow."

"She talks too much."

"She's trying to help me determine whether Mr. Dalton killed himself or was murdered. It's important that we know what happened. Mr. Dalton asked Mrs. Zebow if she knew a mortician, not one in her town but' elsewhere, and she mentioned your name. I take it Mr. Dalton came to see you."

He shrugged. "How can I deny it when I've already just about admitted it?"

"Will you give me the facts? Tell me what you know and what Mr. Dalton wanted of you?"

"He wanted to arrange a fake funeral."

It took considerable effort to refrain from showing the excitement that now mounted within me. Something I'd vaguely suspected was taking firm shape.

"Tell me about it, please."

"This will go into a report to the district attorney and the coroner, I suppose."

"It will not."

"I wish I could be sure of that."

"Mr. Monroney, *did* you finally bury Mr. Dalton and pretend that he was dead?"

"No. No, and I think I would have changed my mind anyway."

"Then tell me what he wanted of you. There will be no repercussions, I promise. You've committed no crime."

"I think he was way off the beam, maybe a little rocky in the head, you know? Here he was, a complete stranger, asking me to come to his home and pick up his body—"

"Did he imply that he would be dead?"

"Oh no . . . no. I was to pick him up. He'd be pretending. Once I got him away from the house I was to stop the service wagon I use, let him out, continue back to my place of business and provide a weighted casket. Then I would arrange services and burial in the family plot. He told me it was all part of a joke and he would pay me well."

"That's very interesting, Mr. Monroney, but if he would be pretending death, who would call you? Someone else had to be in on the scheme."

"Yes, I'm sure of it. I don't know who was going to call. He didn't tell me. All he said was I'd get the word and when I did, move fast, because he didn't want to be forced to fake death over a long period of time. He was afraid he might give himself away."

"But no identity of the person who would call?"

"None. Of course, I never got the call. I read where he killed himself and I assumed that was what he intended all along. I was just going to be some kind of a patsy. I decided to forget the whole thing."

"Thank you," I said.

"Have I been of any help? It's the craziest situation I ever heard of."

"You have helped, in a way, but not as completely as I'd hoped."

"The name of the person who'd make the call, eh?"

"That's right."

"Tell me, did he kill himself?"

"That's what I had hoped you'd be able to tell me. Thank you very much, anyway. What has gone between us will go no further than is absolutely necessary—if we have to use the information at all. You can be assured there will

be no publicity and no attempt to prosecute you. Actually, you didn't do anything anyway."

"Thank God I didn't," he said. "I don't mind admitting it's been worrying me."

"I doubt you will be bothered again about this," I said. "Good-bye, Mr. Monroney."

I returned to the car and sat behind the wheel for several minutes, going over in my mind the evidence I'd just uncovered—and wondering what good it did me. It did, of course, go along with the theory I'd been building up that Dalton had never intended to die and that he'd been creating a monstrous joke for reasons known only to himself. Someone else had to be in on the scheme, but who?

I considered Bert Wagner and decided he wouldn't help Dalton in a plot like this under any circumstance. Walter Thorpe might. I didn't trust him too much, and he'd been under Dalton's thumb anyway. Oliver Hayden was also a contender for the honor of becoming my major suspect. He was a friend of Dalton's and it was possible that Dalton had trusted him. Yet in a case of this kind, merely being a neighbor and a friend was hardly enough to insure the safety of the plot. What he would have needed was someone who was indebted to him, was afraid of him, and for whom there would be dire consequences if he failed to comply. Nobody seemed to fill that description, though among the men he'd accused at the dinner I might find one who'd be apt to obey Dalton, even submit willingly to Dalton's caustic criticism at the dinner so that no suspicion would be cast his way.

I realized I would come to no conclusions sitting here. Above all I wanted to talk to Dennis about this new complication. I was, however, quite proud of myself for having found and tracked down this meager clue. I felt that I was at least getting somewhere.

It was getting dark now; I'd be terribly late. I started the car and was about to turn on the headlights when I saw Monroney emerge from his funeral home in a great hurry—he descended the half dozen outside steps in two

leaps. He disappeared around the corner of the house. I heard the sound of a car being started, headlights swept out of the driveway, and a hearse came into view.

The vehicle was moving fast as it left the driveway and picked up speed along the street. I doubted that a hearse was ever used in an emergency. Yet Monroney was driving as if there was one.

I started after him; I had a feeling th

with all this undue speed a little too soon after my talk with him. I was sure he didn't know what my car looked like, and in the darkness he wouldn't be able to see it anyway if I kept far enough behind him. Should he head for Dalton's mansion or the neighboring village, I'd know Mr. Monroney had not only told me a he, but that he was on his way to warn someone that I knew too much.

We left the town and headed along the concrete road leading toward the village. I was more certain than ever that my suspicion was correct. If my luck held out perhaps I might even find the person responsible for Dr. Garvin's death and all the violence that had occurred so far.

The road was not heavily traveled, and when the hearse slowed, its brake lights flashing, I knew Monroney had been watching my headlights in his mirror and was beginning to wonder if he was being followed.

I doubted that he could identify me if I passed him, so as he slowed down I picked up speed. I turned out and passed him at about fifty. I kept going until I came to a narrow farm road. I'd turned a corner and for the moment Monroney wouldn't be able to see me. I turned into the road, shut off the lights and the motor, and waited. I got out of the car so I could see the hearse better as it went by. I held my breath for fear Monroney had turned around, but after a few more seconds the hearse sped by the spot where I was hidden. I doubted Monroney even knew the farm road was there.

I backed' out onto the concrete again and before I swung around to follow the hearse, I turned off my lights. It was a dangerous thing to do, but I felt it was necessary.

If I ran into traffic I'd have to switch them on, but for now, along the all but deserted road, I felt safe enough.

One thing was in my favor. I wouldn't be apt to mistake some other vehicle and follow it. The hearse was a stand-out to trail. Monroney was speeding again, which made it more difficult for me to follow him without the help of headlights, but I held the road well enough. Monroney was about a quarter of a mile ahead of me now. Even driving with no lights I didn't dare get any closer. I lost sight of the hearse for a few seconds after it turned a corner. When I swung around that same corner I saw a large roadside fruit and vegetable stand brilliantly lighted. I then proceeded to prove to myself what an amateur I was at this kind of intrigue. I should have stopped before I reached the lighted stand, let the hearse get entirely out of sight, and then tried to catch up. Instead I slid serenely by the lighted area and then I realized, with dismay, that if Monroney was watching his rear-view mirror he would be able to see what looked like the small car that had recently passed him now coming his way without lights.

The hearse seemed to be picking up speed; any faster and I wouldn't dare drive without lights, and I had to let him get too far ahead of me. There was a bend in the road and when I cleared that the hearse's taillights were no longer in view. I wasn't sure if he'd pulled out and shut off his lights or if he'd found some way of leaving the road. Certainly a man who'd been in business in this area for years would know almost every side road.

I knew very well that he'd succeeded in getting away from me. I backed up, using my lights now, until I saw another of those narrow dirt roads like the one I'd pulled into. I turned down it. Lights were an absolute necessity here and I made no attempt to turn them off. I speeded up as much as I dared, for the road was narrow, full of pot holes, and had a tendency to curve rather sharply.

There was one encouraging sign. Some vehicle had passed here not long before—the dust from the bone-dry

road was not yet fully settled. Heartened by this, I put on a little more speed.

I was passing occasional farmhouses; some were lighted, some were not. I slowed to peer through the darkness for any sign of the hearse parked in somebody's farmyard.

Then I braked hard and came to a stop. The road I traveled actually broke in half. Two roads now formed a fork in front of me and I was faced with a choice: to the right or to the left? I got out of the car to see if I could detect any more of that unsettled dust, but here was none here. The two roads were a little better than the one I was on now—the dirt was harder packed; it might even turn to blacktop farther on. I tried to figure out where I was, what direction I'd take to reach Dalton's mansion. But I was a complete stranger here and I had no idea which direction I faced, which fork to take. I couldn't delay or the whole game would be lost anyway.

I decided to take the left fork on the chance it did head in the proper direction. But five minutes later the game was not only lost—so was I. More side roads turned up and I had to surrender any chance of catching up with the hearse. My problem at the moment was to find my own way back.

The sting of this defeat was not easy to bear, especially since I'd been going along so well and I might have been on the trail of the one man who could solve the whole puzzle for me. Finally, I did the only thing possible—I turned around and followed the roads all the way back to the concrete highway, which, I knew, would lead me in the proper direction. Monroney had made good his escape and if I found him now it would be only by sheer luck.

I turned the car over to Emmet when I returned to the Dalton mansion. I was disheartened at having failed when such a wonderful chance had presented itself. Of course, I could still see to it that Monroney was questioned and made to explain why he had acted evasively and suspiciously. And tell where he'd gone after I lost him. But if I judged Monroney right, he'd probably have some excuse to account for his actions and he'd defy anybody to disprove his story.

In agreeing to perform the strange task of pretending to bury Dalton, he'd committed no crime, and he'd never carried out any of Dalton's bizarre plans. I'd gone through Dalton's recent disbursements and knew there was no record of any financial transaction between the two men, so Monroney must have been paid off in cash.

When I entered the drawing room I interrupted a chess game between Janet and Hayden; they were playing on a table illuminated by two lamps. They suspended the game to welcome me back. I decided not to confide my disappointment about Monroney to them. Not at this moment.

"I've persuaded Mrs. Zebow to return tomorrow night and try to put on a seance for all of us," I said. "Of course you know everyone who was present the night Mr. Dalton died will be back."

"Yes," Hayden said. "I think it's a good idea."

"Certainly," Janet said. "Since we're not progressing very far we might as well try that."

I thought Janet had made the first positive statement I'd heard from her since she arrived.

"Mrs. Zebow has already been paid for this seance," I added.

Hayden seemed surprised. "I understand she didn't accept a fee for her services."

"This time she was paid in advance. By your husband, Janet, some time before he died."

Janet, about to move a chess piece, was so shaken that she upset two other pieces. She looked up at me without trying to hide her consternation over this news. "Why in the world did he do that?" she asked.

"Apparently he believed so strongly that he could come back he wanted to set the stage for his return." I didn't mention that she'd also been told what message to deliver to the guests assembled for the seance. Even I didn't know what she'd say, and I wanted everyone else to be as surprised as I'd be. A great deal could be learned from people's reactions to something they didn't expect.

"I don't care for any of this," Janet said. "AH these trappings of death."

"Janet," Hayden said mildly, "if Clifford was able to materialize or take physical action against us, he'd have done so by now. All he seems to be able to do is laugh."

"That's bad enough," Janet said. "I'm tired of being frightened."

I said, "I guess we all are. . . . Have you seen Mr. Wagner?"

"He hasn't been here," Hayden said. "Janet and I have been playing chess for the last couple of hours. Nobody has paid us a visit."

"Valerie is upstairs," Janet added. "The poor girl hasn't slept well since we arrived. She wanted to get some rest."

"And neither Mr. Thorpe nor Dennis have put in an appearance?"

"Alison, I just told you no one has been here," Hayden said, as if he was slightly annoyed at the question.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I forgot. I'm going to change. Enjoy your game."

I tapped on Valerie's door; when I received no reply I opened it quietly and tiptoed across the parlor of the two-room suite. Valerie was in bed, sound asleep. I retreated as noiselessly as I'd entered and proceeded to my own room.

There I sat down to try to take stock of things, but I decided I'd be far better able to put the afternoon's events into perspective if I talked to Dennis, so I changed from my slacks into a dress I'd saved for special occasions. I was glad I'd brought it.

Tomorrow evening I wouldn't dare wear anything except slacks and a blouse, for there was no telling what would happen and I wanted to be prepared for any eventuality. But tonight at dinner I wanted to look my best. Perhaps I felt a bit jealous of Valerie. I remembered how fetching she'd looked in that wisp of a bikini when she'd gone swimming with Dennis.

I put my hair up, for a change; removed and then re-applied my makeup for the evening; and put on the dress. It was of thin white lawn with a lace-edged off-the-shoulder top and a ruffled skirt. The weather was warm and the outfit exactly suited to it.

I was almost finished dressing when I heard a car drive up; from my window I saw Dennis waiting for Emmet to come and take charge of his Ferrari.

I made the stairs as Dennis entered so that when I called to him he had to stop and watch me descend the stairs. There was no one in the world I wanted to impress more than Dennis. So far he'd seen me only in slacks or pantsuits.

"Beautiful," he said as I reached the bottom landing. I took both his hands and he drew me to him for a kiss.

Janet and Hayden had entered the reception hall to greet him too, and before I broke our embrace I whispered to him, "I've got news, but we'll have to be alone when I tell it."

He released me and shook hands with Hayden before he kissed Janet fondly on the cheek.

"I don't know who will cook dinner," Janet said, with a quick look in my direction. "But I'm glad you were able to come, Dennis."

"From the calm atmosphere I seem to detect, there've been no new shenanigans from Clifford."

"It's been a quiet afternoon and evening," Janet said. "And I'm grateful for it. Valerie persuaded me not to leave, but I assure you—one more episode and I will."

"I guess I'm elected to cook dinner," I said. "Dennis, you are appointed my assistant. And we'd better get at it."

"Mr. Thorpe may be here for dinner," Janet warned me.

"I'll prepare enough," I assured her. "Come along, Dennis, we don't have too much time."

In the kitchen I talked to him in a low voice. "It may have been a quiet afternoon for the chess players, but not for me. I visited Mrs. Zebow after I found she'd cashed a five-hundred-dollar check Dalton had given her."

"For a seance?" he asked.

"Yes, but not yet held. Mrs. Zebow was to come here when everyone was assembled—everyone who'd been present when Dalton died. She was supposed to go into a trance and deliver a message from him. She refused to tell me what the message was."

"Since Dalton warned everyone that he would come back with a message that would reveal their crimes, I suspect that's what Mrs. Zebow was paid to tell."

"Perhaps. It sounds logical enough. But that's only part of it. She also told me that Dalton had visited an undertaker in Maryville. A man named Monroney. So I drove there. It was a foolish thing to do alone—I should have tried to find you. However, I was afraid if I wasted time I

might not make contact with Mr. Monroney, or that he'd be forewarned and ready to answer my questions with lies. It happens he did not. I think he was so surprised, and perhaps so impressed with my credentials, that he told me the truth—but it's hard to swallow."

"Dalton arranged for his own burial," Dennis guessed.

"That's it. Monroney was to pick up the 'body,' drive away, and then let Dalton out. After that he would prepare a weighted coffin, conduct a funeral, and convince everyone that Dalton really was dead."

"Now we *know* he didn't intend to kill himself," Dennis said.

"That's right. After I left Monroney's establishment he came out in a hurry and hopped into his hearse. I followed him, but—oh! I'm so inexpert at these things. He realized he was being followed and he got away from me. I know he was headed in this direction. I forgot to tell you—he also admitted someone would phone him after the pretended suicide. So we also now know that Dalton did have an ally."

"I've realized all along that he must have had. So Monroney was driving out here to warn this contact man about your visit. Do you realize that this narrows things down?"

"Yes, very much so. If this contact man could have been reached by telephone, Monroney wouldn't have risked the trip to warn him."

"There's no phone in this house," Dennis said. "The phone at Hayden's is cut off, and Wagner has no phone."

"Then it all boils down to Janet, Valerie, Hayden, or Wagner."

"That's right. Of course, there may have been someone else. You're only sure Monroney headed in this general direction. He could have been trying to reach someone in town—one of the others who was here for Dalton's death scene."

"If only I hadn't lost him!"

"What makes you think you have? If Monroney was

agreeable to a scheme like the one Dalton proposed, he can't have the strongest character in the world. I'm going to look him up—tonight. If he refuses to tell me who he was in such a hurry to see, I'll have him locked up."

"It will have to wait until after dinner," I said. "This is going to be a simple meal, by the way. There are steaks in the icebox. Imagine—an icebox in this era! Fortunately, Olga saw to it there was plenty of ice before she left. You peel potatoes and get them on while I prepare the steaks."

"There's stuff for a salad," Dennis reported from the vicinity of the icebox.

"Good. Oh damn!" I added. "Steaks are meant to broil. Dalton and his old-fashioned likes. I can't broil six steaks over the coals. There's not enough room. They'll have to be sautéed, and that's no way to treat a good steak."

I got them ready, prepared the salad, helped Dennis put on the potatoes; then we waited until Thorpe arrived. When his car pulled up, I put on the steaks.

I managed to serve a passable dinner half an hour later. Valerie had come down in the meantime; when I removed the voluminous apron that I'd inherited from Olga and my dress was revealed, she gave me a quick nod of approval. Thorpe noticed it too, I was sure.

When we were seated Thorpe gave us the news he'd been withholding until we were all together. "There's been another murder," he said.

I drew in a sharp breath. I knew who it was instantly, and so did Dennis.

"Strange kind of killing, too. A mortician from Maryville. I think his name was Monroney. He drove his hearse into the village, pulled up to the curb—and there he died. Somebody had shot him, but he managed to drive to the village. Nobody seems to know where he'd been. It's as big a mystery as the death of Dalton." He looked around the table. "I don't suppose there is any connection with what's been going on here?"

I didn't comment and Dennis said nothing. Hayden

shrugged and said, "I never heard of the man. There's no reason to think he'd have had anything to do with the death of Dalton—so far as I know."

"I'm sure Dad never heard of him," Valerie said.

The subject was dropped and we began to speak of tomorrow evening when everyone would be here. As there was no point in keeping secret Dalton's arrangement with Mrs. Zebow, I told about my visit to her—omitting, of course, the fact that she'd referred me to Monroney.

Thorpe was impressed. "Clifford surely must have had faith in his promise to return from the grave. In my opinion Mrs. Zebow is a full-blown fake."

"You didn't think so when she was in her trance and we heard my father laughing at us," Valerie reminded him.

Thorpe nodded somberly. "Now that's right, Valerie. We never did explain that laugh."

"Even Mrs. Zebow was frightened," Janet said. "I was terrified. As I said, if that happens again I'll leave as quickly as I can get packed. And you won't persuade me otherwise, Valerie."

"If it happens again I'll do the driving," Valerie said. "I'll say this much for my father. When he was determined on something he carried it through. Maybe this time he will too. Even if he is dead."

After dinner no one volunteered to do the dishes, but this time neither Dennis nor I cared because we were quite willing to handle that chore—it would leave us alone to talk over this new and terrible crime.

"I guess there's no question why he was killed," Dennis said as we stood at the sink and I tied on the big apron.

"But who?" I asked. "And isn't this going to stop? This killing?"

"Not until we find the person who's doing it. I want you to stay close to the house from now on. If you do go out be sure someone is with you all the time. Don't trust anyone. We're getting closer to the truth and this murderer knows it. If he strikes out again, it'll be at you."

"I'll be very careful. I wish I had some idea who could be responsible."

"So do I. There's certainly enough reason now to suppose Dalton was murdered, and from that murder the other two stem. Why Garvin was killed to get the tape I don't know. The reason for Monroney's murder is apparent enough."

"Dalton trusted someone enough to take him into his confidence and ask him to call Monroney and set the stage for the funeral. Let's consider the possibilities. We thought Dalton hated Wagner and Wagner hated him, but Dalton actually bequeathed him all that money. Now Dalton played a dirty trick on Wagner and it seems he was sufficiently sorry for it to make this bequest, but do you think Dalton would have trusted him that far? To make him a co-conspirator?"

"It seems unlikely," Dennis said.

"Dalton more or less openly accused his wife of seeing too much of Hayden. Under those conditions it seems unlikely that he would trust Hayden. We've got the lawyer to consider too."

"Thorpe? But he was in the village, as far as we know, and Monroney drove there while he was dying from a gunshot wound inflicted somewhere outside the village. Of course Thorpe could have met him somewhere beyond the outskirts. Maybe when I go back to town I can find out if they know just how far Monroney drove before he died. Maybe they could determine that from his loss of blood."

"I would say, then, that we must suspect everyone. What about Janet and Valerie?"

"I doubt it. We must, however, think of the other men who will be here tomorrow night. Lambert Willis, Marty Barclay, and Charlie DeWitt. None of them have been around here so far as we know, but that's no indication they were not—and, believe me, each of them had good reason to kill Dalton."

"I wish it was over," I said. "Three murders, an at-

tempt on my life. It's getting me down, Dennis. It's getting me scared. Not only because my life is in danger—and perhaps yours is too—but, because I'm beginning to believe in ghosts. Everything I've learned dictates that ghosts cannot exist, but the feeling persists. I can still hear that infernal laughter, and I haven't forgotten the footsteps in the night. Nor the fact that a psychic who admits she's a fake was badly upset during that trumped-up seance she isn't certain wasn't real."

Dennis nodded slowly, as if he'd been thinking of something else. "You have a right to worry. . . . I noticed that the remains of the grandfather's clock haven't been touched since Hayden smashed it up."

"I know. I didn't touch it and I'm sure no one else did. Why?"

"Just an idea. I want to look through the pieces again. As soon as we finish the dishes."

When they were done and while I cleaned up the kitchen, Dennis went out to the entrance hall and sorted out the various metal parts of the clock mechanism. He was still at it when I joined him. Everyone else was in the drawing room. I stood by until Dennis straightened up. He shook his head.

"I'm damned if I know what made that clock go haywire. If it was one of Dalton's jokes there'd have had to be something to set it off—to time it for days after his death. There's nothing. It's just an old clock in fifty or sixty pieces."

When he joined the others Hayden glanced at Dennis with a smile. "I noticed you were checking through the old clock."

"Just an idea," Dennis said.

"I had the same one. I checked it right after the blasted thing almost drove us all crazy. I thought Dalton had left it with a timing device."

"Then we can be satisfied he didn't," Dennis said. "Which makes us face up to the question—was it something supernatural? Anybody got any ideas about that?"

"Believe me," Thorpe said, "I'm beginning to think it was."

"Maybe after tomorrow night you won't have a single doubt left," Valerie commented.

"Do you really think your father found a way to come back?" Janet asked her daughter.

"If anybody could, he would."

"I'm inclined to agree, Valerie. I think perhaps I should leave in the morning."

"You'll have to go alone," Valerie said. "I'm staying because I want to see the end of this business. Besides, if he does manage to come back I'm not giving him the satisfaction of thinking I'm a coward. Even if I am."

"Why, I never thought of it that way," Janet said. "I'd hate to give him that satisfaction either. I don't know what I'll do."

"It might be best if you did go away," Hayden said. "There's no telling what will happen tomorrow."

"I'll make up my mind in the morning. And I think I'd like to retire now. I am weary."

"I'll go with you," Valerie said. "I'll give you a pill. That's the only way you'll get any sleep tonight."

Hayden decided to call it a night, too, and so did Thorpe. Dennis and I saw them off; Thorpe left in his white car and Hayden walked down to the garage. Neither Dennis nor I thought anything of that—Hayden almost always left his bicycle there, out of the way. Dennis and I walked back into the house and made the rounds of the first floor, locking up securely.

"You were going to the village to investigate the death of Monroney," I said to Dennis when I realized he'd made no move to leave. "Really, I'll be all right here. And I do think the more we can learn about the circumstances of his death the better."

He hesitated, knowing that the passing of time would weaken his investigation. "If you think ..."

"Emmet is down at the garage, and Janet may be in a

drugged sleep, but Valerie won't be. She slept almost all day. If there's trouble I'm sure we three can handle it."

"All right then. Be certain to lock the door after me. If I get what information I need in a hurry, I'll be back. I won't come inside—I'll nap in the car. We're getting so close to the finish of this that I'm getting worried."

"Let's worry tomorrow night when the seance is in progress," I said.

"Good night then." He kissed me lingeringly and I started to wish he wouldn't leave, but I unlocked and opened the door for him. I waited until he drove away and then I closed and locked the door securely. I was turning away from it when I heard sounds on the staircase and I whirled about nervously. It was Valerie coming down the steps slowly. I shook my head.

"Dennis has been gone half a minute and I'm jittery already."

"I know I can't sleep. I thought I'd come down and we'd have a chat."

"Good. I'd like that. Because there won't be much sleep for me either."

We sat down in the dimly lighted drawing room. One Tiffany lamp was burning and it illuminated only part of the enormous room.

"What's with the murder in the village? The mortician?" Valerie asked.

"I don't know, Val."

"I thought you and Dennis looked a bit shocked when Thorpe broke the news."

"Any murder would bring a shock," I said. "Especially if it occurred so close to home."

"There's no connection, then, with what happened here?"

"Not that I know of, Val."

"You don't sound too convincing, Alison." She was smiling as she expressed her doubts.

"You'll have to take my word," I said.

"Of course. I was just fooling. I was going to use the word 'joking,' but it's lost its appeal for me ever since Dad turned it into something foul. You've no idea how much I disliked him. I won't say 'hated'—that's too strong a word to use on your father. But I didn't like him. I swear I hadn't since I was a little girl. There was a meanness inside him, and there are times when I'm scared to death I may have inherited it. I exhibited some of that meanness when I first met you—forgive me. I knew all along that Dennis was not for me. Anyway, that's only what Dad wanted—a love story, with Dennis and me the main characters—and if that's what he wanted, I'd go out of my way to disappoint him."

"Isn't that a rather strong statement?" I asked.

"You don't know the half of it. The way he treated Mother. It's a wonder she stayed with him. Well, no, not exactly wonder. He had the money and Mom couldn't earn a dime, no matter how hard she tried. Neither could I, for that matter. So we both tolerated him. Even so, he knew it, and he'd rave and rant if we spent too much. He was a unique man, Alison. To use an old phrase, they threw away the mold when they made him—and thank heaven they did. Two men like him in the world would have been unbearable."

"Your mother seems fond of Mr. Hayden," I said. "Your dad must have realized that, too, the way he spoke of her in his will."

"See how nasty he used to be? Listen, Alison, I know my mother. She led one hell of a life with him. I wouldn't have blamed her if she'd gone off with another man. I'd have urged her to do so if she'd fallen in love. But she never did. I don't know if she fought it or if it just wasn't fated to happen; but she was a faithful wife to my father. And he didn't deserve it."

"But now that it's over, I imagine your mother is glad she always had been."

"Why should she be? He's even disinherited her, or tried

his best to. He knew very well he couldn't keep all his money from her. Or me. But he acted as if that's what he wanted—just to make things tough for us."

"Dennis wants none of it," I said. "I'm going to marry Dennis and I don't want any of it either. Whatever happens, you and your mother will eventually get all the estate—except for the sum he left Wagner."

"Wasn't that a strange gesture, though? He did play a very dirty trick on Wagner, forcing him out of the business, but I can't reconcile myself to believing Dad left him that money to sort of put things right. It wasn't like Dad. He might have left Wagner a dollar bill with a critique indicating that's all he was worth, but a hundred thousand! Not that Wagner didn't have it coming."

"Why do you think he took out an insurance policy with his estate as the beneficiary?"

"To make things more difficult for everyone concerned, of course. To make his estate that much more to fight over. He'd be a delighted man if a court battle came of this, if we all began to hate one another. Maybe that was his goal. I don't know—except that whatever it was, it had to be touched with evil, for he was an evil man."

I had no comment to make on that so I maintained silence; neither of us spoke for several minutes. We were lost in our own thoughts.

It began with a faint tapping sound. Valerie and I looked about for the source of it. The sound grew louder and kept growing. Valerie jumped to her feet, one hand pressed against her throat while her face grew gray with terror. The tapping turned into a banging sound and a sound like the fury of a windstorm accompanied the racket, though there wasn't a breeze stirring in the room.

The violence of that ear-splitting noise multiplied when it seemed that must be impossible. I clapped my hands to my ears to try to shut it out but, like the laughter, it came through. Topping it all was a scream so filled with terror it seemed inhuman.

I looked up at the ceiling, certain it was going to fall. I thought the very walls of the room would bulge from the force of the pounding. And then it stopped. All but the screaming—and that came from upstairs.

"Mother!" Valerie cried out, forgetting her own terror when she realized her mother needed her. She raced out of the room and up the stairs. I was tempted to run right after her because I didn't want to be alone, but I managed to steady myself. The screaming stopped. Apparently Valerie had arrived to comfort the terrified woman.

It seemed as if every piece of furniture in the drawing room should have been moved around in the "wind" like tiny toy replicas, but everything was in its place. The quiet was suddenly as bad as the unholy racket. I sat down slowly and tried to tell myself that what had happened was human-inspired. I failed miserably to convince myself of this.

The spirit of a man who had been both evil and mischievous must have managed to return. It was even possible that Dalton's death had been deliberate, and right now I'd have believed this too—except for the story Monroney had told me, and his subsequent murder. . . . I considered the idea that if Dalton had been murdered, his efforts to return might have been even greater.

I bent my head and brought my hands to my face. I wasn't ashamed of my fear. I prayed silently that it would be over now, that Dalton's spirit had had its fill.

Yet I knew that in a matter of hours Dalton would come through again—if what had just happened was his work. Tomorrow night would surely bring the success or failure of his threat to produce evidence that would destroy the men who had worked for him.

I also knew that he had died not of his own volition, but after setting up some fantastic scheme to make his "death" seem real. The scheme had backfired. There was surely no question of that—and now there seemed little question but that he was able to return.

I dreaded what was going to happen when everyone concerned was gathered. I had asked a medium to try to contact the ghost who would destroy us all if that were possible!

That night I slept heavily out of sheer exhaustion. After Valerie had quieted her mother by giving her another sleeping pill, she came down and together we searched the house, even to the dreary, dank cellar so full of cobwebs we were sure nobody could have been down there in years.

In the morning I was the first one up, downstairs even before Dennis came in. We were able to share breakfast and enjoy a quiet talk with no interruption. I told him about the unholy din that had filled the house and he could no more understand it than I, though I did catch him frowning in deep thought now and then as I spoke. Some kind of an idea was occurring to him, but perhaps it was so nebulous he didn't care to share it.

"I should have been here," he said. "That's the story of this past week—I should have been with you."

"What could you have done? It's not possible to fight something you can't see or feel—only hear while your eardrums threaten to give out."

"At least I could have been scared along with you. I did learn something in the village last night, though. By the time the autopsy on Monroney was finished, I thought it was too late to come back here, so I stayed in town. The post-mortem showed that Monroney had been shot at some distance—no powder burns on him. The bullet

entered his back and lodged very close to the heart. Heavy bleeding began at once. The doctors told me that they judged Monroney could have lived about twenty minutes after being hit. What time did you get back after following him?"

"It was seven-twenty," I said. "I remember checking that."

"Monroney was shot about half an hour before that. He managed to get into the hearse and drive to the village for help. Whoever killed him fired at least one more shot as the hearse began to move. There was a bullet hole in the back of it. There was no way of knowing exactly where the shooting took place. Monroney wasn't seen until he tried to park the hearse just before his heart stopped beating."

"Then we're no better off than we were," I said with a sigh.

"Perhaps not. The way I see it, Monroney had to warn the man who was his contact about your visit. He drove to some point close by, eluding you on the way, talked to the man, and then unsuspectingly walked to where his hearse was parked. The man—or woman—then shot him in the back. When he made the hearse and managed to pull away, at least one more shot was fired."

"Then we have to determine where all these people we suspect were at about seven o'clock."

"I've already determined that Wagner was in the village and left to go home—on a bicycle—at six. He is a possibility. Also two of the men who worked for Dalton and are to be here tonight had checked into the village inn—Lambert Willis and Martin Barclay weren't far from where Monroney was probably shot. The third man, Charlie DeWitt, hasn't arrived yet."

"I wonder why Barclay and Willis arrived so early? And didn't come here to tell us they were in town?"

"I don't know. They were in and around the inn all afternoon and evening, but it wouldn't have been difficult

for one or both of them to hop in a car—they each came in one—and drive out to meet Monroney. . . ."

"But if they were at the inn, he could have reached them by phone," I said.

"Yes, that's true. I did find out Willis had a phone call at around six-thirty. The operator at the inn didn't know who it was or where the call came from."

"At seven-thirty Monroney had slipped away from me, I'd returned to the house, and Valerie was in bed asleep—I verified that. Her mother and Hayden were playing chess, and, as I recall, they said they'd been at it for a couple of hours."

"We're not getting very far, are we?" he asked. He got up and brought the percolator to the table to pour more coffee for both of us. "Thorpe hasn't accounted for himself and, since he wasn't at the house, we can put him on our meager list of suspects. If I'm not needed here I'll go back to the village and see what I can learn about Thorpe's whereabouts and get more information on Barclay and Willis."

"Just be here tonight when Mrs. Zebow arrives and the seance is about to commence. I couldn't go through that without you at my side."

"I'll be here," he said somewhat grimly. "And I hope I can bring enough information to accuse someone of these crimes and put an end to this danger that seems to surround you."

"I'm quite all right now. You'd be surprised how much better sunlight makes me feel. This house is so gloomy by night, with nothing but oil lamps and candles. I'll be glad to get out of here."

"And I'll be glad when you are."

"I won't leave though, until I have what I came for—proof that Dalton was murdered. I've little faith in the suicide theory; my talk with Monroney seemed to prove that a *fake* suicide was all that was on Dalton's mind."

As we were finishing breakfast Bert Wagner appeared

at the back door; I promptly admitted him. He sat down and had a cup of coffee while Dennis questioned him.

"I heard about that undertaker being killed," Wagner said. "I wondered if it had anything to do with what goes on here. I never met the man in my life that I know of."

"You don't blame me for asking where you were?" Dennis said.

"Certainly not. I go into the village three or four times a week. I'm not a hermit, despite what's said about me. I like people and I want to be around them—when I want to be. Otherwise I prefer to be alone. I had a few beers at the Blue Gull Tavern. Plenty of people were there, and I talked to most of them. I left fairly early in the evening. I don't know what time because I didn't check it. Time doesn't mean much to me. It was just getting dark, though. I rode my bike back to my cabin. I didn't see anybody on the way and I certainly didn't come across a hearse."

"You should have seen it," I said slowly. "There's only that one road to this house."

"Well, I didn't. That's the truth."

"Monroney must have reached the village in the hearse very close to the time you got home," Dennis said. "If you missed him it must have been by two or three minutes, not more."

"Maybe, but I insist I didn't see the hearse or the man."

"We're not accusing you," I said.

"Let's hope not. What time is the big affair tonight? That's why I dropped by, to find out."

"Dennis is letting the others know we won't have dinner, just the seance. We expect Mrs. Zebow to arrive sometime after nine o'clock and I think she'll want to get it over with quickly. The poor woman is as scared as any of us."

"How is Janet taking it?" Wagner asked.

"She was terrified last night. We had a most violent manifestation. Noise to wreck your hearing, windstorm sounds without any wind. It seems crazy, I know, but it happened."

"I still refuse to be convinced that Dalton managed to

find a way to come back. However, if Mrs. Zebow makes any kind of contact tonight and Dalton puts in an appearance, I'll be convinced."

"I think all of us will!" I said.

"No doubt. Well, you can expect me a little early. I don't want to miss any of this. Thanks for the coffee."

After he departed Dennis was in no hurry to get back to the village. In fact, he suggested we spend some time making a very thorough search of the premises.

"To what purpose?" I asked him. "I'm sure nobody can be hiding here. Anyway, we searched last night."

"What about the cellar?"

"It looks like nobody's been down there in years. Val and I looked."

"I'm going down anyway. You guard the fort."

The cellar door was off the kitchen so he was on his way down the stairs, carrying a lamp, within a few seconds. He stayed there even less time and when he returned he blew out the lamp, set it down and used both hands to brush away cobwebs. "You're right. Nobody's been there since the last time it was cold enough to need the furnace going, anyway. Let's go through the place room by room. Nothing like making sure there's not some booby trap waiting for us."

"Is that what you're looking for? I never thought about Dalton's built-in jokes—not since that crazy room we've kept locked, or the collapsible chair that nearly caused injury to Hayden, or the face incorporated in the dresser mirror in my room. I thought that was enough."

We began an inspection of the kitchen. Dennis missed nothing. He cleaned out cupboards, moved dishes on the pantry shelf, ran his hands along baseboards, and, using a chair, along the ceiling moldings. We went from room to room and found nothing.

"Let's try the roof," he said.

"There's nothing up there, Dennis."

"Let's make certain."

We could hear either Janet or Valerie stirring as we

walked along the corridor to the door that would admit us to the roof stairs. From the roof, the countryside and the sea appeared beautiful and peaceful. Dennis ran his hands along the rather dirty widow's-walk railing and studied the planks that made up the floor of it.

"The battlements are fakes," he said. "Just a false front like movie-set western towns. The minaret is just a shell. There's no way of getting into it. In my younger days, when I had the run of this place, I investigated everything. There's nothing here; we might as well go down."

We used the back stairway this time and wound up in the kitchen, where Valerie was getting her own breakfast. She didn't seem to be in the most cheerful mood.

"I thought you two had left us," she said.

"We were on the roof," I said. "How is your mother?"

"Complaining, as usual. I'm going to get her breakfast. Is there anything new on the latest murder?"

"Not much," Dennis said. "I'm going back to the village presently to see if I can learn anything else."

Valerie looked at him steadily for a few seconds. "I had an unhappy thought this morning, Dennis."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"We've been considering almost everybody as the culprit here. Wagner, Thorpe, Hayden, the three executives who worked for Dad and were here when he died. I guess we may have even unconsciously included old Emmet from time to time. But I don't think we ever seriously considered someone else."

"Who might that be?" I asked her.

"You," she said, and pointed to Dennis. "You inherited the whole estate and that provides you with the greatest motive. Dad might have told you he was leaving everything to you. Now I'm not accusing you, Dennis. Far from it. But you should be a suspect too."

"I grant that," Dennis admitted. "I'm afraid I wouldn't have an easy time investigating myself, though."

"Maybe someone else ought to do just that."

"Valerie!" I exclaimed. "You're on the wrong track."

"How do you know? How can you be so sure, Alison? He had the motive, he had the opportunity, and he could be blinding us with his great activity, trying to find the guilty man. He's been so busy we never looked beyond those he suspected to see him equally suspect."

"Fair enough," Dennis said. "Ask me anything, check my whereabouts. Whatever you like."

"You know I'm not capable of doing any such thing," she said. "I was only making a statement, mainly for Alison's benefit. She's in love with you, and if you sprouted horns I don't think she'd see them. Otherwise, is there anything new?"

Her attempt to finally make light of it didn't work. I was angry, though I made sure not to show it. When Dennis was ready to leave, I walked out to where he'd left his car.

"I have no intention of trying to investigate you," I told him. "Valerie's just sounding off—she's in one of her bad moods."

"She's right, in a way," he said. "I did have a motive—if I knew of the will, which I did not. I've had the opportunities, too. But Valerie forgot one thing—I wasn't here when Dalton died, and I hadn't been here in days. Weeks, in fact. He kept me too busy at the factory."

"When will you be back?" I asked him.

"I don't know for sure. I've got things to run down, especially about Monroney and his death. I'll be here in plenty of time for the seance."

"There won't be one until you are here. Take care, Dennis. You are very precious to me. Whatever evil threatens me may reach out for you."

"Take care of yourself," he said with a smile. "I'll be fine. See you tonight."

"Let's hope whatever happens then will finish this awful business. I'll see if I can soothe Valerie before she makes a complete idiot of herself with some other rash statements."

It wasn't necessary to quiet Valerie down. By the time I

reached the kitchen where she was finishing breakfast, her black mood had disappeared and she was pleasant enough for anyone.

"Did I shock you and Dennis?" she asked. "I'm sorry I said that. I remembered that Dennis hadn't even been here when Dad died. Or for a long time before that."

"He wasn't angry," I said, making it evident I didn't include myself in that statement. "Would you like me to fix a tray for your mother?"

"I can do it. Thanks anyway."

"How is she?"

"I don't really know. She was scared to death before, and this business is getting on her nerves a lot. She has spells of weeping and then she gets angry at every little thing. This morning she didn't want to get out of bed and she swears she will not attend the seance."

"I won't insist on it."

"Oh, she'll be there. But I have to admit she's more terrified than ever."

Valerie had prepared eggs, toast, and coffee, and she carried this upstairs to her mother while I decided that since there would be several guests this evening, someone had to make the house presentable.

I dusted and straightened up, cleaned the kitchen, polished the grand piano, which had somehow been smudged. In the afternoon I spent three hours on the chaise in the parlor of my suite. I didn't sleep, but I managed to rest. By dinner time I felt that I could now face whatever was in store for us. That it would all end tonight seemed certain. Dalton had said it would end when his guests gathered once more, and he would keep his promise somehow—if not by returning as a ghost, then by some device left behind to carry out his wishes.

I didn't dress for dinner because there'd be no time for me to change, and when the seance began I didn't want to be encumbered by a dress. I had brought shantung straight-leg pants and a matching shirt, both in pink. They were practical and easy to move around in.

I was elected, again, to prepare dinner. It was a light meal, served early. Only Valerie came down. Janet was still too ill, though she was going to try to make the seance.

"She's scared stiff, but she said she'd join us," Valerie said. "Is everything ready?"

"There's really nothing to get ready. As soon as everyone is assembled and Mrs. Zebow gets here we'll start. It won't be like the night your father was killed."

Hayden arrived only a short time after we had cleaned up the kitchen. By then I was restless. I'd been inside practically all day and I felt the need for some exercise and fresh air.

I went to my room for a light wrap. Hayden was talking to Valerie about her mother when I came downstairs.

"Are you going out alone?" he asked.

"Just for a little air," I said.

"I don't think it's very wise, Alison. You know the danger you've been in. Dennis won't like it if you wander about unprotected."

"I'm not afraid."

"I've no doubt of that, but still . . . Valerie, set up the chess board. We'll be back in a few minutes. I'm going with you, Alison."

"But it isn't necessary...."

"Dennis told me he didn't like you being alone. I insist."

"All right. It's only for a few minutes."

"Take your time," Valerie said. "I haven't played chess in quite a while. I can practice a little by myself while you're gone."

Hayden and I left the house and walked through the darkness along the brick path that led to the rear of the house. His hand touched my elbow lightly and I had to admit I was glad for his company.

"No sign of Bert Wagner yet? How about going down to his place?"

"All right," I said.

We walked away from the mansion in the direction of

Wagner's cabin. Hayden saw it first when he turned to look over his shoulder. He came to a sudden halt. I turned around too. He was "looking at the roof of the mansion.

"I thought I saw some kind of a light on the widow's walk."

I peered through the darkness. "I don't see anything, Mr. Hayden. Maybe you saw a shooting star."

"No—it wasn't like that. Look! There it is again."

I saw it too. A small white ball of light that seemed to drift idly along the walk, bobbing up and down slowly and acting as if it were alive.

"If I was superstitious, I might think it was Dalton's spirit trying to get into the house," Hayden said.

"I'm going up there and see what it is," I said.

"I'm going with you. Come on—hurry it up. But don't make any unnecessary noise."

The small ball of white light was still moving, but as we neared the rear of the house the sight of it was lost to us.

"Alison," Hayden whispered, "you go up to the roof. Whoever it is certainly isn't going to stay there to be caught. He'll come down the back stairs to avoid you. That's when I'll grab him. Move fast!"

It seemed like a good and logical idea to me. I began to run—as lightly as possible, so as not to alarm whoever was on the rooftop. Hayden hurried toward the back door. When I entered the house I saw Valerie in the drawing room bent over the chess board. I didn't disturb her. I hurried up the stairs, along the corridor. Behind me a door opened and Janet looked out with a worried expression.

"Oh, thank heaven it's you, Alison. I thought I was hearing footsteps. Is everything all right?"

"It's coming along well," I informed her. "At the moment there is nothing you can do to help."

"Thank you," she said, and she re-entered her room. I reached the stairs to the roof and there I hesitated. Obviously whoever had been up there making those ghost

signals with a ball of light must still be there. He hadn't passed me. If he'd left the attic and used the back stairs Hayden would have had him by now and there'd have been some kind of ruckus. So somebody was still on the rooftop. I climbed the stairs, wishing Dennis were here. I pushed open the door and cool air from the sea swept over me.

There was a narrow railed walk from the door to the widow's walk area. I began to move along this, wondering if I was being careless in coming here alone. It was intensely dark now, one of those nights when there is no starlight and no sign of a moon. Cloud formations were heavy and I felt as if this darkness hemmed me in like thick fog. I used both hands on the rails to guide my steps; when the rails ended I knew I was on the wooden platform that formed the walk. I couldn't see anyone, not even a bulky shadowy object. I felt the beginning of a fear that could rapidly mount to terror. Someone had been here, showing a strange light. If it had been meant to attract me, someone had to be waiting. I turned around and that was when a blanket or cloak of some sort was thrown over my head.

The scream that escaped my throat was completely muffled. Two strong arms wrapped about me. I felt myself lifted and suddenly I knew I was going to die.

I was to be lifted over the rail and thrown from the roof to certain death. The house was high and the distance from the widow's walk to the ground was many feet. I couldn't possibly survive such a drop.

This knowledge flashed through my mind and I made a desperate effort to get clear. The grip of the arms tightened. I couldn't use elbows or hands to resist, but I had two legs and two feet. I kicked, heel and toe, as hard and as fast as I could. This drew a grunt from whoever held me. I kicked again, let myself go limp, and the combination of the pain I had inflicted upon my attacker and the fact that I sagged under his grasp, permitted me to slip under the blanket. A hand seized my shoulder but I tore

free. I didn't try to identify the murderer. I was far too intent upon getting away from him.

But where could I go? The widow's walk was an exceptionally large one, perhaps fifty feet long, but . . . I tore free once more of the grasping hands. I knew what I must do.

I began to run, the attacker right behind me. I vaulted the far rail of the walk. It was built clear to the edge of the rooftop, and now there was nothing between me—and the big pool.

I hit the water feet first in the clumsiest dive imaginable. I went down like a rock; when my feet struck the bottom I propelled myself upward.

My head cleared the water. I drew my first real breath in what seemed like an eon. As my lungs cleared, so did my wits. I swam to the edge of the pool and hauled myself onto the concrete deck. There I lay for several minutes. I heard voices and I sat and called out. Dennis and Hayden reached me first. They lifted me to my feet and Dennis took me in his embrace until I stopped shaking.

"I'm . . . getting you all wet. . . ." I said with a slightly hysterical laugh.

"What happened?" Dennis asked.

"Someone—on the roof—tried to throw me over. I jumped into the pool. Thank you for getting here so fast."

"Hayden came running into the house and we were on our way to the roof when we heard you hit the pool."

"Mr. Hayden and I were trying to trap someone on the roof. We didn't do very well, did we, Mr. Hayden?"

"I shouldn't have let you go up," he said.

"No one came down?"

"No one. Though it's possible whoever got away from the rooftop descended the stairs only as far as the second floor."

"And by this time," Dennis said, "he'd have gone the rest of the way after Hayden left the back stairs unguarded."

"I'm not hurt," I said. "But my dignity isn't the best in these sopping wet clothes."

By now Valerie had joined us. "Come on, Alison. I'll help you change."

As we passed through the French doors into the drawing room I saw three strangers regarding me with considerable interest. I didn't stop to be introduced. It was a fairly warm evening, but I was beginning to shiver.

With Valerie's assistance I changed into the white, off-the-shoulder dress. I was no longer worried about being practical in my clothes, for I doubted anything worse would happen to me than the attack on the roof and my dive into the pool.

"Who could it have been up there?" Valerie asked. "You were outside with Hayden. I never stirred out of the drawing room. Mom was in her rooms, and she was the only person on the second floor."

"I've no idea who it was," I said. "Except that I know it was a man because of the strength with which he held me. He obviously set a trap, but he couldn't have done so until after I decided to go for a walk. Otherwise how would he have known to be on the roof, with the weird light that would attract me?"

"Maybe the walls have ears," Valerie said, and not in any light voice. "Don't forget, my father dealt in electronics, and they could easily include listening devices."

"I never gave that a thought. It's an interesting idea."

"It's more dangerous than interesting." She stepped back and surveyed me. "Your hair is still too damp to do much with, but that's a ravishing dress. You look very good in white. Shall we go down now? I think everybody

is here. I looked out the window and the drive is full of cars."

In the drawing room I met the other three executives in Dalton's firm for the first time—balding Martin Barclay; Charles DeWitt, heavyset, nervous, and red-faced; and the courtly Lambert Willis. They had already been well briefed on my part in this strange meeting. Walter Thorpe had arrived and so had Bert Wagner. Mrs. Zebow was already seated and prepared to begin the seance. She appeared to be more nervous than any of us.

Dennis said, "Before we start this, let me say that the death of Clifford Dalton has resulted in the murders of two other men, one quite innocently involved, the other a conspirator with Dalton. Probably the same person is the murderer of all three men. A short time ago someone made a determined effort to kill Alison Craig. It wasn't the first time. Evidently someone is afraid of what she has discovered or what she may find out. She came here with orders to determine whether Dalton killed himself or was murdered."

"There's no question in my mind that Dalton was murdered," I said. I have already reported this."

"But do you know who is responsible?" Hayden asked.

"No, I'm sorry to say."

Dennis went on. "We have come to believe that Dalton made good his promise to return after death. I have never believed this could happen—I still doubt it—but there have been some overwhelming manifestations, including Dalton's voice. Now it has come to the point where Dalton must make good his threat to expose those he previously accused of an assortment of crimes and treacheries. His taped statement, played right after his death, indicated that when he did come back he would inform us where the evidence of guilt is hidden. We are now going to give him that chance."

"I'm ready whenever you give the word," Mrs. Zebow said.

Before she began Janet came downstairs. I'd doubted

she'd make an appearance, but I suppose curiosity was stronger than fear, so she was here. Valerie hurried to help her over to a chair.

"I'm glad you came down," she said. "Perhaps we'll learn the full truth now."

Janet looked about, nodding to the executives. "I don't believe I'm ready for the truth," she said. "No matter what it turns out to be. All of this began with my husband and I feel it's my duty to be present, since he has sworn he will return."

"This time," Dennis said, "the seance is going to be held with all the usual trappings. Mrs. Zebow will be tied to the chair, and, with her permission, all but one lamp will be extinguished. We'll gather around the dining room table at which Dalton was seated when he died. So—we can begin as soon as we're all settled in the dining room."

Dennis took my arm and we led the parade. When everyone was seated, with Mrs. Zebow at the head of the table where Dalton had been seated, Dennis blew out all but one weak lamp.

"Hands on the table, palms up," Dennis instructed.

Hayden grumbled at the idea. "It's all so damned silly...."

"We'll be ready," Dennis said, "as soon as Mrs. Zebow is tied to the chair. We're not taking any chances on being fooled this time."

Thorpe and Bert Wagner tied the thin cords around the medium's wrists and ankles binding her to the chair. Dennis made a brief examination to make sure the knots were tight. Then he sat down and we waited for the seance to begin, our hands in plain sight.

Looking about the table at the dimly illuminated faces, I noted the extreme nervousness and concern of almost everyone. Among these people, I thought, is someone who has so far not stopped at three murders and would be likely to commit more of them if he could gain by it. I had one person in mind more than the others, but with the nebulous ideas I'd developed, I was in no position to voice

an opinion on a subject so serious. We would have to play the hand out, and I could hope the murderer would either stumble and reveal himself, or decide it was time to go far away from here, and so give himself away.

Mrs. Zebow's head fell forward until her chin rested on her chest. She began to make weak moaning sounds and to stir restlessly, straining against the ropes. Only Dennis and I knew that whatever she said would be the words of Dalton, spoken just as he had instructed her.

Everyone was tense and I think when the voice came, we all reacted more in relief than fear. The voice was weak, certainly not Dalton's. I presumed it was supposed to be that of some supernatural contact Mrs. Zebow was making.

"My faithful and esteemed friends and associates," the voice said. "My dear wife and my devoted daughter. Hayden, Thorpe, Wagner . . . all of you, hear me now. I speak through the voice of another, but these are my words. I have broken the wall between the living and the dead. I knew I could do it before I died—otherwise I would surely not have killed myself. I take this somewhat exotic way of proving it. By warning you I would reveal the hiding place of documents proclaiming and proving the guilt of most people in this room, I knew I would get you all back and have a captive audience, held in their chairs by the fear of what is going to happen. If we are quite ready now . . ."

Suddenly the voice broke off in mid-sentence. The room was very quiet. We all expected it to resume, but instead Mrs. Zebow began to moan louder, and then the unholy din began once more. Hayden jumped to his feet, the first to show alarm. It triggered the terror in all of us.

The hangings, the throbbing, and the howl of wind ceased abruptly and the thin voice of the ghostly contact seemed painfully loud in the sudden and intense silence.

"In the minaret you will find what you seek. The minaret. Go there now! I command it, or I shall forever haunt each and every one of you."

When the voice ceased the room was quiet again. There was no repetition of the ear-splitting noises. The quiet, in fact, still seemed unreal to me.

Dennis was lighting lamps. Wagner was busy setting Mrs. Zebow free. She was awake, apparently ignorant of anything that had gone on during her trance or whatever it was. The activity, the quiet determination of most of us, must have gotten to her though, because she edged out of the room and I heard the front door slam; this was followed by the sound of a car starting up and driving off. Mrs. Zebow had apparently had all she wanted of this business, and I didn't wonder why.

"The minaret is nothing," Hayden exclaimed. "It's a joke, sending us there. Last I knew it didn't even have a roof on it."

"That's true," Dennis said, "but he told us to go there, and that's what we're about to do."

"I'm with you," Wagner said.

Janet refused to accompany us. "I can't stand any more of this. I want to get away from here. Valerie, stay with me. Please."

"You'd better," I whispered to Valerie. "She's about ready to go into hysterics."

Valerie nodded. "I know. Okay—good luck. Anyway, if my father is waiting in that minaret, I don't want to see him."

"You think he'll be there?"

"It's one of his jokes," she said. "He's not even dead. It was all rigged. The ultimate in jokes. That's what he'd be after, and we're all a bunch of fools to give him such a chance to laugh at us."

"Valerie," I said gently, as Dennis took my arm, "his body was autopsied. He *is* dead."

Again Dennis led the way to the roof, but this time I wound up at the rear with Hayden beside me.

"Valerie seems to think her father is hiding in the minaret and isn't dead at all," I said.

"She's pitifully wrong," Hayden said. "Dalton is dead. I was there. I saw him die."

"As I told her, Clifford Dalton's body was subjected to post-mortem."

Lambert Willis, who was directly ahead of us, had overheard the conversation. He glanced over his shoulder.

"I think Valerie is right. Dalton always said he was looking for that ultimate joke. He mentioned it to me several times, and I guess this must be it."

"He's dead, I tell you," Hayden insisted.

"Maybe," Willis said. "But so help me, if he's there and he starts that crazy laugh of his, I'm going to do two things. Resign, and then punch him in the face. What is this minaret anyway?"

"It's an ornament built on top of the house. It has no entrance or exit. It's nothing," Hayden said.

"He'll be sitting there waiting to laugh at us," Willis said confidently.

I said, "Mr. Willis, Dalton is dead and buried! I work out of the coroner's office. I know!"

"Who is to say a substitution wasn't made and somebody else ended up in the grave? The coffin was sealed. Nobody can be sure who or what was inside."

"Do you recall how his body fell across the table?" Hayden asked in an angry voice.

"I see it happening in my sleep sometimes. And I remember how you shoved him out of the chair so he landed on the floor."

"That was an accident."

"It looked deliberate to me. Well, what are we arguing about? In a couple of minutes we'll see what's inside the minaret. Can't see much in this dark. What was the matter with the man, not having the house wired?"

To reach the minaret it was necessary to climb over the widow's walk railing, slide down a shingled roof that slanted steeply, climb a similar roof, and cross a short, flat area of the roof. All this, and there was no way to get inside the minaret.

Lamp wicks flickered over the rooftop, but they gave very little light in this open-air darkness. Someone was at the side of the minaret. We heard a shout. I wasn't sure if it was of triumph or anguish.

I turned to Hayden. "You deliberately pushed Dalton out of the chair after he died because you hated him and you couldn't control your contempt for him."

Willis had gone on ahead and Hayden and I were alone on the widow's walk.

"I beg your pardon," Hayden said.

"You killed Dr. Garvin because you had to have the tape. There had been more on it. You erased what else Dalton had wanted to say that night. But you were in a hurry and careless. The speech Dalton made ended in mid-sentence."

"Alison, I don't know what you're talking about, but it's beginning to sound as if you're accusing me of killing Dr. Garvin and possibly Dalton too."

"To say nothing of Monroney, the undertaker. You shot him in the back."

"Alison, stop this nonsense!"

"I know Monroney came here to see the man who was to have contacted him after Dalton's fake suicide. I got back here before Monroney died, but after he was shot. They were able to pinpoint the time of the shooting quite accurately. Wagner came along the road too. Neither of us saw Monroney anywhere on the road all the way to the Dalton estate. And I'm sure you know why. From that point the road goes only to your house. That's where Monroney was and where you shot him. He had to be there if neither Wagner nor I saw the hearse. You shot him and then you came over to finish your chess game—"

"I am being directly accused," Hayden said somewhat harshly. "So far you're talking in riddles. Monroney, the road, the hearse ..."

"You tried to kill me, too, not an hour ago. You used the back stairs to reach the roof before I got there, and you waited for me in the darkness. If you had guarded

the rear exit, the murderer would never have gotten by you unseen. If he'd used the front stairs, he'd have had to pass through the house, where there were people. . . . I don't know why you did this, except that Dalton gave you a tailor-made opportunity to kill him without ever being suspected of the crime."

Hayden said, "Let's go downstairs and talk this out. You're sadly mistaken, Alison, and I have to tell you why. It's impossible I could have killed anyone. . . ."

"Dennis knows it, too," I said. "I'm sure he does."

He seized my wrist. "I'm not listening to any more of this up here. You're coming downstairs. . . ."

"She's not going anywhere," Wagner said from the top of the stairs. "She happens to be right. I saw you enter the rear door of the house after Alison left you."

Hayden sent me spinning to one side, but before he could attack Wagner, he was looking into the muzzle of Wagner's rifle. Hayden gave a sharp cry of alarm. Behind us the others were making their slow way back over the rooftop, their lamps tipping and tilting precariously.

Hayden hesitated for just a second or two and then he began running. He was heading for the end of the widow's walk. He was going to escape by the same route I'd used to get away from him.

It was so dark we couldn't see him go over, but he must have leaped from a running start so he would clear the railing. We did hear a strange and ominous crash below. It certainly didn't sound as if Hayden had hit the water in the pool.

Dennis led the race downstairs with me directly behind him. He picked up a lamp from a drawing room table, pushed open the French doors and led the way to the pool. As I stood beside him, his lamp gave just enough light so we could see Hayden's body sprawled against the bottom of the pool.

"Dennis," I said in an awed whisper, "the pool was full not an hour ago. If it had not been I'd be dead too."

"I know," Dennis said gently.

"But that pool is much too big to have been drained in that length of time. And who would drain it anyway?"

"You'd have difficulty believing it if I told you. Wait here. I'm going to make sure he's dead."

Dennis went down the steps to the bottom of the pool. There he knelt beside Hayden's body and I saw him search the coat pockets of the dead man. He withdrew what seemed to be a small black object that he placed in one of his own pockets. Then he joined me and the others who had crowded beside me.

As we turned to go back to the house, Janet and Valerie walked slowly across the cement deck and looked down into the pool. Janet gave a hard, dry sob. Valerie led her back inside and we followed. Dennis closed the French doors. Lamps placed in several locations by those who had been carrying them gave us a fair amount of light.

Dennis said, "Hayden is dead. He was killed trying to run away. Making the attempt was a confession of guilt. If you will all sit down and be quiet, I'll try to give you my version of what happened, though I may not be right in some of my guesses. I hope that Alison will correct me for, unless I'm mistaken, she has come to the same conclusion I did a few minutes ago."

"First," Thorpe said, "is Dalton really dead?"

"Yes," Dennis said. "He carefully planned this crazy idea of pretending to kill himself right after he'd accused employees and friends of being thieves. That was to get all of you so angry you might make a few disparaging remarks while he lay across the table pretending to be dead. That wasn't all he planned, however. In setting it up he had to have help, so he enlisted Hayden. Why? Because he had reduced Hayden to the point of near poverty and Hayden couldn't afford to refuse. Dalton hired an undertaker to come and pick up what everybody would believe was his corpse. There would be a quick funeral, even before the apparent suicide was reported to the authorities. Meantime, Dalton intended to slip back to

the house, reach the minaret that everyone thought was nothing but an empty shell. There he'd hide until the moment of triumph when he would pretend to come back from the dead; he'd send his terror-stricken victims to the minaret, and—he'd pop out alive. We found evidence in the minaret that food and drink had been there—also a radio and reading matter. Hayden removed some of these things, but he didn't have time to get rid of it all, and he couldn't hide the little door Dalton had cut into the side of the minaret, or remove the flooring Dalton had installed inside."

"Dalton," I took up the explanation, "planned most meticulously, but he forgot that Hayden hated him, and he never imagined that Hayden would substitute a capsule of real poison for the harmless one Dalton thought he was taking."

"I'm beginning to see it all now," Wagner said. "Hayden was the only one with sufficient opportunity to double-cross Dalton."

"He killed Dr. Garvin," I said, "because he had to get the cassette back. The tape ended too abruptly. I presume there had been more on it and Hayden had erased that. Perhaps Dalton made certain statements that would implicate Hayden. Even though that part had been erased, Hayden must have believed experts could overcome the erasure and find out what had been dictated. I'm only guessing, but it is a valid theory. Of course he murdered Monroney because the little man was scared and came to warn Hayden after I paid him a visit. He was weak, he might give Hayden away, so Hayden killed him. He made attempts to kill me because he was afraid I was getting into the case too deeply and might uncover the truth."

Valerie stood up beside the divan on which her mother was seated. "My mother wishes to make a statement," she said in a weary voice.

Janet looked up. "Oliver Hayden had been in love with me for many years. I did not love him. I did care for him, but never once did I betray my husband. He didn't

believe I wasn't cheating on him, though, and he started to wreck Oliver gradually, so Oliver had no suspicion of what was happening and neither did I. When Oliver killed him, I had no warning of it, no knowledge of what he intended to do. I remained in ignorance of it until after my husband was dead and his ghost seemed to be haunting this house. Then Oliver told me what he had done. Who was I to blame him? My husband was not a normal human being. He was ruthless and cruel. This last joke he'd planned was proof of it. He made many people suffer the anguish of uncertainty so he could laugh at their discomfort. He always told me that one day he would invent the very ultimate in a joke. This was it, but it turned on him."

"You took no part in Hayden's murderous activities?" I said.

"Only to give him a single chance . . . I did as he requested, taking an electric torch . . ."

"You should have let him light his own way," Dennis broke in quickly. "There's no need to say anything more. I don't see that you committed any crime beyond neglecting to warn us that he was a murderer. You didn't know yourself until it was too late, and you had no good opportunity to tell us. Valerie, I think you should take your mother to her room. We'll brief you later on the rest of this."

"Thank you," Valerie said. She walked over to embrace me. "And thank you," she whispered.

Dennis resumed after they left us. "Dalton intended to scare the daylights out of all of you by hiding—very cleverly, because I haven't found them yet—tiny speakers to carry his voice. Somewhere there's a concealed transmitting device containing tapes of Dalton's wild laughter and some of the messages from the dead he planned to inflict upon us. He also must have had a remote-control device, much like those used in controlling ordinary television sets. From the minaret, he would have been able to trigger the tapes to produce whatever he wished—

laughter or his taped voice. The old clock that wouldn't stop striking was under similar control. I thought so all along, but I couldn't find the electronic system he'd installed in the clock. Hayden beat me to it. Hayden, of course, knew of Dalton's plans and was able to get possession of the remote-control device. He kept it in his pocket, causing all that infernal laughter and racket . . . even to broadcasting the sound of footsteps . . . by merely using this control device. It worked in the house and outside it—if he wasn't too far away."

Portly Charles DeWitt, perspiring so freely that his face was dripping, tried to mop up some of the sweat with a handkerchief as he spoke. "I can readily believe how this was possible, especially because I know how clever Dalton was in all branches of electronics. There wasn't much he couldn't do in that line."

Dennis produced the small boxlike article that he'd taken from Hayden's body. He held it up. "This is the control. I'll prove it to you."

Suddenly the house was filled with the roar of laughter that had frightened us so many times.

"Please," I implored Dennis, "shut it off."

"I'm sorry," he said, and the sound was cut off. "Now you all know how it was done. I suspected Hayden because whenever one of these so-called manifestations occurred he was either in the house or close to it."

Thorpe was leaning forward in his chair, trying to find the opportunity to express himself. "Hold it a second, will you? I've got something to say. Dalton is dead—and I'm not going to weep for him. He told us that when he came back from the grave he would provide evidence that could send us all to prison. Now he had no such evidence because it didn't exist. We knew it, but we were still afraid he might have something. I want it made clear that nobody here has cheated the business or Dalton. I will also prove, if it becomes necessary, that he must have been near madness to set up such a preposterous scheme

that would hurt so many people. I can use that to break his will, even if it was made out two years ago."

"Thorpe," Dennis said, "I told you I will not accept the bequest. And with what we now know I'm sure any court will agree that the estate must be transferred to Janet and Valerie."

"That's how I want it too, Dennis," I added.

"I know. I'm actually sorry for Hayden. He was once a gentle and kind man. If he became evil it was because of Dalton's doings. Dalton laughed at us, by way of the cassette, but I think this time his joke gave him nothing to laugh about."

"Do you think that at any time it might have been Dalton laughing and not his voice on a tape?" Bert Wagner asked.

"Do you?" Dennis countered.

"I don't know. There were a few moments when I thought I could feel his presence. The windstorms without wind, were they also on tape?"

"They must have been," Dennis said. "I'll find the hiding place of the system and dismantle the whole thing."

"That's what you were looking for when we searched the house?" I asked.

"Yes, but I didn't mention it because the whole thing seemed too unreal."

Willis, Barclay, and DeWitt had endured enough. They excused themselves after Dennis and I agreed there was no purpose in their remaining. After all, I was still working on this case with a certain amount of authority, so I was expected to excuse them.

Thorpe left next and finally Wagner came over and kissed my cheek. "You're quite a girl, Alison."

"What brought that on?" I asked.

"I noticed the way you and Dennis stopped Janet from admitting she'd gone to the rooftop and lured you there with a flashlight Hayden furnished."

"Janet couldn't possibly have known what Hayden was up to," I said. "There is no reason to involve her in

something like that. Or anything else connected with this business."

"There's plenty of reason and I say again, it was generous and kind of you to do what you did for her."

"Good night, Bert," I said.

He gave us a wide smile. "I'll leave you with Dalton's ghost. And another pertinent thought. Who drained the pool? You can't drain an amount of water that ordinarily takes hours to run out in fifteen or twenty minutes. And why was the pool drained, may I ask? Something tells me Dalton knew what was happening here and he took steps to see that Hayden jumped into a dry pool. Now Dalton would have considered that a pretty good joke."

"Nobody's going to answer you," I said. "There were moments when I felt as you did, that something was here. Some presence, perhaps, trying to break through. After all, Dalton did make spiritualism a close study over many years."

"No doubt," Wagner said. "Let me know when the wedding takes place. I'd like to send a gift."

Dennis and I sat down side by side facing the fireplace. "What do you think, Dennis?" I asked.

"I'm not even trying to think. Besides, you're the one who has a report to write."

I nodded. "It's not going to be a complete one because I don't want to be drummed out of the profession of psychology. We deal in facts only. Hard facts, like I'm in love with you, and, no matter what has happened, it was worth it to meet you."