


**CREST
BOOK**

382

2/-



the girl with a secret

Another terror-laced chiller by
the prize-winning author of *A DRAM OF POISON*

"Irresistibly suspenseful..."

NEW YORK TIMES

charlotte armstrong

**THE
GIRL WITH
A SECRET**

A Crest Reprint

**By CHARLOTTE
ARMSTRONG**

Crest Book 382

First Crest printing, June 1960

© 1957, 1959, by Charlotte Armstrong Lewis. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof.

THE GIRL WITH A SECRET was originally published in Duo by Coward-McCann, Inc., and is reissued at 25c in this new Crest edition through arrangement with that company. All characters in this book are fictional and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental. CREST BOOKS are published by Fawcett World Library, 67 West 44th Street, New York 36, N.Y. Printed in the United States of America.

CHAPTER 1

They had been sealed in, sitting still, for seven hours from Chicago, but motion, in the dry sunlight of Los Angeles, began to erase that lifeless feeling. Tony said they would take the airline bus as far as Hollywood, so they went with the crowd.

Alice knew when something happened.

They were pushing along through the waiting room. A man sang out: "Tony Page! Hey, Tony!" Old friend. Chance meeting. The man was going somewhere. It was quick... so quick that Alice didn't even get the man's name... a greeting, a handshake. Yet, when the man had gone on toward the gate to the field, and she and Tony had pushed out upon the sidewalk, Alice knew that something had just happened; something had changed.

Tony didn't say so. He said, "Fellow I used to know," without repeating the name. She looked searchingly up, but his kind, blunt-featured, undistinguished and beloved face was no different. They climbed aboard the bus. Tony went on talking about his grandmother and the family, about the

planned visit, but Alice seemed to know that, in his mind, the plan was no longer exactly the same.

Something had intervened.

She sat quietly, looking out upon the unfamiliar scene. Perhaps he would tell her. If he did not, there would be a reason for that and she would accept the reason's existence. There were things Tony had done, had known, that he could never tell her. She understood.

Tony kept talking like a guidebook to this city. They came to the hotel in Hollywood, transferred to a cab; Tony gave the address.

"Wait till you see the house," he said. "It's an antique. Back in the mouth of a canyon, and you'd think you were a hundred miles from civilization. Except that the house is a civilization, all by itself.

"Gran is an antique, too," he added. "She is a lady."

"A *lady*?"

"Yup. Real thing."

"I'm terrified," said Alice with considerable honesty. "I Will never be a lady. I haven't even got the ambition."

"Be you," said Tony.

So they kissed, in the corner that the driver couldn't see. Alice was comforted. She slipped her arm through his, felt snug.

“Your grandmother lives with her niece and her niece’s husband,” she mused.

“Aunt Hortense. Uncle Greg. My cousins, really.”

“And *their* child.”

“Cousin Bee.”

“Seems strange.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t a grandson closer than a niece in... you know... blood?”

“Fat chance Gran’s had to live with *me*.” Tony grinned and Alice was reminded of the wide world, the far places, the reaches of his experience, that were secret from her, because they had been in secret service. And even the secret of their existence was not yet to be told. Or was it?

“Do they know...?” she began.

He began at the same time. “They don’t know...”

The Pages laughed together.

After which, he said seriously, “They have no idea, honey. And we won’t tell them.”

“If you say not,” she said submissively. She knew very little about the secret work he used to do, had done for several years, was now done with. Her only reasonable and loving attitude was quiet obedience.

“Let them go on thinking I was an international bum,” Tony continued. “Like my father before me.”

“Oh, was he?”

“Yes, he really was, I guess. I suspect his fleece was distinctly gray in Gran’s view. I don’t think he ever saw her after Ma died. But she’s fond of *me*. I want to present you. It seems right.”

“Of course it’s right,” she said.

But Alice (Hansen) Page didn’t particularly look forward to being presented to a real lady in an antique house to receive (her bones boded) judgment.

“How old is Cousin Bee?” she asked, to be saying something.

“Bee? Oh, let me see. For gosh sakes, Bee’s my age. She must be twenty-eight.”

“Not married?”

“Not that I know.” He was casual about Cousin Bee. “Uncle Greg’s an old smoothie,” he told her. “Sells insurance and makes a big thing of it. Rotary Club and all that.” Tony looked down sideways. “Don’t be so smug,” he teased, shrewdly, “just because you got yourself a man before you turned twenty.”

“I turn twenty day after tomorrow!” She felt delighted to be teased.

“Just the same, for two days yet, you are nineteen years old, Mrs. Page.”

They kissed again.

Tony said, in a moment, “Aunt Hortense is a bit of an oddball. So is Bee, as a matter of fact. I’m not...

especially close to those Staffords. You mustn't worry about a thing."

He tightened his arm around her.

Damn it, Tony Page was thinking, I'll have to go see the Old Man. But they can't ask me to do a job, go anywhere. I'm out. And I don't want to leave Alice, my darling, and I won't do it. Maybe it's consultation. Maybe they think I know something useful. They know I'm out. For me, that stuff is over and done. I've got a job in the building business. Got a wife, God bless her.

Alice, so young, so fair. Fair beloved brow with the dark smooth hair going up like a pair of wing's shoulders, and then furled and feathered neat against the darling head. Eyes between purple and gray, grave eyes. "Grave Alice and laughing Allegra..." *Grave Alice*. He liked that very much. Whenever he thought of her, his mind was turned toward poetry.

He'd had enough adventuring, which he now knew meant long dull days of waiting in dirty uncomfortable places. He'd had enough of being outside the patterns, un-placed, and always pretending to be placed. Conniving, snooping, deceiving. Now he *was* placed. Nobody, nothing was going to take him away from her upon whom all his heart was settled.

Yet... this nagged him: what did he know that they didn't know already? So what did the Old Man want of him? Why had Herb Innes given him the old signal

that had so shocked him? He had had to reach for that old imperturbability. It had slipped for a moment. Why had Herb Innes been sent for him?

Could he ignore the summons?

No, couldn't quite do that. He'd worked under the Old Man, into South and Central America, a long time. Common courtesy. All right. Go. Today, if he could. Get it over, whatever it was. Whatever they wanted, he could refuse, couldn't he? He was free. No, he was wonderfully unfree. He was married!

The cab drove down sideways from Cahuenga Pass, scooted east around the foot of the Griffith Park Hills, swung across the tilted valley, climbing. Pretty soon Tony had to give directions.

The cab went straight into the Verdugo Hills. It skirted a kind of mountain meadow, going up. It passed into a tangle of trees and shrubs. It came to his grandmother's house.

Alice could scarcely see the house for the trees and the vines. There were some yellowing stucco walls. There were short, bewildering flights of concrete steps, partly overgrown. Then there was a door.

An elderly maid in uniform opened it. "Oh, Mr. Tony!"

"How are you, Ellen? This is *Mrs.* Page." Tony was feeling very boyish and proud.

“Oh; how do you do, Mrs. Page? I’ll tell Mrs. Redfern and Mrs. Stafford.”

Alice stood in the dim hall that seemed to her to be on the side of the house. It puzzled her that a maid had to go and tell these people that their expected guests were arrived.

The architecture bewildered her. There seemed to be two staircases. One curled up at their left. One went straight up at the other end of this dim oblong. The floor here was tile. A long narrow oriental rug did not cover it entirely. The outside wall of the hall was latticed window, darkened, greened over by vines.

A woman came into the hall and said, “Well, Anthony!”

This was Aunt Hortense, in black with pearls. She was very thin, with a face that was all bone, a sharp beaked prow, a small round hard chin, and the cheeks fallen in. She looks like a mummy! thought Alice. Her heart beat hard. Aunt Hortense repelled her.

“This is my wife. Alice, this is Aunt Hortense.”

“My dear,” said Hortense. She had weak blue eyes that did not seem to stay still. Alice touched a hand of cold bone, limp bone. “Come,” the mummy said, “your grandmother is waiting.”

Tony winked at Alice and she rallied. They followed Hortense who walked with staccato heels across the tile into a room so huge that it seemed indecent. There was an enormous fireplace on the south (front) wall. Before this a great oriental rug...

softly blended of reds and browns and blues... lay like an inner room, wall-less within a room. Around the edge of this rug, furniture was stationed just as if it stood against an invisible wall. It was odd.

In one of the austere chairs on the rug's edge sat Tony's grandmother whose house – whose shrine, Alice divined in a flash of insight – this house was. Hortense came into the presence with reverence.

Old Mrs. Redfern was small. She sat erect with the old-fashioned air of being in almost military control of her spine. She wore gray. There was white lace somewhere. A narrow velvet band in midnight blue held a cameo at her throat, an ornament that Alice had never seen except in a portrait. Mrs. Redfern's bones were built like the bones of Hortense, but on her the narrow beak was dainty, the small chin genteel. Her skin was a delicate dry dainty pink. Her hair was a frost, done smoothly high. Her eyes were gray, calm, sure. They did not openly appraise. But they assumed that nobody was appraising Geraldine Redfern. Any such activity would go the other way.

“My dear Alice,” she said, “we are happy to see you.”

“And I to be here,” said Alice, touching the tiny firm dry hand. Eyes met. Ah yes, thought Alice, judgment is going to be made.

“Please sit down, do.”

“You're looking well, Gran,” Tony said, admiringly.

“I am well. It is two o’clock, is it not? But by your Chicago time, isn’t it four?”

“That’s right,” Tony said.

“Then may I have Ellen bring you tea?”

Tony was looking at her fondly, his head tipped, his eyes drinking her in. For him, this lady brought a train of memories. He was absorbed in them and made no answer.

So Alice said, “Oh, thank you, but we ate on the plane.” She wished at once that she had said, “We had our luncheon” or something more elegant than “ate.” “You are very thoughtful,” she stammered.

Mrs. Redfern’s white head accepted this with a little tremor. “I am sure you will want to bathe and rest. But shall we chat a moment, the four of us?”

Alice, with a guilty start, realized that she had forgotten Hortense completely. She looked and saw her – a stiff packet of bones on a yellow chair. Alice found herself trying to sit straight, which felt unnatural. She didn’t know what to do about it, couldn’t sag, now. She was uncomfortable.

“So you are in Chicago to stay, Tony dear?” asked his grandmother.

“Yes, I am, Gran. Settled down. A job. A flat. A wife.” Tony lounged. Old affection made him easy.

“Are you a Chicagoan, my dear?” The calm eyes were inquiring of Alice.

“I come from Indiana...” Alice began. “A little town...” Mrs. Redfern didn’t care which little town. Her smile accepted the state of Indiana as one blob. “But I was working in Chicago,” Alice went on.

“You are very young to have been holding a position, surely.” The gentle voice was smooth.

“Holding a position,” struck Alice as a fantastic description of her typing job.

“She’s nineteen,” Tony said, teasingly. “Not even twenty.”

“Very young,” repeated Mrs. Redfern. “Alone in Chicago?”

“I’d been going to college,” Alice explained. “But after my first year, I thought it... best to work a year to help pay for my education.” Alice knew now that the subject of the “chat” was going to be her own biography. The pressure was gentle but it was not to be evaded. “So I went to Chicago and got a job. But then I met Tony...”

“So there went everything,” Tony said. “Education! Career! She’s done for, all right.”

Mrs. Redfern did not think this was amusing. “Your parents live in Indiana, do they still?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Your name was Hansen? Isn’t that so? Your father had retired, perhaps?” A roundabout way to ask what he did.

“My father is a pharmacist,” said Alice.

“I beg your pardon?”

Alice raised her voice. “My father owns a drugstore. Hansen’s Drugstore.”

“I see.” The voice glided over and on. “Do you have brothers and sisters, my dear?” Mrs. Redfern forgave her father for owning a drugstore.

“I have a brother,” Alice said, hearing in her own voice a small defensive hostility she had not wished to feel.

“Older?” This was Hortense chipping in.

“No, ma’am, younger,” Alice said. “Joey’s still in high school.”

Hortense looked rather blank, as if shed never heard of such a thing.

Then Alice had a vision of her brother Joe’s big feet planted on this silken rug in his disreputable shoes. The shoe was not made that could stay looking reputable on those huge restless churning busy feet. The vision made her smile.

“Your parents are well?” purred Mrs. Redfern.

“Oh, very well, thank you. *Very* pleased,” said Alice, “about my marrying Tony.”

She was beaming, partly in relief. That’s *all*, she was thinking. Story of my life, so far. It occurred to her that she had not said how her mother spelled her father in the drugstore. She hesitated. To make the statement now would come in awkwardly. Anyhow, these ladies, who didn’t even seem to think a public

high school was natural, could not possibly imagine the flavor of her mother's presiding presence in the drugstore where the little town's pulse beat, where its troubles were known at the prescription counter and its dreams among the cosmetics and the magazines.

But there was a silence. Alice looked up and saw that Mrs. Redfern's eyes were slightly frosty. What did I say? thought Alice. She had said her folks were *pleased*. But now she perceived that it was not for some obscure couple in Indiana to be pleased with Tony Page. It was for Mrs. Redfern to be pleased, or not pleased, with Alice Hansen. "That's all about me," said Alice in a slight panic.

"Forgive me for asking so many questions," said Mrs. Redfern, "but we are so interested, you know. So fond of Tony." She did not say *she* was pleased. She said, "Let me tell you about this house. My husband built it when all these slopes below were vineyards and pastures. He liked the elevation and the seclusion. We still keep the meadow, to protect ourselves."

Alice listened to the voice going on. She got the impression of wealth, although Mrs. Redfern did not quite mention wealth. She was told that Tony's mother had been born here, died here.

"I know," Alice murmured.

"Hortense," said Mrs. Redfern, "is my brother's daughter. She and her husband very kindly live with me."

“But of course,” said Hortense, coming in, gushingly. “Gregory will be home by six o’clock.”

“And where’s Bee?” asked Tony.

“Oh, Bee...” Hortense stirred. “She is at a meeting. She works too hard. Her music takes hours every day, and over and above that, she simply throws herself into these committee things.” Her voice seemed to rattle and clang in contrast to Mrs. Redfern’s silken notes. “Bee is *not*—”

“Beatrice will be along a little later,” said the old lady. Her silken notes were ruthless and cut off Hortense. “Now perhaps you would like to see your room?” She rang a little bell and Ellen came. “Will you show Mr. and Mrs. Page to their room please, Ellen?” The voice altered very subtly. The quality of *this* kindness was shaded delicately, going to a servant.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Ellen, a willing little body, serving in the shrine.

“We’ll dine at a quarter of seven,” the old lady said.

Alice did not know whether to say, “Thank you” or “Goodbye” or just an obedient, “Yes, ma’am,” very much like Ellen’s.

Tony took her arm. “We’ll go settle our stuff,” he said cheerfully. “See you, Gran.”

As Ellen led them upstairs by the straight staircase toward the back of the house, Alice wondered what had become of Mrs. Redfern’s solicitude about the differing time zones. A quarter of seven, by Chicago

standards, was a quarter of nine P.M. – a long time to wait for one’s dinner. She dismissed the thought as mean and unworthy. She was dismayed to know that she did not like Tony’s grandmother. Not yet.

The bedroom was large and comfortable, if rather old-fashioned. Alice looked out the window and there was a mountain. It was so close that she shrank away. A mountain had no business rearing up right outside one’s bedroom window. But there it was.

Looking again, she saw that it was actually fifty or sixty feet away. She could look down and see the green tangle of the grounds. She would have to lean out and crane her neck to look up and see the sky, because this steep of earth rose like a wall. It was just parched dry earth, all scraggly with brown wild grass and strange weedy shrubs.

Behind her in the room Tony was saying, “You want a bath and a nap, hon?”

“Love it.” They had risen early in Chicago.

She heard him go into the bathroom and turn on the water. She kept staring at the mountain. She had forgotten about that intuitive moment at the airport. All kinds of new impressions were bouncing upon her. She was not to know that Tony had now drawn on an old mask, one he knew how to wear so skillfully that no one – and certainly not Alice in this moment – could tell it was there.

“Tony,” she said when he came up behind her, “I see what you mean about a lady.”

“You stood up pretty well to the inquisition,” he said, teasingly.

“Did I?” She turned with a gasp of relief. “I felt so *foolish*.”

He shook her lightly, lovingly. “It’s only Gran’s way, from her own day. Antique. Hon, you could pity her.”

“Oh, no! Not just because I am young—” she said, and Tony kissed her.

“You... are... a... doll...” He spaced this out to be emphatic. “But if you are going to nap... I think I’ll go off. Mind?”

Alice was only a little surprised. “Go off where?”

“Thing is, I wish we’d brought Gran something.” He jingled coins in his pocket. “If I can get the loan of Hortense’s car...”

“Oh, I didn’t think of, that, at all!” If I’d been a lady, she thought, I would have known to bring a gift.

“Some tokenish thing,” said Tony. “You go to, sleep. Because” – his face crinkled – “there’s Uncle Greg and Cousin Bee coming up, and you may need your strength.”

“Oh, Tony!” Alice wasn’t feeling foolish any more. Was she not a doll? She had no idea that he was very skillfully lying to her. He kissed her again, with satisfactory vehemence, and then he left her.

In a few moments Alice saw from the window a car top passing through the green, underneath.

That mountainside looked hot. The westering sun blazed upon it. She drew the blind against it. The room was cool, and now very dim. Alice undressed dreamily. The bath was luxurious. The bed was immaculate and soft.

Alice thought, These people have had “elevation and seclusion” a long time. I don’t know anything about this kind of life. How could I? Her mood was detached, speculative, unworried.

The bedroom door opened with a bang.

Alice started up on her elbow.

A tall, bony old woman in a crisp striped cotton dress, stood in the doorway holding a metal bucket in her hand.

Then Ellen’s voice in the hall cried, “Mrs. Peele! Mrs. Peele! *Don’t* go into the guest room! The guests are *here!*”

The woman with the bucket made a sound that was not a word, but a formless emission of annoyance. She reached in for the knob and, with a rattle of starch in her skirts, yanked the door sharply shut against herself.

Alice sank back, nerves a-twitter. She snuggled her face against the pillow. Who was that? A cleaning woman? Somebody willing and eager to tackle dirt....

I don’t *want* to be “elevated and secluded,” thought Alice, with a curious sadness.

When Tony woke her, it was nearly six o'clock. They must dress for dinner. When they went down, it was Alice who gave Mrs. Redfern the pretty little enameled tin box.

“My dear, how sweet! My favorite ginger!”

“It was Tony who...” Alice caught up with her tongue and changed the verb from “bought”, to “chose” just in time... “who ch-chose it...” she stammered.

“Dear Tony! How sweet! Alice, this is Gregory. This is Beatrice.”

Uncle Gregory began to talk. They trooped into the dining room and his voice poured over the table in a tide of syllables that flooded it halfway. Alice had a curious impression that he was able to make it stop, tactfully, before it encroached upon the old lady's territory. For Uncle Gregory – a rounded, smoothly tanned, massaged-looking man with brown eyes that he kept wide open – deferred to Mrs. Redfern, too.

Alice, in her metallic blue which Tony had advised, with Tony's mother's silver-and-sapphire earrings pinching her lobes, watched who took what fork, what spoon, and tried to listen to Uncle Gregory.

He sounded as if he ought to be very interesting, as he shifted fluently from one civic-minded topic to another. But he was stupefying. He wanted... and in fact permitted... no response. So it wasn't conversation at all. He couldn't sell *me* any insurance, Alice thought, feeling her ears close defensively. She

was able to marvel at the silver and the china and the glass. She couldn't help wondering who washed all these dishes, polished all this silver. There were service plates, whisked away after the crabmeat cocktail, never to reappear. (But they'd have to be washed.)

The napkins were fine linen, embroidered with a long-legged *R*. (They'd have to be hand-laundered.)

Mrs. Redfern sat at the other end of the table, opposite the man of the house, she the mistress and hostess here. She wore lavender. Hortense sat at her husband's side, having changed to another black dress. (Dresses must be cleaned.)

I am a barbarian! thought Alice.

Next to Alice and on his grandmother's right, Tony faced his Cousin Bee. Bee, who wore green, was as thin as her mother, as tall as her father, and nothing like either. She was intense, with a burning intensity. Black hair. White skin. She kept talking to Tony, across his grandmother, with an effect of rudeness. Her large dark eyes rolled and flashed. Every word she had, so far, said to Alice was perfectly mechanical. Bee just didn't bother with Alice. She bothered with Tony, however, seeming to expect him to be, in some way, on her side against the world.

Mrs. Redfern's ladylike calm *didn't bother with Bee*.

Alice wondered.

Dinner went on for what seemed a long time. Alice came out at the end minus a fork and knew not where she had lost her way.

At last they left the table and proceeded to the huge room where they disposed themselves along the rug's edge. Now Uncle Greg began to talk to Mrs. Redfern. Their voices actually became a duet. He allowed *her* to respond from time to time and he would reply.

Bee was still telling Tony some long tale filled with unfamiliar names.

So Alice smiled at the one she tended to forget.

Hortense had some needlework in her lap. She had put on a pair of dark-rimmed glasses. The effect was odd.

“Do you play, Alice?” asked Hortense.

“Play? Oh, the piano? Only a little bit...”

“Won't you play for us?”

“I couldn't!” Alice panicked at the thought.

“Bee, will you play?” Hortense's thin neck made a preening motion.

“Come on, Bee,” said Tony resignedly.

So Bee went to the huge concert grand at the far corner of the room and shook the foundations of the house with booming chords, sent flashing runs rippling up to the plaster.

Alice was impressed. “But surely you give concerts,” she cried, when Bee stopped.

“I am *not*,” said Bee with what seemed to be great satisfaction, “good enough.”

Alice found her mouth to have been left agape and humbly closed it.

Now the doorbell pinged. Ellen could be heard in the hall, greeting someone she called Doctor. The people in the big room simply waited, pretending to be deaf. “Dr. Devon,” Ellen announced.

“Ah.” Uncle Greg rose as if this news were a surprise. “Good evening, Walter.”

Dr. Walter Devon was a rather nice-looking middle-aged man, with a long jaw, a slow smile filled with tumbled teeth, and quite remarkable eyes. Nobody explained him to Alice. Tony seemed to know him of old. Quite evidently he was not here in a professional capacity. Alice thought he rather pleasantly brought with him an air of relating to the world below.

So soon as to seem abrupt, Dr. Devon and Uncle Greg removed to a far corner, disposed themselves at either side of a chess table, and fell into silence.

Almost at the moment that Gregory’s tongue ceased, Hortense began to chatter. She talked on – about clubs, about clothes. Alice had the impression that Hortense braced herself every afternoon against the deluge of Gregory, but once *he* was shut up for the night she burst forth in her own flood, in reaction. Oh, how lonely, Alice thought.

Bee was not listening. She seemed to brood. Alice began to realize that Bee was very conscious of the

presence of Dr. Devon. Mrs. Redfern, who had picked up some crocheting, nodded from time to time, but added no comments. What a strange life here, thought Alice.

Tony said, "Gran, we are still on Chicago time, remember? Will you excuse us if we go to bed?"

So Tony got them away.

When they were upstairs Alice said, "Why isn't Cousin Bee good enough, Tony? I guess I don't know anything about music."

"It's Cousin Bee you don't know about," he said. "She's hell-bent she'll be defeated."

"Why?"

"I don't know. She works like crazy on that piano. She won't *do* anything with it. Those committees of hers are another thing. Society stuff. The great issues she throws herself into! Shall we use pink or blue in the decorations? Bee wastes herself." Tony was no longer casual about Cousin Bee. "I don't think anyone is properly helping her. Hortense is all over Gran, always has been. Uncle Greg is lying in wait for the land."

"Land?"

"The meadow. It's worth a fortune. Bee is *worse*. I don't like the way she is going."

“Maybe she is so used to being... elevated,” Alice groped, “that she is afraid to start... you know?... at the bottom. With music, I mean.”

“Maybe she wanted to get married and nobody was good enough,” said Tony sadly. “So Bee mixes with women and hates women.... All except Gran. Bee has always adored Gran. I don’t like the way she acts toward Gran.”

Alice remembered Bee’s possessive air toward him. “Weren’t *you* good enough?” she asked mischievously.

“Not me,” said Tony promptly. “My mother married beneath her.”

“Oh, good for her,” sighed Alice.

She forgot to ask about Dr. Devon.

CHAPTER 2

Morning was glorious. Even the mountain was shaded, cool and benign. Alice felt young and beloved. She had been all night in her lover's arms, and she must take care not to pity all other people.

Breakfast was served in the dining room with the same pomp and extravagance of dishes. Only Uncle Greg was there. He was evidently accustomed to breakfast all alone.

Alice was trying to guess how many people served in this house. She divined the presence of a cook. And there was Ellen, who waited on them with spry cheer.

"Who is Mrs. Peele?" she asked Uncle Gregory.

"Mrs. Peele? She cleans, my dear. A very hard worker."

Tony's brows went up. "How did you know about any Mrs. Peele?"

"Oh, I—"

The phone rang.

"—saw her yesterday."

Ellen answered, in the hall.

“She came in by mistake,” Alice explained. “It was just a minute—”

Uncle Greg said, “By the way, my dear... I do believe Mrs. Peele also comes from Indiana...”

Alice had no time to respond.

Ellen came saying, “Long distance call for you, Mr. Page.”

“Page speaking... Oh, Mr. Delgado...”

Tony’s boss in Chicago! Alice, who had trailed him to the phone, stood still.

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir... You are at the cabin now?”

Tony’s arm called Alice to his side so she stood within it and could hear the agitated voice at the other end of the connection.

“... broken in two places and I can’t move. And the Carter job has gone absolutely haywire. Can you fly up here right away?”

“Why, I—”

“I need you. I want you to come right here to the cabin and be deputized. Then you can go down to Chicago and knock some heads together.”

“Yes, sir. I can be in Chicago in the morning—”

“No, no. Fly direct to Minneapolis. Call me when you get in and I’ll send a car. Time is of the essence.” The voice was impatient. “This should take no more than a few days. You can have your full two weeks afterwards. On me. Did you get that? You coming?”

“Yes, sir. Where do I call you?”

“Lake Partridge. Ask the operator. You get here as quick as you can.”

“Yes, sir. My wife and I...”

“Not your wife,” the voice snapped. “No facilities in this cabin. She’d be in the way. Leave her there. Aren’t you visiting relatives?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, Tony, I’ll go to Chicago,” Alice said.

“And snap into it, Page,” said the voice on the phone. “This means a lot...”

“Okay, Mr. Delgado. You can expect me.”

Tony hung up. “There it goes,” he said amiably.

Gregory said, “Trouble?”

“My boss. Busted his foot. Seems to think he’s marooned in his weekend cabin.”

“Where’s that?”

“Minnesota. Meantime, something drastic has happened in the office.” Tony shrugged. “Seventy-five million things are always ready to go wrong in the building business.”

“Tony, I’ll go home and wait there for you,” Alice said eagerly.

“No,” he said drawling out the syllable thoughtfully. “Stay here, honey. That’s okay, isn’t it, Uncle Greg?”

“Certainly,” said Uncle Greg. “Too bad, laddie. But we’d love to keep Alice.”

Alice wanted to cry: *No. Don’t leave me here! Please!*

“Look, my angel,” said her husband, “I don’t want you alone in Chicago, waiting for me, when it’s possible I can get stuck... I want to know you’re safe and sound...”

Tony’s eyes flickered and Alice knew that Uncle Greg had drifted off, because Tony said, “Maybe you’ll be bored stiff, but you *will* be safe and sound, honey, and that matters to me. This is evidently a real mess and I’ll have to concentrate. Anyhow, Delgado’s going to send me back again and then we... boy, will we take advantage! Palm Springs! On him! La Jolla?”

Alice said gravely, “All right, Tony.”

He kissed her. She had not been bribed, as he could tell.

Tony began to call airline ticket offices.

So that morning was all ruffled and upset with Tony’s emergency plans. When she heard the news, Mrs. Redfern agreed that Alice must stay. But she prodded Tony. He was required to explain to her who this man in Minnesota was, and by what right he interrupted her grandson’s plans. The values ranking in her mind did not seem to include economic pressures at all. It was like explaining to a child what a job is, what a boss is.

By eleven o'clock, Tony was all set. Flight for Minneapolis, going out at 3 P.M. He'd get the bus in Hollywood. Take the one-thirty, giving him time to pick up his ticket.

Alice had packed for him. At noon she was closing his suitcase. Tony was leaning over the dresser, signing traveler's checks for her. "Get Uncle Greg to cash these for you."

"Tony, I won't need all those."

"You might."

"Oh, Tony, do you think it will be so long?"

"Can't tell until I see. With luck, four days, five. A, week at the most."

Alice started over to the window to look out at the dreary mountain. She was wondering how to endure even part of a week here in this house without him. Then somebody screamed.

Tony stiffened. "What's that?" There had been, entangled with the scream, a thump. A fall?

Whatever Tony had in his hands fell on the dressertop. His hands scrabbled. The top drawer opened and closed. Alice was on his heels out the bedroom door.

A railed passage went around above the oblong of the lower hall. Hortense stood halfway along, having screamed. At the front of the house, old Mrs. Redfern was lying against the jamb of her door. Tony rushed to her.

Cousin Bee came out of a door halfway back. Bee simply glowered. Hortense stood still, hysterically helpless.

“I am afraid I tripped on that mop,” said Mrs. Redfern with surprising aplomb. She was decorous, even on the floor. “So sorry,” she said. “Thank you, Tony.”

Tony was kneeling, his back young, supple, and strong. His one arm held her around her shoulders. The fingers of the other hand were gentle upon his grandmother’s thin ankle. “Does that hurt, Gran?”

“It does, rather,” she said.

Something scuttled in the upper hall at the far end. Alice glanced over her shoulder but saw nothing.

Tony looked up at the three women standing there, and chose one. “Alice, call the doctor. There’s a phone up here... hall table...”

“The number?” Alice asked quietly.

Neither Hortense nor Bee said a number. They were both useless, not functioning, thrown out of mesh by sheer surprise.

“Look in the book,” said Tony impatiently.

So Alice turned, knowing that he was gathering the old lady up in his arms, and went back along the railing to the telephone. It was dark back here. Alice missed seeing the book in which the family’s collection of phone numbers were written. She took the other book... the printed public one. Couldn’t

see. Dragged the phone on its long cord, and the book, into her bedroom where the light was better. Book on the dresser. Found Dr. Walter Devon's number. The only doctor whose name she knew.

"Dr Devon, this is Alice Page, at Mrs. Redfern's house. Mrs. Redfern has had a fall. She has injured her ankle, at least. Could you come?"

"In ten minutes," the doctor said. "Keep her quiet."

So Alice put the phone down, feeling comforted by the contact of her own efficiency with his. Must return the phone—

She saw, then, a bit of white paper on the dresser, with typing on it.

Lv. L.A. 2:30 P.M.

Ar. Dallas 8:00 P.M.

Lv. Dallas 9: 00 P.M.

Ar. Mexico City 2:00 P.M.

What in the world? Alice touched it. It was real. She remembered the movements of Tony's hands and slowly she pulled open the top drawer. Saw the traveler's checks in a heap within. Saw an envelope. Saw the plane tickets in it. Read the word *Mexico*.

Then she knew that the bit of white paper was the record of Tony's true itinerary.

She dropped it into the drawer and closed the drawer.

She took the phone and phone book back into the hall, put them where they belonged, and went along to see whether she could help.

When she was out of her bedroom, a white head popped out of Alice's bathroom. Striped shoulders followed. "Where'd I leave my mop, I wonder?" muttered Mrs. Peele, to the empty air.

In the front bedroom Alice found Hortense jittering and Bee scolding her mother's alarm, while Mrs. Redfern waited quietly for the doctor.

There was some flurry about him when he came. For a reason Alice couldn't quite fathom he was not the right doctor. Yet he would do.

All became clear, gradually. The cleaning woman, Mrs. Peele, had carelessly left her wet mop leaning against Mrs. Redfern's door and the old lady had stumbled over it and fallen, spraining her ankle slightly. Nothing to be alarmed about.

The doctor bound up the ankle. Bee trailed him down the stairs as he left. Ellen said tremulously that luncheon was served. And Tony pleaded his plane.

Mrs. Redfern, of course, remained in her room and Hortense with her. But in a moment or two Bee, red-eyed, joined the Pages at the luncheon table. Bee had been weeping.

"Gran's all right, Bee," Tony said gently.

“I know that,” flared his cousin. So Tony talked about the building business.

“I’ll drive you to Hollywood, Tony,” Alice said, as they were finishing the meal, “if I can have a car...”

“Honey, you could get awful lost in this town.”

“I can take him, I suppose,” Bee said, dispiritedly.

“No, I want to do it,” said Alice, “by myself. Please?”

“Oh, certainly.” Bee’s lips were contemptuous of newlyweds and love.

So Alice drove Bee’s Ford, while Tony tried to impress upon her which way she was going so that she could get back again.

“What was Bee crying about?” asked Alice, as soon as they started off.

“God knows,” said Tony sadly. “Gran, I guess. She’s pretty confused. In fact, she’s – Hortense told me this – Bee is Dr. Devon’s patient.”

“Patient?”

“In a kind of irregular, friendly way I guess. He is a psychiatrist-psychologist. One of those.”

“Oh? Oh dear!”

“I expect she’s got five million complexes or whatever,” said Tony, gloomily. “She’s wound up in knots. Don’t you pay Bee any mind. Hon, *you’ll* be all right.”

“Um-hum...” She waited.

“I’ll wire as soon as I find out what the score is. I’ll miss your birthday. But this is the way it is.”

“I know.”

He went on talking about Minnesota. When they had got down across the valley and were on the stretch, around the bottom of the hills, she waited no longer. Alice said quietly, “Tony, I’ll have to tell you this. I saw your itinerary.”

He made no reply.

“You are going to Dallas and then to Mexico?”

“How did you happen to see it?” he asked quietly.

“You left the paper on your dresser when your grandmother fell.”

“Now,” said Tony soberly, “by rights and by rules, I shouldn’t go at all.”

Alice said nothing but her heart jumped, hoping.

“Ought to be taken off the job. Trouble is, how can I be? I’m the only one who can do it.” Alice realized that he was very upset. “Alice, my darling, I wish you hadn’t seen,” he said unhappily.

“I needn’t *tell*...” she said, not looking away from the road.

He groaned.

“I can keep a secret,” she said gravely, proudly. “Don’t you know that, Tony?”

“I believe you, my darling,” Tony said. “But... you don’t know...”

“Then, could you tell me?” Alice was quiet and patient.

“Evidently I don’t have to tell you I was going to Mexico.” He was bitter and it hurt very much.

“On a job, you said? For the – the service?”

“Yes, I was called. I went to see... an old boss of mine. Fellow we call the Old Man. Yesterday. I think I’ll *have* to tell you some of this. It can’t matter, now that I won’t be going... .” He sounded very bitter.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Basically, it’s narcotics. Which I never had anything to do with.” His voice got bitter again. “And *won’t* now.”

“Tony—“ She felt like crying. “I wish I hadn’t spoken.”

“It’s damn good you did.”

“You’re making me feel terrible,” she said, honestly.

“Listen.” He faced her. “I’ll *tell* you. There is a man, here, in this town. He is... well, you could call him a traitor. He’s employed by importers of drugs, over the border. Tips them off every time there’s any kind of raid planned here. He must have sources here from inside. It’s driving the authorities slightly crazy. Where *I* come in... it seems that I happen to be personally acquainted with the man at the Mexico

City end of the line. Big shot in the international drug business. Big Frank's his nickname. He knows *me* under a cover name from another job, two years ago. And that's why nobody could do *this* job but me..." He mourned, as she could tell.

"Do what, Tony?" she asked, meekly.

"Look, *I* could have shown up in Mexico in my old character. I could have talked to him. He knew me as a... well, somebody on the criminal side of the fence." Tony sounded dreary now. "Suppose I could have gotten, at the very best, a name...? Or a phone number? *Something* to indicate to them here *who this traitor is?* Then they could jump him, stop, him. It would scarcely be evidence. But it would be knowledge and they could dig for evidence later. I'm the one man who could have tried..."

"I understand," she said. She still felt the hurt. "Your boss, Mr. Delgado, isn't – didn't...?" She was groping past the lies she had been told, that were hurting her, also.

"That was all rigged," Tony said, somewhat impatiently. "Herb Innes did it."

"Innes?"

"Man we bumped into at the airport. Sent to contact me. Then sent on to Minnesota to fix me a cover. I'm supposed to get lost in the North woods long enough..."

"And I wasn't supposed to know where you really were?" she asked numbly.

“No, you were part of the cover. How I wish you didn’t know!”

“Why?”

“Because, my darling, your knowing stops the whole project.” He was sunk in gloom and disappointment.

“Tony?”

“Yes.”

“I wouldn’t tell.”

“If I go now,” he said dully, “my life will be in your hands.”

Alice looked at him. “Well?” she said, rather coldly.

His eyes changed as if now he saw her instead of his own problem. “*I’d* leave it there any day,” he said, warmly. “But it’s more difficult than you know...”

“Tell me how difficult.”

“All right.” Tony’s eyes sent her a flash, a communication, a certain respect. “Here is the worst part of it. The Old Man is inclined to think – he has a pure guess that this traitor may be – Dr. Walter Devon. *Now* do you see? Uncle Greg is his crony. They play chess, as you saw, and you’ve heard how Uncle Greg runs off at the mouth. Devon comes to the house couple of times a week. He *treats* Bee. She’d have no secrets from him whatever. Damn it, I don’t like Bee in his hands. That’s one reason I wanted – well, too bad. But don’t you see? If you, knowing the

secret, were to let on to any member of the family where I'd really gone... and that gets to Devon, and Devon is the traitor... why, the word goes over their communication line – which does exist, believe me. My description goes over. And I am dead. Not a figure of speech, Alice. Corpse-dead.”

“Nobody,” said Alice, in panic shrillness, “in the family, or anywhere on earth, will ever know from me.” Her heart was shaken. She was terrified. “Oh, Tony, would there have been danger for you anyway?”

“Not a lot,” Tony said easily. He used the easy voice to calm her. “No, this man in Mexico would have no reason to distrust me, except as he naturally distrusts everybody. I could have handled that. Whether I would have got anything useful...”

“You think you would have.” This was statement.

“Hoped.” Tony moved restlessly.

“I will not tell anyone,” Alice said, very low. “You can be absolutely sure of that. But – don't go.”

“I can refuse now,” he comforted her quickly. “They'll get him, finally, some other way – in time.”

“In time?” she quavered. Something in his voice frightened her.

“Yes, *time*. Frankly, I don't know what I should do. What I'm worth.”

“Couldn't you ask this... this Old Man?” she queried, lost and out of her depth.

But Tony said, “I’m... not obliged. I never was. But after they talked to me yesterday, I *wanted* to go. On account of the family. On account of Bee. And also – they peddle this stuff to high-school kids,” he said.

Alice saw her brother Joey’s feet, which were to her suddenly the symbols of his energy and curiosity and inexperienced courage. Her heart leaped. But this was monstrous!

“I guess you ought to go and do what you can,” she said, “to *stop* that.” Her heart was pounding.

“Ought,” he said bitterly. “Ought.” He groaned. Then he began to talk fast. “If I go, a letter will come for you from Minnesota. And a birthday telegram. I wrote them out yesterday afternoon in the Old Man’s office. Herb Innes is back there, covering for me.” He groaned. “It isn’t just a matter of keeping still. It’s my old business, Alice. It means telling lies. You’d have to pretend I’m in Minnesota. You haven’t had the training. You’re not an actress. *Are you?*”

“No,” she said, “except that all females are, somewhat.” Her lips felt frozen.

“Turn left, up the hill,” he said.

They went up a hill in silence. “Over the bridge and left again,” he directed at the top. “We are almost there. I don’t know what to do. I *could* be lucky. Solve it fast. I was all steamed up to do it. But suppose – it was the end of me? You’d feel... I haven’t any right to leave you in such a spot. I

cannot go. If you were to look cross-eyed at Dr. Devon...”

“But *Dr. Devon...*” Alice frowned. “How could he be the one?”

“Could,” Tony said sharply. “Honey, I’ve been in a world where nothing is what it seems.”

“I don’t see where he’d be able to find out—”

“The Old Man does. Devon is... personally close... to an inside person,” said Tony painfully. “Makes it tough for the Old Man. Especially since he’s got nothing in the way of evidence. Nothing but his sense of smell.”

“But narcotics? A doctor? A healer?”

“We trust them,” exploded Tony. “And rightfully so. And if Devon is using his honorable profession... he is a traitor ten times over.” Tony grimaced. “There’s a lot of money in drugs, you know.”

“Money!” she gasped. “I can’t... I don’t...”

“You wouldn’t,” he said sadly, “know about things like that.”

Alice thought, Then there are degrees of elevation and seclusion. I think *I’ve* seen seamier sides than Mrs. Redfern has. But Tony’s seen much worse. Seen evil. And fought it. What are we here for anyhow? To make ourselves comfortable? To keep ourselves ladies and gentlemen? Or... Tears swam into her eyes, because she could tell that under fear, under tension and danger, under all of that, there was a spot

of fierce joy. To be tested was not merely an ordeal. It was life.

“Go,” she said, impulsively.

“Sweetheart.” Then Tony changed. “I’ll tell you what you’ll do!” he cried. “The whole point of keeping you out of Chicago is gone. Now that you know why can’t you just go back to Chicago? That’s good! That gets you out of range. I think I can still go.”

“Oh, I’d rather,” sighed Alice. “I’d so much rather go home—”

“Right. Tomorrow. Okay? Now, you’ve got enough money? You get a plane as early as you can.”

“I will,” said Alice. “Yes, I will.”

“And I’ll call the Old Man. Stop the letter and the telegram.”

“Right,” she said.

They drove on. They were in Hollywood now. Their nerves vibrated with the relief of a decision.

“But *will* you write me, Tony?” Alice said.

“No,” he said. “No, darling.”

“How long?”

“Just can’t say. They routed me around by Dallas in case of a check. I change names there. But I’ll come back to L.A. direct. When I land back here, I’ll call home.”

“All right.”

“Be careful, darling. You will have tonight at the house. It’s not one of Devon’s nights. Just play dumb.”

“I will never tell,” she said in her grave sweet way. “But I’m not sorry *I* know. I’d rather not be left out.”

“Ah, love,” he said, “I never want to leave you out and this will be the end...”

CHAPTER 3

She left him at the hotel, took the wrench bravely. On her way back along the route she kept herself busy making plans. Tell the family that she and Tony had decided she'd better be nearer him. Call for a reservation. Tomorrow. In Chicago, she could wait and worry alone... but in her own place in her own way, and that was so much better. Tony would do this job. She understood. Exultantly, she understood how he wanted to go.

She drove around the mountain meadow and past the shrouded house to the garage, went in at the back, where the cook, a dumpy woman in her sixties, nodded, and Ellen spoke.

“Oh, Mrs. Page, Mrs. Redfern’s sleeping. Mrs. Stafford is resting, too. Miss Beatrice is at the piano.”

“That’s all right,” said Alice. “I have things to do.” (I’ll pack.)

She ran upstairs, music pursued her. Bee was rocking the house. They are not really sleeping or resting, she thought, they are just in seclusion. Then she began to be able to hear the vacuum cleaner from

the open door of her bedroom. She went into her bedroom and there was Mrs. Peele.

Mrs. Peele put a long flat foot in a white oxford on the vacuum's switch and stopped it. "'Bout through," she said apologetically. "I'll polish your bathtub up a bit, and I'm done."

Alice smiled a little uncertainly.

The old woman was fiercely clean. She had pure white hair, drawn tight, and sharp black eyes that were a surprise on the colorless face. "Got him off, did you, Miz Page?" She seemed to wish to be friendly.

"Yes, thank you."

"Imagine!" said Mrs. Peele with admiration. "Mexico City!"

After one moment of stunned stillness, Alice reached behind her and shut the bedroom door. "What did you say?"

"Mexico City, I said. Long ways, ain't it?"

"My husband has gone to Minnesota," Alice said.

The old woman had a mobile mouth that had been speaking through a half-smile, conciliatory, anxious to please. Now the mouth turned prim. "I thought you saw his ticket," she said. "I seen you look in the drawer, Miz Page." The eyes were taking offense. Don't try to fool me, they said.

Alice was starting to shake. She fought to control this.

"Mrs. Peele... isn't that your name?"

“That’s right, Miz Page.”

Alice took a few steps toward the woman. She was making herself smile and it hurt her face. “Mrs. Peele, aren’t you from Indiana?”

“That’s right. How did you know?” The offended look vanished.

“Oh, I could tell,” Alice smiled even harder. “I know it, because so am I!”

“Don’t say? What part, dear?” The question was mechanical.

“Crawfordsville.”

“That so? Well, I’se born in Gary.”

“We are both from Indiana.”

Mrs. Peele cocked her head. “What’s that got to do with Mexico City?” The black eyes mocked at her. They rolled up and down Alice’s trim body. Alice had made a mistake. To call herself a fellow Hoosier had destroyed the woman’s need to respect a guest in this house. Alice swallowed.

“Have you said anything about Mexico to anyone?”

“No.” Mrs. Peele was brief and positive.

“You’re *sure*?”

“I been in here since you went. ’Cause I couldn’t *get* in all morning. You don’t catch me talking to them in the kitchen.” Mrs. Peele made a contemptuous sound. “They think they’re high-class, living-in here.” The eyes were very bright. The woman was full

of anger. Her very energy stemmed from essential anger. “What’s the matter, Miz Page?” she inquired, slyly.

Alice felt her wits reaching for a way... what way?... some way... to protect him. She said slowly, “I’ll tell you a secret.”

Mrs. Peele seemed to relish this. The eyes turned wise.

“My husband is on some business,” said Alice in a low confidential tone. “He – might make a lot of money. But people must think he’s gone to Minnesota.”

Mrs. Peele’s lips compressed. She nodded.

“Oil wells, you see,” improvised Alice.

Mrs. Peele knew *all about* oil wells, her nod said.

“So would you do me a favor? Don’t mention my husband’s trip to anyone at all?”

“Course not.” The voice was hearty but the glow in the sharp black eyes didn’t inspire confidence. “Supposed to be gone to Minnesota, eh? Well!”

The woman turned to the dressing table where Alice’s things were spread. She began to dust vigorously, moving everything. “You got some pretty jewelry,” she said after a long minute. “I like jewelry, myself.”

The cloth had stopped moving. The room was still for a breath or two. Then Alice moved. “Is there anything here that you would like to have?” she

asked, keeping her voice cheerful. She could see the woman's face in the glass. The eyes roved avidly over the table top. "If you are nice enough to do me a favor," Alice said, sick inside with fear for Tony, "I'd love to give you a little present. Do you like pearls?"

"That's right," said Mrs. Peele.

Alice rummaged her "jewel" box, which was three-quarters full of costume jewelry, and picked out a fat triple strand, a choker. "Would you like these?"

Mrs. Peele hesitated, in some conflict. "From Indiana, eh?" she said, resolving it finally. "Say, it's always nice to meet somebody from back home."

"I think so too," said Alice as warmly as she could. "Why don't you try these on?" She shifted away. Mrs. Peele took the pearls in her sinewy hands. She held them up to her throat. "Can't get the dohinkus fastened. It ain't broke, is it?" Suspiciously.

"Oh no! Here. Let me help you."

Alice reached up, for the woman was very tall. Alice took the clasp in fingers that felt thick. "It's not hard when you get onto it," she said chattily. "Do you like them?"

"Kinda pretty," said Mrs. Peele. "Expensive, are they?"

"Oh, not too – but they *are* good ones. From Marshall Field's..."

"Is that right?" Mrs. Peele had heard of Marshall Field's.

“I beg your pardon!” said the voice of Hortense Stafford in a gasp of surprise.

Alice turned her head and there she was, elegant, mummified, in the half-open door. Her astonished face was turning cold. “I knocked,” she said righteously, “but I am afraid Bee’s music...”

Alice did not guiltily drop her hands from their task. Her fingers kept on trying to make the two ends of the clasp meet. “Just a minute,” she said sweetly, implying that Hortense was an interruption that could very well wait. “Oh, I see what it is, Mrs. Peele,” she said, “I had the thing upside down. Now I’ve got it. There.” Only after this did Alice say, “Won’t you come in, Mrs. Stafford?”

The old cleaning woman turned around, fingering the pearls. She made her face and posture meek, but Alice knew that her eyes were maliciously pleased with Hortense’s discomfort.

“I only came to ask if Tony got off all right.” Hortense was cool.

“Oh yes, he did,” said Alice. “Thank you.”

“And to say that Aunt Geraldine suggests you might care to come talk to her, Alice. If you have a moment...” A dagger shot from Hortense’s eyes.

Alice smiled. “Mrs. Peele comes from Indiana, too,” she said gaily. “Did you know that?”

“Does she, indeed?” said Hortense frigidly. Then Hortense went away.

Mrs. Peele was now smiling as wide as her mouth could go. None of the overtones in the scene had escaped her. Neither Hortense's class-conscious horror nor Alice's deliberate partisanship. "Thanks, Miz Page, dear," she said chummily. "Thanks a lot, I really appreciate these pearls, I really do."

"I'm glad you like them. You'll remember what I said?"

"Listen, I wouldn't tell them nothing," said Mrs. Peele with enthusiasm. "You and me, we don't have to tell them our business. Let them mind their own business, that's what I say. Okay if I do your tub now?"

"Okay," said Alice. "And I suppose I had better..."

"You better go talk to the Duchess," said Mrs. Peele, in nasal tones. A vicious resentment ripped out of her. "Ain't she the Duchess, though? *She* thinks! If she didn't keep her nose in the air so high all the time she'd a seen where I left the mop. But not her. The way *she* sticks her nose in the air."

"I know," said Alice, "you certainly didn't mean to make anybody fall. It was just an accident. It could have happened to anyone."

"That's right," said Mrs. Peele with virtuous pride. "Well, it is sure nice to meet somebody from home." Mrs. Peele's hand fell heavily on Alice's shoulder. Alice did not wince; she smiled. Mrs. Peele took her tall bones into the bathroom, wearing pearls.

Our business, thought Alice. What is that? Bribery? Oh, have I done right? What can I do?

She knew that she could not go to Chicago tomorrow. She could not leave this place, with this woman and her knowledge in it. Alice would have to stay, to keep Mrs. Peele quiet.

She heard Tony saying, "*My life in your hands.*"

She couldn't trust Mrs. Peele an inch. The woman was full of spite. She couldn't be appealed to on the basis of life or death for Tony. This would only excite her to the point where the secret would burst out of her because it would make her so important. Alice knew this beyond any doubt.

Nothing to do, then, but try to keep her quiet. *Succeed* in keeping her quiet, for Tony's life!

NO! NO! She *couldn't* do it! It was too perilous!

Alice slipped into the hall. She wouldn't use this phone, in Mrs. Peele's earshot, so she hurried to the instrument below. She called the airport. If Tony hadn't left he *must not* leave. It was altogether too dangerous now.

She hung on the phone while they paged him, her finger stuffed tight into her right ear against Bee's music. The music stopped and Bee came into the lower hall. "Oh, sorry, I didn't know you were on the phone."

Alice took her finger away. "I'm trying to reach Tony. I forgot something."

“Oh,” said Bee glancing at her watch. “Well, you should have time.” Bee brushed on going upstairs.

It was just 2:45 by the clock on the wall. Alice realized that he must have flown off already. Had it not said, on the piece of white paper, Lv. L.A. 2:30? He was *on* the plane to Dallas now.

Alice put down the phone and tried to think. Call people who also knew the secret? But she didn't know the Old Man's name, or where he was, or even within what organization he functioned. She didn't even know, she realized, what name Tony himself was using from Dallas on. How could she, even if she knew how to try, catch him in Dallas, before he jumped out of the country?

It was already too late.

She rose slowly. Mrs. Peele was coming down the stairs accoutered with brushes and bucket. They passed. Alice gave her a conspirator's smile and received its sly, satisfied counterpart.

Alice went up to talk to Mrs. Redfern.

“I understand,” said that dainty lady, from the throne of her bed where she lay wrapped in fleecy pink, “that you knew our Mrs. Peele in Indiana?”

Hortense hadn't taken long to pass the word, thought Alice bitterly. Inaccurate word, too. She was about to protest the inaccuracy when she said to herself: Wait, Hortense jumped to a conclusion. But this could be good, could *seem* to explain—

A female is a natural actress, she'd said to Tony. Or, to put it differently, a natural liar? Tony's old business took talent for lying. He had told her so. Now Alice was in Tony's old business. She must lie and pretend for her own secret objective, which was Tony's safety.

So she lied smoothly, "Why, yes," she said. "Isn't that amazing?"

Mrs. Redfern said, "I understand, my dear, that you must, of course, be gracious to Mrs. Peele. Tell me, do your parents have servants in the house?"

Mrs. Redfern doubted it. If they had, Alice would have learned long ago *not* to be found fastening pearls upon the cleaning woman's neck. Alice perceived all this clearly. Mrs. Redfern, obliquely, was instructing a member of the lower classes.

But Alice was a dedicated liar now. Good! she thought. Let me be lower class. Let me be something Tony married beneath him. What does it matter? But I am going to have to be more than "gracious" to Mrs. Peele in the next few days.

So she said, pretending to misunderstand innocently, "Oh no, ma'am, Mrs. Peele wasn't any servant. She's a very old friend of my mother's." And Alice smiled.

"Is that so, my dear?" Mrs. Redfern's murmur was polite. If her eyes showed a little dismay, this did not count, since the voice was gentle, the surface was

unruffled. Everyone is some kind of a liar, thought Alice.

Mrs. Redfern changed the subject. "We must think of something to entertain you. Some people are invited for tonight. We had planned a musicale, to present you and Tony..."

The gray eyes were flat. Alice could not help meeting them somewhat saucily. "Oh, you mustn't," she said. "You don't want to present just me."

"I think perhaps," said Mrs. Redfern, coolly, "we had better postpone it."

Now Alice caught herself up. No, no, she must not be saucy. "Please don't worry about me at all," she begged earnestly. "You must rest your poor ankle. I'll wait for Tony."

"It will be dull for you, Alice," said Mrs. Redfern.

"I am not used to a house like this," said Alice, gushingly. "It's all so lovely. So new to me."

The gray eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

When Alice found herself gracefully dismissed, ten minutes later, she went downstairs slowly, listening to the house. She did not know where anyone was or who might be talking to whom. She felt now as if all her thinking, acting, reacting had been done impulsively in a few moments of panic.

Could she riot, after all, speak openly to Tony's own people? Surely if they could be brought to understand that Tony's life might really be in the

balance, then they would help her. They, too, would try to keep Mrs. Peele quiet.

But could they? No one could *order* her not to tell. And Mrs. Peele resented them. But Alice – and perhaps only Alice – could coax her, conspire with her, and keep her from telling.

From telling whom?

Dr. Devon?

But Mrs. Peele would scarcely tell Dr. Devon directly. It would be through Uncle Greg.

And what about Uncle Greg? Would he believe with any readiness that his crony, Dr. Devon, might be a dangerous criminal, mixed in with the drug traffic? Alice didn't know Uncle Greg very well. But she reflected that even if he did believe this to be possible, then Uncle Greg would be faced with the task of keeping the secret from Dr. Devon. And could he? Was Uncle Greg any kind of actor?

Also, there was Bee, emotionally tangled with Dr. Devon, who was her confessor.

Also (Alice's heart shook with the onrush of so many anxieties), was Dr. Devon the only possibly dangerous one? For all Alice knew, Mrs. Peele might be in touch with others somewhere in this city. Who could say where the tentacles of this criminal operation might lie hidden? The news of Tony's real destination mustn't...

Yet why was that so dangerous? Merely the news of Tony's destination? What would it prove to

anyone who heard about it? Even if the woman told somebody that he was going to Mexico City, how could anybody guess what his job was there?

Alice couldn't understand this very clearly. But it came to her that she did know one thing, surely. Tony had *said* it was dangerous to him if his destination were known. She could only believe it. And she had promised him – a half a dozen times – that she would never tell. Therefore she could not tell. And over and above that simple duty, she would not let Mrs. Peele tell, either

So it was simple enough, what her duty was. How to do it wasn't so simple.

But Alice was not going to find it dull.

She had wandered into the big room; Bee was there, reading. "Oh, hi," Bee said.

"What days does Mrs. Peele come?" Alice asked her.

"Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Why?"

"She comes early, doesn't she?"

"Oh, yes... and leaves early. Leaves about four. Why?"

"Then she hasn't left?"

"It's quarter of." Bee glanced at her wrist. "What's this about?"

“She’s turned out to be an old friend of my mother’s, you know.” Alice repeated this lie with ease.

Bee’s dark brows rose on the white forehead. “That’s awkward, isn’t it?”

“I don’t think so,” said Alice, gently.

“Where did Tony meet you?” The accents were even. Bee had just enough grace not to come down on the pronoun *you*.

Alice said demurely, “He picked me up.”

“Wha-at?”

Alice smiled. “People do,” she said. It was true. In the real world, people did. Tony had. He had seen her on a bus. Got off when she did. Male in pursuit, in the real world, which is essentially the same old jungle. Had intervened with his nickel when Alice had fumbled for change, buying the evening paper at her corner.

Tony had said, “I followed you. I had to.”

Alice, searching his face, trying to read the strangeness of it, had said, “Why?”

Tony had said, “Because I want to get to know you. How can I get myself introduced?”

Alice had said, gravely and realistically, “Lots of ways. You can find out whose office I’m in and fake some business with my boss. You could follow me to church on Sunday.”

“I will do that,” he had said, enthusiastically.

She'd said, with the grave air that was peculiar to her, "All it would mean is that you want to know me."

Tony had said, "That's the meaning of it. I think it's partly your nose, but I don't know what it is. Frankly, I've got to find out what it is."

They had been so happily "honest" and "realistic" and mutually enchanted. They'd gone into a hamburger joint, right there, next to the newsstand, to discuss Alice's nose or whatever, and Tony's premonition.

If marriages are made in heaven, heaven's around us, where we can't guess it's going to be. Heaven's on a bus, heaven's at a newsstand. Heaven comes smelling of onions and catsup. Heaven's accidental to this world. Angels come in obliquely. Alice smiled over this.

Then, in the huge room in Tony's grandmother's house, his Cousin Bee said scornfully, "Oh, I suppose they do." As if she were not people. People were somebody else.

Alice pitied her.

"You were never properly introduced?" Bee said. "Really?"

Alice smiled. "Actually, we were introduced in church, one day, by one of the elders..."

Bee's face showed a rise of anger. "You've been pulling my leg, I think," she murmured, and looked back upon her book.

But Tony had turned up in church the following Sunday. And he had “known,” as people say, one of the elders. Dear, wonderful Tony! Then he had gone down to Crawfordsville with Alice, for the next weekend, and he had had a long talk with her father. Alice thought it had all been perfectly proper... and perfect, too.

But now her mind fled to the problem, here and now. Be sure Mrs. Peele told nobody, anywhere. She had better catch the woman on her way out.

Bee said, casually, “How old are you, Alice?”

“I’ll be twenty tomorrow.” The answer came out of Alice’s mouth without thought. Then she remembered that Tony had stopped the telegram. No word from him on her birthday? That would seem strange. “Oh, please don’t tell anyone, Bee,” she begged. “Promise me? I don’t want a fuss made. Please?”

“Up to you.” Bee shrugged indifferently.

“Please excuse me,” said Alice.

She drifted, quaking, into the oblong hall and peered through the latticed glass, between the leaves. Oh, wasn’t she making a mess of everything? When she saw the white head of Mrs. Peele being carried along the driveway, Alice flew out of the front door and down the crazy steps to catch up with her.

“I’ll walk you to the end of the drive. Okay?”

“Why not, Miz Page?” Mrs. Peele trotted now, in black, decent shoes. She carried a paper shopping bag in which were folded her working clothes.

Alice said, “Why don’t you call me Alice? You know what I told Mrs. Redfern?”

“No, what did you tell the Duchess?” The old woman was at ease.

“I said you were an old friend of my mother’s.” Alice had realized that Mrs. Peele had better know this.

Mrs. Peele didn’t utter the word “Why?” but Alice answered the question anyway, as best she could. “Oh, I don’t know...” she said hitting out at a shrub discontentedly. “She’s so... My people are just as good – Maybe you *did* know my mother. Her name is Molly Hansen. Used to be Molly Mercer.”

“Could be I met her some place,” said Mrs. Peele without enthusiasm.

“She’s tall, like you,” said Alice. “Her hair is gray now. It used to be a reddish brown.”

“You homesick for your mama, dear?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, your hubby, he’ll be back soon, eh?” Mrs. Peele’s white brows had peaked up.

“Oh, yes...”

“Has he got money?” asked Mrs. Peele. Her lively eyes were curious about this match.

“No, he hasn’t. Except... you know... there is the chance of it in this business he’s on...” Alice spoke low and then smiled up at her. “So you won’t tell anyone, anywhere, will you?” (Let her think I have a profit motive.)

“Not me,” said Mrs. Peele shortly. They were nearing the end of the grounds. “Say, Alice, dear, I wonder if I could ask you something.”

“Of course.”

“See, I got a payment due and I’m short a little bit. Could you maybe loan me a few dollars?”

So Alice knew she had made a mistake. Mrs. Peele was nobody’s fool. If Alice had lied to Mrs. Redfern about her, Alice had had a better reason than she had been able to give. Also, Alice had pressed too hard with the warning not to tell. Mrs. Peele had already sensed her power. Mrs. Peele was now testing it out a little more. Mrs. Peele had a profit motive.

“I haven’t any money with me right now,” Alice said rather indifferently.

“Oh well, tomorrow would be time enough. All I mean is, say, twenty dollars?”

“I suppose I could help you,” said Alice slowly. She looked at the woman directly and steadily for half a moment. “Of course...” she let her voice go dreamy, as if she were thinking out loud... “if you mentioned this trip to anybody, anywhere, so that Tony missed out on the deal... why then we couldn’t afford...” She pretended to come to a decision. “I could let you

have it tomorrow,” she said in a different voice. “Do you live alone, Mrs. Peele?”

“No, but I mind my business,” said Mrs. Peele, looking away. “Sure be nice of you.” Her voice was absent-minded. Mrs. Peele was thinking things over.

“Well, so long, then.” Alice stopped walking. She was nervous enough to scream. She wanted the woman gone and herself alone.

Mrs. Peele stopped also. “You and me will get along,” she said boldly. “I ain’t been back East for twelve years. How old was you then, dear?”

“I was seven or eight,” Alice said.

“I believe you was,” said Mrs. Peele. “Molly Mercer’s little kid, huh?” She actually grinned. When the mouth widened so, it was not pleasant. “Well, hasta la vista, like they say down Mexico way.”

Alice turned on her heel. Mrs. Peele marched on into the road that skirted the meadow.

Alice thought, How can I do this? It’s impossible! I’ve got to do it!

CHAPTER 4

She had reached the top of the steps when a yellow car drove in. Dr. Walter Devon got out of it. “Hello, there,” he called upward.

“Oh hello, Doctor...”

“How are you, Mrs. Page?” He came swiftly up. “I thought I’d take another look at that ankle.”

“Oh, how nice of you,” said Alice. “Come on in.” She was able to turn her back on him and take the doorknob. But the door had locked itself behind her. She pushed the bell button. They must stand here side by side and wait for Ellen.

Don’t wonder about him at all, she told herself. Keep, it out of your mind. Banish it.

The problem now was not Mrs. Peele, but herself. How to keep *herself* from telling.

“I’m sorry to hear that Tony was called back East,” she heard him saying sympathetically.

“Yes, it’s a nuisance.” She turned around because she could not stand staring into the wooden face of the door. She looked out over the grounds. “This is all so strange to me,” she said, “this foliage...”

He wasn't a man to talk about the foliage. "You know, I am very glad," the doctor said softly, "that Tony's gotten out of that dangerous business."

She knew her eyes, her whole face, showed surprise and shock. She could do nothing about it.

The doctor exuded, an air of proud omnipotence. "You didn't know I knew? Oh, I know many things. And I think it was high time he got married and dropped his cloak and dagger. A childish business! Don't you agree?"

"Oh, heavens!" said Alice. "I surely do agree!" She made it a gushing agreement, riding on the force of her surprise. After this, her speech had nowhere to go.

Ellen saved her by opening the door.

Alice went first up the circular stairs which kept her back to him.

She rapped at Mrs. Redfern's door. Her hand was all right.

"Yes?" the ladylike voice responded within.

"It's Alice, Mrs. Redfern. Dr. Devon is here."

"Thank you, Alice. Just one moment, if you please."

They would have to stand here side by side, waiting. Alice managed to send a little rueful smile up at the doctor. His eyes shocked her, they were so alive and aware. She could feel his interest, his inquiry, the power of it. She knew, now, that if this

were the man, the danger was very great. And she felt afraid.

“What are you afraid of, young Alice?” she heard him saying gently. Ah no, this was never a man that she could fool!

Nevertheless she had to fool him.

So Alice said, in soft breathlessness, as if his sympathetic perception had compelled a confession, “I don’t know, Dr. Devon. She’s such a lady. I’ll never be. And here I am... left alone in this house... .” She closed her eyes, tried to squeeze tears.

“She can’t bite you, you know,” the doctor said.

Alice must open her eyes. She saw Bee standing at the railing of the upper hall with jealous rage frozen on her face. As Alice reacted, the doctor glanced behind.

“Come in, please,” said Mrs. Redfern’s voice.

Alice opened the door and went in blindly. Mrs. Redfern said, “Leave the door open, Alice, and sit down, my dear, please.”

Propriety!

Alice sat down on a straight chair near the door.

Dr. Devon approached the bed with a wary bedside manner.

But fear now tumbled free in Alice’s head. So Dr. Devon knew Tony’s old work, all about it! So Dr. Devon knew for sure that Tony was not on the criminal side of the fence. Therefore, if Dr. Devon

were the traitor, he would not like the secret presence of Tony Page in Mexico City. Would he suspect its purpose? Perhaps not. But if he were to find out where Tony had secretly gone, surely he would pass the word to watch out. He would give Tony's description. And then, when Tony casually approached the sensitive subject in Mexico, and they, there, *knew* he was Secret Service – Tony would walk into a trap! Now Alice understood! Oh, Tony hadn't told her *this!* She'd been left to find it out in shock and ride the shock as best she could.

The only safe thing to do was assume that Devon was the man.

Alice felt herself grow cold and still. Very well. She would never tell Devon or any member of the family where Tony was, either openly or inadvertently. She had promised. She was resolved and she had the strength of that resolution. Very well. She was not quite twenty years old. But she had the strength of youth, the strength of her own intelligence, the strength of love, which is very great. And even in fear there is strength, if one can tap it. All these strengths would help her.

So to act, to lie, to seem... what? She would seem to be Alice Hansen Page from Indiana, a country girl, no lady, left here with strangers... and – here came the false erected on the true – frightened of them. Afraid she wouldn't measure up. Gauche. Timid. Frightened of them. That was what she would seem.

Hortense came dithering in.

Alice got up and (gauchely) slipped away.

Dr. Devon said to Mrs. Redfern amiably, "Too bad young Tony was called back. But at least you will have the chance to know his little bride a little better."

Mrs. Redfern sighed. "Yes," she agreed. "Yes."

"Be kind," the doctor urged. "She is a little in awe of you ladies, I think."

Mrs. Redfern's eyes were chilly. "Thank you," she said.

Hortense said, "It's too bad. She is pretty and so young. But these girls fade early." Hortense drew up her own thin elegance.

The doctor looked inquiry.

"Our old cleaning woman," said Hortense with a fastidious *moue*, "is a friend of Alice's mother."

"What a coincidence," said Dr. Devon tolerantly.

Bee Stafford pounced upon the doctor in the lower hall. "Couldn't I see you tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow, Beatrice, I am engaged all day."

"Sometimes I think—" said Bee wildly — "I'll scream!"

"Try to relax," he said kindly. "You will not scream, Beatrice." He concealed his wish to get away. But moved away.

Bee made a mute, a helpless gesture. Her dark eyes followed him as he departed.

Dr. Devon entered his car, thinking to himself for the hundredth time how easy it would be to addict Bee Stafford to narcotics. He could drop a word and she could be approached.

He really had only toyed with the idea. On the whole, he thought not.

He wouldn't have bothered with Bee at all had it not been for Gregory, who was useful to him. The epitome of respectable solidity. An excellent reference. Unhappy, of course. (Perhaps all respectable people were unhappy.) Hortense was the epitome of snobbery. And Bee, naturally, was a mess. He thought of the pseudo happiness of drugs for her and was tempted. Oh yes, she was the type. Drugs interested him. He had a cold and curious brain. Mortals were fools. Which was an infallible source, of money, he had found.

Poor Bee. He had taught her to know her enslavement to her grandmother. Wasn't helping her a great deal. Jealous of the little Alice. What a nuisance Bee was! He used his charm, of course. One does, if one has it.

He drove away.

Alice did not see him go.

She was beginning to catch on to the rhythm of this strange house. It was a shrine. Hortense considered endlessly the old lady's preferences. The servants served them. Gregory deferred to them. Even Bee's rebellious contempt deferred to them, if only in

reverse. When the old lady was not about, there was no life in the house.

She was not at the dinner table. Bee was sullen and Hortense was silent. Only Uncle Gregory rambled on.

Alice, wearing a pink dress and the silver-and-sapphire earrings again, wondered how she could live the evening through. She pounced upon a chance to ask, "Is Dr. Devon coming to play chess this evening?"

"No, not on Tuesdays. As a matter of fact..."

Alice cut in, as was the only way. "If you would like a game, Uncle Gregory, I play a little."

"Well, do you, indeed?" Uncle Greg discoursed upon the royal game until coffee.

At ten o'clock Uncle Greg shoved back his chair. His brown eyes stretched very wide. "Do you know you have beaten me rather badly?"

"Guess I have," twinkled Alice. Oh, chess was good! You couldn't think of anything else, much. Yet she had found out things about Gregory. He was a man with mental ruts. Nobody you could quickly convert to the astonishing idea that a crony of his was possibly a scoundrel.

"Remarkable," said Uncle Greg. "You must have a game with Walter Devon."

"Oh, no," said Alice, "really." She looked up and Bee's gaze was like a sword. "I'd be embarrassed,"

Alice said. "Please... With you it's different, Uncle Gregory. It's family. I couldn't play with Dr. Devon. Please? Promise me?"

Uncle Greg was looking at her uneasily. "Very well," he said, "but you are remarkably brainy, my dear, aren't you?" He didn't seem to be pleased about it.

"Oh, this was an accident," said Alice hastily. "And I'm going to quit while I'm ahead." Her slang, her laughter, sounded a little cheap. But oh, she was afraid she had made another mistake. To seem! To seem young, timid, gauche, frightened. That was the role. Such a one did not display the ability to play a bold, sound game of chess!

Uncle Greg soon excused himself. He had nothing to say to his wife or child, no life in this house. His real life must be in the community and his status there. He disappeared upstairs.

As soon as he was gone, Hortense began. Alice now discovered something about Hortense. She was a gossip. She sucked life from other people's real or imaginary sins and adventures. She had none of her own, except this sin. Hortense was a scandalmonger. She clucked over a neighbor's wayward child. She worried at the story. It animated her. Alice lay low and listened and was afraid. Hortense was one who would tell all she heard, and more!

All the while Bee took a butterfly interest – now pouncing, now drifting away. Once she broke in to

invite Alice to a luncheon at the club tomorrow. Alice accepted shyly, but Alice knew she would not go. She could have a headache. She could not leave the house with Mrs. Peele in it.

Alice was trying, a little late, to keep herself a background figure. Young, timid, and a little overwhelmed. The day crept to its end. Alice was invited to say good night to old Mrs. Redfern.

“Good night,” said Alice at Mrs. Redfern’s door. The old lady lay, leaf-light, upon her bed. Dainty. Self-contained. Uncomplaining. “Sleep well,” said Alice, with uncontrollable good will.

“Thank you, my dear Alice. Good night.” A little surprise curled in Mrs. Redfern’s gray eyes.

Alice went to her own room. Soberly, she realized that it was not easy to pretend to be what she was not. Her intelligence had shone out in that chess game, without her meaning to betray it. Just now, her willingness to respond, equal to equal – her genuine lack of awe – had betrayed itself, too.

Alice was not a timid, unforceful, negligible, country-bred, awestruck little girl with no personality of her own. Tony wouldn’t have loved such a one.

Oh, Tony! she thought; I must be more careful. I must not be myself at all!

Tuesday was over.

Tuesday; Mexico. Tony registered in the middle of the night by a name he had used in this same hotel before. He spent the balance of the night moving from restaurant to bar to restaurant to bar.

At the fourth place a man called him by the old name.

Now, one did not walk up to Big Frank and ask prying questions. One did not, in fact, walk up to Big Frank at all.

So Tony let it be understood that he would not be averse to a word with Big Frank, for auld lang syne.

This was understood. It was a beginning.

On Wednesday, Alice was up early, spying out the routine of Mrs. Peele. The woman seemed to be occupied in the back regions before breakfast. Afterwards, she began, in the big room when Gregory had gone and the ladies still lay abed.

Alice gave her good morning and took care to seem to have forgotten all about any urgency or any twenty dollars. Mrs. Peele, in a blue-striped dress that had been starched to the point of ostentation, buzzed about her work with the energy of the driven. She hadn't quite the brass to remind Alice of their bargain so early in the day.

Mrs. Redfern's ankle permitted her downstairs by midmorning. Alice took note. When the ladies came down, Mrs. Peele went up. She did their rooms while they were out of them. Good!

At a quarter of twelve, Alice produced her headache and Bee went off alone. Alice (the ladies cooing) retreated to her bedroom to “lie down.” Mrs. Peele was still somewhere upstairs.

Alice heard her go down at about 12:30. Did she eat lunch in the kitchen? Talking? Alice scarcely knew what to do.

Then her door slammed open and here came Mrs. Peele bearing a tray.

“I made them let me bring it, dear,” said she. “How you feeling? Got the headache, dear. Too bad.” Mrs. Peele feigning sentimental concern was rather frightening.

“It’s some better,” said Alice feebly.

“That’s good. You don’t mind if I dust?”

“Of course not.”

Alice was happy to have her. Indeed, Alice would keep her as long as she could. So Alice asked questions. Mrs. Peele, darting around the room, dusting with a grim thoroughness, told Alice that her husband was dead. She lived with her son. He had been married but his wife had turned out to be “a lazy good-for-nothing.” So they’d split up and now he lived with his ma.

Mrs. Peele showed Alice a snapshot of a young man with a low brow, eyes glowering from under a cap of clipped dark hair that looked like fur. His name was Cary, she said. A hard worker. He was a truck driver and her only child.

Mrs. Peele and her son spent a lot of evenings together, watching TV, mostly. He didn't have so many friends. His ex-wife told a lot of lies about him. (In her heart, Alice pitied any daughter-in-law to Mrs. Peele.) The implication became clear. Mrs. Peele and her son were very close indeed.

"I didn't say one word to Cary, even," said Mrs. Peele, meaningfully.

Alice could see the sense of injury crystallizing. (I didn't tell, but you haven't produced the money!) Mrs. Peele was all ready to be the wronged party. It was her way of life, Alice divined, to be the wronged party and a spitefully efficient servant to those she despised.

Alice said, "I'm glad you didn't. By the way, I have that money."

Alice got off the bed, fetched her purse and took out the bill.

"Thanks a lot," said Mrs. Peele mechanically.

"I promised you," said Alice, "so there it is. And you're welcome." She was trying to seem insouciant. Mrs. Peele got it.

"You hear from your hubby?" she asked curiously in a moment.

"Not yet. But I will." Alice climbed back upon the bed. "What programs do you like, especially?"

But Mrs. Peele had lost her chatty mood. "I dunno," she said discontentedly. "There's a lot of

junk on TV.” She turned her back and began to wallop the surface of the dressing table.

Alice lay against the headboard. The truth was, she remembered sadly, that she would not hear from her husband at all. And this was her birthday! Normally, Tony would never – even in the fake emergency circumstances – forget her twentieth birthday. The family, if they knew, would think this odd. Bee, who did know, would think it very odd. Could she do anything about it?

And then she thought, Oh God, I could have stopped him! Too late, she saw how she could have done it. Too late, she remembered Herb Innes in Minnesota. She could have called *him* at Mr. Delgado’s in Minnesota, yesterday. There would have been time. No plane is faster than the telephone. Herb Innes knew how to reach the Old Man. And surely the Old Man would have known how to reach Tony, in Dallas, and stop him in time.

Too late now!

Alice felt stricken. She could have got herself out of this whole mess, and kept Tony safe. No help to think of it now. She caught herself close to tears. She looked up. The cleaning woman was watching her by way of the dressing-table mirror.

“Say, Alice,” said Mrs. Peele in a minute, “you know I’m going to my club, Saturday night?”

“How nice!”

“I’d sure like to borrow these earrings off a’ you, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“What... earrings?”

“These here.”

Mrs. Peele held up in her gaunt hand Tony’s mother’s silver-and-sapphire earrings.

“I guess these is real stones,” Mrs. Peele said and her tongue examined her upper lip. Her eyes were sly.

Alice loved the dainty things. Cobwebs, wrought of silver, set each with two sapphires. They were her treasures. It crossed her mind now to lie, to protect the sapphires, the beloved heirlooms, and say that they were only glass.

But what was a sapphire... what was an heirloom, what was any physical thing, to Tony’s life?

“Yes,” said Alice, “they are real sapphires.”

“You can kinda tell,” said Mrs. Peele with satisfaction, as if she congratulated Alice for telling the truth.

Alice said slowly, “And a week from Saturday, I will give them to you.”

Mrs. Peele’s thumb came up and pressed the jewels.

“If you haven’t... told what I ask you not to tell,” Alice said. It was bald and direct, but necessary.

“How would you know,” said Mrs. Peele, just as baldly, “if I did or didn’t tell?”

“I would know,” said Alice steadily, “by the results.”

The thumb moved on the sapphires. “You sure don’t want nobody to know where he’s at, do you, dear?” said Mrs. Peele saucily.

Alice said nothing.

The woman switched her bony hips to and fro. “Only thing is, see, this – uh – club meets *this* Saturday night.” The voice faked hesitancy. The sharp eyes keep watching. “So a week from Saturday don’t do me any good.”

She’s got me and she knows it, thought Alice.

“I’ll loan them to you for the party,” she said quietly.

“Thanks a lot,” said Mrs. Peele in a voice a little higher than was normal. She knew there had just been a clash of wills. She knew she had won. “Say, how do they go on?” She held one to an ear.

“I imagine you can figure it out,” said Alice without spirit. Her heart was leaden. The old woman was looking into the mirror, now, trying to put the dainty things on her lobes. Alice stared at the window. At the mountainside.

“You ain’t mad, Alice, dear?”

Alice did not stir.

“Listen, I wouldn’t do anything to upset your hubby’s business.” Mrs. Peele was definitely uneasy. Why?

Alice turned her head and smiled faintly. "I was just thinking," she said slowly. "Maybe I'm foolish. We don't have to get rich this year. We are young."

There was power in resignation. Mrs. Peele felt her own power slipping.

"Listen," she said, "I'll just borrow them for the party, see? I wouldn't take a present like that from you, Alice. I mean, these is worth something."

"Yes," said Alice. "Mind you don't lose them."

"Oh, I wouldn't! Now, dear, you ain't eating your broth."

"I've had enough."

"Headache?"

"No," said Alice listlessly.

"You don't want to worry," said Mrs. Peele. "I mean, nobody's going to say nothing... far as that goes."

Alice plucked at the bedspread.

"You just don't feel well, that's what it is. You sure looked awful sick a couple of minutes ago."

Alice closed her eyes.

Mrs. Peele removed the tray. Alice felt it go.

Then the door slammed.

Alice blinked and sat up. No earrings on the dressing table. She got off the bed to look in her box. The earrings were gone. Alice began to gnaw the knuckles of her thumb, to bite it. Needed the pain.

What would the old woman do now?

CHAPTER 5

She stood it for about twenty minutes; then she began hastily to dress. She put on her pink again, to be ready for dinner. She put a pair of pearl buttons in her ears.

She went downstairs, stepping quietly, and the strange house, the huge luxurious lonely house, was still.

Alice went into the dining room. All was neat and silent here. She pushed the swinging door to the pantry. Nobody. This was the hour of the day when nothing went on in the kitchen. Lunch over. Dinner not yet in preparation. She pushed at the second swinging door to the kitchen proper. Peered through.

No Ellen. No cook. But there was Mrs. Peele. She was standing with her long muscular legs apart, wielding a wet mop upon the kitchen linoleum. She was alone, working vigorously. In her ears were the lovely old earrings that Tony's grandfather had given Tony's mother, years ago.

Alice let the door shut softly and she leaned upon the cupboards. In her pulse, time beat by.

But not enough time had beaten by (not enough for Tony!) when Alice heard movement in the house. She moved swiftly through doorways into the big front parlor.

“Oh, Alice, there you are,” said Hortense. “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, I’m fine now.”

“Too bad you missed the luncheon. Excuse me, I must speak to cook, if she is down...”

Hortense clattered off toward the kitchen.

Something of her feigned resignation had crept into Alice’s mind, truly. Fate was fate. You rode on risks and chances. Perhaps Dr. Devon was not the man. Anyhow, she could not possibly keep Aunt Hortense out of the kitchen.

With scarcely any surprise, she heard female voices going high. She heard Hortense calling, “Alice? Will you come here, please?”

She moved numbly.

The kitchen, although well supplied with modem appliances, was in size an old-fashioned kitchen. Mrs. Peele had only now finished her mopping. She stood at bay. Hortense faced her and Hortense was aflame.

“Alice!”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Those are Eileen’s earrings!”

“I know they...”

“Miz Alice said I could wear them,” mumbled Mrs. Peele. “Didn’t you, Miz Alice?”

“Miss Alice shouldn’t have said any such thing!” Hortense quivered with rage. “They belong to the family! They are priceless heirlooms. Alice, you hear? Mrs. Peele says you loaned them to her.”

“Yes, I...”

“Alice, you cannot! Don’t you know that Mr. Redfern brought them from Paris?” Hortense was beside herself.

Mrs. Peele’s face contorted. “I ain’t good enough for something from Paris, is that it?” Her hostility was out!

“Alice!”

Alice stood with heart pounding, throat dry.

“I guess you don’t believe *me*,” said Mrs. Peele angrily. “I guess there’s some things you don’t know. I happen to done Miz Alice a kind of favor. You want to know what it was, Miz Stafford?” Her face showed naked malice, now.

Iron rammed into Alice’s soul. “Just a minute, Aunt Hortense...”

“Take them away from her!” blazed Hortense.

“But just a minute... They belong to me, you know,” said Alice.

“They are family...”

“But Tony gave them to me. They are my property. Don’t you see?” Alice spoke as gently and

reasonably as she could manage. Mrs. Peele's face began to show great satisfaction. The lips tightened.

"You are out of your mind," said Hortense rudely. "They cannot be replaced. She'll lose them."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Alice soothingly. "Please, Aunt Hortense, there is nothing to be so upset about."

Now Hortense was speechless!

"And I guess you don't understand," said Mrs. Peele, nasally. "I'se going to say, see, I used to know her mama, back in Indiana. Molly Mercer, that was. I knew Miz Alice when she's a little bitty kid." The black eyes swiveled to Alice, looking for approval now. "And that's why she gave these here earrings," said Mrs. Peele, turning the screws. "Ain't that right, Miz Alice?"

"*Gave* them!" Hortense was close to shrieking.

Cook put a startled face in at the door from the back hall.

Alice moved and put her hand on Hortense's forearm. "Won't you please," said Alice softly, "let me talk to you just a minute and not in front of people?"

The mummy face was stiff with outrage.

"Please," said Alice, turning the thin body, guiding it toward the pantry. Hortense stumbled along. Alice looked back and sent Mrs. Peele a cold and

disapproving glance, and saw the hands go nervously to the ears.

But Alice did not let go of Hortense. The thin arm, all bone, was quivering in her grasp. They went through the pantry into the dining room. Here Alice said, "Please, Aunt Hortense, I am begging you not to make a fuss."

"Fuss!" the woman hissed.

Alice said, "Will you please not mention this to anyone?"

"Not mention...!" The body jerked. "I don't care to have you touching me, Alice."

Alice tightened her fingers. "Aunt Hortense," she said as honestly, as appealingly as she could, "I have a reason. Will you believe me? Will you do this for me? Will you wait until Tony comes? They are Tony's heirlooms. Tony's gift to me. And Tony's business. So please wait. Let him do what he wants to do about it. Isn't it his business, really? Won't you agree to that?"

"I think you are..."

"Think whatever you... think. Just please promise me?"

"You are hurting me," said Hortense icily.

"No, I am not hurting you. I only want you to promise me."

"Why should I promise you?"

“Because I ask you to,” said Alice with quiet despair.

“Let me go!”

“If you promise to let Tony deal with this. Not to mention it.”

“I promise,” said Hortense angrily.

So Alice opened her fingers and let her go. “I’m awfully sorry,” she said, “that you are so upset. There is no need.”

Hortense turned and simply walked away.

Alice stood there trembling. She heard the heels cross the tile margin of the hall, begin to stumble up the stairs. She knew despair. But she could not afford despair.

She whirled and went back into the kitchen. The old cleaning woman was standing there with an unholy excitement in her eyes. Cook was agog at the far side of the room. Alice went over to Mrs. Peele.

“That wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t worn them,” said Alice sharply, “to mop the kitchen floor.”

“Now, Miz Alice, I didn’t...” The nasal whine died away.

“I don’t know,” said Alice sternly, “whether I *can* give them to you, now.”

“You said they’s yours, didn’t you? You can do what you want...”

Alice said coldly, “If not, I will make it up to you somehow. Do you understand that?”

“Who’s going to stop you...?”

Then her face changed and Alice knew who had come into the kitchen.

She turned and there was Tony’s grandmother. Walking as well as if she’d never hurt her ankle. Small, erect, wearing the gray with the white lace, with the velvet at her throat. Her face unsmiling but serene, her head high, Mrs. Redfern came toward them.

“Mrs. Peele,” she said in the gracious tones that went to an inferior, “I have been told that you were wearing a pair of earrings that belonged to my daughter, Eileen.”

“Miz Alice said...” Mrs. Peele’s eyes went to and fro. Her whole mien had fallen to servility. The essential anger in Mrs. Peele grew out of this servility that she despised in herself. But she could not help it. Mrs. Redfern was too much for her.

“Give them to me, if you please.” The small immaculate hand was held forth.

“But she said I could have them!”

“Will you give them to me, if you please?” The voice was exactly the same. No anger. No loss of poise.

Mrs. Peele seemed to crumble. She put her fingers into the pocket of her work dress. The blue-and-silver earrings came out, sticking to them.

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Redfern.

Mrs. Peele then dropped them meekly into the lady's hand.

“And that will be all,” said Mrs. Redfern, inclining the frost of her high-done hair very slightly. “It was in very bad taste, Mrs. Peele, for you to accept such jewelry from anyone in this house. And especially from a very young person. I do not think you need trouble to come back tomorrow. If you will let me know how much is owing you in wages, I will be glad to see that you receive it. Good-bye.”

Mrs. Redfern turned, without any haste. “Alice,” she said in the same gracious tones, “will you come into the drawing room, please? I would like to speak to you.”

Mrs. Redfern left the kitchen.

Mrs. Peele now went into rage. “See that!” she snarled. “You see that! Now I'm out of a job! And what did *I* do? *You* give me them earrings. The Duchess! Wait till *she* finds out her precious grand—“

“Mrs. Peele,” said Alice, “come out here with me a minute.”

Cook had been a silent witness to all of this, standing beside the sink, her neck twisted, her eyes round.

Alice pulled the old woman out into the back entry.

“You won't be out anything,” she said fiercely. “Write down where you live, where I can find you. I will bring you some money.”

“How much?” said Mrs. Peele truculently. Her anger was deep. It would cost money.

“A hundred dollars,” Alice said.

Mrs. Peele’s lips drew back from her teeth.

“Write it down! Hurry, I have to go...” said Alice.

“And so do you.”

“You can let the Duchess wait,” said Mrs. Peele viciously. “You can listen to me a minute...”

“I am listening,” said Alice coldly, because she felt so cold.

“My son, Cary, he wants to try it in Arizona,” said Mrs. Peele rapidly. “I’d just as leave go along. But... that’s going to take more than a hundred dollars.”

“How much will it take?” No time for anything but blunt bargaining.

“Three hundred dollars,” said Mrs. Peele, and the eyes were cold.

So Alice knew that Mrs. Peele had seen, and counted, the traveler’s checks that Tony had left her. Mrs. Peele knew that they totaled three hundred dollars.

“That is all I have,” said Alice.

“So? What about that?”

“When would you go to Arizona?”

“Soon as I had it.”

“Tomorrow?”

Mrs. Peele’s bony shoulders shrugged.

“I’ll have to get to a bank,” said Alice.

“Guess that’s right.”

“Will you pack,” pressed Alice, “tonight? And be ready? Because otherwise the family might... you wouldn’t keep three hundred dollars...”

Mrs. Peele got the point. “I guess,” she said, “I could go tomorrow. We could kinda take off and nobody would know where, huh?” Was she willing to conspire again?

“Yes,” said Alice, urgently.

Mrs. Peele looked around her. Was she choosing between revenge and money?

“Write it down,” said Alice. “Put it under a stone on the back porch. If you don’t write it down, I can’t bring you the money.” Then Alice made a mighty effort. With all her strength, she made herself relax and smile. “Unless you’d rather tell,” she said lightly.

She turned.

“Alice, dear?” Mrs. Peele’s voice was anxious to please. “I’ll be waiting on you, then? Tomorrow? Okay?”

The old woman, seeing the money slipping away, had chosen the money.

Alice went through the kitchen, giving cook’s round eyes a nervous smile.

She went through the door to the hall, this time, and crossed its length and entered the drawing room.

Mrs. Redfern was there, sitting near the fireplace, her hands lying quietly.

Alice went to her. "Yes, Mrs. Redfern?"

"Sit down, Won't you, please?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Redfern inclined her head. "I am afraid," she began in her silken voice, "that there are some things you may not understand, my dear. In a family like ours, there are memories."

Alice could feel her face flushing. She choked down the angry retort. My family can remember things, too.

"My husband went abroad one year," went on Mrs. Redfern gently, "and in Paris, he bought those earrings for our only daughter. They were his gift of love, a long time ago. She wore them with love, and they went to her son with the memory of love, from her and from his grandfather. These things have meaning." The voice was teaching, benignly. "Although the earrings have some intrinsic value, the greater value, by far, lies in their history."

Alice could barely tolerate what was being said to her. As if she *were* a barbarian! She kept her face down. She tried to look humble.

"You must see," went on the old lady, "that in them is my husband's taste. And taste is an intangible value, too. Now, I don't doubt that you wished to be kind to a woman whom you knew as a child. But clinging to these earrings are all these

intangibles which you could not give her. Even if she kept the earrings, she would not appreciate, she would not understand. You ought to have found her another little gift. Oh, I know that you did not quite realize what you were doing. And I am sorry that I had to step in so arbitrarily. But it was necessary. You would have broken Tony's heart, my poor child. And you will be grateful to me, I assure you."

Mrs. Redfern paused. But Alice could make no sound. She had never felt so humiliated in her life. And she could not defend herself. She certainly would not explain to these people! Hortense had promised and gone promptly to break the promise, as if it had been moonshine. Alice would ask nothing of Hortense, ever again. Nothing of any of them!

Mrs. Redfern said, "I concede that the woman was at fault, too. She ought to know better than to accept such a gift, even if you..." Mrs. Redfern left off the end of her sentence. "Now... all is well, and. I am sure that you understand better. So we will say no more about it."

Alice could not move.

"Alice?" The voice was gentle as to a naughty child.

"What's going on?" said Bee's voice. Bee was there.

"Oh, Alice gave Eileen's lovely earrings to the cleaning woman," said Hortense in her grating voice.

"She didn't!" Bee was convulsed.

“It’s all right now. Aunt Geraldine will just keep the earrings until Tony comes.”

“I should think so!” said Bee, and then flippantly, “How chummy can you get with the help?”

Mrs. Redfern said kindly, “Alice simply didn’t understand.”

Alice could do nothing at all but burst into childish tears and run upstairs.

Upstairs, however, and alone, she dropped the luxury of tears. What was to be *done*? She would have to get the traveler’s checks cashed, somehow. She would have to fetch Mrs. Peele’s address from the back porch. She would have to find the place, take the woman the money. Tomorrow. And all of this without the family knowing what she was doing.

But if Mrs. Peele actually did go to Arizona, this was worth all the money, all the trouble, everything!

She stared at the mountain. After a while she began to make ready for dinner – which was not going to be pleasant. There was a cloud forming in her mind, a warning, a foreboding. Even if Mrs. Peele were gone, there was another problem.

The problem stated itself when, having found the piece of paper under a stone on the back porch, and hidden it carefully upon her person, she slipped back into the hall.

Hortense was waiting in the hall. The mummy face put on sweetness. “May I talk to you, Alice?”

“Yes, ma’am?” Alice was cool.

“I am very anxious to help you, my dear.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Stafford,” Alice said.

Hortense caught no irony. Her pale eyes roved upon Alice’s face. “Just what is Mrs. Peele to you?”

“A friend.”

“Of your mother, you say?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Hortense licked her lower lip with a small flash of her tongue. “Aunt Geraldine, of course, ought not to be upset. We can’t allow that. But Greg and I feel that Tony left you in our care. Now, when you give a pair of valuable heirloom earrings to a...”

“I begged you not to fuss about the earrings,” Alice murmured.

“*And you said you had a reason!*” pounced Hortense. “I distinctly remember you saying that you had a reason! I told Greg... the point is *why?* Why did you give her the earrings?”

“I wished to,” said Alice stonily.

“You couldn’t have wished to,” cried Hortense. “Greg is right. You are not that stupid. Why won’t you tell me?”

“What is it you want me to tell you, ma’am?”

“The reason! The reason!” Aunt Hortense was in an agony of curiosity. “And what did Mrs. Peele mean when she said she had done you a favor? Is there anything in your background...?”

Alice said, “Mrs. Stafford, I don’t want to quarrel about this. Please excuse me.” She started to walk. Hortense followed.

“What is that old cleaning woman to you?”

Alice walked on without answering. She looked back from the arch to the drawing room. Hortense stood still, now, wringing her hands. Alice actually felt a little sorry for her.

But she saw the problem.

She began to understand what Tony meant when he used the word “cover.” She began to see that “not telling” was too simple an idea. She could not let them wonder. Must satisfy a curiosity so violent. Must give them something else to believe.

Uncle Gregory was in the drawing room. He gave Alice a reproachful look and went on talking toward the old lady. Alice sat down, silent, subdued. Her mind, however, was busy searching for a lie to tell them, to cover up, to keep the secret safe for Tony’s life.

CHAPTER 6

Dinner was no more ordeal than usual.

When Mrs. Redfern had risen to proceed to the drawing room, Alice lingered to be last.

Gregory, the gentleman, was politely waiting. Alice said to him, "Uncle Gregory, Tony said you would help me cash my traveler's checks. He endorsed them, you see, and I guess that's not quite proper."

"It is not," said Greg. "They should be signed when cashed. Why don't you go into the bank, my dear? The nearest branch, right down in our shopping center. Ask them to phone me if they make any question." His robin outline swelled.

"Oh, thanks," said Alice.

"Not at all, my dear. By the way, Dr. Devon is coming in. Won't you try a game of chess?"

"Oh, I'd so much rather not!" Alice panicked. She must keep away from Dr. Devon. "Please, Uncle Greg, promise not to get me into that!" She'd had enough for one day.

“As you like,” said Uncle Gregory. And then he said, “Alice, Aunt Geraldine tells me you have not apologized to her.”

Alice’s head snapped up.

“After all,” said Uncle Greg, “what you did today was, at the least, very thoughtless. And a lady apologizes.”

“I... I’m sorry,” she stammered with a burning face.

She went into the drawing room where the ladies were seated. Had to be humiliated to the ground. She walked over to Tony’s grandmother and bent a little almost as if she bowed. “I would like to apologize,” said Alice gravely, “for my mistake today.”

“Yes, my dear.”

“And to thank you,” said Alice, steadily, “for what you did to correct it.”

“You are forgiven, of course,” said Mrs. Redfern graciously. “Come now, let us have a pleasant evening.”

Alice sat down. She stared at the room, without focusing. She would endure.

But when Dr. Devon came, the first thing Alice heard was Uncle Gregory saying, “We have a chess player in the house, Walter! This will surprise you. What do you think? Young Alice, here, beat me all hollow!”

“Is that so?” said Dr. Devon. “Who taught you to play, Mrs. Page?”

Alice was pinned in his attention. But he promised, she thought; Uncle Gregory promised me!

“Try her, Walter,” urged Gregory. “I dare you.”

“I’d be delighted,” said Dr. Devon.

Bee said, with a roll of her eye, “Alice, I didn’t hear your answer. Who taught you to play?”

A whole paragraph stuck in Alice’s throat: None of you understand about me. My father and mother have played chess together ever since I can remember. My father’s hobby is mathematics. My mother works in the drugstore but her hobby is doing things for the blind. She types Braille books. My sixteen-year-old brother, who’s in public high school, could beat Uncle Gregory at chess even better than I did – although he is probably going to be a first-string football player at some college. You don’t understand the complexity of real people.

She couldn’t burst out with all this. Finally, she murmured, “My father...”

“Mayn’t I have the pleasure?” smiled Dr. Devon.

She saw no way out of it without another fuss.

But when she was seated at the board facing the doctor, with Uncle Gregory standing over, silent and intent, she could not think straight. She was in such an inner turmoil – part fury, part fear – that her mind was fuddled. Her game was uncertain.

She looked up when Dr. Devon forebore to pounce upon an error. "I don't think you are in the mood for chess tonight," he said softly.

"I'm not," she confessed.

"Then let's not go on. It is a game, after all, and if it is not being fun..."

"I am sorry," Alice said, meeting those probing interested eyes. "It's just that I've been upset. I did something stupid."

"Now, that's all over," said Uncle Gregory.

"We all do things for which we call ourselves stupid," said Dr. Devon. "Usually there has only been some misunderstanding along the way." He smiled. "We'll have a game another time."

The doctor began to put the pieces back in place. Greg moved away. Alice sat still, studying the doctor's face. She could not help a glow of gratitude. She could not believe this was the evil man.

He looked up at her. "Whenever you are upset, young Alice," said he softly, "remember that I am in the business. We don't actually shrink heads, you know. We encourage hearts. Will you remember?"

She knew her eyes were melting.

"Heard from young Tony yet?"

"Not yet," said Alice, easily, as to a friend.

"Pretty funny, too." She heard a hard spiteful voice. She turned her head and there was Bee, eyes

flashing. "When you consider this is her birthday and, as far as I know, Tony forgot all about it."

"Beatrice," said the doctor gently, after a moment, "won't you please play for us?"

"Will you listen?" said Bee furiously.

Alice looked behind her. Gregory was at his cigar box. The ladies sat erect in their chairs. She couldn't doubt that they were all thinking how odd it was that Tony hadn't called her on her birthday.

Dr. Devon escorted Bee to the piano and returned to Alice. "Shall we be more comfortable?" So Alice rose.

"Tony went to see Simmons, did he?" the doctor said into her ear, very casually.

"To see whom?" She responded with genuine bewilderment.

"No matter. Come."

They settled in easier chairs. Mrs. Redfern said in her calm tones, "My dear, is this really your birthday?"

"I didn't want a fuss made. Please."

"Congratulations."

"Many happy returns," said Aunt Hortense stiffly.

"No game?" said Uncle Gregory.

The doctor said, a little sharply, "We must listen to the music."

So Bee played.

The doctor seemed to listen. Actually, he turned in his mind his growing curiosity about young Alice. About the calling away of Tony Page. It was “pretty funny,” this birthday business. For a bridegroom. Well, he’d discovered one thing. The little bride had never heard of Simmons, otherwise known as the Old Man. So if the bridegroom was gone on some secret mission, the little bride did not know. Perhaps this was what made her so unhappy, uneasy. Perhaps not. He thought complacently, She is going to tell me everything *she* knows, sooner or later.

Bee played a long piece with great style. When she had crashed down the final chords, the doctor sighed and prepared to be charming. “A great talent. Is it in the blood, I wonder?”

“Supposed to have been an Italian contessa in the Stafford line,” said Bee in good humor.

“Redfern blood,” said Hortense in her harsh tense way, “is entirely English. Stafford, too, is an English name. Very old.”

“I see,” the doctor murmured.

Something in this response, so bland as to seem mockery, tempted, Alice, who had sat seething beneath decorum. Now she looked up innocently. “What does ‘old’ mean? I would think that everyone alive must have had just about the same number of ancestors.”

“Ah, true,” said the doctor, twinkling at her.

Alice twinkled back. He can't be the man, she thought again. He doesn't like this ridiculous stuffiness any better than I do. He is nice!

Bee had not missed the twinkling. "Hansen," she said. "What is that?"

Alice looked up into her jealous eyes.

"Norwegian?" asked the doctor amiably.

"Scandinavian stock is healthy," said Cousin Bee in such a way to imply that health was vulgar and unrefined. "How long ago did your people come over?"

Alice said steadily, "I don't know." Her heart was pounding. This Cousin Bee!

The doctor said musingly, "Some people are too busy to look back, I imagine. Mine were. I know very little about my name."

"But surely Devon is English," Hortense gushed. "And very old."

"And Peele is English, too," said Alice impulsively. "And very old." She sat smiling.

The room was still.

Dr. Devon was immediately aware that a hit had been given and taken. He did not understand. He said, "Was Peele your mother's name, young Alice?"

As Alice shook her head, the old lady spoke calmly. "I am sure, Beatrice, you did not mean to be rude."

Bee said nothing but Alice flushed. She had been goaded into impertinence and the reproach was indirectly for her, too.

Mercifully, Uncle Gregory spoke up. “Walter, aren’t we having a game at all?”

So the men fell silent at the chess table. The ladies were silent in their chairs.

Alice sat still. Well, after all, she was not a girl who took snide remarks on her chin without retort. She was very angry with these people – all but Dr. Devon. Their old English names, their ridiculous pretensions, did not strike any awe into her soul. She was not impressed by their wealth, by their blood, and certainly not by their behavior. This had been a bit thick, all right. A bit too thick. Must Alice Hansen sit here, still and cowed? To receive Bee’s malice, Hortense’s snobbery, the old lady’s oblique reproaches? She felt restless and rebellious.

“Music doesn’t disturb anyone?” she asked suddenly.

“Why, no...” said Mrs. Redfern with a faint surprise.

“Then may I?” Alice didn’t wait for the white head to nod. She went to the piano. Alice knew how to roll out jolly little rhythms... twinkling tunes... popular classics. Her fingers were nimble and gay. No somber crashes for Alice. Her hands went along of themselves. Then Alice looked up.

All the ladies heads were still. Bee's face (like the face of Hortense) was haughty. Offended? Alice looked toward Dr. Devon, wishing for his understanding smile. But Dr. Devon was intent upon the chessboard. Without the eyes, his profile had no charm. It looked... different, she realized with a sinking heart. Sour.

What am I doing? thought Alice. Showing off? Antagonizing? Oh, Tony!

Her hands fell upon a discord. "I would like to be excused," she said weakly.

"Of course, my dear," said Mrs. Redfern and under the ladylike sweetness there was audible a faint eagerness to have her gone.

Alice ran into the hall and up the quickest way by the circular stairs. She hung upon the upstairs railing, felt it, hard and real, against her abdomen. Oh Tony! she cried silently, I can't. I am not able! I do everything wrong.

Then she could hear Bee speaking in the big room. "Did any of you realize that Tony picked her up?"

"Aah!" Hortense's gasp.

"She told me that. Then she tried to take it back. Then she said they met in church." Bee's voice was derisive. "Goodness knows where he found her."

Hortense said, "To give our Eileen's precious earrings to an old cleaning woman!"

Alice heard Dr. Devon say, "What was that?"

“That’s what she did!” cried Bee. “Oh, Aunt Geraldine got them back and fired the woman. Alice says Mrs. Peele is a friend of her mother’s. I wonder what her mother is like.”

There was a beat of silence. Then Mrs. Redfern’s gentle tones carried all the way across the room and up the stairs. “I’m afraid the poor child feels out of place here.”

“What a strange thing to do,” the doctor said.

“I think she’s covering up something,” said Cousin Bee. “And do you know what *I* think? That old woman from Indiana knows what it is. Something Alice would rather we didn’t hear about. Something in her past, I suppose.” Bee was vicious. Alice’s heart jumped.

“Aaah.” Hortense gave out her gasp.

Alice heard the doctor say with amusement, “Her ‘past’ is not of great duration...”

“Oh, she’s young,” said Bee. “And jazzy, isn’t she? Maybe she’s been mixed up with jazz people. Who knows? Maybe she smokes marijuana.”

“That is very cruel, Beatrice,” said Mrs. Redfern in a moment, wearily.

“It’s a joke, Aunt Geraldine,” said Bee shrilly.

“I can assure you,” said Dr. Devon’s smooth voice, “that it cannot be so. I would know. I am rather an expert on narcotics.”

Upstairs, Alice drew away from the railing, tingling with alarm.

“I should imagine,” she heard him go on, “that what troubles her may have to do with young Tony. A young person in love... you know? It is strange she had no word today. He might have telephoned.”

“Long distance,” said Uncle Greg, grumpily. “Your move, Walter.”

“Minnesota?” said the doctor chidingly.

“There is *something*...” Bee said.

“Beatrice,” warned Mrs. Redfern. Then, gently, “You must excuse her, Doctor.”

Below, Dr. Devon took his warning. He chose to wipe the wild malice from Bee’s face. “Alice seems a pleasant child,” he said. “Too bad her music is such trash.” He sent Bee his charming smile.

He was a bit tired of being charming to Bee. She was such a nuisance. And the old lady irritated him, too. Always banking down human passions, whence information could come. Save the surface and you save all, he thought contemptuously. *Her* motto. But her day was over.

Young Alice interested him more and more. Now, why had she given the cleaning woman the heirloom earrings? There would exist a reason. He told himself that he knew how to find out.

Upstairs, Alice went along the hall to her room, one hand on the wall. She was frightened. Bee guessed too well. The doctor kept thinking of Tony far too much. The speech about narcotics had rocked her. She had no *right* to like Dr. Devon or to trust him of her own judgment. She had a secret to keep and she *must* keep it. She felt as transparent as window glass. The affair of the earrings was perfectly obvious to them all. It must have been bribery, they were thinking. And it had been. And they knew it. So they knew she had a secret. And she must confess something... something... anything... to explain herself. To satisfy. To keep them from guessing the true secret. For Tony's life.

She sat on her bed in the dark and it came to her what she could tell them.

But she would not do it while Dr. Devon was in the house. She could not tell this lie to *his* eyes.

So she waited; and when she heard his car going away, she opened her bedroom door and walked back down the hall, down the stairs. This had to be done.

Below, Mrs. Redfern had just risen from her chair, with Hortense solicitously by her side. Bee and her father looked around at Alice with surprise.

"There is something I think I had better tell you, please," said Alice bravely.

“Yes, Alice?” Mrs. Redfern sat back. The whole room hushed and waited. They were already feeling satisfied.

“I didn’t want to tell you,” said Alice nervously. “It’s something Tony doesn’t know, you see. I only wanted to tell him first, myself.”

She swallowed painfully. All of them were giving her their complete attention and she was launched, with no possibility of escape, into this lie.

“I was married once before,” said Alice.

“Aah...” Hortense rocked on her feet. Bee straightened.

“Mrs. Peele knows about it, I suppose?” said Bee briskly.

Alice produced the inspiration that had come to her. Was Peele your mother’s name? the doctor had said.

“Mrs. Peele was my mother-in-law,” she said bluntly. “I had been married to her son.”

Thunderclap. Silence.

Now they must concede that she was explained. One might give a valuable gift to one’s ex-mother-in-law, especially if one wanted her to be quiet about the relationship. They were snobs enough to take this for a valid motive. Alice thought it was going very well. They were shocked enough.

“The marriage was just a mistake,” she went on. “It didn’t last at all. I ought to have told Tony. Of course,

now I will tell him.” She produced a tremulous smile. “I’m sorry.”

“What is the son’s name?” snapped Uncle Gregory.

Alice turned her eyes to him. “Cary.”

Uncle Greg stretched high. “What makes you think you can lie to us?” he said furiously.

She didn’t speak.

“Don’t you think,” said Gregory, “we check up on people hired to work in this house? We know Mrs. Peele lives with her son, Cary. We know he was married and divorced.”

“Yes, I...” Alice’s tongue fell.

“We checked it when she came here,” said Uncle Gregory, “seven years ago.”

Thunderclap. Silence.

“How old were *you*,” said Gregory, “more than seven years ago? Seven from, let us say, nineteen leaves *twelve*, I believe.”

Bee laughed.

“And do you think I’ve forgotten,” went on Uncle Gregory, who was not a stupid man, “that you asked me at the breakfast table *who Mrs. Peele was?* I think you’ve forgotten that. You are not a clever liar, Alice. Just a liar.”

“Aah...” gasped Hortense.

“This is unforgivable, Alice,” said Mrs. Redfern into the swirling silence.

“But you—“ Alice rose. Her plot in ruins. Mortified beyond endurance and at bay – “you people!” She stormed childishly because there was nothing else that she could do. “You won’t believe that anyone of Mrs. Peele’s p-profession can *be* a friend. You fuss so about those silly earrings. You keep looking down on me and making cracks. You...” She was weeping in helplessness. “Well, I have to wait here for Tony. I don’t care what you think. I thought I’d give you *something* to think. I thought it would please you. Well, I won’t say any more to you, true or false.” She turned to run.

“Alice,” said Uncle Greg.

“Let her leave the room,” said the old lady, sadly. “This is all quite impossible. Quite impossible.”

Alice ran upstairs and threw herself upon her bed. What a fiasco! Shudders of humiliation shook her. The trouble was, she honestly knew that if the situation was not her fault, it was not theirs either. They had good reason to look down on her now. How stupid she had been! And then how childish, how small she’d had to be! Never mind. Never mind. No humiliation mattered, if Mrs. Peele was going off to parts unknown, if the secret was still safe.

Whatever they guessed, they could not guess where Tony was. Because Alice would simply never tell. Never tell. And Tony would be back. She did not

know what day, what hour, would see him safe. So just hang on. Do what she had to do tomorrow. Never mind them. Keep still. Don't tell. She was too poor a liar to lie any more. Alice buried her tired head. The house was quiet.

It was not as quiet as she thought it was. Downstairs Gregory was on the phone.

“Glad I caught you still awake, Walter.”

“What's the trouble, Greg?”

“It's Alice. There seems to be something very peculiar... She just tried to tell us a shocking lie.” Uncle Greg recounted the scene. “So I'm afraid there's something very wrong going on between her and this Mrs. Peele, Walter. Alice forgets she let slip to Hortense that she 'had a reason.' And Hortense got it out of our cook... something *was* threatened. It sounds like blackmail. Now, we are in a responsible position. I thought you might help us.”

“I'll be glad to try,” said the doctor alertly. “Have you been in touch with young Tony?”

“No. No, I don't like to disturb him, so late. If we only had some hint that would tell us what we ought to do.”

“It would seem she had a powerful motive,” said the doctor thoughtfully, “to tell that lie.”

“And who knows what the truth, may be? We know nothing about the girl. And, I am beginning to think, neither does Tony.”

“I can see how it is worrisome,” said the doctor sympathetically. “Perhaps I can drop by tomorrow. She might talk to me.”

“Come for dinner,” pressed Greg.

“Thank you. Yes, I will. Something else occurs to me. You say the cleaning woman was discharged?”

“Yes.”

“Where does she live, do you know?”

Greg said, “I can look it up.”

“Will you?”

Greg looked it up and the doctor took it down.

“Why do you want this, Walter?”

“Whatever is between them,” said the doctor reasonably, “they *both* know what it is, you see? It might be easier to talk to this Mrs. Peele.”

“I see, I see,” said Greg, with admiration.

He hung up. Wednesday was over.

Wednesday; Mexico. Word seeped to Tony late in the day that Big Frank. was agreeable to a visit. So Tony went.

After politenesses, Tony suggested that if Big Frank wished anything done in Los Angeles, Tony, who was going there, would be quite willing to

oblige. Big Frank, who was a rather distinguished-looking gentleman with long thin restless fingers, replied sweetly that all he wished done in Los Angeles was already being done. He thanked Tony just the same.

CHAPTER 7

On Thursday, Alice, neat and businesslike in her gray suit, walked into the branch bank fifteen minutes after it opened. An official came to her beckoning smile. "I am Alice Page," she said, in carefully planned, confident words. "My husband was called away suddenly and signed his traveler's checks, hoping that I could use them. My uncle, Mr. Gregory Stafford (She saw with relief the man's nod of recognition) said that if it seemed necessary you could call him."

"I see, Mrs.... er... Page." Alice tore a check out of the little book. He inspected it and smiled a cautious smile. "I had better call, if you don't mind?"

"Of course not." Alice leaned gracefully upon the counter.

She had avoided everyone this morning. She had left messages with Ellen. Gone for a walk. Exploring.

The bank man seemed to know Gregory very well.

"Greg. Hank Bowman, at the bank. Mrs. Anthony Page is here... how about these traveler's checks?"

Finally, he said beamingly, "That will be all right, Mrs. Page."

Now Alice handed him the entire bookful.

She walked out of the bank in another fifteen minutes with three hundred dollars in her purse.

The address where Mrs. Peele was to be found meant nothing to Alice. She looked up and down the street, but no cabs were to be seen cruising. So she found a telephone and summoned one. The driver looked shocked when she gave him the street and number. "Cost you about \$7.50," he warned her gloomily.

Alice didn't care and convinced him of this. She felt free. It was wonderful to be away from that house. And she thought she knew what to do about Mrs. Peele.

Alice let the cab go when the long ride was over, for she could not afford to ride back again in such luxury.

She looked up at the two-story building, which stood in a nondescript neighborhood. The building was divided into two flats, and Alice hesitated between two doors.

"Hey, Alice!" somebody called over her head. "Up the stairs, dear. Door to your right."

Alice opened the door on her right and went up a steep gloomy enclosed flight of stairs. The door at the top was open and Mrs. Peele welcomed her within.

Alice looked around her and saw some suitcases standing on the floor. She realized that Mrs. Peele

was dressed for traveling, in her black, all severe. Alice let her gaze drag over the suitcases and then looked a question.

“We’z about ready to take off,” said Mrs. Peele with super-friendliness, born of nervous excitement. “Cary, he’s got a half a day’s little job but he’s all set. I’z kinda waiting on you and that business.”

Alice said, “Yes.” She opened her purse. The black eyes went immediately to her hands. Alice said slowly, “I have it here. What did you say to your son, Mrs. Peele?”

“Nothing,” said Mrs. Peele promptly. “I never said your name or that I knew you, even. I said I’z going to have a little extra, that’s all. He trusts me.”

Alice went on, still slowly, “If I don’t give this to you, Mrs. Peele, what will you do?”

“Well, can’t hardly see how we’d go,” said Mrs. Peele with exasperation. “I’z counting on it. You know that.”

“And what would you do if you couldn’t go?”

“Well, now,” said Mrs. Peele indignantly, “a favor is a favor and you know that. I mean, I’z counting on you. And if you didn’t do what you said you’d do, then why should I?” The face was belligerent.

Alice put the packet of money down on the table. Mrs. Peele’s hand darted to it. Alice said, quietly, “What you have just done is a crime. You could go to jail for it.”

Mrs. Peele recoiled – not, however, letting go of the money.

“I was talking about blackmail,” said Alice steadily. “No, I don’t want the money back. You take it. The point I am making is – If you don’t keep your side of this bargain, I can, and I will, see that you go to jail.”

“What are you talking about? Blackmail!” burst out Mrs. Peele. “Sounds like blackmail, what you’re saying.”

“Yes, it does, doesn’t it?” said Alice. “I wanted you to realize that the threat can go the other way.”

Mrs. Peele sucked in her breath. “Listen, what if something kinda goes wrong, see, and I ain’t to blame?”

“I will know,” said Alice calmly.

“Don’t know as I like this.”

“You will have to like it,” said Alice, sternly. “Because I won’t take the money back. So the only solution is to be quiet. *The only one*. Well, good-bye, Mrs. Peele.” She held out her hand. “I hope you have a successful trip.”

“Hope so too, dear.” Mrs. Peele spoke mechanically. She had the bills in her hand. “I guess we understand each other all right.”

“I’m sure we do,” Alice returned. “Neither of us will say a word to anyone. You must never say that I was here.”

“Well, that’s okay.” A bell pinged. “And you don’t, either. Now, who’s that?” Mrs. Peele went to the window. “Somebody in a yellow car.”

“Is there any way down, except those stairs?” Alice felt her breath catching. She wanted no one to pass Alice Hansen Page on these stairs. Also, her mind was groping for remembrance. A yellow car? “Better not let me be seen,” she gasped.

Mrs. Peele chewed her pale lip. Her eyes swiveled. Perhaps the memory of the word “crime” was in her mind. “Why don’t you just step in the hall, there. Or go on in the kitchen. It’s prolly just a salesman.” Mrs. Peele lifted her skirt and thrust the money inside the top of the stocking on the bare skin of her old thigh. “I’ll call you when whoever-it-is is gone. Okay?”

Alice stepped out of this living room into a narrow hallway that seemed to run through the middle of the flat to a brighter room at the back. She pulled the door shut behind her. The air was dusty and still. She heard Mrs. Peele sing out, “Who is it?”

Then she heard the suave familiar voice she had half expected. “Mrs. Peele? My name is Devon. Dr. Walter Devon. I am a friend of the Staffords.”

“Them people owe me ten dollars,” said Mrs. Peele promptly. “You bring it?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.” Alice could hear an undertone of opportunism, a very faint amused surprise in his voice.

“Well, thanks a lot.” Mrs. Peele sounded pleased. “Nice of you.”

“Oh, I wanted to come because I am also a very good friend of young Mrs. Page’s,” Alice heard him say. She could almost see his eyes, his smile. “I do want to help her in every way I can.”

There was a second of silence. Then Mrs. Peele said, shortly, “Well, that’s good, I guess.”

“She told me all about it,” purred Dr. Devon. “About the trouble.” (Alice’s nostrils flared suddenly.)

“Yah?” Mrs. Peele was noncommittal. (Alice clenched her hands.)

“I know you want to help her, too,” the gentle voice went on. “I know you knew her in Indiana, but don’t you think... ?”

“Yah?” said Mrs. Peele in a sudden hoot. “I dunno what you’re talking about, Mister. I don’t know you. And there ain’t no trouble I know of. And ain’t going to be any. So I’ll say thanks for the ten bucks, and I’ll say good-bye. I’m kinda busy.”

Alice stood behind the door with her heart racing. She felt dizzy and she put her hands on the wall behind to ease her body back upon its support. She did not entirely understand. But Dr. Devon was out there telling lies! And the old woman had been shrewd enough to perceive it. Something in Mrs. Peele was on Alice’s side!

“Just a moment,” she heard him say, in less than dulcet tones.

In the barren, colorless, about-to-be-deserted room, the doctor’s eyes examined this old woman. Tough old biddy. Not the type to be taken in by any friendship routine. Or charm, either. “I want to talk to you,” he said rather harshly. “And you had better talk to me.”

The woman was spreading her lips in a derisive smile.

“Alice Page gave you some earring he said with menace.

“And I gave ‘em back,” she answered saucily.

“You lost your job.”

“So what?” The old woman was staring at him steadily.

“Now Alice says she was once married to your son.” The doctor permitted himself a nasty smile. He expected denial but not the denial he got.

“Go on!” snorted Mrs. Peele. “Alice never said any such thing!”

“I assure you she did.” The doctor’s lips drew back, felt dry.

“Naw!” Complete scorn. The old woman simply was not going to believe him, which was irritating when what he said was true.

“I want to know why,” he said brusquely.

“You do, eh?” The toss of the woman’s head was infuriating. “And who are you?”

“Somebody who can get you into trouble,” he said, with no aim but to intimidate.

“That so?” said Mrs. Peele with no visible alarm.

“I can get your son into bad trouble,” said the doctor, hunting for a purchase on her.

The old woman’s black eyes flickered. “No, you can’t. Listen, you get outa here, will you? I dunno what’s the matter with you.” The fiercely clean old face expressed exasperation.

“Have you seen Alice today?”

“Nope. Get along, Mister.”

“Where is your son?” He watched her. “Is he here?”

“Nobody’s here, and it’s none of your business where my son is.”

He fell back upon quiet firmness. “Mrs. Peele, you know something Alice doesn’t want you to tell.”

“Is that so?” jeered Mrs. Peele. “You’re the one said she told *you* something. Listen, Mister, who do you think you are, anyway?” She looked tough and embattled. He hadn’t fooled her. He wasn’t scaring her. He had no purchase.

“You are going to tell me,” he said.

“Oh, I am, am I?” said Mrs. Peele. “You sure got a crust!”

He remembered that flicker. “If you don’t,” he said coldly, “I will arrange to have your son arrested.”

“Aw, shut up,” said Mrs. Peele, disgustedly.

The doctor felt his temper rising.

“I have friends on the police force...” he began.

“You’re a great kidder,” she said. “You bet you are.” And then, viciously, “You got *nothing!*”

She simply did not believe that he was dangerous.

But he was! He was!

“You run along outa here,” she said. “I got no time.” The old woman lifted her hard muscled arm, put her big hand flat on his chest, and gave him the contemptuous push one gives a stubborn child.

As he staggered, the doctor’s mind flamed. The physical indignity outraged him. “Listen, you old bat,” he said viciously. “You want to see your son arrested for pushing dope?”

“I guess you’re plain nuts,” said Mrs. Peele.

“Oh you do, do you?” He caught her wrist in his fingers and twisted. His anger had made him say something indiscreet and this made him angrier. “Now see here. Stop this nonsense. What is between you and Alice Page?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” said Mrs. Peele, her eyes mocking him with angry triumph. “And for nonsense, man, you got the world beat. Arrested! For pushing dope!” Her voice rose in a screech of derision.

“You have no idea,” said the doctor, “how easily I could fix just that. Believe me.”

“I wouldn’t believe you! Better let go of me, Mister, or I got a mind to throw you down them stairs.”

So he twisted his fingers on her skin and Mrs. Peele yelped and then they were wrestling.

He was putting his strength in his one hand against the formidable strength in her arm. He found himself moving the few feet to the open door. Then they were out at the head of the stairs. He said, through clenched teeth, “I’ll let you go when you tell me...”

“You got everything real wrong, Mister,” panted Mrs. Peele. “I ain’t going to let *you* go, and my son, he’s coming in a couple minutes, and he’s going to beat you up like you never been beat...”

His hand ached.

“Dope!” shrieked Mrs. Peele. “Dope, you say? Well, we’ll see about you and dope. Maybe you got friends in the police. I heard about snoops like you before. You try *that*, Mister... the police would like to know about it!”

The doctor perceived that he had said a good deal too much. Frantically, he used both hands, both arms, and – on almost the first occasion in his life that he had been engaged in physical violence – he did quite well. The old woman tottered, and with no sound out

of her mouth, the long hard skeleton lost its balance. It went banging down the stairs.

Alice, standing behind that door, was shaking as if she were having a chill. Her hands dripped sweat. She pressed them on the wall with desperate force. She ought to have moved, gone through the door, stopped them, whatever they were doing scuffling out there. How could she have stopped them? And what were they doing? She could not see!

She could hear no more. All was quiet. The old woman was neither shrieking nor even speaking, now. She dared not move until her ears could tell her more.

The silence was long. Had he gone? Could she escape?

She heard feet coming up the stairs.

Alice went rigid. Her whole frame was taut, paralyzed. Surely Mrs. Peele would sing out. Nobody sang out. So Alice knew it was the doctor, moving around on the other side of the door.

And he was the man, the evil man! He had lied! He had threatened! And narcotics were in the threat! And the threat was evil! *He was the man.*

He had used violence, too. Mrs. Peele must have been knocked unconscious somehow, somewhere. No sound of her.

Then the doorknob rattled, two feet away. Alice stood against the wall and felt the sweat drip off her fingers. She did not breathe.

The door opened against her. It swung into her face. She did not move or breathe. If it hit the soft resistance of her paralyzed body, he would know it. He would find her.

The door did not swing quite far enough.

She could hear his breath whistle. He did not come through the door. He must be looking along the passage toward the kitchen.

All was very still in the flat. Very still.

Suddenly the door swung away from her. The latch clicked. She heard his feet going away.

They shuffled softly down the stairs. Alice did not move, except to breathe again.

She stood rigidly where she was. Someone would come soon. The son, Cary, was coming. She realized that she must move. She must go, see what she could do to help the old woman, who had physically fought to keep the secret, who had resisted pressure, who was reliable, after all. Help her.

This thought released the fear-bound limbs.

She swayed away from the wall. Her heart suffocating her, Alice cracked the door open. The living room was silent, empty. The suitcases stood on the floor. A little breeze flapped the sleazy curtains of the front window.

Alice tiptoed across and looked down into the street. No yellow car. No car at all.

Where was the old woman?

Alice tiptoed to the exit door, to the top of the stairs.

Mrs. Peele was lying, head down near the bottom, her skirts up to her knees.

Alice went down, fingers on the wall, shaking, shaking.

Mrs. Peele's neck was awry. No one could live, and her neck twisted so.

Alice did not touch her. She did not think of the money in the stocking top, which was still concealed by the skirt. Alice thought *murder*. Thought *police*. Thought again.

New questions swarmed into her mind. Had anyone heard that screeching, that thumping? Was there anyone in the downstairs flat? No, surely, for such a one would have heard, would have come to see, by now.

Alice clutched her purse in her sweating slippery hands. She stepped very carefully around what lay there. A spasm of her heart bade Mrs. Peele farewell. Then she pushed at the door to the street with one shoulder: it opened.

Alice slipped out into the air and walked, as slowly and as steadily as she could, on her trembling legs. Blinds were down in that downstairs flat. Nobody

was about. She walked to the corner, a mercifully short distance. There was a clock in the window of some kind of office there: 11:50. She turned the corner. No one in that office? Alice began to walk up the hill of the cross street. She turned the next corner. And the next – without aim, except to get far away.

Alice had “witnessed” a killing. *But she could not tell!* Two miles away, and lost, with no idea where she had got to, Alice had affirmed this in her mind. Gone over it again and again.

She could not tell.

Because Dr. Devon was the traitor, the one Tony was after. Because the police do not keep a prisoner incommunicado. If she told what she had heard, and knew, about the death of Mrs. Peele, they would arrest Dr. Devon, no doubt. But he would have a lawyer. He would be able to send messages.

If she told, the police would want to know what Alice had been doing there. Why had she come there? Why had she hidden herself there? Why had she given Mrs. Peele the money? (Oh, the money! She ought to have taken the money away. Too late.)

She could not imagine standing up against a police inquisition, stubbornly telling what she had done but not why. It would be impossible. They’d wear her down. They’d know how. Then Tony’s secret would be known.

How could Alice trust the police to keep it a secret? Something was rotten in some law-enforcing department, or Tony wouldn't have had to go away.

Even if there were no rottenness, *Dr. Devon* would be told Alice's story. He, and his lawyer, would be most interested parties, with the right to know. So Devon could get word to Mexico. Tony would be in the trap. Tony would die. Corpse-dead. Mrs. Peele-dead.

No, thought Alice, I cannot tell.

Her original secret had a terrible secret added to it piggy-back.

When Tony was back safe, *then* she could tell.

Alice felt cold and filthy. Her clothing was beginning to dry upon her back. She had a bowl of soup at a counter. The heat of it was comforting. Then she set about finding herself, and putting herself on the way back to the house. There was one thing to do and one thing only. She must go back to the house and act as if Mrs. Peele were still alive.

CHAPTER 8

It took a long time, on two bus lines, so that the afternoon was nearly gone when she slipped in at the back door, where she would not have to ring. She hurried through the kitchen and upstairs. She ripped off her clothes to bathe, to get physically clean. It would help some. She must get back in mood. She must try to pick up every thread as each thread had been this morning.

But Alice felt ten years older than she had this morning. I was only playing before, she thought. It was a bit of a game. I was, in large part, frightening myself with a “maybe.” There was always the doubt. Maybe Dr. Devon was not the man. Maybe none of my worry was necessary. But now I know. Now it is no game. Now it is real. And if I do not take perfect care, something terrible will happen to Tony.

She had a strange conviction that this was going to make it, in a way, easier.

She began to dress. She was in her slip, fixing her face and hair, when there came a tap on her door.

It was Bee. “I thought you were back,” said Bee.

Alice groped for whatever thread had stretched between them. Music?

She said quickly, “You know, Bee, I should never have played the piano in this house.”

“Oh, it wasn’t so bad, for what it was,” Bee said.

“Well, thank, you.” Alice was able to marvel at this tolerance.

“The family is completely stuffy,” Bee said with her habitual contempt. “Dr. Devon isn’t stuffy, of course. He just has no taste for jazz.”

Alice perceived that Bee’s jealousy had been appeased.

“What a commotion you are making!” Bee looked amused. “What got into you to tell that crazy story about being married to Cary Peele?” Alice didn’t answer. “Whatever you are trying to cover up,” said Bee pityingly, “you really can’t keep it a secret, you know.”

“Oh, I was just silly,” murmured Alice. “There isn’t any secret...”

“Oh, yes, there is,” said Bee complacently. “It will have to come out. The pressure is bad for you, don’t you know that? For your own psyche. Much better to talk things out. You’ll have to. Or you’ll blow your top, eventually.”

“Do you think so?” murmured Alice.

“I’m fond of Cousin Tony,” said Bee suddenly. “I’d listen.” Her dark eyes glistened. “Mother is

going out of her mind with curiosity. But I... well, I've learned a little bit about what it means if only someone will listen. I know if you keep things shut inside, you can be poisoned. I really know that."

Perhaps Bee meant well. But Alice simply could not help resenting Bee.

"I suppose you would promise not to tell?" she asked quietly.

Bee flushed. "You mean I blurted out it was your birthday yesterday? For heaven's sake, was that important?" Alice didn't reply, so Bee went on, in a moment. She seemed a bit contrite. "Well, I'm sorry," she said. "Do you know, Alice, I think you ought to talk to Dr. Devon. He..." (Was Bee trying to be generous?) "He is wonderful to talk to. And you've got to talk it out, whatever it is, and get rid of it. That's the only way."

"The only way to what?" said Alice.

"To... to peace..."

"I was getting dressed to go down for dinner," said Alice. "It was peaceful, I thought."

Bee stiffened. "I did the best I could." She was furious. "I offered. I was willing to be friendly – even with a liar! Aunt Geraldine sent me to ask you to come to her room," she added sharply. "I ought to have given you the message, period."

"Thank you for the message," said Alice gravely.

Bee slammed the door. Alice could not find it in her heart to be sorry.

When, dressed in her blue, ready for dinner, Alice came into the old lady's room, she found her seated on a small pink love seat, dainty immaculate, every white hair in place – a lady.

“Will you sit down, please, my dear?”

Alice sat down upon a low slipper chair. Alice did not know how her own face had changed. She did not know that the very planes of her flesh looked refined and drawn toward the bone. She did not realize that she appeared more mature by ten years than she had the night before. She said, gravely, “Yes, ma'am?”

“We are all concerned about you, my dear, but I, particularly...”

“I'm sorry, ma'am. There is no need. I agree that what I did last evening is unforgivable,” said Alice quietly.

Their eyes met. A tingling something passed between them.

“There are two sides to everything, “ said the old lady slowly. “Perhaps I have not heard all your side.”

“I acted like a stupid, spiteful child,” said Alice calmly.

“I don't believe,” said Mrs. Redfem, “that you are a stupid, spiteful child, Alice.”

The meeting of eyes was, in a way, opposition. Yet it was tingling to the nerves in some other way.

“I feel that I must ask you some questions,” said Mrs. Redfern, “even if I risk being rather pressing.”

Alice said nothing.

Mrs. Redfern started obliquely. “This has all been very unpleasant—”

Alice said agreeably, “Yes, it has.”

“Beatrice has made some horrid suggestions.”

“I know.”

“You know?” When Alice did not respond further, Mrs. Redfern touched her dry lips with her tongue. “I scarcely know what to say to you. I hoped to make you understand that as Tony’s family, and now yours, we rightfully feel concern when something troubles you.”

“I do understand that, ma’am.”

“What is it that troubles you?”

“Nothing troubles me,” said Alice with a faint smile. “Thank you for feeling concerned.”

Now Mrs. Redfern’s eyes fled. “It occurs to me – I am afraid that I did notice, on the first afternoon that you came... was there not something you hesitated to tell me?”

“No.” Alice remembered nothing.

“I believe that you did hesitate,” the old lady contradicted gently. “So I am assuming that this

trouble relates to your family?" Alice couldn't speak. She couldn't seize on this or try to lie any more. "I am sure it is nothing to be ashamed of," said Mrs. Redfern, benignly.

The condescension stung. The old lady perceived how Alice winced. "Oh, Alice, my dear child... Tony has married you, left you here. You are in my house," she said.

Alice said flatly, "I do wish Tony hadn't left me here."

Now it was the old lady's turn to wince.

"But since he did," said Alice, "I must wait for him, mustn't I?"

"Of course."

"That is what I'll do," said Alice, "as unobtrusively as I can."

"Very well," said the old lady, bleakly.

Eyes met, for the last time, with a certain respectful stubbornness in each pair.

Alice escaped.

She sighed deep.

She started down the circular stairs.

At the foot, Uncle Gregory stood watching her.

"Will you come in here, please," he snapped. He was home early. He was upset. Alice stiffened her spine.

He led her into a very small denlike room, tucked into the house corner under those circular stairs. He shut the door. She felt imprisoned.

“Mrs. Peele is dead.”

He was brutally abrupt, but Alice could not feign surprise. She could do nothing but stand with her back to the little desk, dumb and numb.

“Her son, Cary, called me at my office,” said Uncle Gregory. “Now, what do you know about this? I want the truth!”

Alice swallowed. Her hand crept up to her throat. She shook her head.

“We will have no lies this time,” said Uncle Gregory sharply. “Hank Bowman, at the bank, was in touch with me this afternoon.” Gregory’s eyes were shrewd. “You cashed three hundred dollars’ worth of traveler’s checks?”

“Yes, I did,” said Alice. There was no way to deny this. She knew, now, how much she had to admit.

“On Mrs. Peele’s body,” said Uncle Greg, “they found three hundred dollars.”

Alice closed her eyes.

“Cary knows nothing about it,” said Uncle Greg. “Bowman won’t make the connection. At least I hope not. But I make the connection and I’ll have the truth out of you, please. You gave that three hundred dollars to Mrs. Peele, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir, I did,” said Alice.

“Why?”

“Did you say she is dead?” Alice faltered.

“Yes, I said she is dead. Tell me about that money. At once, Alice.”

“Yes, sir. You remember... I was the cause of her losing her job? I hadn’t meant her to lose her job. When she needed a little money to get started somewhere else... I thought I ought to be helpful – if I could.”

“You were not bribing her to keep quiet, as Bee suggests?”

Alice’s head ached. Her eyes ached. She shook the aching head.

“You thought Tony wouldn’t mind?” Uncle Greg’s mouth had a bit of a sneer.

“I do think,” said Alice in a low voice, “it will be for Tony to ask about what I have done with our money.”

Uncle Greg said, with an exasperated snort, “I don’t believe you. You are too brainy. You absolutely cannot have been so stupid. I think you *are* concealing something. What a mess you have got us into now!” He took a few paces and turned. “Cary Peele found his mother at the bottom of some stairs with her neck broken,” he snapped.

Alice covered her face with both hands.

“Take your hands down, young lady. I want the truth. Were you there when this happened?”

Alice said, “No.”

“But you were there sometime today?”

“Yes.”

“A good thing you say so,” pronounced Uncle Greg grimly, “because there is a cab driver who has contacted the police. Now tell me,” he demanded.

“I had promised her the money,” said Alice very quietly. She lifted her chin, calm with her desperate imperative. “So I cashed the checks and I did take a cab to her place. I went upstairs and gave her the money. We said good-bye and I came down. It took five minutes. And that’s all.”

“You got there at 11:25 this morning?”

“Did I?” said Alice.

“That driver says so. How long were you there?”

“No more than five minutes,” she lied again. “Not even that. What... happened to her?”

Uncle Greg chewed his mouth. “Now,” he said, “I must make you understand this mess you are in. If Bowman ever... That driver says he picked up a girl in gray. He knows where. He can *describe you*. He knows when you got there. *Who knows when you left?*”

Alice simply shook her head.

“Young Peele says the police are looking for this girl in gray,” said Uncle Greg with bitter distaste. “Do you understand? If Bowman ever makes the

connection... I don't know what we are going to do. This is a murder case."

Alice gasped.

"Her wrist, you see," said Uncle Greg. "Somebody had hold of her wrist so violently that it's marked. Alice, was that you?" Now his severity was displaced by pleading. Uncle Greg was afraid.

"No, sir," said Alice steadily. "It was not I."

"You left her alive?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can't... help the police at all?"

Alice could sense a loosening of tension in Uncle Greg. He was looking for a way out. "No, sir, I can't," she said earnestly. "I saw nobody there. She was all alone. I left her alive." These were lies and she asked with curiosity, "Do you believe me?"

Uncle Greg gave her a cold stare. "I believe you," he said, "and I'll tell you why. You gave the woman three hundred dollars. It is still there. If you'd had anything to do with that fatal fall, you certainly would have taken the money back."

Alice showed no reaction.

"Now," he went around the small desk to a chair, "sit down. Sit down," he commanded briskly. "We'll have to decide what's best to be done." She sat down. "The last thing I want," said Uncle Greg, "is to see this family dragged into any connection with a murder case. I don't intend, if I can help it, to trouble

Aunt Geraldine. It is simply too... sordid. Very well. I am willing to believe that you left the woman's home before she fell. On one condition. That is, if you tell me the rest of it."

"There is no..."

"Why did you give her the money? Why the earrings in the first place? What is behind this, Alice?"

"I've told you..." she said.

"No, you have not."

"I'm sorry..."

"Then I must call Tony at once," said Uncle Greg. "If *he* can make you talk sense, then let him do it. You are his problem, actually. I don't see what any of us have done to deserve this. Where is he?" he snapped. "In Minnesota? What is the name of the place?"

"Lake Partridge," Alice said, faintly.

"And the name of the man... his boss?"

"Mr. Delgado."

Uncle Greg stood up. "You refuse to tell me, do you? You insist you felt only friendship for that woman?"

"But that is so," said Alice.

"You tossed away three hundred dollars of your husband's hard-earned money?"

"Tony will understand," she murmured.

“We shall see,” said Uncle Greg grimly.

He opened the door and set off down the hall for the telephone. Alice followed him. In the midst of this trouble, she somehow felt fairly certain that Uncle Gregory was not going to turn her over to the police. Not if he could find a way out of it.

But her heart hurt. Tony! Tony! Tony! He wasn't in Minnesota.

She thought, Shall I tell Uncle Gregory all of it? Now? Tell him that Dr. Devon killed Mrs. Peele? Oh, how can I? How could he believe me? He thinks I am a liar. He knows I am a liar. *I am a liar*. I can't make him believe, and be afraid for Tony, as I am, and keep quiet.

Could not tell.

Uncle Greg was being savage with a brace of operators. Then he was talking to someone in Minnesota. “Mr. Tony Page, please.... Oh? When did he leave?... Oh, I see... Then you don't think he will be in Chicago yet?... Yes, I see. Thank you.”

Alice's heart seemed to expand and soften.

“Tony's left for Chicago,” said Uncle Greg, “and won't be there yet. So I can't reach him at the moment. What am I going to do with you?”

“I can't help the police at all,” said Alice in a low voice. “But you must do whatever you think you ought to do.”

He grimaced. He said, "I'll reach Tony in the morning. Meanwhile, be quiet, Alice. Don't speak of this to the ladies."

"No, sir," Alice said submissively. "I promise you."

Lake Partridge, Minnesota, was calling Los Angeles. For a man named Simmons.

"Herb Innes, sir. Something funny. Tony Page's wife never showed in Chicago."

"Where is she?"

"Don't know, but there was a call for Page at Delgado's place. Just now. From Glendale. We ducked it. Said Tony was en route to Chicago."

"Right."

"This... er... wife – knows..."

"I realize."

"Don't like it, sir."

"Cover Page if you can," the Old Man said.

"No word? He's not back?"

"No. You better be in Chicago."

"I'll fly down. Immediately."

"Right. Cover him if you can."

Thursday; Mexico. Tony spent most of the day hunting up a certain import-export firm that operated as quietly as Big Frank did... dealt in

jewels and other hard goods. Here he offered his services. When he was turned away, with blank looks, Tony felt satisfied that Big Frank would have a report of this, before night fell.

Slow, thought Tony. But easy might do it yet.

Alice went into the big room to wait for dinner. Soon the ladies gathered there. Hortense gave her a look of such flaming curiosity as to seem almost mad, but Hortense said nothing. Mrs. Redfern took her usual place – in the middle of the shrine, thought Alice. Bee flounced in, ignoring Alice. Which was dandy.

She felt fairly steady. Uncle Greg was going to stall until morning. And for the moment Tony was protected by some blessed liar in Minnesota. The ladies hadn't heard of the death of Mrs. Peele. There would be a stretch of calm, a recess from stress.

So she drew her breath.

Then she heard Ellen at the door... Ellen saying, "Good evening, Dr. Devon."

The custom of the house permitted Alice a few minutes... just a few minutes... to brace herself once more. She hadn't known Dr. Devon was coming here tonight! To dinner! She was filled with panic.

What could she do now? How could she meet the eyes of this man? This traitor? This criminal? This murderer? But she must! Not only must she meet his eyes, but she must make him believe that, for her part,

nothing had happened. All was exactly as it had been before, between the two of them. The thread... oh, how had it been? She remembered that she had rather liked him. He had seemed to be on her side. She had thought he was nice. But *this*? Impossible! How seem to be somewhat charmed by this evil man – who could send the word to murder Tony. *Tony!*

The saving thought came.

What if it were Tony who had just rung the bell? What if it were Tony about to come into this room, right now?

As Dr. Devon's figure appeared in the arch, everyone saw Alice look up and over her pretty face come a radiant greeting. The mouth curved, the eyes shone. She was throwing at him the whole wonderful dream of seeing Tony safe. A line seemed to jump between them. A connection quivered in the air. "Hi!" burst Alice – as if it had been Tony.

Dr. Devon could not help responding with a warm smile. "Hello, young Alice," he said, affectionately.

Then he must turn to greet the ladies and receive the dark suspicious look from Cousin Bee.

Uncle Greg came up behind him. "Walter, I wish you would step into my den a minute, please."

"Of course, Greg. Excuse me?" The men withdrew.

The glow faded from Alice's face. There was to be no recess at all. Greg was about to confide his quandary to Dr. Devon. She knew this. She had been wary of exactly this when she had made it as clear as

she could that she had not stayed with Mrs. Peele, beyond a few minutes. Dr. Devon was going to have to believe that Alice had left Mrs. Peele alive... had been gone... knew nothing. Because if he did not believe this... Alice felt cords tightening in her back. *He must believe it!* Slowly, she felt her confidence rise. He would believe it, because she had been able to smile at him, for Tony. Why, she could do anything! Anything at all! For Tony.

She looked down and saw her heart shaking the fabric of her dress.

Bee said furiously, "What's going on in this house? Alice has secrets. Now Dad has secrets."

"Aaaah," murmured Hortense.

"Did you have a pleasant day, Alice?" Mrs. Redfern's gracious tones rode over Bee's unladylike agitation.

Alice replied in kind. "It was very interesting, ma'am," she answered, pleasantly. "This is a fascinating city." Their eyes met, smiling.

The men were shut in together, in the tiny den. "Tony's on his way to Chicago, so I can't reach him until he gets there." Gregory's eyes were wide and anxious. "What am I to do, Walter?"

Dr. Devon listened quietly. He pursed his lips but he did not open them.

"You don't have to tell me," burst Gregory, "that I ought to call the police, right now. Alice is the girl in gray. She admits it. But I don't want to do that,

Walter. I am thinking of the family. I am thinking... and I admit this frankly... of myself.”

“You believe what Alice tells you.

“Oh yes, as far as she goes. I know she hasn’t told me everything. I don’t know why she gave away that money.”

“But you don’t believe that Alice had anything to do with the woman’s death?”

“Of course not,” said Greg impatiently. “Do you?”

“No, no, I don’t believe it for a moment,” soothed the doctor – who knew.

“I wish you had seen the woman, Walter,” groaned Gregory.

“I am a busy man,” sighed the doctor. “I wish I had. You say it was the woman’s son who called you?”

“Yes. We were her employers...”

“The police have not called you?”

“No, no, but they may. I imagine they will. I’ll say this much, Walter. I intend to wait at least until morning. I don’t think I am bound to call the police tonight. What I wonder... You see, what worries me is that the police may know more than I know they know. Now, you have friends, I believe...”

“You would like me to... inquire quietly?”

“I... What do you think?”

The doctor thought a moment. "It might be wiser if you inquired," he said finally. "You know the local authorities. You know Chief Townsend here pretty well, Greg."

"Yes," said Greg, reluctantly.

"He would be able to talk to his opposite number. You were the woman's employer. You have that natural interest."

"Yes."

Now Dr. Devon told Greg what Greg wished to be told. "I don't think you are required to throw young Alice to the police, at this moment. Perhaps never. I certainly don't think you are required to bring down garish publicity upon your family until you know more than you do. You ought to know – first, what the police are up to. Second, what Alice herself was up to with the woman."

"I agree," said Gregory with a heavy sigh. "I think I follow you. Suppose, for instance, the police have already found the killer? That would let us out."

"Just so," said Dr. Devon. "Did the son tell you anything like that? Is there a suspect? Was anyone... anything... seen? A car, for instance?"

"He said not. He mentioned only that cab driver. How they got on to him, I do not know. Of course, the son may not have been told. Or perhaps something has turned up since..."

"My point," said the doctor gently. "Why don't you call Townsend now, Greg?"

“You think I...?” Gregory fidgeted.

“If I were to do it for you,” said the doctor smoothly, “it might be just a little... dubious? I don’t have the natural interest. It might look... later... well, a bit devious on your part. Do you follow me?”

Greg nodded.

“And, of course we have this evening,” the doctor said, “during which I will see whether I can’t persuade young Alice to confide in me. She is rather... drawn to me, I think,” he added complacently.

CHAPTER 9

When Dr. Devon returned to the big room alone, it seemed to Alice that Uncle Gregory had gone to the phone in the hall, but she had no anxiety to spare for him. What must her mood be now? Why, she was in trouble and the doctor was her understanding friend. So Alice sent him a less happy smile, a smile tinged with appeal.

The doctor renewed his greetings to the ladies, but the connection had jumped into the air. He sat down near Alice. Between him and Alice there was that line. "You mustn't worry at all," he murmured for her ear.

She cast down her eyes.

"You would like a cocktail, doctor, I am sure," said the old lady and Hortense rose to trot away. "And how is Mrs. Devon?" inquired the lady hostess.

When Greg came in, a moment or two later, he sent a nod across the room and the doctor received it.

Then Bee made a strange noise in her throat. Alice looked at her. Bee was wild.

"All right," cried Bee, "what is it? What is it?"

“What is what?” said Gregory impatiently. “We are having Martinis, aren’t we?”

“Do you think I am stupid?” blazed Bee. “Nods and winks and whispers all over this place!”

“Beatrice...” said her great-aunt.

“Aunt Geraldine, I don’t care. I don’t see why they keep us out of it. Alice knows! Why should Alice know?”

Hortense was back. She stood there with her narrow shoulders hunched, her long neck craned forward. “Ellen will bring them in a minute. Know what?”

Gregory said, “Will you be quiet, Bee? Will you both, please?”

“No, I will not be quiet!” Bee was out of control. “I will not be treated like a child. My own father... Dr. Devon...” (*My own Dr. Devon*, her manner betrayed.)

Dr. Devon betrayed a whiff of dislike. He said smoothly, “It really does not concern you, Beatrice.”

“Whom does it concern, then? Alice?” Bee’s black eyes swam with tears. “Why should you be so concerned with Alice? Always Alice! Ever since she came...”

Mrs. Redfern said, “Beatrice, you must not make a scene.”

The doctor said, “Of course not. There is no need.” He wore his smile.

Mrs. Redfern's head was high and she was not smiling. "There is never need for a scene," she said, coldly. "If anything troubles you, Gregory, you may quietly explain."

"I'll handle it, Aunt Geraldine. I won't have you bothered..."

"Alice," said Mrs. Redfern, "is my grandson's wife and my guest. If it concerns her, then I am bothered. Now, if you please...?"

Dr. Devon chose to help Gregory off this spot. "Perhaps," he purred, "it is best that this dear lady does not read the newspaper in the morning... without warning."

Gregory said uneasily, "Maybe."

"Something sad has happened," said the doctor, gently. "Your Mrs. Peele has had... well, an accident."

The old lady took this in, tasted it, digested it, began to question it.

"Yes," said the doctor, watching her, "the poor woman is dead."

"Aaaah—" Hortense went to a chair and threw her bones into it.

Ellen came with a tray and two cocktails. The room froze while the men took them.

When she had gone Mrs. Redfern said, quietly, "How did this happen?"

“She fell, it seems,” said the doctor, “on some stairs.”

“Aahh...”

“It is bound to be in the paper,” the doctor said to Gregory, who shrugged helplessly.

Bee said, “Go on. Go on.” Her eyes were burning.

The doctor went on. “There seems to be some idea of... foul play.” Then, on the heels of this shock, he turned to Alice. “We are hoping,” he said, “that Alice, who, of course, knew Mrs. Peele years ago, may be able to tell us something about her.”

Alice began to shake her head.

Bee wasn't having any. Bee said, “Alice *knew!* She is not surprised. Alice knew all about this?”

“Why, yes...”

“How did she know?”

“I told her,” said Gregory. “For Pete's sake, Bee...”

Bee paid him no attention. “I heard you,” she cried to the doctor. “I heard what you said to her. *Why* mustn't she worry? What is there that she mustn't worry about?”

“Just a moment, please,” said the doctor sternly. “Just a moment...”

“Alice is mixed up in the whole thing, isn't she?” raged Bee. “That old woman knew something! Maybe Alice did it to her!”

Gregory's patience gave out. "If you aren't quiet," he said to his daughter viciously, "I will see to it that you are kept quiet."

"This is too bad," said Dr. Devon mournfully. "Beatrice, that was very irresponsible. I am ashamed for you. Dear Mrs. Redfern, may I bring you something? Are you feeling ill?"

Mrs. Redfern's face had lost all pink.

Alice said, in real distress, "Please, Uncle Gregory! You are all just making things worse."

But Mrs. Redfern's voice had not lost its calm, nor did it lack authority. "Alice, I think you had better explain."

"But I can't..." gasped Alice, "I promised."

The doctor's head snapped around. "You promised? Whom?"

Alice said, eyes wide, "I promised Uncle Gregory."

Uncle Greg said, "Bee's torn that. Too late. They'll have to hear it all." He glared at Bee.

Bee was sitting stone still.

Alice turned to the old lady. "Please, Mrs. Redfern, it is not at all what Bee said. It's only that I went to see Mrs. Peele this morning. That's what bothers Uncle Gregory, and the doctor, too. I only stayed a minute. She was perfectly all right. I don't really know anything at all that could possibly help the police... but..."

"Police!" hissed Hortense.

Mrs. Redfern said, "Why did you go there, Alice?"

"Yes," said Uncle Gregory, "now that the whole thing is out on the carpet... why? Why did you go there and give the woman three hundred dollars?"

"Aaah..." Hortense was beside herself. Bee did not move.

"But I have explained that," Alice said. "She was a friend. I've told you over and over. Don't any of you," she cried, "have a friend worth three hundred dollars?"

Her heart was shaking her whole body. How could she get out of this?

Mrs. Redfern put her tiny hand across her eyes. Her head bent and it was strange to see it bending.

The doctor sprang up. "We are not being wise," he said severely, "to continue such a scene. As our dear lady says, it is not necessary. If Greg feels that there is more that Alice might tell us, that Alice is reluctant to confide... do you know what occurs to me? I see here a situation in which I can be of assistance to you all."

He had the floor.

"You know me," he said to the family. "I am your friend. I think you trust me. You know my work. I propose to make myself the middleman here." He turned to Alice. "You must understand, my dear, that this family is simply anxious to know what its duty is in this matter. Therefore, someone must know exactly why you went to see this Mrs. Peele. Or gave her

anything. You have been reticent about the relationship and very possibly for some excellent reason. But you are very young, my dear. And you are more or less a stranger here. It is difficult to accept your reticence. Don't you see that Greg needs a way to determine his duty? Toward his family. Toward Tony. And toward you. In the matter of informing the police, for instance. May I not be the one to resolve this impasse? Could I not reassure them?"

"I have just reassured them," Alice said, stiffly.

Bee said, hoarsely, "Yes, he can help. This is pretty bad, Alice. You will have to let him help you." Bee seemed to have been shocked into some human concern.

"Of course I can help her," the doctor said blithely, "help all of you. Let me ask you this. If Alice were to speak frankly to me, in private, and I were to tell you that she has had good reason for all she has done, and that I understand her reticence... wouldn't you believe me? Wouldn't you feel relieved?"

"That's right," said Greg. "That's a very good idea, Walter."

"Alice, of course," said the doctor softly, "must know that nothing she tells a man in my profession will ever be revealed."

Alice sat still.

"Does anyone else agree?" the doctor asked.

Hortense said, shrilly, "We don't mean to pry, Alice, but it has been so very peculiar! And now the

woman is dead! You will have to explain. You will simply have to..."

Bee said hoarsely, "Yes."

"If Alice tells you something we *ought* to know," said Mrs. Redfern crisply, "Will you then tell us, doctor?"

"Oh, no," he said, quickly. "No, indeed. But I have some judgment. I can advise her. So I believe I can set all your minds at ease. Don't you think so, Alice?"

Oh yes, thought Alice. He can shut the family up. He can keep them at bay. They will all let me alone if he says so. He'll "understand" all right. *He'll have Tony killed!* Her eyes filled with tears.

Dr. Devon leaned over her. "You are so miserable with this secret trouble," he coaxed, "so very miserable, poor young Alice. Let me take some of the burden. I am on oath, remember? You need not hesitate..."

The tears dried in Alice's eyes with magical abruptness. But I am on oath too, she thought, proudly.

She lifted her chin. She was sitting in everyone's attention, in the doctor's total attention. What she would say must be as close as possible to something she believed with all her heart.

She said, "I'm sorry. I don't like this idea."

Nobody spoke.

Alice stood up. "I have not killed anyone," she said.

“My dear, my dear, we don’t believe for one moment...” the doctor crooned.

“Nor have I committed any crime... unless it was to give a woman some money.”

“For what reason?” yelled Hortense.

“I do not wish,” said Alice, coldly, “to analyze my reason. I do not want to talk about it. It doesn’t seem to me that this blabbing...” she caught breath in, steadied her voice, “this pouring everything out, is always right. It seems to me that a person sometimes has a right to keep a secret. Even a very young person. A right to that dignity.”

“No loss of dignity,” purred the doctor. “Only the relief of talking it out to a sympathetic friend.”

“That’s true,” said Bee. “That’s true. Please let him help you.”

“I am afraid,” said Alice, “that ‘talking’ isn’t all there is to the relief of anything.”

“But of course not,” soothed the doctor. “It is a beginning.”

“I am a stranger here,” she interrupted. “None of you know me. I understand that. You respect Dr. Devon. You have known him a long time. Suppose Dr. Devon had given Mrs. Peele, or anyone else, three hundred dollars? For reasons of his own? Would you insist that anyone had to know what his reasons were?”

“Perhaps not,” the doctor murmured. His eyes were alive. Alice had the terrible impression that only he was understanding.

“Well, then Alice drew herself tall. “Perhaps I have what you are calling a secret. Perhaps I have made a mistake in my life and I do not want it known. Well, then, I believe that if *I* have made mistakes, *I* must seek to know that, and I must seek to live over them, and to come where I will deserve respect. I don’t see that I will get *there* any better way than by using my judgment, and keeping my own conscience.” She was faintly trembling. “I am the youngest generation here. Perhaps you don’t understand us. We don’t live in a shrine, like you, Mrs. Redfern. We are not protected.” Eyes met with that small shock. Alice swung to the Staffords. “But we are not nervous, either. We stand up,” she said. “I stand. I am not confused. I do as I choose to do. Choice is my right and – as long as I am not a criminal – so is the responsibility.”

She had watered herself down long enough. *Alice herself* was speaking. “You are ladies and gentlemen,” she said, “are you not? I am only asking you for a certain decent privacy... I will ask the same thing of the police, if you say so.”

Silence.

The phone chirped in the hall and Gregory scuttled to answer it, as if he were glad of escape. Dr. Devon’s eyes were hooded. Mrs. Redfern gazed down upon her hands with a brooding air. Bee had a stunned look. Hortense was having trouble with her gasping.

Then Gregory came back into the room with a lighter tread. “That was Townsend calling,” he announced almost cheerfully. “It seems there is a suspect.”

“Oh?” The doctor looked alert.

“Or a clue to one,” said Greg with satisfaction. “Some person had been standing behind a door in that flat, for some time. The wall is covered with fingerprints. Somebody lurked there. So that lets Alice out.” And he sighed.

Alice stood still.

That lets Alice in... as she knew.

Between her and Dr. Devon there was a singing line, electric, quivering.

It was Bee who recovered her voice. “Alice, you were in that place. Was there a door... where somebody *could* lurk?”

Alice said, and her lips were cold, “I have no idea. I have told you all I can tell you. I will not be questioned any more. Please excuse me from dinner.”

“You can’t just walk out,” Bee began, excitedly.

“Beatrice...” It was the doctor’s voice. Smooth, exuding wisdom. “She can and she must. Alice is overwrought. We must excuse her.” He lifted his hand. This was a decree. “Alice must go to her room and rest quietly. For her own sake. For all your sakes. Please believe me – I know this to be psychologically necessary.”

He, of course, had them in his control.

Alice said, "Thank you, Dr. Devon."

Alice began to walk on the rug. She reached the tile. She reached the stairs. Her toes took them.

In the big room, Mrs. Redfern said, a trifle shrilly, "Is this a shrine?"

"What must we do?" burst Hortense. "What must we do now?" For once, Hortense was not rushing to Mrs. Redfern's side.

"Dinner is served," said Ellen.

"Put it back, please, Ellen," said Hortense, excitedly. "A half hour..."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ellen, my dear," said Dr. Devon suddenly, "would you mind waiting upstairs in the hall? Please? Just... er... to make sure Mrs. Page is all right. If she needs us – if she moves at all – would you call?"

Ellen backed away, eyes popping.

"I am terribly afraid this is very serious," the doctor said to the family.

"You think it was Alice behind the door?" said Bee, with a calm shrewdness.

"It may have been," the doctor said sadly. "It may have been. And we must save her – from herself – if we can..." His eyes glazed: he was in deep thought.

Alice sat on the floor of her bedroom beside the window. Her cheek touched her bare arm, flesh comforting flesh. The mountain was out there, steep, and silent. Dusk was sliding up the mountain.

Let them flay me, she thought. No word about Tony. Ever. Nothing was left to her but silence. Silence and seclusion.

I will stay here, she thought, where I am. I will sit here, on the floor, and stare at the mountain until Tony comes.

Or, if they called the police, then jail and silence. She could stare at some wall.

She did not expect the police. She did not think Dr. Devon would permit that. He would be afraid of what Alice might have to tell.

So remain. Be silent. She did not fear Dr. Devon for herself. He might be afraid. But he could not know. And he could not get at her.

Stay here, in silence.

Thursday; Mexico. Late in the day, Tony saw Big Frank again. He was twitted, as Big Frank chose to display omniscience. Why had Tony approached unreliable people? Tony needed a job that bad, did he? So Tony let the balance go over. Yes, he said, the favor should go the other way. He needed a job. He hinted that he understood quite well the flow of narcotics from importer to consumer. He had hoped...

Big Frank laughed. He offered Tony a job in Mexico. Menial. Poorly paid. Tony refused it, cheerfully, like a man who, after all, could buy plane tickets and knew himself worthy of higher things.

No offense was taken on either side. They dropped the subject and reminisced.

Closer, thought Tony.

In the big room, the doctor had the floor.

“First,” he decreed, “I think it is absolutely necessary to reach young Tony. In the meantime, I think it is absolutely necessary to protect young Alice. I think we must seclude her. I think I see how this can be done.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll get on to Tony,” said Greg. “What are we to do about Alice? I don’t know that I follow.”

“For everyone’s sake” – the doctor’s smile was gruesomely kind – “she must be secluded. To prevent the ruinous publicity for you dear people. For the young girl herself. To protect young Tony from it, who knows nothing about all this and who must be informed. Even more important, it may be necessary to protect the girl from physical danger.”

“Danger?” Bee said.

“If Alice was behind that door.”

“Danger from the... from the one who did it?”

“Exactly. That’s why it cannot be allowed to get into a newspaper that Alice was anywhere near that

flat. Don't you see?" said the doctor impatiently. "A killer may kill again. Isn't that quite possible?" He looked around at their frightened faces and felt the pleasure of power. "Believe me, this could be dangerous," he said.

"Tell us what we can do, doctor," quavered Hortense, who was with him heart and soul.

"I propose... now, you would naturally send up a tray?"

Mrs. Redfern was sitting erect once more. She had been listening stonily. "The child must be fed," she said rather sharply. "She is in my house."

"Then I can see..."

Bee interrupted. "Alice is just confused, isn't she, doctor? She is terribly confused. She ought to have told us. You don't think she... did it?" Bee's eyes hunted his face for some comfort.

The doctor said in sad melodious tones, "Of course not. But she is overburdened, Beatrice. That outburst came from a burdened psyche. You are so right that she needs to tell. Someone must reach her and help her. She cannot stand alone."

"No," said Bee hypnotically. "No, this is terrible."

"Got to do something," said Greg nervously.

"The way I see it," said Dr. Devon, "may appear to be arbitrary. It is merely kind. I have sedatives in my car. I think it should be possible to administer enough in her food, on the tray... oh, not to harm her in any

way. Simply to permit me to take her, tonight, to a private hospital. There is one I... er... know. This would effectively remove her from any police questioning. It will give us time.”

“That’s right,” said Greg hopefully.

“Furthermore, once she is there... I know of certain other drugs, useful in my work, which more or less reduce a resistance, you see? I am quite sure that, with their aid, I can induce her to, confide in me. Once I know the extent of her knowledge... I mean to say, whatever it is that has been burdening her mind... I can better advise how to deal with it.”

“Of course,” said Hortense emphatically. “She *has* to be *made* to *tell* you *everything!*”

Greg straightened. “Then shall I speak to cook? Will you come along to the kitchen, Walter?”

The men moved. Mrs. Redfern said, “If someone will please help me to my room?”

Bee stumbled up and toward her. “Oh, Aunt Geraldine...! You shouldn’t... you shouldn’t...”

“I cannot sit to dinner,” said the old lady, “if you will all excuse me?”

“Oh, no! You shouldn’t have even heard all this. I’ll help you...” Bee said.

The doctor was saying to Greg, “A half-hour, I would say. We will send up the tray and then perhaps we can dine? Then, I think...” Mrs. Redfern was passing, supported by Bee. The doctor gave the old

lady one of his smiles. "You must rest, dear lady," he said kindly. "Please rest in the assurance that there will be no scandal. No publicity. You may be sure we will see to that. All is well. We have modern ways to deal with these problems. Don't trouble yourself to think about it at all."

"If I may be excused?" she repeated gracefully.

"Of course," said the doctor with an air of tolerance and understanding.

At the top of the stairs, Mrs. Redfern disengaged her arm. "I can manage now, Beatrice."

"Oh, Aunt Geraldine, that she has got us into a mess like this? But trust the doctor. He understands..."

"You may leave me, Beatrice," said the old lady. "I am quite steady, as you see."

Thursday; Mexico. As Tony was taking his departure, Big Frank asked him when he intended to leave the city. Tony said he had a plane seat for Sunday.

"See you before you go, eh?" Big Frank inquired.

"Up to you," said Tony. "Otherwise, so long..."

It left a couple of days. Friday. Saturday.

Tony thought he might still get something.

Alice brooded upon the mountain with somber eyes until somebody knocked on her bedroom door. “Yes?”

“It’s Ellen, Mrs. Page. With a tray for you.”

“Oh, thank you,” Alice got up and unlocked the door. “I’ll take it. Thank you very much.”

“That’s all right, Mrs. Page,” said Ellen with large eyes. She drew away nervously.

Alice, using both hands, carried the tray to the dressing table and set it down. She turned. She would lock the door again. But Tony’s grandmother was standing in the door.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” said Alice gently. “I think I had best be left alone.”

“You may go down, Ellen,” the old lady said.

“Ma’am, I was told to wait up here...”

“This is my house,” said Mrs. Redfern, “and you and I are old friends, Ellen. In half an hour or so you must say that everything is very quiet. And that is all that you must say.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Alice put her hand out toward the door, but Mrs. Redfern touched it. Mrs. Redfern closed it, behind her.

“I have come to tell you that there is a drug in your food.”

Alice recoiled.

“They plan to take you to a hospital.”

“A hospital!”

“Alice?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

Mrs. Redfern stood very straight. “In my time, we used to manage. We felt it important to keep certain personal dignity. We took responsibility upon ourselves.”

“I’m – I’m glad if you understood...” Alice stammered. But the old lady’s eyes were bleak and sad.

“That is why I have come to warn you. I cannot permit this. I cannot agree that it is right.”

“To... take me away?”

“They plan something more. Dr. Devon is saying that he knows of certain other drugs.”

“Other drugs?”

“That lessen your resistance. That induce a state... so that once you are helpless in a hospital, you will tell him everything he cares to know.” Mrs. Redfern clasped her tiny hands together. Alice went close to her swiftly, for she looked as if she would fall.

Mrs. Redfern held on to Alice’s arm. “Gregory, Hortense, and poor Beatrice... they agree to it. But I cannot agree.”

“They plan to drug me... until I tell?” Alice was terrified.

“And that is rape!” said the old lady fiercely. “Of the mind.” Eyes met with shock. “That is *wrong*.” Mrs. Redfern’s small mouth made a sudden grimace. “I must act as I see to act. If this is a shrine, it should be a shrine to *something*. I will not let them do this wrong to you. So I warn you, and you must get away.”

“Yes,” said Alice, her heart racing. “I will get away. Thank you.”

“But where will you go?” The old lady was suddenly tremulous. “Will you go to the police, Alice?”

“Not now,” said Alice slowly. “I must act as *I* see to act.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Redfern. “Yes. Will you go to Tony?”

“I will be in touch with Tony,” said Alice, gently.

“Have you money? I have no cash. A check, perhaps?”

“I don’t need it, ma’am. Thank you. I have five dollars.”

The old lady’s eyes showed dismay.

“I will be all right,” said Alice. “I have been... in the world. By myself...”

“But child...”

“I will manage,” said Alice, firmly.

“Will you go soon, then? They are at dinner. A half hour, the doctor said. Ellen was to watch you.”

“I will go now.”

“But where?”

“You had better not know,” said Alice grimly.

“Wicked!” said the old lady. “Medieval! It makes me think of the rack. But worse – to take away your very wits! To rob your memory! What becomes of a decent privacy? Or choice? Or your human being? I agree about your rights, Alice. Whatever you have done, you shall have your rights.”

“Thank you... for all this.”

“I warned you because I despise their plan.” Now the old lady trembled again. “I do not know what your secret is.”

“It is not what they think,” said Alice, and then sadly, “I cannot tell you.”

“I do not ask to be told.” The old lady drew herself up.

“Alice, whatever your mistake,” her voice rang, “*live it down*,” she commanded.

Alice gasped. “Yes, I... Thank you.”

The old lady turned. Alice was swift to the door, opened it. The old lady went through like a wraith. But erect. Soldierly.

Alice closed the door. His drugs! His Judas smile! Evil! Killer of the body! Raper of the mind!

Oh yes, she would go. She would go to save her own life. She knew if Dr. Devon had drugged both secrets out of her, he would have found a way... She

put on her gray suit, took her top coat, her smallest case, her five dollars. Tied her shoes to her belt.

She would simply vanish. Then surely... please, make it so?... they would waste enough time looking for her... so Tony could get home safe. And then she could tell.

She slipped out of the room. The hall was bare. Mrs. Redfern's door was shut. Alice crept down the circular stairs that came out close, to the front door. She could hear a voice, distantly, from the dining room. Gregory's, rolling along.

She went outside. The light was almost out of the sky. She stepped carefully within the shadows. Walked the drive. At the gate, she slipped on her shoes. She walked the road around the meadow. She came into the quiet suburban streets and walked on.

Half an hour later, Ellen insisted that everything had been quiet and that was all she knew.

But Alice had vanished.

Uncle Gregory was aflame. The doctor, with a grim mouth, advised against calling the police quite yet. Gregory got on the telephone to Chicago. Tony's apartment did not answer.

The doctor was ready with more advice. He was sure it was not best to call the police tonight. Best not to alarm old Mrs. Redfern, either. Best alarm nobody. Try Tony in the morning. Meanwhile, the doctor himself had certain contacts. He might be able to set

in motion an especially discreet undercover inquiry. He counseled the family to rely on him. The misguided girl had run away, but perhaps he could find her.

Alice had vanished.

On Friday, early, Gregory talked to Chicago. Tony's apartment still did not answer but his office did. Oh, Page? Oh yes, he'd got in, late yesterday. But he had taken off for Los Angeles by now.

Gregory put in a call for Alice's folks in Indiana. They thought she was in Los Angeles. When he asked if Alice had friends in that city, they said, No, she was with some relatives of her husband, and who was this, please? Gregory, with a surge of cowardice, ducked out of it and hung up.

He called Dr. Devon for comfort. Devon had not found Alice, either.

Alice had vanished.

CHAPTER 10

Mrs. Redfern remained in her bed that Friday. It was assumed that the “scene” had been too much for her. Hortense did not go near her, but stood about like a shuddering ghost. Scandal in the house was too much for Hortense. She wasn’t enjoying it.

It was Bee who tried to serve her great-aunt. A Bee curiously subdued. Mrs. Redfern lay secluded, and said she wished for nothing. The old lady did not ask for Alice. She asked nothing - and told nothing.

No one dared tell her that Alice had vanished.

Dr. Devon had come in, just before noon, when a telegram arrived for Alice. Gregory ripped it open. It was from Tony, and announced that he had a plane seat for Phoenix and would come on from there as best he could. “Train or dog sled.”

For Gregory, that tore it. He had had enough. If Tony were going to be unreachable until some undetermined time on *Saturday*, then Gregory stood on his public virtue. He would listen to no more words about judicious delay. Gregory called his friend Chief Townsend, and told him everything he knew.

Townsend listened with professional calm. He was reassuring. He would talk to the right officers. He would try to keep it out of the papers. The police would find Alice Hansen Page, aged twenty, five feet four, dark hair, blue-gray eyes, personable....

Who had vanished.

Gregory felt better. Dr. Devon said he felt better, too. He looked drawn.

Friday; Mexico. Tony loafed the day away. Damn this job. Slow. He thought of his darling, his Alice, waiting alone in Chicago. Grave Alice, whom he loved.

Friday, at five P.M., the phone rang and Hortense answered. A man was asking for Tony Page. Hortense said she was sorry, Mr. Page was not here. There was no message.

Saturday. Dr. Devon was on the phone, early, asking if Tony had turned up yet. Tony had not. Nor had he phoned nor wired.

“And where is Tony’s Alice?” roared Uncle Greg. “That’s what I am going to have to answer when Tony gets here. The police can’t find her. You can’t find her. Or can you?”

“Not yet, I’m afraid.”

“You realize,” said Greg in a quickly hushed voice, “that this... killer may have reason to find Alice?”

“How could the killer find her,” soothed the doctor, “if we can’t? What do the police say?”

“Don’t you know?” said Gregory, rather crossly. “Well, the police found somebody who saw a girl in gray, on foot, in that neighborhood, around twelve noon. Peele found his mother around noon, didn’t he?”

“Um,” said the doctor. “Yes, I believe he did.”

“Alice knows something about that killing. Only thing I can think of now... Alice must be frightened. She’s got in touch with Tony, somehow, and they are together.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” the doctor said. “I suppose that’s possible.”

“He’s overdue,” said Gregory. “Somebody expected him to be in this house at five o’clock last night.”

“Who was that?”

“Phone call. Some man. I am only praying that Tony will turn up soon and that he’ll have Alice with him.”

“I certainly hope so,” said Dr. Devon. “Will you let me know?”

“Yes, but it seems to me,” said Gregory, “we didn’t handle that girl quite right, Walter. We antagonized her.”

“I wonder how?” the doctor murmured. “Well, let me know.”

The doctor hung up and dialed with an angry finger. “Listen,” he said, “what is this? Here’s a girl, barely twenty years old, a child, no friends, no money. What’s the matter that you can’t turn her up?”

“We got no angle, Doc. We ain’t the cops and this is a big town. Some kind of places we don’t...”

“Find her,” snapped the doctor. “And while you’re about it, get a check on Page, will you? Try Phoenix. I want to know whether he ever actually went through Phoenix at all.”

Saturday, promptly at five P.M., a man’s voice on the Redfern telephone asked for Tony Page.

“Who is this?” barked Gregory.

“Is Mr. Page there?”

“No, he is not. Do you know where he is?”

The party hung up. Gregory held his head. Chief Townsend had told him, regretfully, that the papers had the story. They’d print it in the morning.

When Bee took Mrs. Redfern her light supper on a tray the old lady’s face looked fallen in, skeletonized.

“Do you feel any better, Aunt Geraldine?”

“I am tired, Beatrice.”

She did not ask for Alice. Or for Tony. Or anyone. Bee said no more, but crept away.

Saturday; Mexico. At five P.M., Big Frank summoned Tony to him. Tony went – not without a flash of apprehension. This could be good. Or very bad. But Big Frank was cordial. They spoke of many things, and none of them to do with narcotics. At last Big Frank said that Tony might try calling a certain phone number when he got to Los Angeles. Tony grinned and said he might. Discretion and psychological groundwork had paid off as much as it was going to pay. Tony knew Big Frank had gone as far as he was going to go.

Sunday; afternoon. Somebody hailed a young man as he walked through the gate at Los Angeles International Airport. “Tony! Hey, Tony Page!”

“Herb Innes! Well, well...” Tony stopped and shook hands. “Give me a minute to call Chicago?”

“She’s not in Chicago.”

“What?”

“She’s vanished.” Tony put pincers on the man’s arm. “Now, talk.”

“She never did come on to Chicago. What we know... she walked out of your grandmother’s house last Thursday, around seven P.M. She seems to be mixed up in a homicide.” Innes waved a piece of

newspaper at him. “So the police are looking... we are looking... and we have reason to think some unsavory characters are also looking for your Alice.”

Tony was tingling with shock. “Homicide? How?”

Innes said, “A witness, maybe.”

“*Where is Alice?*” Tony looked frantically on all sides.

“You find out. You go get the family inside view on this disappearance.”

“You got a car?”

Innes had a department car, with a two-way radio connection. After a while, he said to Tony’s grim face, “Get what you went after?”

“I got a way to him.”

“To Devon?”

“Dunno. To whoever. I got a phone number. Inside the operation. Somebody else will have to climb that ladder. Not me.”

“We’ll get somebody on it,” Innes said gloomily. “That’ll take time.”

“Yep.” Tony was stoical.

“Let me give the Old Man that number.” Innes took the mouthpiece off the hook.

“You do that,” Tony said. “And tell the Old Man that I’ll see him *after I find Alice*. Not before.”

Tony went into his grandmother’s house, alone. He was received with exclamations of relief, but these

beat against his unsmiling face like surf against a wall. “Where is Alice?” he asked them, abruptly.

This sent Uncle Greg into exposition. He made a tale of Alice’s mysterious doings. The death of Mrs. Peele. Their efforts. But Uncle Gregory’s tongue was not itself. When he got to the last part, it went lamely, but she had gone.”

“...upset for *you*, Tony,” said Hortense piously. “And for Aunt Geraldine. So terrible! It’s in the paper!”

“You know what it’s about,” said Bee challengingly.

Tony, who knew the secret, could guess what the blackmail had been about. Oh, my poor Alice, he groaned to himself. The cleaning woman! “She was just gone?” he said. “Before you could manage to drug her and drag her to some hospital?”

“But we simply...”

Ellen said, “Mrs. Redfern wants you, Mr. Tony.”

“Gran? Where is she?”

“She’s in her bed. We haven’t told her. Tony, don’t...”

Tony was bounding up the stairs.

His grandmother’s tiny hands clung to his. “She had so little money, Tony. But she was very confident. She said she could manage. I couldn’t

permit them to do that, could I? I had to send her away.”

“Good you did.” Tony broke into his first smile. “The rest of them don’t know you did that, Gran?”

“I chose not to tell them,” his grandmother said with a touch of hauteur.

“You don’t know where she is?”

“She said she’d be in touch with *you*.”

Tony looked grim again.

“Someone,” said his grandmother, “has been trying to get in touch with you on the telephone. Every day, at five o’clock.” She sat higher. “They think,” she said, “that I am content to lie here, so long as *I* am safe and *I* am comfortable. They think I am content to be ignorant, lest I be ‘upset.’ But I know what is going on in my house. Ellen tells me. It is sometimes necessary...”

“To lie low and keep quiet?” finished Tony with perfect understanding. “Sure it is, Gran... Every day, you say?”

“The phone? Yes, Friday. Then yesterday, again. I have wondered...”

“I think I’ll wait.”

“Tony, I am ashamed... I see I have let things slide in this house. Alice called it a shrine.”

“Alice...” Tony swallowed. “I’ll do better if I don’t talk about her. I’ll think better how to find her.”

“I believe,” said Mrs. Redfern calmly, in a moment, “that she will manage.”

“I... think so, too. I think so.”

They held each other's hands.

Tony came downstairs just before five o'clock. He was in the hall as Ellen let in Dr. Devon. The doctor held out his hand. His smile was full of sympathy.

Tony said, “I don't think I want to talk to you. Excuse me.” He turned his back; he sat down beside the phone.

The doctor said, in a forgiving voice, “I understand.” He took Greg into the big room where he spoke comfortingly. But he was listening, too.

At five o'clock, the phone rang.

“Is Mr. Tony Page there?” Man's voice.

“Speaking,” said Tony. “Who is this?”

There was a kind of scuffle at the other end and then there was Alice. “Tony?”

He said, “Where are you?”

She told him.

“Coming.” He hung up.

“What was that?” Gregory got no answer. Tony brushed by Aunt Hortense. He said to Cousin Bee, “Give me your car keys.” She pointed to a table drawer. Tony took the keys and went out the door.

The doctor said, “If you will excuse me...”

“You think that was *Alice*?”

“I have no idea.” The doctor looked and sounded a trifle hurt. “I have an appointment. If you’ll excuse me.”

Tony saw the yellow car behind him. He grimaced. He wasted no time, but it took fifty minutes across the car-choked city. He pulled up at a red curb and to heck with a ticket. Tony grinned up at the façade.

Ziegler’s Drugs.

The place was filled with light, and shining wares. At the back, a little clerk in white was wrapping a woman’s purchases. Medicine and a lipstick. Trouble and dreams. Alice knew all about working in a drugstore, among the drugs that blessed mankind. She lifted her sweet grave face and saw him before he made a sound. The radiance broke upon the face.

Then it seemed that this customer embraced this clerk and this clerk wept into this customers coat for just a moment, because waiting, hiding, hoping, fearing, hadn’t been easy. But then she tumbled out the whole story while he held her.

“Devon,” said Tony. “I was getting sure. He’s followed me. He’s right outside.”

“Tony, I couldn’t tell! I didn’t know your Old Man’s name. So I *haven’t* told. He knows that. Will he try to kill us both?”

“I’m sure he’d like to.” Tony sounded bemused. His right hand touched her cheek in love and wonder.

“Tony, is he going to?” She had a look of reckless willingness.

“Nope,” said Tony. “Because this wonderful drugstore of yours has got a phone booth.”

He swung her around and stuffed her in and put his own body between her and any evil thing. He dialed the Old Man’s number. “No point, after we tell,” he explained to Alice. “So now we tell.”

“Devon’s your man,” he said into the phone. “He tried to beat information out of that Peele woman. Gave himself away. Threw her downstairs. My wife was there. She’s your witness. He’s your man.”

“Homicide, too, eh? Fine! Fine!”

“Maybe not so fine. He’s outside now. We are...”

“We know. Innes trailed you both. Sit tight. Hang on. We’ll buzz Innes...”

Alice breathed in the reality of Tony-alive and Tony-here. She didn’t much care about anything else at the moment.

“Innes thinks Devon’s seen he’s had it,” said the voice on the phone. “Innes will try to close in. A car’s on the way.”

“Anything for me to do?”

“You armed?”

“No.”

“Is he?”

“Don’t know.”

“You keep well back in that drugstore.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And by the way, congratulations.”

“I accept, on behalf of my wife,” said Tony.

“Right,” said the voice, amiably. “Kiss her for all of us.” Tony hung up and kissed her for himself.

The pharmacist was outside the glass door, now, looking troubled. Tony came out. Alice came out and introduced her husband. “The one you’ve been calling for me, Mr. Ziegler.”

“You said it was a man who owes you money.”

“Well, I was just lying,” said Alice cheerfully. “And I’ll have to resign, now, Mr. Ziegler. And I’ll thank you forever more.”

The pharmacist began to look stricken. How not? thought Tony, if he is losing Alice. He watched her sparkling face, but his ears were checking on the street. He was by no means sure that Devon “had seen he’d had it.” There was the risk that a reckless fury would yet send violence into this bright place. So Tony kept two pyramids of brilliant packages, and himself, between the street and Alice. Then he heard some kind of thud out there.

People on the street saw a man get out of the yellow car. Instead of coming to argue with the driver of the black car that had swerved so stupidly into his path, the man turned away.

The driver of the black car called, "Stop!"

Dr. Devon did not stop.

So Herb Innes stopped him, very neatly, as he had been taught to do, with a bullet near the knee.

A siren wailed. A police car came.

By the time they drove Bee's car into the grounds, it was long after dinner. There had been talking to do. Alice must have a lawyer. She was accessory-after-the-fact, in a way. Nobody thought she'd have any real trouble. Tony was alive. And back in the building business. Devon was in the prison ward of the hospital. He would betray no more. And the job of catching him had been quickly done.

As the car stopped, Alice cast a pleading glance up at Tony's face. "Try to remember how it must have seemed to them."

Tony didn't reply.

Ellen opened the door. "Oh, Mr. Tony! Oh... *Mrs. Page!*"

In the big room, they would have this minute to brace themselves. Tony took her there, in the tight shelter of his arm.

There they were, Gregory and the ladies, along the margin of the great rug. It seemed to Alice that every one of them spoke her name.

“How did you find her? Do the *police* know you’ve found her?” Uncle Gregory was filled with civic virtue.

“The police know all about Alice,” Tony said.

“Do they know her secret?” This was Hortense.

“Oh , yes.”

“You know,” said Bee, flatly.

“Sure, I know. I gave it to her.”

Alice said, “I am very sorry that I had to be so much trouble in this house. I couldn’t exactly help it. I hope you are all going to forgive me.”

“I would like to understand,” said Gregory, stiffly.

“Well,” said Tony, “it’s fairly simple. Alice made a promise. Does that mean anything to you? She promised. She gave me her word. Just as Hortense promised not to fuss about some earrings. Just as Bee promised not to mention a birthday. Just as you promised not to get Alice into a chess game.”

“What on earth,” exploded Uncle Greg, “is so important about a chess game?”

“*Or* a promise?” said Tony, and his cold wrath went around.

“Now you are angry,” said Hortense, “and you have no *right*...”

“Alice asks me not to be angry,” Tony said. “Alice asks me to remember how it must have seemed to you.”

“Promised what?” screeched Hortense. “Promised what?”

Tony said cruelly, “I’d like to keep it a secret.”

“Oh, please,” said Alice, “they *said* we needn’t. It was just that I’d promised not to tell where Tony really was. It got difficult. And I made a lot of mistakes. I told lies. I *made* you suspicious of me. I didn’t do it very well.”

“She did it well enough to save my life,” said Tony, “until Gran had to save both of us.”

“Your *life!*”

“Right. I was after a criminal. Well, we got him.”

“A criminal? What kind of criminal?” Greg was aflame.

“Oh, the dirtiest kind,” said Tony. “In the narcotics trade. A killer, too. Oh, he’s a bird, he is!”

“But why couldn’t Alice tell us where you were?”

“Because the criminal was in and out of this house. And if *he’d* known, he’d have fixed *me*. He also would have fixed Alice, as it turned out.”

Their faces were comical, thought Alice, and it was very sad, too. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Nobody could help it. After Mrs. Peele found out, you see, I just had to bribe her. Pretend she was a friend. Give her things. I couldn’t tell you.”

Bee said, with a fearful wag of her dark eyes, “A criminal?”

“Oh, we got him,” Tony said. “Devon’s under arrest. Bullet in his leg, too.” Tony sounded rather pleased about the bullet.

“Walter Devon! Narcotics! A killer!” Gregory was working his mouth like a rabbit’s. Bee alone did not look surprised.

“Sure enough,” said Tony cheerfully. “He killed Mrs. Peele, trying to pry the secret out of *her*. Alice was there.”

Gregory said, after a stunned moment, “But Alice should have told us.”

“*Should she?*” said Tony, and the big room held no sound.

“Well, we’ve got to hang around awhile,” said Tony in a moment. “Purposes of the law, and all that. But we’re going to La Jolla tonight. For a week. Alice has had an awful time.”

“Oh, so have they,” murmured Alice. She thought Bee looked ghastly.

Mrs. Redfern said in a threadlike voice, “Tony, will you do something for me in La Jolla?”

“Of course, Gran.” He didn’t like the look of her, suddenly. “Gran, do you realize that you really did save us both? If Devon had drugged Alice last Thursday night and I was still out of the country if you hadn’t sent Alice away...”

The Staffords were dumb.

The old lady nodded as if murder and escape from murder were quite within her ken. "I never cared for Walter Devon." Her voice strengthened. "Or – especially – for some of his modern ways." Her head was high. "I'd like you to look into a place in La Jolla for elderly people of some means."

The room felt shock. The house felt it.

"I'll do anything you say," said Tony gently.

"Look at us," said his grandmother, "huddled around the rug. I shall sell this enormous unnecessary house."

Hortense was stricken. "Aunt Geraldine! No... aaah, no! *You* couldn't bear a 'place.'"

"Why not?" said the old lady coolly. "It seems that other elderly people find themselves quite comfortable. Do you think I am afraid of the world?"

"What about the real estate?" said Uncle Gregory compulsively. Then he had the grace to flush. "I... sorry." He looked around the room as if to catch a glimpse of it before it vanished.

Now Bee stood up and stretched out her arms and looked at her hands which trembled. "A criminal?" she said bitterly. "The only one who understood me?"

"I understand you," said Mrs. Redfern crisply, "quite well. I know, for instance, that you've been turning and twisting for two days because your good

taste alone... your sense of art, perhaps... had already told you there was something wrong about that man.” Bee stared at her great-aunt. “My poor Beatrice,” said Mrs. Redfern, “you grew up in a shrine. You were not allowed to be young. Since that man’s talked to you, you’ve turned and twisted... haven’t you?... and wished you were not so devoted to me? My dear girl, you *are* not. You never were. It will do you good to have no one to blame for anything. Neither he nor I. Go free and stand up,” commanded the old lady. “You cannot love anyone, you see, until you do.”

Bee ran out of the room.

“Bee isn’t well,” began Hortense nervously.

“She’ll learn to manage,” said Mrs. Redfern confidently. “You and Gregory will manage. I shall manage. Alice?”

“Yes, ma’am?” Alice detached herself from Tony and went over to the chair. “Yes, Gran?” she said affectionately.

“In a small box on my dresser,” said the dulcet arrogant voice, “you will find your earrings.”

“Yes, Gran. Thank you.”

Alice found in the old lady’s eyes no condescension, no sentimental smile. It was something strong that spoke... some toughness that communicated with its counterpart.

“I am glad,” said Tony’s grandmother, “they have come down to a young person of quality.”

THE END

of a Crest Reprint by
Charlotte Armstrong