

Dean Koontz (Deanna Dwyer) – Children of the storm

[Version 2.0 by BuddyDk – august 3 2003]

[Easy read, easy print]

[Completely new scan]

[Some spelling errors has been left as is (This is an old book)]

## **NO HAVEN . . .**

As she and the children stood by the windows, watch-ing the sea which glittered madly with reflected moon-light, Sonya felt more at peace than she had for a long time. The solidity of Seawatch made her feel as if she were in a fortress, sealed away from harm . . .

Alex destroyed that mood in a moment. “Are you wor-ried?” he asked.

Sonya did not look away from the sea. “Why should I be worried?”

“He won't hurt you.”

She looked at Alex. His eyes were very dark, almost too dark to see in the meager light. “Who won't?”

He scuffed his small feet on the carpet and looked back at the rolling sea. “The man.”

“What man?”

“You know,” said Tina. “The man who says he is going to kill me and Alex . . .”

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# CHILDREN OF THE STORM

Deanna Dwyer

LANCER BOOKS  NEW YORK



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## CHILDREN OF THE STORM

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**LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 1560 BROADWAY  
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## BOOK ONE

### ONE

Having lived nearly all of her twenty-three years in the brief summers and the bitter winters of Maine and Massachusetts, Sonya Carter was especially intrigued by the Caribbean—by the al-most too-bright skies, the warm breezes that smelled of salty ocean air, the palm trees that could be seen nearly everywhere, the delicious mangoes, the spectacular sunsets and the sudden twilights that deepened rapidly into purple dark-ness . . . Too, the warmth of the Caribbean seemed to represent life, bustle, excitement, antici-pation—while New England, in her mind, was as-sociated with death and loneliness. She had lost her parents in Maine, thirteen years ago, when their car overturned on a stretch of icy highway. And this past winter, her grandmother, who had raised her ever since she was orphaned at the age of ten, had at last succumbed to the deep and awful coughing that had plagued her for years, the taint of the lungs that had long been her burden. In the last weeks of her life, lying in the crisp white sheets of the hospital bed, she had been thin and dark, her face drawn, too weak even to smile. Certainly, people died all the time in the Carib-bean, just as they did in the rest of the world; this was no place of respite from tragedy, no sacred shelter from the ravages of time. But here, at least, Sonya had never lost anyone whom she desper-ately loved. This newness, this freshness of the place and its lack of associations, was what made it special, an unsullied haven where she could more easily be happy.

Lynda Spaulding, a girl with whom Sonya had roomed during her senior year at the university, thought this journey was a distinctly bad idea, and she went to great lengths to persuade Sonya to call it off. “Going way down there, among strange peo-ple, to work for someone you’ve never met face-to-face? That’s going to be trouble, right from the start, you mark my words.”

Sonya had known that Lynda was more jealous of her success in securing such a position than she was concerned about Sonya’s well-being. “I think it’ll be just fine,” Sonya had said, repeatedly, refus-ing to be disillusioned. “Lots of sun, the ocean—”

“Hurricanes,” her roommate said, determined to throw clouds over the situation.

“Only for part of the year, and then only rarely.”

“I understand the sea can sweep right over one of those small islands when a real bad wind comes up, during a storm—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Lynda!” Sonya snapped, “I’m in more danger on the freeways than I am in the middle of a hurricane!”

Later, Lynda had said, “They practice voodoo down there.”

“In Haiti.”

“That’s the center of it, yes. But they practice it all over those islands.”

Sonya had now been in the islands three days and had yet to see any sign of dark religious rites. She was glad that she had come, and she was look-ing forward to the job.

She had flown from Boston to Miami on a 747 Jumbo Jet, uncomfortable in such an enormous craft, certain that it could not be expected to keep its hundreds of tons aloft for very long, surely not long enough to cover the length of the East Coast. In Miami, she boarded a cruise ship of the French Line for her first sea journey and, less frightened of drowning than of falling twenty thousand feet in a steel aircraft, she immensely enjoyed the trip. The boat stopped at San Juan, Puerto Rico, then leisurely wended its way southward until it stopped at the exquisitely beautiful island of St. Thomas where the beaches were both white and black, the sand hot and the orchids wild. The next stop was St. John’s port, then on to the French-owned island of Guadeloupe where they docked at the city of *Pointe-a-Pitre* late in the afternoon of a brilliantly clear first Tuesday in September. The ship would sail on to Martinique, Barbados, Trini-dad, Curacao and then, eventually, back to France. Sonya disembarked at Guadeloupe,

missing those other exotic ports, but not particularly upset by this. She was eager to begin her new job, her new life, to form new hopes and dreams and set about making them reality.

Her four large suitcases and one metal-bound steamer trunk were unloaded onto the dock at *Pointe-a-Pitre*, where a fiercely dark terminal worker put them onto a four-wheeled cart and led her into the air conditioned passenger's lounge.

"It be an outrageous wahm day," he said, smiling with many bright teeth, his voice syrupy and yet a musical delight that she thought she would never tire of no matter how long her job kept her in these climes. When she tipped him, he said, "De lady be outrageous kind," half-bowed and walked away.

The lounge was busy—though most of the hustling and bustling was done by the tourists, chiefly Americans who appeared unable to adjust to the lazy ambience of this new land. The dark-skinned workers all seemed loose-jointed and half-dreaming, their pace adjusted to what the tropics required of a man if he were to live his allotted span and remain healthy.

"Miss Carter?" Someone said from behind her.

Startled, she turned, her heart thumping, and looked into the eyes of an extremely handsome man perhaps four years her senior.

He said, "My name's Bill Peterson. I'm the Dougherty's chauffeur, messenger and boat captain all rolled into one." He was tanned so deeply that he could have passed for a native at a quick glance, teeth white against his brown skin, only his blue eyes stood out startlingly from his dusky countenance. He made Sonya feel out of place, a foreigner with her pale skin and bright yellow hair. At least, they had the blue eyes in common.

"I'm glad to meet you," she said. "Can I call you Bill?"

He smiled. He had a very winning smile, almost boyish. He said, "You'd better."

"Sonya, then, for me." She had to look up in order to speak to him, for he towered over her five-feet, four-inches.

"Good!" he said, clearly pleased with her. "I can see that you're going to get along well with everyone. I was afraid you might be hard to get to know, a snob or a complainer—or something worse. On an island as small as Mr. Dougherty's *Distingue*, it would be intolerable to have a staff member who was anything less than fully amicable."

"How small an island is it?" she asked.

She was remembering Lynda Spaulding's warnings about high water and hurricanes.

"One and a half miles long, slightly less than three-quarters of a mile wide."

"That doesn't sound so tiny," she said.

"In a vast ocean, it is infinitesimal."

"I suppose."

He seemed to sense the source of her uneasiness, for he said, "I wouldn't worry about it sinking out of sight. Its been there for thousands of years and looks to last even longer."

She let the musical name roll around on her tongue for the thousandth time since she had first heard the word a month ago, found it as pleasant as she always had before. "*Distingue*," she said dreamily. "It almost sounds like paradise."

"The name is French," Bill Peterson said. "It means 'elegant of appearance', and the island is just what the name implies—palms, orchids, bougainvillea and white-white sand."

She smiled at him, at his obvious enthusiasm for the island. He was a big man, a couple of inches past six feet, slim and well-muscled. He was wearing white jeans and a maroon, short-sleeved, knit-ted shirt; his arms were brown as nuts and knotted with muscle, his hands broad and strong. Yet, talking about the island, he sounded like a child, a little boy who was breathlessly anxious for her to share his enthusiasm, his sense of wonder.

"I can't wait to see it," she said.

"Well," he said, looking at her luggage, "we'd best get your things along to the private docks where I have the *Lady Jane* tied up."

"That's Mr. Dougherty's boat?" Sonya asked.

She could still not get accustomed to the idea that she was working for a bona fide millionaire,

someone who could own an island and the boat to get to and from it. It was all like a scene from some fairy tale, a dream from which she would wake sooner or later—or, if her old college roomie were to be believed, it was not a dream but a nightmare. In any case, it did not seem *real*.

“Yes,” Bill Peterson said, “but it’s not the most interesting of boats. I’m an experienced trimaran captain, and I always prefer sailing to the use of engines. For one thing, it’s ecologically more sound a method. But more important than that, sails give a man a sense of accomplishment, a real communion with the sea that the use of engines inhibits. But Mr. Dougherty is not really much of a sea lover. He believes that gasoline is far more reliable than the wind—though I’ve seen more small boats with engine trouble than those caught unexpectedly in the eye of a calm. The *Lady Jane’s* not really a bad little cabin cruiser, though. You’ll probably like her.”

He whistled for and located another porter, supervised the loading of Sonya’s baggage onto another wheeled cart and then led the way out of the chrome and glass structure into the suddenly oppressive—by comparison—heat of the late afternoon sun.

The tourists out on the promenade easily outnumbered the locals, dressed in the most awful bermudas and loud shirts, the women in slacks too tight for them, many almost comical in their floppy straw hats and exaggerated sunglasses. But Sonya had had enough of colorful costumes, native accents and mannerisms; now, all that she wanted was to settle down on *Distingue* as a governess for Mr. and Mrs. Dougherty’s two small children, and begin a career that would make use of her education and training.

The private docks at the bay port of *Pointe-a-Pitre* were not shabby, by any means, more well-appointed than the public landing decks. They seemed newly built of sea-bleached stone, concrete and tightly-fitted, well-oiled dark wooden planks. The *Lady Jane* nestled in a berth barely large enough to accommodate her, floated lazily on the swell, beyond a sign that read: PRIVATE. JO-SEPH L. DOUGHERTY. LADY JANE. She was perhaps twenty-five feet long, slim and dazzlingly white, trimmed quite subtly in a dark blue and contrasting gold stripe, spotlessly clean and with an air of welcome about her.

“How lovely!” Sonya said, meaning it.

“You’ve been on a boat before?” Bill asked.

“Never, except for the ship coming down, of course. But that was so terribly huge that I didn’t feel as if I was on a boat at all.”

“I know what you mean.”

“It was more like a floating town.”

“You’ll *know* you’re on a boat when you’re on the *Lady Jane!*” he said. “The sea bounces her a bit, unless we put her up toward top speed—and *then she* bounces the *sea*”

The porter put the bags on the main deck, near the pilot’s cabin, accepted a tip from Peterson, doffed a tiny porter’s hat as he smiled, and wheeled away the luggage cart.

With a gentleness she would not have thought Peterson capable of—since he was such a big man—he took her arm and helped her down the steps and onto the deck. He escorted her on a complete tour of the pilot’s cabin, the galley and the two staterooms below deck.

“It’s utterly gorgeous,” Sonya said, enchanted by the sparkling little machine.

“You’ll have plenty of opportunity to go out in her,” Peterson said. “The kids both like to be taken on trips into the smaller islands, the cays and the backwater places. And on your off time, you might want me to take you out as well.”

“You mean I can use the boat for my own enjoyment,” she asked.

“Of course! The Doughertys love the beach and shore fishing. But as I said, neither of them is really a sea lover, except at a proper distance. If you don’t make use of the *Lady Jane*, she’ll just sit there at the dock, rusting.”

“I wouldn’t let her rust!”

He laughed. “Spoken like a real sailor.”

She stood in the pilot’s cabin with him while he maneuvered the small craft out of its slot along the wharf, amazed that he did not slam it rudely against the sleek hulls of its neighbor ships and that when he

had taken it into the harbor, he was able to guide it around the plentitude of other boats—perhaps a hundred of them—that bobbed on the bright water. He seemed to have been born on a ship, raised with his hands around a wheel and his eyes trained to nautical instruments.

She asked no questions, and he started no conversations until they were out of the busiest sea lanes and in the open water, the heavy ocean swell rolling rhythmically toward, under and beyond them. “How far to *Distingue*?”

“Twenty-five minutes, half an hour,” he said. “It’s not actually very far from civilization, but the illusion of isolation is pretty good.” He handled the wheel nonchalantly, setting course by some method which she could not divine.

“I’m sure the children like living in a place where there’s no one to compel them to go to school,” she said, holding fast to a chrome hand railing as the boat slapped through the crests of the foam-tipped waves.

“They’ve been pretty rambunctious since the family came down here from New Jersey,” Peterson agreed. “But you’re a school teacher as well as a nurse, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“So their days of freedom are limited.” He grinned, very warmly, very reassuringly, a man almost any young woman would be attracted to.

“I hope they don’t see me as an old dragon,” Sonya said. “I don’t intend to make their studies burdensome, if I can help it.”

“No one could see you as an old dragon,” he said. “Absolutely no one at all.”

She was not accustomed to flattery, and she was unable to respond with more than a blush.

He said, “You seem to have picked up quite a bit of education for a girl so young.” He looked sideways at her, then back at the sun-dappled sea.

She said, “One of the few things that bills and taxes couldn’t touch in my father’s small estate was a trust fund he had established for my education. It couldn’t be used for anything else; and I took full advantage of it. After nurse’s school, I wasn’t really certain that I wanted to spend my life in hospitals watching people die little-by-little. So I enrolled in the elementary education curriculum at a small college near my grandmother’s place. I don’t know whether I would ever have enjoyed teaching in a normal grade school atmosphere. This job—governess and tutor, is just about perfect, though.”

“The kids are bound to like you,” he said, smiling at her.

“I hope so. I also hope I can teach them well enough to keep up with the island government’s requirements.”

“Whatever you teach them,” he said, the tone of his voice having suddenly hardened a bit, “they’ll be safer on *Distingue* than in a town somewhere, in any regular school. Safer than they’d be in private schools, too, for that matter.”

*Lady Jane* rose, fell, groaned as the water slapped her hull, whined on through the choppy seas.

Sonya felt a shiver course the length of her spine, though she was not sure of the cause. The day was not chilly, nor the company—thus far—full of gloom. Yet there was something behind what Peterson had just said, something in the way he had said it that was distinctly unsettling . . .

She said, “Safe?”

“Yes. The island puts them out of the reach of anyone who might take it in mind to hurt them.”

He was completely serious now, with no more white-toothed, bright-eyed smiles for her, his big hands gripped hard about the wheel as if he were taking his anger out on that hard, plastic circle.

“Why should anyone want to hurt them?” she asked, genuinely perplexed but uncomfortably certain that he had an answer. Bill Peterson seemed a level-headed man, not the sort to generate wild stories or unbased fears.

“You don’t know about what’s happened?” he asked.

“No.”

He turned away from the water and looked at her, obviously concerned. He said, “Nothing about the threats?”

“Threats?” she asked.



The chill along her spine had grown worse. Though she had by now gotten accustomed to the rollicking progress of the speeding craft, she still held tightly to the shining hand railing, her knuck-les white.

“Back in New Jersey, someone threatened to kill both of the kids—Alex and Tina.”

The *Lady Jane* rose.

The *Lady Jane* fell.

But the ship and the sea both seemed to have re-ceded now as the thing that Bill Peterson was telling her swelled in importance until it filled her mind.

She said, “I suppose wealthy people are often the targets of cranks who—”

“This was no crank,” he said. There was no doubt in his voice, not a shred of it.

“Oh?”

“I wasn't up in New Jersey with them, of course. This house on *Distingue* is their winter home for four months of the year, and I'm here the year-around, keeping it up. Mr. Dougherty, Joe, told me what happened up there, though. It scared him enough to finally move his family and serv-ants down here ahead of schedule. What he told me happened up there would have frightened me too, no question.”

She waited, knowing that he would tell her about it and angry with him for having brought it up. Yet, at the same time, she wanted to know, had to know, all about it. She remembered her roomie's warnings about coming to an unknown place, to work for unknown people . . .

“It was telephone calls at first. Mrs. Dougherty took the first one. Some man, obviously trying to disguise his voice, told her what he would do to both the children when he found an opportunity to corner one or both of them when they were alone.”

“What did he threaten?”

Peterson hesitated for a moment, then sighed wearily, as if it required too much energy to keep such awful things secret. “He was a damned ugly man. He promised to take a knife to them.”

“Stab them?”

“Yes.”

She shuddered.

He said, “And cut their throats.”

The chill had become a positively arctic line along her slender back, had frozen her to her place by the safety railing, sent cold fingers throughout her body.

“There was worse than that,” Peterson said. “But you wouldn't want to hear what he said he'd do, not in detail. Basically, he made it clear he wanted to mutilate them before he killed them.”

“My God!” Sonya said, quaking openly now, queasy inside. “The man sounds mad.”

“Very obviously, he was,” Peterson agreed.

“Mrs. Dougherty listened to all of this, put up with the filthy things he was saying?”

“She says she was frozen by that voice, that she couldn't have hung up even if she'd wanted to. And believe me, she wanted to!” He concentrated on the instruments for a moment, seemed to make a course adjustment with the wheel, then said, “He called twelve times in one week, always with the same kind of patter, though it got even worse, even more brutal than what I've told you.”

“And they listened?”

“Mr. Dougherty began taking all the calls, and he hung up. At first he did, anyway.”

“Why'd he change his tactics?”

“Well, they began to wonder if they had a real psychotic on their hands—instead of just a crank. They went to the police and, finally, had a tap put on their phone. The guy called six more times while the cops were trying to trace him.”

“Trying to trace him?”

“Well—”

“Good God, you'd think they'd want to find out what kind of a depraved—”

It was Peterson's turn to interrupt. “Oh, the po-lice wanted to find him, sure enough. But tracing a telephone call, in these days of direct dial systems, isn't all that easy. You have to keep the man on the line for four or five minutes, until they get it pinned down. And this character was getting clever. He was

making his calls shorter and shorter, packing more and more violent rhetoric into them. The police wanted him, because that's part of their job, but also because the pressure was on them. I'm not giving away any secrets when I say that Joe Dougherty wields influence and can force an issue when he wants to. In this case, he wanted to. But it took them six more calls from this crackpot to locate the phone."

"And?"

"It was just a payphone."

"Still—"Sonya said.

"After that, he didn't call again for a while, for more than two weeks, Joe said."

"The police kept a tap going?"

Peterson said, "No. After a week, they packed it up and convinced Joe that their man was only a hoaxer, perverted, to be sure, but not serious. They didn't explain how he got hold of the Doughertys' unlisted number, but they were ready to ignore that. So were the Doughertys. Things were much easier if they believed it, you see."

"I see," she said.

She wanted to sit down in one of the command chairs by the controls, but she was afraid she would lose her balance if she let go of the railing.

"Then, after two weeks without any calls, they found a note in Tina's room, pinned to her pillow."

"Note?"

"It had been written, so far as they could tell, by the same man who had made the telephone calls."

Sonya closed her eyes, tried to ride with the rocking vessel and with the story Peterson was telling her, but she did not think she was going to have much luck.

"The note made the same threats as before, only elaborated on them—blood-curdling things, really obscene." He shook his head and looked as if he would spit out the taste of the memory. If it were this unpleasant to recall, for Peterson, what must it have been like for the Doughertys, who had experienced it all first hand?

"Wait a minute," Sonya said, confused and not a little frightened by what he had told her. "Are you saying that they found the note in their own house—that this madman had been in the little girl's room?"

"Yes."

"But *how*?"

Bill looked at his instruments, held the wheel steady in his powerful hands as he spoke. "No one saw or heard him—even though the butler, maid, cook and handyman must have all been around when he entered the house. Perhaps even Mrs. Dougherty was there, depending on the time the note was placed."

"They called the police."

"Yes," Peterson said. "And the house was watched by plainclothesmen in unmarked cars. Still, he managed to get into the house, three nights later, leaving notes on the doors of both the kids' rooms."

"The police didn't see him?"

"No. They started trying to convince the Doughertys that one of the servants was involved—"

"Sounds reasonable to assume," Sonya said.

"Except that Joe has had these people with him for years—some of them served his mother and father when they were alive and maintaining a big house. Joe just couldn't see what any of them would have against him or the kids. He treats his employees well, as you'll soon discover. Besides, none of that crew would be capable of such a thing: a gentler lot, you'll not find anywhere. When you meet them, you'll see what I mean." He looked at the sea, looked back at her and said, "Besides, neither Mrs. Dougherty nor Joe recognized the crackpot's voice."

"You said, before, that he tried to disguise his voice."

"Yes, but even disguised, they would have recognized the voice of someone they talk to every day and have known for years."

"I suppose," Sonya said, reluctantly.

For the first time, Peterson seemed to realize what the story had done to her composure, and he forced a smile for her, an imitation of his genuine grin. "Hey, don't let it upset you like that! No one got hurt. And, obviously, the kids are safe down here on *Distingue*. They've been here since the middle of

June, going on three months, with no more incidents.”

“Still,” Sonya said hollowly, “the man who made the threats is on the loose.”

“Oh, brother,” Peterson said, slapping his fore-head, “I must have come on like a real doomsayer first class! I really didn't mean to worry you, Sonya. I was just surprised that Joe hadn't explained the situation to you. Look, he and Mrs. Dougherty are sure the crisis is passed. They're so sure that they want to take a few weeks off for a trip to California. Once you're settled in, they'll pack and be off. Now, would they leave their kids if they thought there was still the slightest breath of danger?”

“No,” she said, “I guess they wouldn't.” However, all of this sudden attempt to reassure her had actually done very little to erase the image of a de-ranged and murderous child molester which he had first painted for her.

To distract her, he grinned even more broadly, and a bit more genuinely, and waved his arm dramatically ahead of them. “What do you think of our island, our lovely *Distingue*? Isn't she about the most marvelous piece of real estate you've ever seen?”

Sonya looked up, surprised to see the island looming before them through the curve of the sun-tinted, plexiglass windscreen, like the opening scene in some motion picture, too beautiful for anything but fantasy. She had not noticed it growing on the horizon, but that might have been because, except for the central spine of low hills, the island was nearly as flat as the sea which lapped at all sides of it. A thick stand of lacy palm trees backed the startlingly white beaches and shaded, on the nearest of the hills, a mammoth house that must surely contain two dozen rooms or even more. It was of white board, with balconies and porches, several gables and many clean, square windows that reflected the golden-red brilliance of the sun and gave the place a look of warmth and welcome.

If she had not just heard the story which Bill Peterson had told her on the way over from *Pointe-a-Pitre*, she would have thought that the Dougherty house was absolutely charming, a beautiful mass of angles, lines and shapes, the product of a good architect and of expert crafts-men spurred to do their best by a customer who could afford any expense whatsoever, any luxury that struck his fancy. Now, however, with the real-life nightmare hovering always in the back of her mind, like a dark bird of prey, the house seemed curiously menacing, swathed in purple shadows, full of darkened niches, harsh, sharp, a mysterious monolith against the sweet Caribbean horizon, almost a sentient creature lying in wait on the brow of that tropic hill. She began to wonder, more seriously than before, if her old college roommate had been right about the dangers in coming to this place . . .

“You'll like it,” Peterson said.

She said nothing.

“This is God's country, in the true sense,” Peterson said, still anxious to repair her mood, which he felt responsible for damaging. “Nothing bad can happen here.”

She wished she could be sure of that.

## TWO

Henry Dalton, the house butler, came down to the small boat dock to meet them, pushing an aluminum luggage cart over the uneven boards of the little pier. He was sixty-five, but looked ten years older, a slight man with snow white hair, a grizzled face, hard black eyes that looked far too young for the bushy white eyebrows that arched above them like senior citizen caterpillars. Though he must have been nearly six feet tall, he seemed smaller than Sonya's five-feet, four-inches, because he drew in on himself, shrank himself, like a dried fruit, as if he could protect himself from any further aging merely by rolling up and letting the world pass over him.

When he spoke, his voice was tight and dry too, almost quarrelsome. "Henry Dalton," he said, not offering her his hand.

She smiled and said, "Sonya Carter." And she did offer him her hand.

He looked at it as if it were a snake, wrinkled his face even more, until he was in danger of losing his eyes and mouth altogether in some sharp crease of flesh. But at last he reached out and took her hand, held it briefly in his long, bony fingers, then merely dropped it as a man might drop a curious seashell he had lifted from the beach and studied and grown bored with.

He said, "I came to get your luggage."

Bill Peterson had already carried her bags from the *Lady Jane*, and now he carefully stacked them on the metal cart, his brown arms bunched with muscle, his thick hair falling slightly forward, into his eyes, as he bent to the task.

"This way, then," Henry said when the cart was loaded. He turned, gripping the wheeled cart, and led them back toward the mansion, walking ram-rod stiff. He was wearing dark slacks and a white, short-sleeved shirt made to be worn outside his trousers. Though a gentle breeze mussed Sonya's hair, it did not stir the hem of Henry's white shirt —almost as if Nature herself were wary about disturbing the old man's dignity.

Sonya and Peterson fell back a few steps, out of the butler's hearing, and she said, "You didn't warn me about him!"

Peterson smiled and shook his head. "Most of the time, Henry's as pleasant an old coot as you could meet. Occasionally, though, he seems to vent all his stored-up antagonisms, and he has a bad day. Everyone avoids him on a bad day, and it's like it never happened. Unfortunately, he's chosen your first day here as his first bad day in weeks."

They reached the front porch steps, where Peterson and Henry worked together to maneuver the cart onto the porch floor, and then they went into the foyer of the Dougherty house, through a heavy screen door and a heavier mahogany door, into air conditioned coolness that was sweeter than the false relief of the passenger terminal at the docks of *Pointe-a-Pitre*.

"How lovely!" Sonya said, without reservation.

And the foyer *did* seem to promise a marvelous house beyond. It was paneled in the darkest teak wood imaginable, almost black, carpeted in a rich red shag that made her feel as if she were in the dark chamber of a furnace with hot coals beneath her feet and, paradoxically, cool air all around her. Original oil paintings, of many different schools, were tastefully arranged on the walls of the small room, the pieces of naturalism and sur-realism somehow blending when they should not have, complementing one another when they should have clashed. The foyer ceiling, and the ceiling of the corridor which led from it, were high and open-beamed, also of that same very dark teak, quite in contrast with what one expected in a house in the tropics, but nonetheless effective for their striking anachronism.

Henry lifted her luggage from the cart and placed it on the flat bed of an open escalator platform at the bottom of the steps. He punched a button in the wall, which Sonya had previously mistaken for a light switch, and sent the machine slowly along the steps. It was attached to the wall on an inset track,

moved slowly, and would save Henry all the effort of lugging those bags to the second floor.

The old man said, "I'll put them in your room, later. First, I imagine you'd like to meet the rest of the staff."

"Of course," Sonya said.

"This way, then."

"I'll tag along," Bill Peterson whispered to her.

"I'd appreciate it," she said, smiling thankfully at him. She hoped the rest of the staff was more like Bill than like Henry.

They followed the red-carpeted corridor to the rear of the house, went through a white, swinging door and into the kitchen, which was fully twenty-five-feet on a side and equipped with all the latest gadgets and conveniences. All the appliances were new, white and chrome, the pots and pans all copper-plated. In the middle of the room, at a heavy, built-in table that contained a double sink, a woman Henry's age was grating a block of swiss cheese into a large porcelain bowl.

She looked up, her chubby face slightly red, her dark eyes alive and young, put down the block of cheese and said, "Who have we here?"

"Sonya Carter," Henry said. "The woman who'll be taking care of the children." He looked at Sonya and said, "This is Helga, the cook."

"Glad to meet you," Sonya said.

"Same here, same here," Helga said. She had stood up, from her tall stool, as if this were a formal meeting, and Sonya could see that the chubbiness extended beyond her face. She appeared to be the sort of cook who constantly sampled her own preparations.

"There's not a cook in the islands compares to Helga," Bill Peterson said. "Thank God for the sea and the boat and all the other things to do around here. If there weren't a lot of ways to exercise, we'd all be as stout as Helga herself."

The cook blushed proudly and sat down again, picked up the cheese and looked at Sonya under her eyebrows. "Nothing really that special," she said, shyly.

"Helga's also too modest for her own good," Peterson said.

She blushed even more and returned to grating her cheese.

At that moment, the back door opened, and a small, tidy woman in her mid-fifties came in from outside, brushing her small hands together more as if to satisfy herself that some chore was completed than to actually clean them. She appeared to be the sort of woman who would never have to wash her hands, simply because she was also the type of woman who would never get them dirty in the first place. Her hair was nearly all white, drawn back from around her sharp face and tied in a bun at the back of her head. She wore no lip-stick or makeup, but had a flawless complexion for a woman her age. She wore a simple, light blue dress that vaguely resembled a uniform, and she moved with a sprightliness that Sonya had often seen in career nurses who enjoyed their jobs and were like new girls in the hospital after even thirty years of service.

"My wife," Henry explained to Sonya. And the girl thought that, for a moment, some of the old man's vinegar seeped away, as if this woman could sweeten him merely by her presence. To his wife, he said, "Bess, this is Sonya Carter, the kids' teacher."

Bess crossed the kitchen and took Sonya's hands, looked up at her like some concerned mother assessing her son's fiance. She grinned, glanced past Sonya at Bill Peterson, then back at the girl, and she said, "Well, I'm sure Bill couldn't be more pleased." There was a tone of mischief in her voice. "After all, until now, he's had to take the boat to Guadeloupe and even farther to look at pretty girls. He'll be saving himself the trip, now."

Sonya felt herself blushing, as Helga had blushed earlier, and she wished *she* had a block of cheese to grate, something to hide herself in.

But if Bess were mischievous, she was also considerate, and she relieved Sonya's embarrassment as easily as she had caused it, by asking questions about the trip down from the States. For several minutes, they stood there in the kitchen, talking, as if they had known each other for years and were only catching up on things after a short separation. Henry continued to soften noticeably around his wife, and Sonya

felt certain that the center of the Dougherty household was probably not Mr. Dougherty or Mrs. Dougherty or either of their children—but was Bess.

“Well,” Henry said after a few minutes, “she ought to meet the others. And then I’d guess she wants to freshen up and rest after that trip.”

“Leroy’s outside, patching the concrete at the pavilion,” Bess said. “I was just talking to him.”

Henry led Sonya and Peterson outside, onto the mat of tough tropical grass that covered the lawn like a flawless carpet, took them down a winding flagstone walkway toward an open-air pavilion down near the easterly beach. The building was perhaps forty feet long and twenty wide, with picnic tables and benches arranged around its waist-high rail walls. The roof was shingled tightly but laced over with palm fronds to give the illusion of primitive construction, and the final effect was exceedingly pleasant.

“Mrs. Dougherty likes to sit here in the morning, when it’s cool and when the insects are not out. She reads a lot,” Henry informed them.

Leroy Mills, the handyman who was working on the pavilion floor, stood over his most recent piece of patchwork, watching their approach, smiling uncertainly. He appeared to be in his middle thirties, small and dark, with an olive complexion that indicated Italian or Puerto Rican blood. He was thin, but with a stringy toughness that made it clear he was not a weak man at all.

Henry made the introductions in a clipped fashion and finished with, “Leroy lived in Boston for a time.”

“Really?” Sonya asked. “I went to school there.”

Leroy nodded. “Too cold in Boston, for me.”

“Me, too,” she said. “What part of Boston are you from?”

“A part I don’t like to remember,” Leroy said, still smiling uneasily. “I haven’t lived there for quite a while now. I was Mr. Dougherty’s handyman in New Jersey, before we moved here.”

“You were a handyman in Boston, too?” she asked, trying to make some pleasant conversation. Though he seemed nice enough, Leroy Mills was not particularly easy to engage in conversation.

“Yes, there too.”

“I’m a fumble fingers myself,” she said. “I admire someone who can fix things.”

“If you need something repaired, almost anything, just call for me,” he said. He looked at the wet concrete at his feet. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get back to work.”

Their conversation had been a most mundane one, yet it stuck with Sonya all the way back to the house. Mills had been so uncommunicative, even though Henry, by mentioning Boston, had provided them with a simple take-off point for an exchange of greetings. Of course, Mills might only be shy, as Helga so obviously was. And, when all was said and done, did she really know anything more about the others than she did about the handyman? Helga was too shy to say much. Bill Peterson was talkative and open but had not said much about himself; likewise, Bess. And Henry, of course, had said little because, as Peterson had explained, he was having a bad day. Yet . . . Mills’ uncommunicative nature seemed different—as if he were being purposefully secretive. She had asked where he lived in Boston; he had avoided saying. She had asked what he did there; he had skipped that subject too. She realized, now, that he had been completely circuitous in his responses, as if she had been questioning him rather than making polite conversation.

At the house again, she shrugged off the incident. She was building proverbial mountains out of molehills—all because of the story Peterson had told her on the way over from *Pointe-a-Pitre*. Child mobsters, threatening telephone calls, poison pen letters, madmen-on-the-loose—none of these things made for peace of mind, and all of them served to set the imagination working overtime.

In the front foyer again, Bill Peterson said, “Well, I’ll leave you to your rest for now and see you at dinner. You’ll meet the Doughertys then, too.”

“They eat meals with us?” she asked, surprised.

Peterson laughed. “It’s a democratic household, all the way. Joe Dougherty is in no way a snob, and he runs a lively dinner table. Leroy, you and I will eat evening meals with the family; the kitchen staff, which has to be cooking and serving, will eat separately, of course.”

“See you at dinner, then.”

She followed Henry up the wide central stair-case to the second floor, along that main corridor to the far end where her room lay at the southeast corner of the great house.

The chamber was painted a restful shade of beige, with an inlaid teak ceiling. Dark blue carpet, the color of clean seawater, gave deliciously beneath her feet. The furniture was all hand-carved red cedar, as Henry explained. It was in a Polynesian mode, with god faces hewn into most of the open surfaces and with holy symbols—fish, suns, moons, stars, leaves—cut in between the faces. It was all heavy and rich, not in the least bit feminine but Sonya liked it. She had never really been one for frills, laces and satins, but preferred things that were *different*, unique. And this was certainly as different as she could have asked for. A full bath, in dark blues and greens, lay off her main room and included shower and sunken tub. Her closet was nearly as large as a whole bedroom itself.

“May I help you unpack?” Henry asked, after bringing the last of her bags.

“No thanks,” she said. “I’ll feel more at home if I set things up myself.”

“Dinner at eight o’clock, then,” Henry said. “You’ll find the family in the front dining room.”

“Fine,” she said. “Thank you, Henry.”

He nodded, and he left without making a sound, closing the heavy wooden door as softly as a professional burglar stealing away from the scene of his crime.

Sonya went first to the single window in her room, a large, many-paned sheet of glass that gave view of the back lawn, the flagstone path, most of the pavilion at the foot of the hill and, beyond that, the white beach and the endless blue-green sea. It was a beautiful view, and she knew she would make it her first stop every morning when she got out of bed, a quick glance at those marvelous skies, at the palms and sand and the breakers rolling relentlessly in toward shore. It was all so clean, so alive, so free of death. Or it seemed to be.

She remembered the man who had threatened to kill the Dougherty children, and she wondered . . .

Next, she went to her dresser and examined her reflection in the oversized oval mirror. Her long, yellow hair had already been bleached a shade or two lighter by the tropic sun, and it would be nearly pure white in a few weeks. Her face was pale, but that could be changed in a few days. For the most part she looked fine, except for the weariness of all her recent travels, which showed in an undefinable film, a thin mask of exhaustion.

Abruptly, she realized that she had been looking at herself only to discover what kind of a picture she had presented to Bill Peterson, and she blushed anew, though there was no one to see her this time. She felt like a silly young girl struck by a juvenile infatuation, rather than like a mature young woman, and she looked away from her reflection, afraid that she would accidentally catch her own eyes, meet her own gaze and end up laughing at herself.

Instead, she studied the frame of the large mirror, which was also of red cedar, carved to form two long slim alligators. Their scaly tails touched at the base of the mirror, hiding the sturdy braces that attached the piece to the top of the dresser, while their wide and toothy mouths met snout-to-snout at the top of the mirror. It was a beautiful piece, of excellent craftsmanship—but it was also somewhat sinister.

She turned away from the mirror altogether and opened her first suitcase, pulled out the carefully folded clothes and began to fill up the hangers in the enormous walk-in closet. She was nearly half finished with her unpacking when the knock came at her door, loud and rapid and insistent. She finished slipping a dress onto another hanger and put that away in the closet before she went to see who knocked.

When she opened the door, she stepped back slightly, sucking in her breath, wondering whether she ought to slam the door shut again. The man on the other side was positively menacing: better than six feet tall, so broad at the shoulders that—had he been wearing a jacket instead of a light-weight white shirt—she might have thought he was wearing padding. His chest was huge, stomach flat, arms like those of a serious-minded weight-lifter—all corded with muscle, thick and sinewy. His face was broad, his features crude enough to be the preliminary work of a sculptor hacking at a new piece of granite. His eyes were intensely blue and watchful, his nose twisted and gristly from having once been broken and badly repaired. His lips were thin, almost cruel, and were not now curled into either a smile or a frown, but held tight and bloodless and straight, as if he were just barely able to hold down his fury. She could

not imagine what he could be furious with her for.

“Miss Carter?”

His voice was hard, raspy, and—if a voice could be described by more than sound—cold enough to chill her.

“Yes?”

Her own voice sounded small, weak and miserable by comparison, and she wondered if he could sense her uncertainty and her fear.

“My name's Rudolph Saine.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said, though she was not particularly pleased at all.

He said, “I'm the childrens' bodyguard.”

“I hadn't heard they had one,” she said.

He nodded. “That's understandable. The other members of the staff don't know me that well yet, and since they've all been together for years, I sort of fade out of their minds. I only came on with Mr. Dougherty when he had to move down here. And most of my time is spent with the kids, away from the others.”

“Well, Mr. Saine,” she said, “I imagine you and I will be seeing quite a lot of each other.” The prospect didn't please her, but she tried to smile for him.

“Yes,” he said. He looked at her carefully, as if scrutinizing a possibly dangerous insect, apparently decided she had no sting. “I'd like to talk with you about the childrens' safety—some Do's and Don'ts, if you want to call them that.” He had moved his lips, but he had still avoided smiling or frowning, almost as if those expressions were completely beyond him. Sonya found him too sober and serious to be at ease with.

“I'm just unpacking—” she began.

“I won't take long.”

“Well—”

“I want to get some things straight, between us, right from the very start.”

She hesitated a moment more, then stepped back, holding the door, and said, “Come in.”

Rudolph Saine sat in the largest of the two easy chairs in the room and nearly filled it to overflowing. He gripped the cedar arms in his hands, as if he were afraid the thing might start to fly at any moment—or as if he thought he might have to get up in a great rush and launch himself at some enemy or other.

Sonya chose the edge of the mammoth Polynesian bed and said, “Now, Mr. Saine, what should I know?”

He said, “You must never take the kids anywhere without calling me first. Every time you venture away from the house, you must be certain that I am with you.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“Even if you're only taking them out to the pavilion,” he elaborated, “I want to go along.”

“I'll remember that.”

“I feel they're safe within the house itself, during the daylight hours anyway, but I never feel comfortable when they're outside.”

“I can understand that.”

“Even when they're *in* the house,” Saine went on, “I'm right there with them about half the time—or I'm within sight of them, or within earshot if they should call for me.”

Sonya supposed Saine's diligence was admirable, but she wished that he wouldn't go on about it so, for it only served to remind her what Bill Peterson had told her on the boat, earlier. She was trying to think about the vitality of the Caribbean, the bright future she had, the good times that awaited her. She did not want to face the fact that death might have followed her from the north into this sunny land.

She said, “Rest assured, I'll not take them anywhere without you.”

His thin lips seemed to grow even thinner. He said, “I sleep next to their room, and I usually remain awake until four in the morning, for it's between two and four that most people choose to break into a house. I sleep from four until eleven, and I'm up and ready for duty by noon. I'd appreciate it if you could limit your excursions, away from the house, to the afternoons or evenings.”



“No trouble,” Sonya said.

“Thank you.”

“Anything else?” she asked, getting up, trying to imply by her movement that she wasn't anxious to hear anything else, even if he were not finished.

“One thing.”

“That is?”

He hesitated, looked away from her for the first time and, then, gaining resolution from some source she could not guess, looked back again and said, “Occasionally, Miss Carter, you might think that it isn't necessary to call for me—so long as another member of the staff is with you and the children. I want you to understand that no one else can take my place in this respect. You must always call for me, no matter who on the staff offers to accompany you in my place. And if, for some reason, I am not available—should it be my day off, or should I be on the mainland for some other reason, you must cancel your plans and re-main with the children in the house.”

She felt that chill along her backbone again, like a fingernail of ice slicing her flesh.

“Do you understand?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I would appreciate it if you didn't tell the rest of the staff what I have just told you.”

Quietly, her voice nearly a whisper, though she had not meant for it to be so low, Sonya said, “Then you don't trust them?”

“No.”

“None of them?”

“None.”

“Then you think that those threats might have been made by someone within the household?”

Saine stood up with fluid grace, like an uncurl-ing cat despite all his muscles. He towered over her, and he looked capable of handling anyone who might try to harm the children.

He said, “Perhaps.”

She said, “Is there anyone you suspect espe-cially?”

“Everyone.”

“Even me?”

“You too.”

She said, “But I didn't even know the Dough-ertys when they were having all this trouble.”

He said nothing.

She was determined to press the issue. “Well? How can you think I might be the guilty one?”

“I did not say I could show *how* all the suspects came to be suspects in my mind. My personal form of judgment does not operate according to the normal standards of law, Miss Carter. In my personal, private, mental court, everyone is guilty until proven innocent.”

“I see.”

He went to the door, opened it, turned and looked at her with those piercingly blue, blue eyes. “Since you will be nearly as responsible for the children as me, Miss Carter, I suggest that you adopt my own pessimism. Trust no one but yourself.”

“Not even you?”

“Not even me,” he said.

He stepped into the corridor, closed the door and walked quietly away, the deep-pile carpet soaking up his footsteps.

Sonya had lost her enthusiasm for unpacking.

## THREE

The front dining room was fully forty feet long and twenty wide, containing an enormous china closet, the longest dining table that Sonya ever had seen, and a liberal sprinkling of *objets d'art*— paintings, metal sculptures, glass and marble figurines in both exquisite miniatures and larger sizes, elaborately hand-carved candlestick holders in various dark woods—which somehow made the place seem cozier and less formal than its heroic dimensions might otherwise have made it. The table was set with expensive wedgewood china and decorated with fresh floral centerpieces—miniature pompoms, blood roses, chrysanthemums— all against a royal blue linen tablecloth that gave the place settings a cool, relaxed feeling.

Eight diners, well-spaced from one another, sat around the large table, four members of the staff and four of the family. Bill Peterson, Rudolph Saine, Leroy Mills and Sonya sat along both sides of the table, in company with Alex and Tina Dougherty, the two children. Joe Dougherty and his wife, Helen, sat at opposite ends of the table, for an effect, Sonya thought, that was almost baronial, despite the friendly atmosphere and all that was done to make her feel at ease.

Joe Dougherty was a tall, lanky, easy-going man, with a deep voice that would have made him a natural for the voice-over in almost any television commercial. He had sandy-red hair that was full over his ears and curling at his collar, a splash of freckles across his nose and cheeks. His smile had made her feel welcome immediately.

The fact that Sonya had never even met her new employer before accepting the position and making arrangements for the journey to the Doughertys' private island was the single thing that Lynda Spaulding, her roommate, had found the most irksome. "How can you go that far to work for people you've never even seen, never even *talked* to on the telephone, never written to? How in the world do you know if you're going to like them? You probably *won't* like them. And even if you find that you can endure them, how do you know they won't take an immediate dislike to you? Suppose, after a couple of days, they decide that you're just not right for them or for their kids, or something, and they let you go? All that time you'll have wasted, all that money for airplane fares, ship fares!"

Patiently, trying not to show her anger, Sonya had said, "Mr. Dougherty's paying all my travel expenses."

"Yes, but that wasted time if they—"

"I'm sure, if for some strange reason, we don't hit it off well, Mr. Dougherty won't quibble about paying my return fares and giving me a handsome check for severance pay. You keep forgetting, Lynda, that he's a millionaire."

"I still think this is a mistake."

If Sonya had wanted to be truthful with the Spaulding girl, she would have had to agree that the whole situation was just a bit unusual. However, she knew that a single agreement, on even a matter that was basically inconsequential, would only give Lynda more confidence, more fuel to carry on her pessimistic tirades, her heated role as a doubting Thomas. And Sonya had had quite enough of these one-sided conversations, for they showed her more about Lynda Spaulding than she really wanted to know. So she worried in private.

Joseph Dougherty was an alumnus, one of the most distinguished alumni, of Sonya's own university. Regularly, he donated rather large sums of money to the school to help in the construction of this science lab, or that students' lounge, or this sculpture garden. . . . Naturally, when he required a tutor for his two children, he preferred to hire someone who was also a graduate of his alma mater, and he turned the selection of that someone over to Dr. Walter Toomey, the Dean of Student Personnel and a personal friend of the Dougherty family.

When she had been called to Dean Toomey's office, at the end of August—she had been a full-year

student, finishing four years of work in only three years, and she had thus been completing her education in August—she had not known what to expect—but she had certainly never anticipated that the conference involved an offer of employment from a millionaire!

“I’ve taken the liberty,” Dr. Toomey explained, once he had given her the general outline of the job and her potential employers, “of sending Mr. Dougherty your records from the university. He has seen them, given his final approval. If you want the job, it’s yours.”

“But he’s never even met me!” she’d said, incredulous.

“Mr. Dougherty’s a very busy man,” Toomey had explained. “He doesn’t have time to interview potential employees. And he trusts my judgment, for we’ve been friends for a good many years now.”

“But with all the people you could have chosen, why choose me?” Sonya asked, beginning to be excited, but still wary.

“Come, Miss Carter,” Dean Toomey said, smiling gently, “you’re being far too modest.”

“No, really, I—”

“For one thing, you’ve got the highest grade average in your field, in your graduating class. For another, during your three years here, you’ve been constantly involved in extra-curricular activities: drama club, the campus peace movement, the yearbook staff, the newspaper . . . You’re known as a doer, someone who accomplishes things, and you’re also known as an optimistic, immensely pleasant young woman.”

Sonya was flushed bright red, and she did not make any comments.

“Furthermore,” Toomey said, “You’ve got a degree in nursing, an excellent spare talent for a governess and tutor who will be spending much time with active young children.”

She had seen the logic of that, but still she worried about meeting her employers. She needn’t have worried, for they were quite personable people, the Doughertys.

Now, on *Distingue*, the roast had been served, complete with six different vegetables, all rather exotic, and Joe Dougherty was questioning her about her trip from Boston, punctuating her remarks with amusing anecdotes about his own experiences with airlines—lost baggage, a martini that was accidentally made completely with vermouth and no gin.

Helen Dougherty was more quiet than her husband, though she was in no way aloof or snobbish. She was an exceptionally lovely woman, with high, aristocratic cheekbones, a pert nose, thin but somehow friendly lips, a rich fall of auburn hair framing her delicate face. She was a slim woman, one clearly born to position; she moved with a fluid grace, whether walking to the table or merely salting her potatoes, that must have come, in part at least, from having been raised in the very best private schools where a third of the classroom hours were spent in the establishment of good manners and habits of gracious elegance.

The children—nine-year-old Alex and seven-year-old Tina—sat side-by-side near their mother’s end of the table, on cushion-raised chairs, both dark-haired, dark-eyed and beautiful. They were dressed pretty much alike in simple, serviceable jeans and lightweight tee-shirts, clean but certainly not formal. Occasionally giggling, offering their own observations, but mostly quiet, they complemented the air of casual formality—if there could be such a thing, a mixture of easiness and distance. Perhaps the distance, the lingering note of formality was all in Sonya’s own mind; after all, she had never been this close to a millionaire and his family, and she could not bring herself to think of them as just average folks.

“I hope Bill didn’t scare you too badly on the way over from *Pointe-a-Pitre*,” Joe Dougherty said. “Sometimes, he thinks the *Lady Jane* is a racing boat, and he puts her through her paces.”

“It keeps the engines in good condition to open her up now and again,” Bill said. “You’re just too land-bound to appreciate a good fast cabin cruiser.”

Joe Dougherty grinned, winked at Sonya. “I don’t think it’s my landlubber leanings that turn me against speed boating. No, instead, I think it’s just a combination of good common sense and—”

“Bad digestion?” Bill Peterson suggested, good-naturedly.

“No,” Dougherty chuckled. “Good common sense and—a good strong fear!”

Helen laughed. “That sums it up for me, too.”

Catching the spirit of underlying humor that existed between the Doughertys and their help, Sonya said, “Well, he came out here at top speed from Guadeloupe, but I didn’t mind at all.”

"You see!" Peterson cried, triumphant.

"I just stood there by the wheel, at the safety railing, and I didn't faint once. If you don't believe me, you can go look at the railing—and you'll see where my fingers bent it."

"Betrayed," Peterson said gloomily.

"Did Bill take you on a tour around the island, before docking?" Helen asked.

"No," Sonya said. "I was anxious to get here, get to work."

"Tomorrow, then," Helen said.

"My pleasure," Bill said.

"I still can't get used to the fact you own a whole island," Sonya said, shaking her head.

For the first time, Joe Dougherty's face clouded, and he looked less than perfectly happy. "We don't, exactly," he said.

"But I thought—" she began.

"We own most of it," Helen explained. "But the Blenwell family has the cove at the far end of *Distingue*, and they own the Hawk House which over-looks the cove."

"I offered them an excellent price," Dougherty explained. "Far too excellent for people their age to turn down." He laid down his fork, wiped his mouth with a blue linen napkin. "Lydia and Walter Blenwell are in their seventies, far too old to live half an hour from the nearest ambulance service and an hour or more from the nearest hospital. Their children live in Jamaica, and up around Miami, but they steadfastly refuse to leave Hawk House."

"And that's the fault of Ken Blenwell," Bill Peterson said. He sounded as if he did not much like Ken Blenwell.

"You're right, of course," Dougherty said. He explained: "Lydia and Walter have raised one of their grandchildren since he was two years old. The boy's father was killed at the outbreak of the Korean war, and his mother, not a Blenwell girl, never was very stable. She had to be institutionalized when the child was two, and she died at her own hand while in the—the home."

*Madhouse*, Sonya thought. She didn't know why Dougherty's euphemism, when speaking about a neighbor, was so frightening.

"And her son, he's in his mid-twenties by now, Walter and Lydia's grandchild, has taken it in his head to own Hawk House when they're gone. He persuades them to hold out. Hell, he even persuaded old Walter to come to me and try to buy out our three-quarters of *Distingue*. Seems Kenneth wants to own the whole shebang some day."

"We don't intend to sell, of course," Helen Dougherty said.

"Of course," her husband agreed.

She said, "We love this house—its old name was Seawatch, which is rather fitting when you consider it commands a view of the sea from three of its four sides—and we love the island too. It's such a quiet place, so beautiful and clean and fresh. It's like a monk's retreat, in a way, a place to escape from—from the everyday cares that plague the rest of the world."

But Sonya saw, as the woman hesitated in the middle of her last sentence, that Helen Dougherty did not consider Seawatch an escape from *ordinary* day-to-day cares . . . No, more likely, this lovely, wealthy woman saw it as an escape from the madman who had threatened the lives of her children. Even as she spoke, she turned her head ever-so-slightly to look upon her two children, as if she wished to be certain that they were still beside her, still close at hand, still safe and not snatched up and carted away while her attention had been elsewhere.

Sonya looked at Bill Peterson to see if he had noticed Helen's involuntary moment of fear.

He had.

He winked at Sonya, smiled, as if he were trying to restore the mood of good-humored ribbing which had dominated at the table until only a few moments ago.

She did not wink back.

She looked at Leroy Mills, his eyes on his plate, quiet and withdrawn, shy—or guiltily avoiding Helen Dougherty. Which was it?

Sonya looked away from Leroy Mills, feeling chilled and much too helpless in the face of such

brooding evil that she sensed all about her, and she looked across the table at the bodyguard, Rudolph Saine, whom she was startled to see staring back at her. She blinked in confusion, but he did not. He stared unwaveringly, unblinkingly, his broad forehead slightly furrowed as if he were concentrating on some puzzle or other, his intensely blue eyes, like chips of wet, bright glass floating in water, locked on her own eyes, held.

She smiled at him, even though her smile did not come naturally or even easily.

He did not smile back.

She looked away from him, flustered, but found herself sneaking another glance in his direction to ascertain whether or not he was still so terribly interested in her.

He was.

He had not looked away.

She turned quickly toward Helen Dougherty, then looked at the woman's husband, hoping someone would say something, anything, to break this sudden, inexplicable, malevolent spell which had descended on the entire company like the tension in the air just before a major summer thunderstorm.

"Then," Joe Dougherty said, like a heaven-sent breath of fresh air, "tomorrow you'll relax, tour the island, get a little sun, refresh yourself. Wednesday's soon enough to begin the kids' lessons."

Sonya looked at the children, and found them looking shyly at her, looking up under the eye-brows, heads tilted, tentative smiles on their small, cherubic faces. As all children did when faced with a new teacher, they would be wondering what she was like, whether she would be stern or friendly, whether she would like them or be indifferent.

"Well," she said to Dougherty. "I really had wanted to get started as soon as possible, sir."

"My name's Joe," he corrected her, amicably enough. "We go by first names around here. My father and mother were stuffy, position-conscious *nouveau riche*, and I won't run a house where everyone goes around in starched collars."

"Joe, then," she said, smiling. "I've studied the requisites listed by the island government. I've seen the tests—or samples of them—the children will have to pass next spring in order to be officially raised in grade level. I'm really very anxious to begin."

He waved her into silence, not imperiously, but good-humoredly. "These scamps have had an extended vacation, and it's time they were made to work."

"Ahhh," both kids said, in unison.

"Quiet in the peanut gallery," Dougherty said. To Sonya, he said, "However, one extra day of freedom will not set them back any further than they already are, and I'm absolutely insistent that you settle into the routine here on *Distingue* in a manner befitting the traditional leisurely ways of the tropics."

Happily, Sonya said, "Whatever you say, Joe."

The children cheered her.

"Natural-born goldbrickers," Dougherty said, affectionately.

Sonya looked up at Saine again, found that he was still scrutinizing her, watching her reactions to everything that went on at the dinner table, and, in some mysterious way, forming an opinion of her, making judgments, deciding just how far she could be trusted.

She felt as if she were on trial, and she realized that, in Saine's mind, she was. She remembered what he'd said about not trusting anyone at all, and she returned his stare this time, evaluating him in the same way that he was summing her up. In a moment, he realized that the tables had turned and that she was judging him. He smiled at her and returned to his excellent food.

## FOUR

After supper, Alex and Tina, at their father's suggestion, took Sonya on a tour of Seawatch, beginning with the rest of the ground floor. She learned that, because the sea lay so near beneath the surface of the island, the house had no basement; such a subterranean chamber would have always been filled with brackish salt water. Unwillingly, Sonya thought of Lynda Spaulding's many warnings about the power of the sea during a hurricane . . .

She had already seen the front dining room where they had just eaten, and the ultra-modern kitchen where, earlier, Helga had been so determinedly grating that block of cheese. But there was more, much more, still to see.

Across from the front dining room was a combination lounge and drawing room, with heavy oak furniture in a Spanish motif, the ubiquitous red carpet, black velvet drapes, a cool and calming gloom that warm, indirect lighting only partially dispelled.

"When we have guests," Alex said, taking his role as guide quite seriously, "they usually come in here."

Tina, his sister, who was on the far side of Alex, peered around him and looked shyly at Sonya. "You're not just a guest, are you?"

"No," Sonya said.

"She's our new teacher," Alex explained, patiently.

"Good," Tina said. She shook her head positively, her dark hair bouncing. "I think I'll like you."

Sonya chuckled. "Well, Tina, I'll do my best to make you absolutely sure of that."

They went from the drawing room into the hobby room, where there were workbenches littered with all manner of cameras, camera parts, projectors, tools, scraps of film and of white leader tape, editing equipment and stacks of film cans.

"Dad's hobby is movies," Alex explained.

Tina giggled. "He makes some funny ones."

"And mom's a—still—photographer," he said, pronouncing each syllable of the last word with the utmost care, as if he were reading it from a prepared index card. He pointed to a door at the far end of the room and said, "That's the dark-room, where they develop the film. It really is awful dark—except for these purple lights they have."

"We're not allowed in there," Tina said, solemnly.

"You should know," her brother said.

She sighed. To Sonya, she said, "I went in once. I got spanked."

"Dad had a reel of film on the drying racks. It was spoiled," the boy explained. "That's the first and last spanking we ever got."

"But we're allowed out here," Tina said, pointing to a table flanked by two high stools. "Alex makes his airplane models there, and I put my puzzles together."

Next, they came into a small dining room, less than half the size of the one in which they had earlier taken their supper; here four or five people could dine comfortably, a very cozy nook not meant to hold large dinner parties. Most likely, this was the breakfast and lunch room, for meals that might be eaten by two or three members of the household, at all different hours.

The ground floor also contained a game room, with a regulation size pool table, a ping pong table, color television set, shelves of games and a lot of comfortable, beaten up old black vinyl arm chairs. Connecting with the game room was a library fully as large as the drawing room or the front dining room, all four walls built up with shelves from floor to ceiling and at least ten or fifteen thousand volumes shelved neatly around scattered pieces of sculpture. The room also contained a large, dark pine desk and a matching captain's chair, several heavily-padded easy chairs arranged beside tall, heavy-looking

ultra-modern steel floor lamps.

On the second floor, the stairwell divided the living space into two distinct clusters of rooms, in two long hallways. The family's bedrooms were to the left, the staff's to the right (except for Saine's bedroom, which was in the family section).

They went up to the third floor, which was only half-sized, directly above the family's portion of the second level.

"This is father's study," Alex said.

"We can come up here," Tina explained. "But only when it's absolutely necessary." As Alex had stumbled over the word "photographer," the little girl spoke her piece as if quoting her father.

Joe Dougherty's study was certainly an impressive room: as large as the drawing room down-stairs, airy and yet homey, well-furnished, containing yet another two thousand books of all types, with a beamed ceiling and two long windows toward the front of the house, which looked out on palm trees, white beach, and the sea that curled toward the land with countless, white-edged tongues of water. One had the feeling that great decisions had been made within the walls of this room, that enormous financial issues were considered and carefully dealt with. At the gadget-studded desk, Dougherty had added and subtracted figures that Sonya knew she would find meaningless because of their enormity. At these windows, perhaps, he had stared at Mother Ocean, gaining serenity and perspective with which to overcome his knottier problems.

And now as she and the children stood by those same windows, watching the sea which glittered madly with reflected moonlight, Sonya felt more at peace than she had for quite a long time. Her parents had been dead for many years. And, already, it seemed that her grandmother had been dead for as long, for years instead of months. And what Bill Peterson and Rudolph Saine had told her about the madman who'd threatened the Dougherty children—all of that was like something she had once read in a story, not like something she had experienced, something that could be real. The solidity of Seawatch made her feel as if she were in a fortress, sealed away from harm, in a great bubble of safety passing through the riotous flow of time without suffering any damage.

Alex destroyed that mood in a moment.

"Are you worried?" he asked.

Sonya did not look away from the sea.

She said, "Why should I be worried?"

"He won't hurt you."

She looked at Alex.

His eyes were very dark, almost too dark to see in the meager light of the desk lamp that was clear across the room.

She said, "Who won't?"

He scuffed his small feet on the carpet, and he looked away from her as if he were embarrassed. He looked back at the rolling sea, and he said, "The man."

"Man?"

"Yes."

"What man?"

Tina said, "You know. The man he says is going to kill us, me and Alex."

"Who says that?"

Tina said, "The man. He says it himself."

"No one is going to kill you," Sonya said, firmly, softly. But she didn't really know how she could be so sure of that.

The peacefulness of the night, the sea and the palms had swiftly disappeared, to be replaced by a brooding malevolence, like a large jungle cat waiting to spring on its prey.

"He promised that he would," Alex said.

"Well—"

"He promised, several times, that he'd get the both of us, me and Tina." Curiously enough, the boy did not sound frightened so much as intrigued by the possibility of death. She knew that young children

were not as frightened by such things as adults, and that they even enjoyed vicarious violence in a way adults had lost the taste for (witness their love of gory fairy tales, of Edgar Allan Poe and similar macabre literature). But this seemed coolly sinister, this casual acceptance of their own mortality.

“Who told you about this?” Sonya asked. She had imagined that the worst of the situation had, very properly, been hidden from the children.

“No one particular,” Alex said.

“We just listened around,” Tina piped up.

“We heard things,” Alex said.

“When no one knew we were listening,” Tina added. She sounded quite pleased with their stealth,

“You should both be private detectives—or spies,” Sonya told them, trying to lighten the mood again.

“Anyway,” Alex said, “don't worry about him. He's not interested in you, just in us.”

“Well, you're just as safe as I am,” Sonya said. “Mr. Saine sees to that.”

“He goes with us everywhere,” Tina said.

“Exactly.”

Alex shrugged. “Rudolph can't do much if the man is really after us. If he really wants us, bad, what can Rudolph do?”

“I believe Mr. Saine could handle anyone,” Sonya said. “Anyone at all.” She smiled at them and hoped her smile did not appear as phony as it really was.



## FIVE

The man stood under the lacy palm trees, down near the thatch-roofed pavilion where Helen Dougherty liked to go every morning to sit and read while the sea murmured gently behind her. He was dressed in dark clothes, and he was all but invisible in the deep purple shadows of the trees, like a spirit, a specter. The moonlight touched the lawn, touched the top of the palm fronds above him, but did not touch him, as if it were afraid of him, as if it were purposefully avoiding contact with him.

He watched the house.

Especially the children's windows.

Light shone there.

He hoped to get a glimpse of them crossing the room, a quick flash of a small shadow . . . He felt powerful, good and deadly when he watched them without their knowledge. Such clandestine observation made him feel that he really was invisible, that he could move against them whenever he felt like it.

Some night, not now but soon, when the room was dark and the kids were asleep, when Saine was especially lax, when everyone had all but forgotten about the threats . . .

. . . then he would strike!

He would be quick.

He would be calm.

And silent.

Quick, calm, silent, deadly.

He would have to forget about torturing them, of course, though that had been such an important part of his original plan, before this, before the family had moved here to the island. Now, in such close quarters, the children would be able to summon help rather quickly. If he tortured them, they'd scream and scream and scream . . . And they'd be heard, and he'd be apprehended before he could escape.

Saine was not *that* lax, ever.

One swift, clean cut, from ear to ear, opening their tender young throats like ripe fruits.

He would kill the boy first, without waking the little girl. Then he would creep, silently as wind, to her bed, where he would open her throat as he had her brother's, swiftly, calmly, quietly. Then, when there was absolutely no danger of their crying out for help, he would leisurely work on them with the knife . . .

Now, watching their lighted room, standing by the palms near the pavilion, the man took the knife from his pocket and opened it.

He held it in front of him, so that moonlight struck his hand and glinted wickedly on the seven-inch blade.

It was quite sharp.

He spent a good deal of time honing it.

He ran a finger along the blade.

Lovely.

It would do the job.

When the time came.

Soon.

## SIX

"There it is—Hawk House!"

Bill Peterson shouted over the roar of the *Lady Jane's* engines, pointing with one hand while, with the other, he brought them rapidly around the point of *Distingue*, out of the calmer waters in the lee of the land and into the choppy wavelets that pounded in toward the sheltered cove and were broken up on the hooking arms of beach.

Sonya shielded her eyes from the glaring after-noon sun and stared at the old, dark house that loomed, almost menacingly, on the hill above the cove. Its windows were like black, blinded eyes, its porches and balconies like unhealthy growths sprouting from its weathered walls. It was much like Seawatch, really; but where Seawatch looked welcoming and warm, Hawk House seemed fore-boding and cold.

Peterson cut the engines back, bringing a com-parative quietude to the open waters.

He said, "Mr. Dougherty would like to own it. He'd remodel it and use it as a guest house—maybe as a retreat for friends and business associ-ates."

"Are we going in to shore?" Sonya asked.

"What for?"

He seemed surprised that she had asked.

She said, "I thought we could meet the neighbors."

His expression changed, in the instant, clouded, his eyes narrowing to slits, and he said, "You wouldn't want to meet them."

"Are they really so bad as all that?"

"They'd give you a reception about as cold and rude as you'd be able to survive. A conversation with the Blenwells always leaves me with icicles hanging from my earlobes and the end of my nose."

Sonya laughed.

"Really," he said, still somewhat serious. "The Doughertys and their people are not particularly welcome at Hawk House."

As they reached the entrance to the narrow cove and moved across its mouth, Sonya spotted a tall, very deeply tanned, dark-haired young man, perhaps Peterson's age, standing on a small pier at the throat of the cove, wearing white slacks and a white tee-shirt. He appeared to be there for no other purpose than to watch them as they rounded the tip of the island.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"Where?"

She pointed.

She thought Peterson stiffened when he caught sight of the dark figure who stood so motionless, but she could not be sure.

"It's Kenneth Blenwell," he said.

"The grandson?"

"Yes."

At that moment, almost as if he had been listen-ing to their conversation despite the two hundred yards of open water that separated them, and de-spite the persistent growl of *Lady Jane's* engines, Kenneth Blenwell casually raised a pair of dark, heavy binoculars, to get a better look at them.

The sun glinted off the binocular lenses.

Sonya, embarrassed, looked swiftly away.

"Bastard," Peterson snapped, with feeling, as if he thought Blenwell *could* hear.

"Actually," Sonya said, "we're the ones who're snooping. I suppose he has a perfectly legal right to come out on the pier and check us out."

“He already knows who we are,” Peterson said.

“He doesn't know me.”

“Then he does now.”

Peterson accelerated, brought the small cabin cruiser up toward its top speed, arching slightly out toward the more open water, but hemmed in by sandbars, he was unable to pull completely away as he might have liked to.

As they reached the far arm of white-white beach that formed half the little cove, as land rose up, and palm trees, to conceal them from Blenwell, Sonya stole one quick, last look backward at their mysterious neighbor.

He appeared, from a distance, to have the glasses trained directly on Sonya's eyes. As a result, she felt as if they were only inches apart, as if they were on the pier together. Their eyes had locked in some inexplicable, hypnotic gaze, and they could not break free of each other.

A rising hillock, and the thickening stand of pines, cut Sonya off from Kenneth Blenwell's steady gaze, and she snapped awake like a girl coming out of a nap, startled and ill-at-ease, wondering what had come over her.

“Wasn't it his mother,” she asked Peterson, “who was sent away to the—madhouse?”

“Yes. And if you ask me, I think the madness was passed on from the mother to the son.”

“Why do you say that?”

Peterson frowned, looking at the choppy blue sea on the windward side of *Distingue*, but it was not the slightly angry waters which had generated the frown. He said, “It's hard to pin down. But if you ever meet him, you'll understand why I said that. He's—cold, withdrawn, very sober. He gives you the feeling—I don't know how—that he's only the form of a man, that inside he's completely hollow.”

“I see.”

She turned to the lovely scenery and didn't ask any more questions. She didn't want to have to listen to any more answers.

Later that afternoon, when they went swimming off the point from Seawatch, several hundred yards out in the Caribbean, using the *Lady Jane* as their base, Sonya experienced the extremes of reaction to her new circumstance: optimistic enjoyment—and fearful anticipation of disaster.

The joy came from the simple act of floating and frolicking on the brilliantly blue-green waters of the Caribbean, the sun beating down hot and steady, the sky high and wide and unbelievably blue, gulls circling high overhead like monitors of their pleasure. Peterson had brought the *Lady Jane* through the wide mouth of a submerged coral reef shaped like a semicircle with its open face towards shore. This natural crescent formed a breakwater that cut the roiling waves and left only a gentle in and out swell that Sonya gave herself over to. She lay on her back, gently moving her hands to keep herself afloat, sinking and rising, bobbing at the dictates of the gentle sea. Bill floated beside her, bronze already but growing even more tan, an extremely handsome man, very gay and very vital, the perfect sort of man to be with on a day like this in a place such as this.

Then came the fear.

Something brushed Sonya's feet, startling her into a sudden, loud yelp, so that she sank, thrashed, gained the surface again.

“What's the matter?” Peterson asked.

“A fish, I guess,” she said. “It touched me, and I wasn't expecting anything like that.” She laughed, but stopped laughing when she saw that the incident did not amuse him at all.

He was staring intently at the water around them, as if he could see down through the glaring surface.

“Sharks!” he snapped.

“What?”

But she had heard.

She had heard too clearly.

“Swim for the boat,” he advised. “Make as much noise as you can. Forget about being a good swimmer; just thrash the water to a boil. Noise scares them off.”

In a minute or so, they were both standing on the deck of the *Lady Jane*, dripping saltwater on the polished boards, safe.

"I always thought the reef formed a barrier against them," Peterson said; wiping his face with a towel. "But they must have come in from the landward side, through the open end."

Sonya was shivering so badly that her teeth chattered together like clamshells. "Would they have hurt us?"

"They might have."

"Are they still there?"

He pointed.

"I don't see—"

And then she did see: the hard, black fin, thrusting out of the water like a knife, circling, moving rapidly, now lost in the glare, now visible again.

"How many?" she asked.

"I saw two," he said.

As she watched the shark circle and circle, as if waiting for them to come back into the water, her joy evaporated altogether. It seemed, to her, that the shark was a portent of things to come, a sign to beware—to be cautious.

The sea no longer appeared to be as beautiful as it was only minutes ago . . .

The sky was far too bright.

The sun, instead of warming and tanning her, seemed fiercely, unmercifully hot and she realized, belatedly, that she might as easily burn as tan.

"Let's go in," she said.

He started the engines.

Dinner was even better Wednesday evening than it had been the evening before: lobster tails with sweet butter, scalloped potatoes, pepper slaw, several vegetables, fresh strawberries and cream for dessert. Conversation at the table remained lively—actually, now that everyone had grown accustomed to the new addition to the table, it was livelier than it had been the night before. Unfortunately none of it could erase Sonya's feeling of impending disaster.

She retired to her room at nine-thirty, closed and locked her door, and made ready for bed. It was too early for sleep, and her nerves were too much on edge to permit her to turn out the lights just yet. She had brought several paperback novels with her, and she propped herself up on pillows, in the center of the Polynesian bed, and she began the best of the lot, trying to get caught up in the story.

Two hours later, when she had read slightly more than half of the book, she felt sleep steal in behind her eyes and begin to tug insistently at her heavy lids much like a child might tug at his mother's skirts.

She got out of bed and turned off the lights, stood for a moment in the cool darkness, listening for something but not knowing what.

Before getting under the covers, she went to the window and looked out at the night sea and the swaying palms . . . As before, she was taken by the beauty of the scene, and she might have stood there admiring it for a long while, might have seen nothing at all out of the ordinary if the man standing beneath the palms, some distance from the house, had not chosen that moment to stretch his legs. He leaned away from the bole of one of the largest palms and stepped back and forth a few times, on a short path, before taking up his vigil again.

Rudolph Saine?

He did not seem big enough to be the body-guard, though he was not a small man. Or she didn't think he was. In the deeps of the shadows, however, little about him was recognizable.

She stood there, for long minutes, waiting for him to reveal himself once more. She was confident that he would not see her, for the room was dark behind her. Then, with a start, he stepped from the tree and seemed to gaze up at her, though his face was in shadows, and she could only suppose it was she who had attracted his sudden interest. She realized that, in the light of the large moon, her white pajamas must have shown up like a signal flag.

The stranger—if he was a stranger—turned away from her and abruptly walked off into the sentinel

pinetrees.

In an instant, he was lost to sight.

She stepped back from her window, as if what she had seen was part of an illusion and that, if she turned away from the screen on which it had been played—her window—it would cease to be true and real. She wondered, briefly, if she should report this to Rudolph Saine, but she decided that she really had nothing to report, nothing that meant anything. She had seen a man standing in the shadows of the palms, near the house, watching the house at night. And he had gone away. What good would that information do anyone?

*Where had he gone?*

Who knew?

*Who was he?*

She couldn't say.

*What did she think he was doing there?*

She didn't want to think what he might have been doing there. She had come here to get away from ugly thoughts, old fears, tension, anxiety. She didn't want to have to face anything like that.

And since she could not answer any of the questions Rudolph Saine was most likely to ask, she could see no sense in dredging up the mess. She would appear to be nothing more than a slightly hysterical young woman, still upset over her encounter with two sharks during the afternoon, sleepy, seeing things in the night, illusions, deceptions of shadows. She could do no good whatsoever by crying wolf at every little incident that disturbed her, for then, if the real trouble came, she would find them slow to react to her cries for help.

That was logical, wise.

Refusing to consider the import of her observation, refusing to dwell on the memory any longer at all, having convinced herself that she was right to keep her silence, she went to the large bed and got beneath the sheets, snuggled down and buried her bright, blonde head in the fluffy pillows. She would sleep . . . sleep . . . Then everything would be fine. In the morning, all of this sense of onrushing trouble, this fearful anticipation would be gone. In the morning. It would all be fine, then. Just fine. She slept . . .

In the morning, of course, nothing had improved.

At the university, a year earlier, a boy named Daryl Pattersen, whom she had dated for a while but about whom she had never been serious, told her that he liked her so much chiefly because of her ability to ignore all of the unpleasant things in life. "I mean," he told her, "you don't just grin and bear it when trouble strikes. You actually ignore it! You seem to forget about the disaster two minutes after it's happened. When you get a bad test grade, I've seen you toss the paper away and go about your business as if you'd just gotten an A."

Naturally, Lynda Spaulding, Sonya's room-mate, a pessimist from the word "go," did not look upon this personality quirk as an attribute, as Daryl did, but she saw it as a fault, a weakness, a dangerous inadequacy that had to be watched carefully. "Life isn't all roses, Sonya, as you should know by now. You try too hard to be happy, and you work too hard to forget the things that've made you unhappy."

"My own private psychiatrist," Sonya had said, slapping her forehead with an open palm.

"See, you know I'm telling you the truth. You're trying to turn what I say into a joke, so you won't have to think about it." Later, she said, "You surround yourself with friends who're always jovial and in a good mood; sometimes, you make friends with the biggest phonies on campus, just because they're always smiling."

"I like people that smile," Sonya had said.

"But no one should be smiling all the time!"

This morning, on *Distingue*, Sonya had forgotten all of those exchanges with Lynda Spaulding. If she remembered anything, it was Daryl's sweet and charming remarks.

Still, the air was filled with expectancy, tense, waiting.

In the next few days, there was no lessening of that tension. She began each workday at ten, with the children, going over their reading skills and seeing what she might do to improve them. Fortunately, both

Alex and Tina were exceptionally bright students, and they needed no encouragement to do their work, for they were as curious as they were intelligent. By noon, when they took a lunch break, the kids were usually a good many pages ahead of the lesson which she had planned for them, like two intellectual sponges soaking up all that she could pour before them. After lunch, around two o'clock, they began work on arithmetic and spelling, some geography and history for Alex and some skill-games for Tina.

Friday afternoon, when they were studying the map of the United States during the geography lesson, Alex pointed to the eastern seaboard, traced the outlines of one state in particular. "That's New Jersey," he said.

"Yes, it is."

"Where we used to live."

Sonya frowned. "Yes. You see how far away you are from there?"

"Real far," he said.

She found Guadeloupe for him and, though *Distingue* was not on the map, indicated their general position in relationship to the larger island.

"I'm glad they scared us out of New Jersey," Alex said.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. It's prettier down here."

"Lots prettier," Tina added.

"I'd hate to be killed in New Jersey," Alex said. "Down here, it would be better."

Sonya chose not to question this rather macabre statement, but went quickly on with the lesson, drawing the boy's attention to the West Coast, as far away from New Jersey as she could lead him.

By four-thirty each afternoon, finished with lessons, they were ready for a swim, a game of tag, a walk about the island—always with Rudolph Saine in tow, his burly arms, like the arms of a gorilla, swinging loosely at his sides, his scowl permanently in place, his broad face creased like putty that had been scored with a sculptor's blade.

He carried a holstered revolver under his left armpit.

Sonya pretended not to notice.

And still, nothing untoward happened.

Monday afternoon, when she had been on *Distingue* for nearly a week, Sonya was given the last half of the day off, for Joe Dougherty wanted to take his kids to Guadeloupe for a couple of movies and—he told her, shuddering as if the prospect utterly repelled him—supper at their favorite greasy hamburger emporium. "I think we set the best possible table here at Seawatch," he told Sonya. She agreed. "But," he said, "the kids tell me that our food 'stinks' in comparison to the hamburgers and French fries on Guadeloupe."

"Better not let Helga hear them say that."

"Never!" he vowed. "I'd rather lose my fortune than lose Helga and her cooking!"

Because Bill Peterson was to take the Doughertys to the main island, and because he would wait there for them, Sonya was left to entertain herself for the remainder of the day. Bill asked her to come along and promised her a thorough tour of *Pointe-a-Pitre*, but she said she preferred this chance to get familiar with *Distingue*.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, when she would ordinarily have been coaxing the children into getting settled for their second study period, Sonya set out from Seawatch to walk the length of the island and then home again. She wore white shorts and a lightweight yellow blouse, sandals that consisted of little more than a sole and a strap to hold them to her feet. Despite the giant, orange sun and the cloudless heavens, she felt cool and happy, looking forward to the expedition.

She lifted her long, yellow hair and tucked it behind her ears, to keep it from blowing around her face in the gentle breeze that came in from the open sea. She felt fresh, clean and very alive.

Several hundred yards from the house, she stopped at a turn in the beach to watch a bevy of sand crabs at play. When they saw her, or sensed her, they bolted up onto their tall, multi-flexed running legs

and, looking very silly, skittered for cover, dropping onto the sand and, in an instant, disappearing from sight.

She studied several parrots that flitted from palm to palm, birds Joe Dougherty had imported and nourished to give the island a sense of color and life.

She also studied the arrangement of coconuts at the crown of a number of fruit-bearing trees, wondering if there was any chance of her climbing the bowed bole and retrieving one of them. She decided against such a reckless foray, so long as she was on her own.

She had gone almost two thirds of the island's length when, so suddenly that she let out a terrified squeal, someone stepped out of the palms along the beach and said, "Hello, there!"

"Who—"

He was tall, about Bill Peterson's age and size, though his hair was dark, as were his eyes, and he was more thoroughly, richly tanned than Bill, as if he had been born and raised in the open air, under clear skies. He was not so handsome as Bill, but more rugged, earthier in a way that made him look somewhat older than he really was.

"Ken Blenwell," he said, stepping in front of her and grinning broadly.

She remembered the man whom she had seen when they took a boat tour around the island, the man standing on the Blenwell pier and watching the *Lady Jane* with field glasses. So this was what he looked like close up.

"Do you have a name?" he asked, still grinning.

"Oh, of course!" she said, embarrassed by her lapse. "You startled me so, that I sort of lost track."

"Sorry about that."

"I'm Sonya Carter."

"What a lovely name!" he said.

"Thank you."

"Were you coming to see us?"

His teeth were exceptionally white, strong and broad, like the teeth of a healthy animal.

"Us?"

"My grandparents and me," he said. "The Blenwells? Down at Hawk House?"

"Oh," she said, "no. No, I was just out for a walk, getting to know the island. Am I close to Hawk House, then?"

"Quite close, yes."

"I was enjoying myself so much," she said, "that I didn't realize how far I'd come."

He stood before her, his bare feet planted wide apart in the warm sand, almost as if he were there to stop her from proceeding any farther. He said, "Well, this makes two disappointments in less than a week."

"Oh?"

"When you came around the point in *Lady Jane*, with Peterson, I thought you were coming to pay us a visit then. But you went right on by, leaving me disappointed." His grin no longer seemed as pleasant as it first had; it seemed positively threatening. Or was that her imagination? Yes, it must be that: imagination, exaggeration. He was still smiling; he seemed personable and charming.

"That was you on the pier, with the binoculars?" she asked.

"You know it was."

"I suppose I do, yes."

"Will you accept my invitation to visit us?" he asked, looking down on her. He was quite tall.

"I'd like that."

"Now?"

She hesitated, then said, "I don't see why not."

"Wonderful!"

He stepped out of her way, walked up beside her and took her arm, as if he thought she might turn and run unless he had a good hold on her. His grip was firm; he appeared inordinately strong.

They walked along the beach together. From a distance, they might have looked like any

happy-go-lucky couple. Up close, the observer would have seen the lines of tension around the girl's eyes, would have seen something—something not quite identifiable, but unsettling, in the big man's dark face.

“You like the island?” he asked.

“It's beautiful,” she said.

“It is that. Someday, I hope to own it.”

“Oh?”

“Unless, of course, your employer, Dougherty, refuses to sell his portion. But I'm confident that, given time, he'll come around to my offer. It's more than adequate. He could turn a neat profit with what I'm willing to go for it.”

“But I doubt he needs the money,” she said. She didn't know why she felt like needling the man, but she couldn't resist the chance.

“Everyone needs the money—or thinks he does. Millionaires are no different; Dougherty is no different.” As the beach turned and Hawk House came into view, he let go her arm. “What strikes you most about *Distingue*?”

“Too many things to choose one,” she said. “The beaches are so pure white.”

“That's because they're *white volcanic* beaches. The sand was formed at the most terrific heat— oh, ten or twenty thousand years ago, and maybe longer. Surely, longer.”

“And the palm trees,” she said, motioning to the lovely green giants to their left where they closed in on Hawk House. “I wanted to climb one of the coconut palms for some fruit, but I was afraid that I'd fall and couldn't call for help.”

“We'll get some coconuts later, together,” he said.

“I like the parrots, too,” Sonya said. When she talked, she felt more at ease. “They're so pretty and bright. And when they make that cawing, trill-ing noise, they make me think I'm in some old movie about Africa or South America.”

He said, “I hate the parrots.”

“For heaven's sake, why?” she asked.

“The noise they make is raucous, bothersome,” he said.

She looked at him, saw that he was serious. His jaw was set tight, almost as if he were gritting his teeth.

“But—”

He interrupted her: “I'd exterminate them if I owned the island myself.”

“They're so pretty,” she insisted.

“But they don't belong,” he said. “They're not a natural lifeform to *Distingue*. Dougherty imported them for his own amusement.”

“So?”

“They simply don't belong,” he repeated, giving each word the same, harsh force.

“By that reasoning,” Sonya said, “you could argue for the extermination of the *people* on *Distingue*. We aren't indigenous to the island either.

We don't belong, naturally speaking. Why not ex-terminate us too?”

“Maybe you have something there,” he said. He grinned at her, but she could not be certain if the grin were genuine.

“Here we are,” he said, taking her arm again. “Watch your step.”

He lead her onto the front porch of Hawk House, opened the door, and lead her into a gloomy entrance hall that smelled of furniture pol-ish and old lace curtains.



## SEVEN

Kenneth Blenwell escorted Sonya along the dimly lighted main hall to a set of sliding doors, pulled these open in one smooth movement and ushered her into a drawing room where the only light was that which somehow managed to break through the drawn halves of the heavy, blue velvet drapes—and that eerie blue light which a black-and-white television set puts forth. The only signs of life in that room, at first, were those glimpsed from the non-life on the television screen: the movement of the actors, camera changes, the tinny voices and the melodramatic background music that rose and fell like the sea.

“Grandmother, Grandfather, I’ve brought company.”

The volume on the television went down, though not off altogether, as someone with a re-mote control device reacted to Kenneth’s statement.

“This is Sonya Carter,” Kenneth said.

“A lovely name.” The voice had been that of a woman, but thin and weak, almost a whisper.

“Thank you,” Sonya replied.

By now, she had located the old couple. They sat in two ridiculously overstuffed chairs, about ten feet from the television set, their feet propped up on ottomans, utility tables beside them, cock-tails set out on the tables. Grotesquely, it seemed as if they were rooted to the spot, that they had not moved in years. They would remain there, even as corpses, until they had rotted and turned to dust.

“Bring her closer!” Walter Blenwell snapped. The old man’s voice was as brittle as his wife’s was soft. “Let’s see what manner of young lady you’ve got here!” Though it seemed to be meant kindly, each thing he said sounded like an imperious command made by a humorless potentate.

“Hello, Mr. Blenwell,” Sonya said, stepping into the light thrown by the television set.

“Well, a pretty lady,” Walter said.

“Thank you.”

Both the old man and the old woman were in their seventies, somewhat emaciated, their faces lined so heavily that they reminded her of pieces of tablet paper crumpled in the fist and then clumsily straightened out again. The blue light from the television did nothing at all to make them look younger; the unnatural color gave them the appearance of frozen bodies, touched by a coat of frost, eyes glittering icily.

Kenneth had brought two chairs, one of which Sonya took, gratefully. With the television light framing her, almost silhouetting her, she felt as if she were on display.

“Tell Winnie that we’d like new refreshments,” Lydia Blenwell said.

“Will do,” Kenneth said.

He departed, leaving Sonya alone with the old people.

“Refreshments will be simple,” Lydia said. “Neither of us is up to real entertaining any more.”

“Speak for yourself,” Walter snapped. “I believe I could still enjoy a good dance or two, a real formal ball.”

“Yes, you might go to the ball in a carriage,” Lydia told him, leaning forward in her chair, smiling, “but you’d have to come home in an ambulance.”

Walter snorted.

Sonya thought the old couple were merely amusing each other, and that the jibes were not meant seriously, but she could not be certain, and she felt out of place.

“How do you happen to know Kenneth?” Lydia asked.

She had once been a very pretty lady, Sonya could see, but now her eyes looked gray, flat and dull, her hair wiry and unkempt. Her face was criss-crossed with wrinkles, and these were especially concentrated around the eyes and mouth, an unfortunate condition which gave her the look of a cunning weasel and the pursed lips of an habitual gossiper. At one time, her question would have seemed like

only a polite conversational initiative, but now it sounded half-quarrelsome, nose-y.

"I met him on the beach," Sonya said.

"Guadeloupe?"

"Well, not exactly," Sonya said.

Kenneth had come into the room again and taken his seat next to Sonya. He said, "We met outside, a couple of hundred yards from the house, just a half an hour ago."

"What do you mean?" Lydia asked, not com-prehending, her pursed mouth in a tight little bow.

"She's working for the Doughertys," Kenneth explained.

"Those people!" Walter snapped.

"I'm tutoring their children," Sonya said.

"How do you stand to work for him?" Lydia asked.

"Mr. Dougherty, you mean?"

"Of course, him."

"He treats his people well."

Walter snorted derisively. "We haven't much in common with the Dougherty family."

"You might even say that we're—at odds with them," Lydia added.

"The young lady can't help about that," Ken-neth said. "We can hardly blame her for what the Doughertys have done."

Neither of the old people said anything to that.

Sonya felt distinctly uncomfortable in that dar-kened room, as if the walls were drawing closer and the air, despite its coolness, was pressing down on her like a sentient being; she imagined that she could feel walls and air hard against her back, on her shoulders, weighting down on her scalp, crushing. Why on earth had Kenneth Blen-well insisted on her coming to the house when he must have known she would not be much appreci-ated by his grandparents?

At that moment, a woman in her sixties, dressed in a wrinkled maid's uniform, pushed a serving cart into the drawing room. Cups and saucers rat-tled on it.

The maid—a rather dumpy woman with a wounded look, wheeled the cart into the center of the gathering, trundling it across one of Sonya's feet and nearly catching the other as well, offering no apology and giving no sign that the incident had even transpired.

She said, "Mrs. Blenwell, I ain't used to havin' guests at this hour of the day, people to make ready for and what all."

"We're not used to having guests at *any* hour of the day, are we, Hattie?" Walter Blenwell cackled.

"Just the same—" the maid began.

"Here we go, Hattie," Kenneth said, rising and taking hold of the cart. "I'll carry on from this point."

Without a word, but with a quick and un-friendly glance at Sonya, the woman turned away from the cart, dusted her hands on her unclean dress, and waddled out of the room.

Kenneth poured the brandy in the four snifters, then the steaming coffee, served everyone in rela-tively short order. Though the ritual had not taken more than three or four minutes, Sonya felt as if the maid had left the room hours ago.

"Any more threats over there?" Walter asked, after a terribly protracted silence while everyone sipped alternately at their brandy and coffee.

"Any what?" Sonya asked. She had not been ex-pecting him to speak to her again, and she hadn't been listening.

"Come on, girl, you know what I mean! Threats! Have there been more threats against the children?"

She cleared her throat and said, "No, not any more."

"You do know about the threats?"

"Oh, yes," she assured the old man. "I know about them."

"Terrible thing," Lydia said.

"Yes."

"And it's most terrible," Kenneth said, "because it brought them here to *Distingue* months ahead of schedule—and it's keeping them here for a lot longer than they usually stay."

He did not seem to realize or care that his thoughtlessly antagonistic comments about the Doughertys put Sonya on the spot. She could hardly, after all, join in a conversation denouncing her employer.

“Threatened to cut their throats, didn't he?”

“I suppose,” Sonya said.

“He did,” Walter said. “He threatened to cut their throats from ear to ear. But there was more than that.”

“I'll say there was!” Lydia wheezed.

She was leaning forward, as if the talk of blood had given her more energy than she'd known at one time in years.

“Torture and mutilate,” Walter said, shaking his grisly old head, his white hair blued by the television. “Threatened to torture and mutilate them as well as kill them.”

Sonya swallowed all of her brandy, trying to still her nerves, which were as jittery as a congregation of frogs.

“What kind of a man, do you suppose, would even *consider* doing something as unspeakable as that?” Lydia asked Sonya. From the old woman's pursed lips and anxious expression, Sonya could only surmise that she was eager as a schoolgirl to meet this marvelously daring soul, whoever—or whatever—he was.

“I don't know,” Sonya said. “A monster of some sort, a—madman.” She took a sip of her coffee.

“More brandy, Sonya?” Kenneth inquired.

“No. No, thank you.”

“I believe the man also threatened to disembowel them,” Walter said. “Didn't he, Kenneth?” The old man held his coffee cup in both shaky hands.

“He was not so civilized as to word it that nicely,” Kenneth said. “He promised, instead, 'to open the kids' guts,' quite a more forceful way of putting it.”

The walls drew nearer.

Despite the air-conditioning, Sonya was perspiring.

She put her cup down.

“Worse than that, though,” Walter said. “The man promised worse than that.”

“The eyes,” Lydia added. “He promised to do something with their eyes. I don't remember just what.”

Before any of them could tell her just what the man had threatened to do with the Dougherty children's eyes, Sonya said, “How did you learn all of this?”

“Ken told us,” Lydia said.

“And how did you hear all this?” Sonya asked the grandson.

He smiled. “Rudolph told me.”

“Mr. Saine?”

“He's the only Rudolph I know around here.”

Sonya was shocked, for Saine did not strike her as the sort of man who would go running to the neighbors, blabbing the latest gossip—especially to neighbors like the Blenwells, when he knew they did not like or associate with the Doughertys, his employers. And that meant that she had badly misjudged the burly bodyguard—or it meant that Kenneth Blenwell was lying, and that he knew about the nature of the threats through some other source . . .

“You know Rudolph, then?” she asked.

“We're friends.”

“Friends?”

“Why sound so incredulous?” Ken asked her. “Is there a law against it? I think he's a very capable, admirable man.”

Lydia leaned far forward in her seat and said, “I know what it was now!”

“What are you talking about?” Walter snapped.

“What that terrible man promised to do with their children—he was going to cut out their eyes, he said. Take them right out of their heads. Wasn't that it, Kenneth?”

“Yes, I think so,” he agreed.

Sonya stood so abruptly that she caught the serving cart with her hip and jarred all the utensils on it, almost knocking over the cut glass brandy decanter which the youngest Blenwell barely managed to catch before it tipped to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” she said, somewhat breathlessly. She wished that she could control the tone of her voice, for she knew that it contained a note of obvious panic. “But I really must go now. I’ve things to do back at Seawatch and—”

“I’m sorry if we’ve frightened you,” Kenneth said.

“No, no, you haven’t—”

She turned, aware that she was being rude, but really not caring much after having endured the past half hour with them, and she made for the open door and the hallway where there was at least a bit more light.

When she opened the front door of Hawk House, Kenneth was right behind her.

He said, “You’re being silly, you know.”

She turned, looked up at him, squinting in the strong sunlight. “Oh? How so?”

“Even if someone does intend to kill the Dougherty kids, you’re safe. No one has threatened you yet.”

She nodded and went down the steps.

“I’ll walk you back,” he said.

“That’s not necessary.”

“No trouble.”

She summoned up all of her wits, thinking fast, and she said, in as level and forceful a voice as she could manage just then, “No, Mr. Blenwell, really now. Please don’t bother. I would much prefer to walk home alone. I set out, alone, to explore *Dis-tingue*. I want to see it at my own speed, in my own fashion, in order to get some emotional *feel* about the place. I’m sure you’ll agree that that sort of thing is best done by oneself.”

He grinned.

Again, looking up at him, caught by his dark eyes, she could not be certain whether that grin was produced by high spirits, or whether he was mocking her.

“Suit yourself,” he said.

“Thank you for the coffee and brandy,” she said.

“It was nothing.”

“I’m sorry if I upset Hattie’s schedule.”

He continued to grin. “Not at all.”

She turned away from him and felt relieved when she could no longer see his grin or his eyes.

She set off toward the beach, went down the stone steps in the bank at the end of the lawn, took off her sandals and let the sand creep between her toes. When she reached the edge of the lapping sea, she turned toward Seawatch and walked away from Hawk House at a quick but not abnormal pace.

“Come again!” he called.

She pretended not to hear.

Thinking of the grisly details which the Blenwells had insisted on painting for her, she rounded the point and, as soon as she knew she was out of Kenneth Blenwell’s sight, she began to run. Her breath came into her lungs in curious, short sobs.

## EIGHT

The remainder of that week passed without significant event, as Sonya continued to instruct Alex and Tina, played games with them, and, on her off hours, enjoyed the sea, sand and sun, slowly forgetting about all the portents of danger: the shark, the man standing beneath the palms that night, the conversation with the Blenwells . . .

Her friendship with Bill Peterson continued to flower and seemed, at times, to border on more than mere friendship. Though she was clearly attracted to him, and he to her, Sonya vowed to let the relationship develop slowly, cautiously, so that neither could be hurt by any eventual rejection. She admired him, liked him, studied him from a distance when he was unaware of her—but she was not yet sure if she was in love with him. She rather thought she wasn't. But that might very well come, given time, given leisure to know him better.

She had also begun to grow close to Bess Dalton, Henry's wife. That woman was always full of smiles, teasing, laughing; she could even cheer Henry when he was in one of his sour moods, which was more frequently—once or twice a week—than Bill Peterson had at first let on.

Helga, the cook, remained quiet, shy, vivacious only when the subject was food in general or her cooking in particular.

Leroy Mills, the handyman, also remained stand-offish, saying little, making himself scarce when she was around.

Each time she saw him, she tried to fit him to the shadow she had seen beneath the palms . . .

On her second Saturday at Seawatch, Sonya was summoned to Joe Dougherty's airy study at the top of the house, where she was given her first bi-weekly paycheck, the first, she hoped, of many. Though she had worked at a number of part-time jobs during high school and college, this was the first full-time position she had ever held; the receipt of the check, therefore, was a special occasion, like a milestone in the journey toward complete maturity and responsibility. And since most of the check, except for some mad money, would be banked in a savings account—receiving room and board in addition to her salary, she had few outside expenses—she was especially pleased and excited by the sight of that first salary check, almost like a teenager on her first job.

"You've done very well," Joe told her. "Helen and I think that Dr. Toomey couldn't have come up with anyone better for the job."

She smiled and looked at her hands. "Thank you—Joe."

"The children feel the same way," he said. "They're absolutely crazy about you, and therefore they're learning."

"I like them too," she said. "They make it easy to teach them, to have fun with them. They're both awfully bright, as inquisitive as any kids I've ever come across."

He nodded, aware of his children's talents. He said, "For some time now, Helen and I have wanted to get away, by ourselves, for a short vacation, a week or two. We have friends in California we've been promising to visit for months now."

She knew what was coming, didn't like it, but said nothing.

"We'll be going over to Guadeloupe tomorrow morning, in the *Lady Jane*, and we'll catch a private plane out of the islands, around eleven o'clock. That takes us straight into Miami, where we have an hour lay-over before the commercial flight to Los Angeles."

Sonya nodded.

He said, "I typed out our intended schedule and left it with Rudolph, and I've got another copy of it here, for you."

He handed her a gray, Xerox sheet of paper.

She tried to conceal the trembling in her hands when she took the paper from him. She stretched it

tight, holding it with both hands, and she thought she managed to appear relatively unruffled, though, all the while, she was thinking of the threats that had been made against Alex and Tina.

Joe Dougherty leaned back in his desk chair and said, "We'll be staying with friends; the addresses are there at the bottom of the page, along with telephone numbers."

Sonya looked, saw them, cleared her throat and said, "Fine." Her voice, even in that single word, did not sound so strong and calm as she would have liked.

He hesitated, as if he did not know how to phrase what he must say next, swiveled to look at the blue sky that shone behind one of his large windows and, gaining strength from that view, turned to her once more. "If, for any reason, you should need to contact us, feel free to call at any hour of the day or night."

"Will I need to, do you think?" she asked. Her voice sounded small and shaky, but she did not care.

"It's highly unlikely," he said.

She wondered . . .

He said, "But those kids *are* awfully active, like a couple of young pups always scampering about. If one of them should fall out of a coconut tree or try to swim too far out toward the sandbars—or get hurt in some other way, we would, of course, want to know about that immediately." He smiled. "We're not the overly protective sort of parents, but we do like to keep tabs on those scamps."

"Naturally," she said.

"On the other hand," he said, "they are certainly not fragile, not by any means. They're as flexible as two rubber bands; they'll snap back from just about anything, like most kids their ages, I suppose. So, if I were you, Sonya, I wouldn't lay awake nights worrying about them. Every kid gets his quota of scrapes and bruises; that's a part of growing up."

She had decided to say nothing about the circumstances which had sent the Dougherty family to *Distingue* ahead of their yearly schedule, and she was surprised to find herself saying it nonetheless, as if the words were being formed against her volition, as if the voice she was using was not hers at all.

"What about the man who—threatened them?" she asked.

His face clouded, but only for a moment. He was the sort of man who was rarely depressed or frightened—one of the reasons Sonya liked working for him so much—and was also the kind of man who, when he *was* concerned, would be careful not to let his anxiety spread to those around him. His frown, therefore, was short-lived, replaced almost at once by his contagious smile. He leaned back in his chair again, and he said, "I suspect that we've long since outdistanced that man and his threats."

"He still frightens me," she said.

"Don't think about it," he said. "That entire episode is over and done with."

"I can't help it," she said, feeling somewhat like a ninny, but determined to make her own feelings understood.

Dougherty leaned forward again, hunching conspiratorily over his big desk, his arms resting on it, his hands folded together in the center of the big blotter. "The man was *neurotic*, Sonya, mentally disturbed. But I don't believe that he was completely mentally unbalanced. If he had been utterly mad, a psychotic instead of a neurotic, he would have done less threatening, less posturing, and he would have acted. He would long ago have hurt the children."

"I guess so."

"I *know* so."

"But—"

Dougherty interrupted. "Furthermore, even if the man was capable of doing the hideous things he said he would, he has been left behind in New Jersey."

"If I could be sure of that—"

"I'm sure," Dougherty said. "Positive. We've been here for months, now. If he were coming after us, he would have arrived long ago. He's most likely turned his attention elsewhere, harassing some other unsuspecting family. A psychotic would have come after us at once, for we would be the only satisfactory targets for his twisted hatred, and he would feel at a great loss if he couldn't continue to torment us. A neurotic, however, a less ill man, would easily turn his hatred elsewhere. And though I pity the family he bothers next, I'm just as glad that we're out of it and that he's found someone else for his games."

Sonya thought that she detected an eagerness to see an end to the affair, even at the cost of the madman's original intent, but she did not think it was her place to say so.

"You're right, I suppose," she said.

He smiled, nodded. "I wanted you to have our schedule in the event of some accident. I didn't mean to upset you, Sonya."

"I'm okay now," she said.

"Good. We'll see you again in a couple of weeks, then."

"Have a good trip," she said.

"We will, thank you."

The steps down from the third floor seemed endless, shifting and treacherous, for Sonya was the slightest bit dizzy. She went to her own room and lay down on the bed, the Doughertys' vacation schedule still clutched in her hand.

It would be all right.

She thought of Kenneth Blenwell, of the darkened rooms of Hawk House, thought of the old couple vegetating before the television set, thought of the strength in Kenneth's hands when he had gripped her arm . . .

The two alligators, framing the looking-glass, seemed almost alive, snapping at each other.

Sonya calmly forced herself to think about Bill Peterson who, if Blenwell represented danger, represented safety and security: he was light where Kenneth Blenwell was dark; he was gay where Blenwell was sullen; he was open where Blenwell was closed and foreboding; he was simple and direct, where Blenwell was unnecessarily complex and duplicitous. He was easily as strong as Blenwell, as tall, as vigorous, and surely more dependable. As long as Bill was around, she thought, nothing too terrible could happen to anyone.

And, of course, Rudolph Saine would be near at *all* times, hovering just at the edge of her sight, his pistol holstered under his arm, his eyes watchful. That should make her feel even safer. Between Peterson and Rudolph Saine, nothing bad could happen, absolutely nothing.

## BOOK TWO

### NINE

Shortly past nine o'clock on Sunday evening, having eaten a simple meal with the rest of the staff and unable to become interested in the novel she was reading, Sonya went for a walk, alone, in the gardens to the north of Seawatch. Here, small cactus of many varieties, miniature palm trees, orange trees, tropical roses, arbors full of bougainvillea, and wild orchids of countless strains were kept in neat and yet colorful order by Leroy Mills. She was assailed by one heady scent close after the other: second crop orange blossoms, the warm sweetness of bougainvillea, the mustiness of the cactus, the indescribable fragrance of hundreds of blooming orchids. In this wonderful olfactory fantasyland, where even the semi-darkness gave view of colors that were bright and striking, she was able to forget the last traces of her lingering fear, at least temporarily, and give herself over to the pleasures of communing with Nature's loveliest creations.

Stone walkways meandered through the garden, carrying her from one type of flower to another, from palms to orange trees, to orchids and to roses, through the sheltering arbors and out again, Seawatch, heavily lighted, threw a pale yellow glow even this far and, though leaving her shrouded in purple shadows, made her feel safe and relaxed.

She could, if she paused in her stroll a moment, hear the soft sussuration of the roiling sea as it slid into the beach quite close at hand. It was a calm-ing sound, rhythmic, as soothing as a mother's kiss.

She sat upon a stone bench which was situated twenty feet from the garden path, between two dense arms of shoulder-high tropical rose bushes, listening to the sea and enjoying the exotic fragrances that hung like heavy clothing on the moist night air. The bench was swathed in shadows, which must have been the reason why the man who suddenly appeared on the walkway, moving toward Seawatch with a swift and purposeful stride, didn't see her immediately . . .

Over the hypnotic boom of the surf and the after-echoes of each rushing wave, she thought that she heard someone cough: once, sharply, as if to clear the throat.

A moment later, leaning forward on the bench in order to hear better, she fancied that she detected the sound of approaching footsteps on the garden path. Abruptly, as the man walked out of the arbor of bougainvillea on his way toward the house, her fancy was proven real.

She rose, to go meet him, whoever he was.

For an instant, in the back of her mind, there rose the notion that he might not be someone she knew—and even if he were, he might not be a friend at all. But she brushed away the pessimistic thought and went toward the path.

She could not see who he was, for the darkness was a mask across his face, and it played deceptive tricks with his size and build.

As yet, he was oblivious of her.

She saw that his loping stride would carry him past her before she could reach the path, and she said, "Who's there?"

He stopped cold.

"Bill?"

He said nothing.

"Bill?" she repeated, because that was who she hoped he was, not because she recognized him.

He seemed frozen to the spot.



Hypnotized . . .

She stopped, too, half a dozen quick steps away from him, alerted by some subliminal danger signal, still unable to see just who he was. He was only a silhouette. A mass of shadows shaped some-what like a man, nothing more.

“Rudolph?”

She could hear him breathing.

He said nothing.

Then, as if the words had been spoken by some-one else who had magically possessed her body, her back cold with sudden perspiration, she said, “Ken?”

He turned and ran.

“Wait!” she shouted.

He disappeared into the arbor from which he had originally come, his darkness blending in perfectly with the deeper darkness of that leafy tunnel, gone like a genie vanishing back into the lamp.

She went after him.

Sonya knew, now, knew more surely than she could ever have put into words, that she had accidentally encountered the same man who had made the threats against Alex and Tina . . . the man who had driven the Dougherty family from its home in New Jersey to Seawatch and *Distingue* . . . the man with all the tales about knives and mutilation . . . torture and death. She could not have produced any real or circumstantial evidence to prove her conclusion. Instead, her certainty was based upon some sixth or seventh sense, on some unexplained but undeniable flash of clairvoyance: this is the man!

And if she were correct; if this *were* the mad-man who had caused so much anguish, she could not let him get away scott free without first catch-ing a glimpse of his face or of some other distin-guishing feature that would later serve to identify him: his exact size, his build, his manner of dress.

She ran after him.

The sea was forgotten, though it still thumped the beach and echoed on the flat sands.

The flowers were forgotten too. All she could think about was catching up to the stranger.

She ran into the open mouth of the waiting arbor.

She brushed the leaves aside, at the opening, felt them slither over her bare arms like the delicate wings of insects, and she stepped into unre-lieved blackness.

She had thought that he would run the entire length of the arbor, into the open air again, from there across the remainder of the gardens and into the thick, sheltering pine forests of the central part of the island, much too quick for her to catch. But she had been wrong about that, very wrong.

He remained in the arbor.

He stood quite still against the lefthand wall, holding his breath, listening for pursuit.

He was waiting for her.

She did not disappoint him.

She cried out when she brushed against him, re-coiled like a kitten from a snake.

She turned.

He grabbed her, whirled her around to face him once more, though in that pitch, she could only suppose they were face-to-face.

His hands let go of her arms and, in an instant, had a tight hold on her neck.

She screamed.

It was a terribly weak scream, too shallow to have carried clear over to Seawatch, much too shallow to be heard and draw any help. A useless, whispered scream . . .

He pressed her back against the wall of the arbor.

Hard ropy vines gouged at her back, like horns or like talons, hurting her.

Even now, even as she gagged and twisted under the pressure of his large, dry, determined hands, Sonya tried to see something of him. His face could be no more than inches away from her own, for she could feel the wash of his rapidly ex-haled breaths against her forehead . . . But the darkness, in the final analysis, was too deep, too intense for her to discover anything at all about him. Except, of course, that he was frightened of being discovered and that his hands, his squeezing hands, were awfully large and

strong.

Strangely, though his grip on her throat was decidedly uncomfortable, it was not deadly. He held her against the wall of the arbor, and he cut off most of her breath, but he delayed making that last little bit of effort that would finish her off—al-most as if he had to have time to build up his cour-age for the kill . . .

She squirmed, tried to pull free of him, found that she was only making the pain at her throat worse, like a hot file scraping away at half her esophagus.

She tried to scream again.

No sound: just pain.

Okay, no screaming. She would talk to him, reason with him, ask him to please let her go so they could talk this over like reasonable human beings. But when she tried to speak softly and per-suasively, she found that she had no more luck than she had had with her scream: the words re-mained unspoken, choked down.

Without warning, without apparent reason, he tightened his hands, moving closer, having gotten the necessary courage . . .

An even deeper darkness, a thousand times blacker than the pitch beneath the arbor, whirled and danced tantalizingly at the back of her mind, growing ever larger, closer, beginning to envelope her like soft raven wings—or like a shroud.

For the first time in this nightmarish encounter, Sonya was genuinely, unreservedly terrified and not merely afraid. Her terror swelled, bloomed, blossomed into the ultimate horror: the expecta-tion of certain death . . .

Somehow, until this very minute, she had not been able to envision herself as a corpse, lifeless and cold and finished forever. Perhaps it was an absurd application of her overly-optimistic approach to everything in life, but she honestly had not seriously considered the possibility that she might die here, in the gardens, between the madman's hard, dry and deadly hands.

Now, of necessity, she understood.

She grabbed his wrists.

They were thick, corded with muscle.

She could not budge them.

Quickly, she slid her hands along his arms, to his biceps, trying to force him away.

Blackness: closer, closer . . .

She raked her nails at his face. And again. She missed both times, striking only air.

She twisted and fought, growled deep in her throat as she felt herself weakening and knew that she must not give in to that sweet, beckoning un-consciousness that, right now, seemed so welcome, so very desirable.

He was gasping for air, too, as if he were the one who was being methodically strangled to death, and he whimpered eerily, like some wounded animal, with each indrawn breath. Sonya could sense, rather than feel, the great, nervous tremors which shook the man's entire body like reverberations passing through a gong.

She knew that she had only moments left. Al-most unconsciously, with the mindless desperation of a cornered animal, she raised her right foot and brought the hard, plastic heel of her loafer down solidly on the toes of his left foot, ground hard. He was wearing only canvas-topped sneakers, which afforded him no protection at all.

He cried out, let go of her with one hand as he reached for his injured foot.

She twisted, pushed hard against him, tore free.

“Hey!”

She ran, sobbing hysterically, collided with the far wall of the arbor, re-oriented herself, and made for the open end of the arbor, the way she had come.

He grabbed her shoulder and sent her stumbling into the wall again. Somehow, even hurt as he was, he was right behind her.

She pushed off the wall, out of his grip, and ran again.

Curiously, although he was no longer throttling her, Sonya felt still on the edge of unconscio-us-ness;

that formless, black cloud grew nearer, nearer still, soft and warm. She only managed to keep going because the thought of collapsing so close to escape utterly infuriated her—and from her fury, she found a few last dregs of energy.

The end of the arbor was only thirty feet away, though she would not have questioned any-one who told her that it was really a mile instead; it *felt* like a mile, each step a major journey. Then the air was cooler, the darkness less dark . . . At the end of the arbor, he caught her again, one hand on her shoulder, spun her around with a sud-denness that jerked her off balance.

She gasped, staggered, almost fell.

He would have gone for her throat in another second, and then she would have been finished for sure. But she did not give him that second; she stamped out, twice, caught his injured foot on the second try. She did not strike it hard, but just hard enough.

He yelped, hopped to one foot, fell with a crash.

She turned and ran again.

The night air was cooler than she remembered it, really cool, almost chilly.

Her throat burned as if a fire had been set inside of it, and it was too raw to permit, yet, a cry for help.

She passed the bench where she had been sitting when the man had first appeared from the arbor, kept on going.

A dozen paces from the edge of the garden, on the verge of the open lawn where the light of Seawatch spilled more profusely, Sonya tripped on a loose stone in the walk, fell.

She tried to get up.

She could not.

Her heart racing, so winded that she could only barely get her breath, she passed out.

## TEN

When she woke, she did not know where she was—though she definitely knew where she *wasn't*. She was not in her huge Polynesian bed on the second floor of Seawatch, not in the center of that soft, queen-sized mattress where she had spent the past eleven nights. The surface beneath her was hard and somewhat chilly.

She lay still for a long while, trying to remember what had happened and where she was. She hated, more than anything else, to wake up in a strange place and not know, for a few moments, how she had gotten there. When her parents were killed in the automobile accident, she had gone through a number of scenes like that. First, in the middle of the night, she had been moved to the neighbors' house while she slept, her parents already an hour or so dead, her babysitter sent home; in the morning, when she had opened her eyes, her heart had risen instantly into her throat, for she recognized nothing around her. That day, she was taken in by an aunt and woke in that house the following morning, confused, somewhat frightened, longing for the familiarity of her own bedroom with the dolls she knew so well, the scatter of knickknacks and souvenirs that instantly reassured her when she woke there among them. The day before the funeral, she was moved in with her grandmother, where she was to stay, and was faced with a third strange setting to grow accustomed to. She remembered the fear in the morning, when she opened her eyes on the unfamiliar ceiling, lying in a bed which she did not remember and was sure she'd never used before, a sense of impermanence sweeping over her like a black tide . . .

Suddenly, she recalled the corresponding blackness in the tunnel of the bougainvillea arbor, the blackness that had closed in on her and made her faint, and she opened her eyes like shutters flying up on two small, twin cameras.

The starry sky lay overhead.

Part of a moon.

She seemed to be alive, something she was surprised to find.

She was stretched out at the edge of the gardens, lying half across the stone walk and half in the grass, where she had fallen. One arm was flung out to her side, the other above her head so that, had she been standing, she would have looked as if she were preparing to do a flamenco dance. Despite her situation, she was amused at that thought. She moved, seemed to be all right, sat up.

That was a mistake. Her head began to throb as if there were a tiny man inside beating at her skull with a sledgehammer. A fierce pain arced over both eyebrows, and it seemed the lasting sort. Also, her throat felt swollen and raw, and she wondered if she would be able to swallow a long, cold glass of water. That drink was what she desired more than anything else on earth.

She touched the sides of her neck, carefully, gently. It *was* swollen, but the pain was not so terrible, more of a tenderness, like a sprained ankle or pulled muscle.

She got slowly to her feet, like an invalid doubting the effect of some new miracle drug, reached out and stopped the world from spinning around and around like a top. When it settled down, and she managed to keep her balance about as easily as a girl on a tightrope might, she turned toward Seawatch, blinked at the pale light in its windows and, with a small sigh, began the long walk across the north lawn.

It was good to be alive. She didn't know how she had escaped the man in the arbor, why he hadn't given chase and found her, but she *did* know it was perfectly wonderful to be alive. She hoped she could stay that way a while longer.

## ELEVEN

“You didn't see anything?”

“Nothing at all, Rudolph.”

“Not even a glimpse of his face?”

“No.”

“Think.”

“I have thought.”

“When you grappled with him, what could you tell about his hair? Bald? Short? Long?”

“I didn't notice.”

“Might he have had a mustache?”

“I don't think so.”

“How do you know, Sonya? In your struggles, did you touch this man's face? Did you feel that he was clean shaven?”

“No.”

“Then you can't really be sure about the mus-tache. And he might even have had a beard.”

“He might have.”

“How large a man was he?”

“He seemed huge.”

She shuddered at the memory.

Rudolph squinted at her, as if he were ready to strike her with one of his hammy fists. Instead, he struck the top of the kitchen table, and he said, “I didn't ask you how the man *seemed*. I asked you how he *was*. Was he a large man—or was he small? Was he fat? Thin? Or merely average?”

“He wasn't fat or thin,” she said. “Neither ex-treme. But he was quite strong, muscular.”

Her voice was a thin, strained hissing, like air escaping from a pressurized spraycan. Each word pained her, made her mouth run dry and her tight throat constrict even further.

“How tall?”

“I don't know.”

He grimaced.

“Well, I don't,” she said.

He said, “No taller than you?”

“Taller than me, yes.”

“See, you do know!”

She said nothing.

He said, “Taller than me?”

She looked at him as he stood—six feet four inches or better. “Not so tall as you,” she said.

“Around six feet?”

“Maybe.”

“Think. You can't be sure?”

“No.”

“For God's sake, Rudolph!” Bill Peterson snapped.

The bodyguard looked at him, waiting patiently for the rest of his outburst.

Peterson said, “The girl has had an absolutely horrible experience. You can see that she's in pain, and she's still frightened. On top of all that, she's tired. Yet you continue to act as if what she has to tell you is vital to—”

“*It is vital,*” Saine said. His voice was firm, cold, final, and he nodded his burly head in the manner of a wise man who, having spoken, expects no ex-pressions of doubt or contradiction.

"I'm okay," Sonya told Peterson. She tried to smile at him, though that expression caused her a twinge of pain beneath the chin, and she reached out to squeeze his hand.

"Six feet tall, then," Saine said, musing over what little data they had managed to puzzle out. "That's something, anyway."

"Damn little," Bill said. "I'm around six feet tall, as are Henry and Kenneth Blenwell. And if Sonya misjudged by a couple of inches either way—quite an easy, understandable error to make considering the situation that she was in—we could include both you and Leroy Mills."

"Ah, yes," Saine said. "But we *have* eliminated the women." He had a rueful smile on his face. "Unless, of course, one of them is in league with the man who attacked Sonya."

"And you forget," Peterson said, "that whoever this man is, he's most likely an outsider, a stranger, perhaps someone we've never seen. In which case, your guess at his height is even more worthless."

Saine gave Peterson one last, close scrutiny, then turned back to Sonya to resume the question-ing. "Did this man in the garden say anything to you?"

"Nothing."

"Not a single word in all that time?"

She hesitated.

He saw the hesitation, leaned across the table and said, "Well?"

Sonya said, "I believe he shouted at me, when I first stamped on his foot and broke away from him."

"What did he shout?"

"A single word—something like 'Stop' or 'Hey.'"

"You didn't recognize his voice?"

"I wasn't thinking about that, just then. He might have been someone I know, and he might not have been. It's hard to say—from a single word."

"His clothes?"

"I didn't see them."

"You said he was wearing tennis shoes."

"I think he was, canvas tops of some kind."

"Not much help," Peterson said. "Nearly everyone in the tropics owns at least one pair of sneak-ers." He looked at Rudolph Saine and said, "I'm wearing socks and loafers right now, if you want to check."

"I know you are," Saine said. "I already checked."

"You're a tough case," Peterson told him.

"I have to be."

"If you suspect everyone in Seawatch, Bill said, "why don't you line us all up against the wall, like they do in the movies—then make us take our shoes off? If one of us has a bloody set of toes, then . . ." He snapped his fingers. "Voila! The case is solved!"

Saine shrugged his massive shoulders, unmoved by the suggestion, which Peterson had made half in sarcasm. "If the man was wearing socks and sneakers," Saine said, "it is unlikely that Miss Carter drew blood. His toes may be bruised—and they may be unscarred. Even if I were to find evidence of such an injury on one of you, what good would that evidence do me? You may have hurt yourself in some other manner . . . Such flimsy 'evidence' would never be admissible in court."

"Still," Peterson said, "at least you'd have some idea who—"

"Yes," Saine agreed. "And the man I suspected would know he was suspected. He would lay low. He would become even more careful than he has been to date. If he finally did kill the children, he would have himself protected with a cast iron alibi, because he would know that nothing else but cast iron would stop me from moving against him."

"In other words, you want to give him enough rope to hang himself," Peterson said.

Saine said nothing.

"Isn't that—sort of playing with the children's lives?"

Saine said, "Mr. Dougherty trusts my judgment. This is my job, not yours. You must rest easy and not let it worry you so." He smiled a non-smile.

Sonya squeezed Bill's hand all the harder, to let him know that, if he were arguing with Saine for her sake or because he was angry with the body-guard's treatment of her, none of this was necessary. She was tired of anger, raised voices, so much suspicion. She would just as soon get the questions and answers done with, no matter how pointless they might seem, so that she could go up-stairs and get into bed—perhaps with an icebag at her throat.

Bill seemed to take the hint, for he did not re-pond to Saine this time. He just sat there at the table, beside her, staring across at the big man, looking angry but powerless.

Saine said, "Was this man wearing a watch, Sonya?"

"No."

"Any rings?"

"I don't know."

"His hands were around your throat for a long time, as you tell the story. Now, surely, you'd know whether or not he was wearing any rings. A ring would gouge at your skin, more than likely. At the very least, it would make an especially painful point."

"It all hurt so much, I didn't notice if one place hurt more than another," she said. She rubbed her throat lightly. The swelling had gone down a bit, but the bruises had begun to appear, brown-purple and ugly. She hated for everyone to see her like this. She caught a glance from Leroy Mills who was sitting on a chair by the refrigerator; he blushed, looked down at his hands. He seemed as embarrassed by her bruises as she was.

"Was he left- or right-handed, Sonya?" Rudolph Saine asked.

She blinked in surprise and, for a moment, thought that he was kidding her. When she saw that he was not being funny, that he was perfectly serious, she said, "How on earth should I know?"

"When he grabbed hold of you—you'll remember that you said he grabbed you several times during your tussel under the arbor—did he always use the same hand?"

"I'm not sure."

"Can you remember a single incident? The first time he grabbed you, was it with his left or right hand? Which shoulder did he take hold of, Sonya?"

She shook her head. "I can't say."

"Try."

"It was so dark, and the whole thing was such a nightmare of grabbing, hitting and clutching that I can't remember anything about it—except the chaos and terror."

Saine nodded and looked away from her. He faced Peterson, seemed to gather his thoughts for a moment, folded his big hands together on top of the table, and said, "Bill, where were you between eight-thirty this evening and—say, ten o'clock?"

"On the *Lady Jane*" Peterson said, without hesitation.

"What were you doing there?"

"Bedding down for the night."

"You have a room in Seawatch," Saine said.

"And, as you know perfectly well, I almost never use it, except to store my things. If the weather isn't bad, I always sleep in the forward stateroom on the *Lady Jane*."

"Why?" Saine asked.

"I like it there."

"Why, though, when you have such excellent quarters here in the main house, do you choose to sleep in the cramped stateroom of a small boat?"

"It's not so cramped," Peterson said. "And it's air-conditioned. Besides, I'm a man of the sea, not of the land. I was raised on boats by parents who were sea lovers, and I've worked most of my adult life on one kind of vessel or another. On the other hand, you're a man of the land; you're perfectly comfortable in a big house, in your own room. We are different types, you see. Rather than four plaster walls, I prefer the slap of waves against a hull and the smell of open water."

"You make it sound quite attractive."

"It is," Peterson said.

Saine said, "Eight-thirty is an early hour to turn in. Do you always go to sleep so early?"

"I didn't say I was asleep."

"To bed, then."

"Often, yes." Peterson leaned back, as if he were no longer angry with Saine, as if he were only bored. "I turn on the radio to a good FM channel, usually something from Puerto Rico, maybe Jamaica. I like to read. Music, a book, a few drinks."

"This was your routine tonight?"

Peterson nodded. "It was."

Saine unlocked his fingers and looked directly at the younger man. "What book were you reading?"

Peterson told him, title and author. "You want me to recount the plot for you?"

"That won't be necessary," Saine said. "What about your drinks? What were you having?"

"Gin and tonic."

"How many?"

"Two."

Saine got up and began to pace, his big body like a caged animal in the confines of the bright, sanitary kitchen. He said, "Could anyone vouch for you?"

"Not that I know of. I was there alone, and I didn't see anyone after supper."

Saine nodded and turned away from Peterson, as if the man were no longer important. He looked, instead, at Leroy Mills, pursed his lips and said, "What about you?"

"I was in my room," Mills said.

He did not look up from his hands, which held each other nervously, and his voice was subdued. Sonya thought his manner might spring from some underlying guilt or merely from a shy nature. It was impossible to tell which.

"Were you in bed early, too?" Saine asked, an undeniable note of sarcasm in his voice.

Mills looked up quickly, shook his head quite vigorously, as if not only to deny the alibi Saine had just given him, but as if, also, to indicate that he wouldn't be satisfied with telling anything but the truth. "I was writing letters, Mr. Saine. I wrote two letters and was on the third—when Miss Carter came home and all the excitement began. Then I had to come down here, to talk with you."

"Letters? To whom?" Saine asked. He stopped pacing and stood before the small man, looking down on him.

"To my family," Mills explained. "I wrote to my sister, Rose, in Oregon, about her new baby. It's her first. And I wrote to my brother in New York. The third letter was to my mother. She lives with my brother, but I always like to make her let-ter separate, to let her know she's important to me." He looked down at his hands again.

"Your mother's still alive then?"

"Yes, Mr. Saine. She's quite old, but she gets around pretty good."

"You're lucky to have her with you, yet," Saine said, ignoring the two thousand miles that separated mother and son. "Most men our age are without much family, unless they've married and started one of their own. My own mother's been dead three years."

"I'm sorry," Mills said, looking up. He appeared to be really hurt at Saine's loss.

The bodyguard caught himself, shook himself from his reverie and began to pace again.

Sonya was amazed by the little scene which had just transpired, for it revealed to her a side of Rudolph Saine's personality which she had not thought existed. He had always seemed hard, tough, brutal, formidable, reliable, capable—any of a hundred similar adjectives. But never before had he appeared to be at all emotional or sentimental, not until this brief exchange with Leroy Mills. She saw now that Saine was a man of contradictions, of many parts, with an outlook that was far larger in scope than she would have guessed.

"No one to verify your letter-writing story, I suppose," Saine said at last.

"No one saw me," Mills said.

"Of course."

"But if you want, Mr. Saine, I can go upstairs and get the letters to show you."



Saine shook his head, wiped a hand over a face suddenly weary. "No. They prove nothing. You could have written them earlier in the day, or even yesterday."

"I didn't, Mr. Saine," Mills said.

Saine shrugged.

He turned to Henry Dalton who stood rigid and apparently disinterested, by the kitchen door, al-most as if he were a sentry. "And what about you?" Saine asked.

"I was right here, in the kitchen, with Bess," Henry said. If he had not been in a bad mood today, this entire affair had certainly helped to put him in one. His voice was sharp and waspish, his whole attitude indefinably antagonistic.

"Doing what?" Saine asked.

"Washing dishes."

"Isn't that part of Helga's job?"

"Yes," Henry said. "But she wasn't feeling so well tonight, and she went upstairs to lie down. She was probably asleep through all of this. She wasn't out in the gardens, that's for sure." He cast a glance at Sonya that made the girl feel as if he held her responsible for the entire mess.

"I didn't believe she was," Saine said. "You've forgotten that, tonight at least, I'm only interested in the men here."

"What has that interest gotten you so far?" Henry snapped. "I see no clues."

"Nor do I," Saine admitted.

"It isn't anyone in this house," Peterson said. "It's someone else, an outsider."

"How has he gotten to *Distingue*?" Saine in-quired.

"The same way all of us did," Bill said. "By boat, of course. He could have come in after dark, in any sort of sailboat, beached it in any of a hun-dred places along the shoreline."

"Perhaps," Saine said.

Though her throat hurt considerably whenever she spoke, and her headache flared up with each word as if words were marbles that rattled around inside her head, Sonya said, "Have you given care-ful consideration to the Blenwells, Rudolph?"

Saine looked surprised. He said, "You told me this was a strong man. Both Walter and Lydia Blenwell are old—"

"I'm referring to Kenneth Blenwell," she said.

Saine frowned.

He said, "I doubt very much that he's our man."

"How can you be sure?" She was remembering, all too clearly, her first and thus far only encoun-ter with that tall, dark, brooding young man. She remembered the way he smiled at her, his vehe-ment dislike of the parrots and his threats to kill them one day—and she was also remembering how strong his hand had been on her arm when he was guiding her across the lawn and up the steps of Hawk House.

"Why would Ken Blenwell travel all the way to New Jersey to harass Alex and Tina?" Saine asked.

"We've already decided the man we're after is mentally ill. We've already said he doesn't need reasons," Sonya observed.

"Still—" Saine began.

Bill Peterson interrupted him. "Besides, Blen-well has good reason, in his own mind, to go to New Jersey, after the Doughertys. He wants to own *Distingue*, all of it, both houses."

"What would murdering the kids gain him, to-ward that end?" Saine wanted to know.

"He hasn't killed them yet," Bill Peterson pointed out. "But his threats to kill them brought the whole Dougherty family running for the 'safety' of Seawatch, which might have been ex-actly what he had in mind. With them so close, his threats could be carried out quite easily. And if Alex and Tina were killed on *Distingue*, Joe Dougherty would unload this house and his share of the island so fast your head would swim to watch. And because he's offered the best price and would be a fast buyer, Ken Blenwell and his grandparents would become sole owners."

"I think Bill's right," Sonya said.

Saine shook his head. "Maybe. I still don't think so. Blenwell is too level-headed, too—"

"What are you protecting him for?" Bill suddenly asked. He let go of Sonya's hand, pushed his chair away from the table and got to his feet, his anger giving him a nervous energy that bristled almost visibly all over him. "You put members of the Dougherty staff to the most grueling kind of questioning, intimidating them, letting them know you suspect each and every one of them, but when it comes to another very likely suspect outside the family, you grow lenient and doubtful."

"Call it intuition," Saine said.

"Bull. I've never seen you operate on intuition yet," Peterson said. "You've got reasons for dismissing Kenneth Blenwell from the list of suspects. I just wish I knew what those reasons were."

"What are you implying?" Saine asked, reddening.

Bill hesitated a moment too long before he said, calmly, "Nothing. I wasn't implying anything at all."

The scarlet color drained slowly out of the bodyguard's face, like water from a keg tap, and the tension in his broad shoulders slackened and disappeared altogether. "I'm just doing my job," he said. He was not offering any excuses, but explaining the situation to a bunch of inattentive children.

"Of course you are," Bill said. "I'm sorry, Rudolph. It's just that I keep thinking what someone wants to do with those two kids"—he motioned with his hand toward the small dining room off the kitchen where, out of sight, Bess and Helga were playing with the children—"and I want to start hitting someone, anyone. And now, when he almost kills Sonya—"

"I know, I know," Saine said. "We're all on edge, and we all have a right to be. But I'm the one best qualified to investigate things like this, no matter what any of you may think of my methods."

Bill nodded. "And now," he said, "shouldn't we get Sonya to bed? She's going to be stiff as a board in the morning; she'll need all the sleep she can get."

"By all means," Saine said.

"I can get there on my own," Sonya said.

Peterson said, "Nonsense." He helped her from her chair and made her lean on him as they walked out of the kitchen, down the corridor and up the main staircase.

At the door to her room, Bill said, "Sonya, are you certain that you're all right? You look awfully pale. If you want me to, I can get the *Lady Jane* going and run you over to the family doctor on Guadeloupe, have you there and back in a jiffy."

"I'm a nurse, remember? I know what I'm doing." She smiled at him affectionately, pleased by his obvious concern. "I've got a bruised throat, which will take a couple of weeks to go away completely. And I've got a splitting headache. But a few aspirins and a good night's sleep are just the medications I need for both complaints."

"Sure?"

"I am, yes."

He looked directly into her eyes, so evidently concerned about her that she was, for a moment, disconcerted. "I didn't want to see you get hurt, Sonya. I never thought you'd become so awfully involved with this thing."

"It's hardly your fault," she said.

His face grew tight and angry. "That madman said it was the children he wanted. Why come after you?"

"He didn't come after me," she reminded him. "I stumbled across him in the garden. He was probably looking for a good observation point; you can see the children's bedroom windows from that part of the garden. When he realized he'd been seen, he panicked. That's all."

He leaned forward, putting one arm protectively around her, and he kissed her, tenderly, on the lips, dizzying her for a moment before he pulled away again.

"I don't want to see you hurt," he repeated.

"Don't worry, I won't be," she assured him. "I don't intend to go for any more walks, alone, at night. Not until this thing is over and done with, anyway."

"Good."

To change the subject, partly because she was unsettled by his kiss and partly because she was not up to any tender intimacy just now, she said, "Do you think Joe and Helen will be in California by now?"

“For hours,” he said.

“Will Rudolph call them?”

“Yes, on the radio-phone, relayed from Guadel-oupe. It's really a shame that we have to disturb them now, when their vacation's just begun. They'll want to come right home.”

“That's best, isn't it?”

“I guess,” he said. “Though there isn't anything that either of them can do.”

He bent, kissed her again, more quickly this time. “Have a good night,” he said.

“I will.”

She watched him walk away toward the stairs, then stepped into her room, closed and locked her door.

The darkness was empty and still.

She did not turn on the lights, but walked across the room to the largest window.

For a long while, she stood there, very still, star-ing at the palm trees and the lawn and the night sky and then distant sea beyond, fingering her throat, swallowing with difficulty, trying to pene-trate the shadows for a glimpse of some watcher.

Eventually, she realized that there was no one there.

Only then did she draw her drapes and turn on the lights.

## TWELVE

Half an hour later, refreshed and relaxed by a hot shower and a couple of glasses of cold tap water that quenched some of the fire in her throat, she had pulled back the covers and was getting into bed when someone knocked at her door. From the solid, forceful, rapid pounding, she knew that it was Rudolph Saine, though she could not imagine what he might want to ask her now. Surely, he had covered everything, earlier, in the kitchen. Warily, resigned to the fact that she'd have to wait a bit longer before ending the night, she turned her back on the bed and went to see what Saine wanted.

"Yes?" she asked, when she opened the door.

She was wearing a high-necked, oriental pa-jama which covered her bruised throat, and she felt less self-conscious than she had earlier.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Saine said. But he was clearly not sorry, for he was only doing his job, still, and he was not the sort of man to apolo-gize for what duty necessitated.

"I wasn't asleep yet," she said.

He nodded. "There have been new develop-ments within the last half hour, things I thought you should know about."

She felt that she probably didn't want to know, no matter what these new developments were, but she also knew he was going to tell her anyway, even if she would prefer to remain ignorant.

He said, "Of course, we have no conventional telephones, as you know them, here on *Distingue*. When we wish to place a call, we contact the ma-rine operator on Guadeloupe, by means of our radio-telephone which is kept upstairs, in Mr. Dougherty's study. The Guadeloupe marine operator then dials the number we want, in a con-ventional manner, and makes a patch between the mainland line telephones and our radio-phone. It sounds very complicated, but it is really quite sim-ple and efficient, as it would have to be for all the business Mr. Dougherty has to do by telephone. It's more expensive than normal telephone service, but Mr. Dougherty hardly worries about expense."

Relaxed a moment ago, Sonya felt a minimum of tension slowly creeping back into her, like dirty water. Rudolph Saine was usually a man of few words, direct and to the point. In offering this long explanation of the radio-phone, he seemed to be avoiding, for as long as possible, some ugly bit of news.

"Though the radio-telephone is simple and efficient, it is also—vulnerable," he said. "It does not function well during bad weather, and not at all during a major seasonal storm. And with a sin-gle hammer blow, anyone could mangle enough of its insides to make it useless." He cleared his throat and delivered the bad news: "Someone has done just that. They smashed a number of tubes— which I might have been able to replace from our stores. But they also wrecked much of the printed circuitry, which I can't repair without expert help."

"Who?" she asked.

"The same man who attacked you, I presume. Or someone who's working with him."

"How could he get into Seawatch, clear up to the third floor where the radio-telephone is?"

Saine smiled sourly. "If he lived here, that would be no problem at all: a flight of stairs, an unlocked door . . ." He shrugged.

"Then you're still convinced that it's a member of the household staff?" she asked.

"Yes. But I'm not overlooking other possibili-ties. If there is a stranger on *Distingue*, he could have entered the house in a number of ways, lo-cated the radio-telephone and demolished it while I was questioning everyone in the kitchen."

"How would he even know about its existence?" she asked.

"He would know that no telephone lines are run to small islands like *Distingue*, and he would also know that a man like Mr. Dougherty would re-quire constant communications with the outside world. Even a psychotic can reason out something like that." He seemed, by his tone, to be castigat-ing himself

for allowing anyone to get at the radio-phone, as if he should have been at two places at once, in order to prevent such a disaster.

“Then you've not been able to call the Dough-ertys?”

“No,” he said. “But I'm sending Bill Peterson to Guadeloupe to make the call and to bring back some island police officials. Our man has gotten suddenly bold, and I don't want to take any more chances; I don't want to give him even the slight-est opening at the children.”

“Of course,” Sonya said. And though she longed for the big, comfortable bed and a lengthy, deep sleep, she said, “What can I do to help, until the police get here?”

“Nothing,” Saine said.

“I'm really feeling all right,” she protested. “I probably look worse than I actually am.”

“I'll be with Alex and Tina,” he said. “In their room, with the door locked and my revolver un-holstered. No one's going to get to them before we get some help here. I just wanted everyone in the house to know what's happened. And I wanted to recommend that you keep your door latched, as I see you already had done.”

She nodded, feeling slightly numb.

She recalled, against her will, Lynda Spauld-ing's warnings, and she wondered when, on top of everything else that had gone wrong, they could expect the hurricane . . .

“And one other thing,” Saine said.

“Yes?”

He smiled thinly. “I wanted you to know that I no longer consider you much of a suspect, Sonya.”

“Unless I choked myself to throw you off the track,” she said.

He smiled more warmly. “I hope, however, that this admission on my part will not lead to a corre-sponding laxity in your attitude toward me.”

“It won't,” she said. “I still suspect you.”

“Good.”

“I'm serious,” she said.

“I know you are. I urge you to continue to sus-pect me, to suspect everyone here. If we are all somewhat paranoid, we may survive this affair. Otherwise, we're sure to lose.” He stepped back from the door. “I must go now. Remember to slide your latch in place.”

“I will.”

She closed the door and bolted it. Only when the bolt snicked into place did Rudolph Saine turn and walk heavily away, down the hall.

In the space of a few hours, they had gone from a state of uneasy anticipation to a stage of seige.

# BOOK THREE

## THIRTEEN

The man was upset by the need to improvise. After all, he had spent a great deal of time, long nights lying awake, planning it all out in detail, such perfect detail, not a single factor overlooked: how long he would wait, biding his time until the family had been lulled into a false sense of security; when to strike; how to gain entrance to the children's locked room without alerting them or anyone else; how to kill both of them without letting them cry out for help; what sort of alibi would be iron clad, satisfactory to both the island police and the family . . . His plan, indeed, was like a gleaming, well-oiled machine which he tended to with profound dedication; all that it wanted was the flip of a single switch, and it would run so smoothly, like a Swiss watch, soundlessly, efficiently, a plan to end all plans, a plan to end two small lives . . . But now he was improvising, because he felt that his plan had become suddenly inadequate, that events on *Distingue* had taken away the usefulness of his marvelous plan and demanded, instead of carefully thought-out strategy, flexibility, freshness of mind, quick and accurate insight into all new developments, and even quicker action.

With the Doughertys gone, the time seemed most ripe. There were two less watchful antagonists to deal with now. And if he could kill the children while they were away, frolicking in California, he would not only ruin their lives, but laden them with an unbearable pack of guilt: they would never be able to forget that, while they were in California having fun, their children were destroyed in a most unmerciful manner . . .

Improvise . . .

He was now forced to improvise, because he had been careless in the gardens and had stumbled right into the girl. She had thrown him off his time table, she sure had. Now everyone *knew* that he was on the island, and he could not afford to hesitate any longer. Fortunately, he had smashed the radio earlier in the day, but now there were other things to attend to, other precautions he must make. Improvisations . . .

He should have killed the girl.

He hated himself for his failure.

He should have used the knife instead of his hands.

The knife would have been surer.

Somehow, he had panicked, and he had let her get away.

Had he only followed her far enough, he would have found her lying unconscious in the middle of the path, and he could have killed her with ease then. She deserved it for what she'd done to his foot. Thank God that she hadn't drawn blood and that he was still able to walk without limping. A limp would have ruined him, marked him at the start.

He paced back and forth in his room, keeping his foot limber, stopping now and again to look at his reflection in the mirror.

He thought he was a handsome man.

He spoke to his reflection, too. He said, "Jeremy, you're just right for the part of the avenging angel. You've got a righteous jawline, a look of strength about you, of tremendous competence."

Jeremy was not his real name. Sometimes, he forgot this. He had been talking to the nonexistent Jeremy for years now and, at times, he felt that he *was* Jeremy and no one else.

He liked being Jeremy.

Jeremy was colorful and daring.

And composed.

Jeremy was afraid of nothing.

Jeremy had the courage to strike out at those who deserved to suffer, had the tremendous, admirable strength of character required for him to act as both judge and jury, to mete out the proper punishment, no matter how severe it had to be. He had a knack for seeing, at a glance, who had led a life that was far too easy; he had a talent for picking those who simply must have their lives balanced by some pain. God had meant everyone to live through some pain, even the rich. Jeremy could act as God's instrument. He could put people in their place, he sure could, real fast.

And he would.

Soon.

Maybe tonight yet.

"Jeremy," he told the mirror, "this is a big night for you. Tonight, you're going to make fools of ev-eryone. You're going to make fools of Saine and Peterson and Mills and Dalton and everyone else in this house. Not to mention Kenneth Blenwell, or the vacationing Doughertys, who're going to look like even bigger fools . . ."

He chuckled to himself.

He was happy.

He was a child on Christmas morning, with a single gift to give: death. He would give them death, just punishment, pain.

He stood before the mirror a moment longer, talking to himself, to his. Jeremy-self. As before, when he named those he would make fools of, he included his own, real name in the list. After all, when he was Jeremy, he was not his real self; he hated his real self as much as he hated nearly ever-yone else on *Distingue*. He was only Jeremy now, no one else. When Jeremy mentioned the killer's real name, real self, he spoke of another individ-ual, someone else altogether. And when the mur-ders were committed, and when Jeremy faded out, relinquished control of the mind, when the real man and real identity returned, the real man would never understand that he had killed with his own hands.

Basically, though neither the Jeremy-self or the real self would understand this, he was not an evil person. He was simply schizophrenic, completely and totally insane.

## FOURTEEN

Despite her injuries, and despite the immediate danger which hung over Seawatch like a black cloud, Sonya managed to fall asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow. She slept soundly, dreamlessly, and she woke shortly before nine o'clock Monday morning, stiff and sore but decidedly better than she had been when she crawled between the sheets the night before. She had felt as if she were a hundred years old, then; now, overnight, she had lost seventy-five years, anyway, and was almost her old self. Her head-ache was gone, and her eyes no longer felt red and grainy. Her throat was less swollen than it had been, but it was still quite sore, a condition which she knew she would have to endure for a few days yet.

Her drapes were drawn tightly shut, still, and they prevented all but a few tiny streams of sun-light from entering the gloomy chamber. She lay there in the shadows, staring at the ceiling, wanting to think out her situation before she got up to face another day.

The big question in her mind, now, was whether or not she should remain as the Dougherty govern-ess and tutor . . .

Originally, she had taken the position, because it had seemed like a fun thing, working for a mil-lionaire, living in a mansion on a private island in the Caribbean . . . She had always gone out of her way to avoid bad scenes, depression, sadness . . . And she had been sure that here on *Dist-ingue*, she would meet only happy people, people who were on top of the world, who knew how best to enjoy everything life had to offer, who had little or no reason to be gloomy. She had expected much laughter, many interesting friendships, per-haps a few parties, for diversion, of the sort you read about on the society pages of all the better, metropolitan newspapers.

Actually, she had expected almost anything but what she had found when she arrived on *Dist-ingue*.

Of course, once this horrible business about the children was over and done with, perhaps they would be much happier and more pleasant to know than they now were. Everyone was under tremendous pressure over this affair, waiting for the worst and praying for the best, passing time like cattle under the swaying blade of an automatic executioner. When that pressure was re-moved, they might be—

No, she thought, things would not be so much better, even if the present crisis passed. Even if they caught the would-be killer and packed him off to some remote prison or asylum, there would still be a lot of negativism on the island: Henry Dalton and his grumpiness; Leroy Mills' strange, quiet, almost secretive ways that made her think he was always planning to do something of which he was utterly ashamed; the Blenwells at the far end of the island, hating everyone else, talking about killing the parrots, sitting in their dark drawing room like creatures who would ash and rot if they came into contact with direct sun-light . . .

No, already there were too many bad memories associated with this island, memories that would haunt her if she remained. It was best to go.

They'd be disappointed with her, at first.

But they'd understand.

She would write out her resignation that after-noon and give it to Joe Dougherty when he and Helen arrived back from California this evening.

Then she'd be free.

After all, they'd realize that no one wanted to live around a place full of bad memories, full of the stink of death and the threat of death. It was always better to get out, go elsewhere, slough off the bad past. You couldn't be happy if you didn't slough off the bad things that happened, stick them away in a corner of your mind, forget them, let dust cover them. Anyone could see that.

Her decision firmly made and justified, at least to herself, she let her mind wander over the people on



*Distingue* who might fit a murderer's shoes. She found that she suspected almost everyone, from Mills to Henry Dalton, to Saine and Peterson. They all had the opportunity, she supposed, to commit such a crime, though she could see no motivation. Even a madman, it seemed to her, would need some motivation, no matter how inconsequential it was, some spark to set him off. And that made Kenneth Blenwell the chief suspect, of course; he wanted Seawatch and all of *Distingue*. She let her mind wander through the memory of her first meeting with Kenneth and his grandparents, and she became convinced she was right. She would have to speak with Rudolph about it, convince him to be more serious about the possibility of Blenwell's guilt.

At last, her mind began to return to the same thoughts, as if in a circle, and she knew it was time to get up.

She showered, dressed, brushed her yellow hair until it shone, then went downstairs for breakfast, shortly past ten o'clock.

In the small dining room just off the kitchen,

Rudolph Saine sat before a large plate of bacon and eggs, keeping a watch over Alex and Tina, who were working diligently at stacks of pancakes that were smothered under blueberry syrup. Both kids had bright purple stains around their mouths and purpled fingers, but they had somehow managed not to spot the white tablecloth.

Sonya said, "They must be good. Either that, or you've just heard that food will be outlawed as of tomorrow."

Tina giggled and wiped at her mouth.

Alex swallowed a mouthful of pancakes in a loud gulp, then said, "Hey, Sonya! Did you know someone wrecked *Lady Jane*?"

His eyes were fever bright, his voice quick and excited.

She frowned. "Wrecked it?"

"Chopped a hole in her," Tina explained.

"Right in the bottom," Alex said. "She sank."

"You can still see her," Tina said. "But she's mostly sunk."

"Same thing happened to the neighbor's two boats," Alex said, chattering like a magpie. "Someone chopped holes in 'em."

"Sunk 'em," Tina said.

"Whoa, there," Sonya said. "You two are going too fast for me. I can't keep up with you."

She looked at Saine.

He didn't look happy.

"Is this true?" she asked.

"Too true."

She went to the kitchen door, opened it, saw Helga working on a pie crust at the central table. "When you have time, Helga, would you get me some coffee and maybe a couple of sweet rolls?"

"Sure, right away," Helga said.

"Take your time."

Sonya closed the door and went back to the table, sat down across from Saine. "Is it very bad?"

"Last night," the big man said, "I told you that Bill was going to boat over to Guadeloupe and get the police. Well, he didn't make it. Someone opened the sea cocks and scuttled the *Lady Jane*."

"Scuttled?"

"Sank her, flooded her hold." He forked eggs into his mouth, chewed and swallowed them. "She was down with her keel on the ocean floor and her pilot's cabin barely above the waterline."

"A hole chopped in her too?"

"No, that's Alex being melodramatic."

"Being what?" Alex asked.

Saine smiled. "Eat your pancakes before you wither up from lack of nourishment."

Sonya said, "Couldn't the hold be pumped out?"

"Bill was going to do just that—until he found out that the electric pump was smashed."

"A hand pump, then—"

"He's working on that," Saine said. "But it'll take two days of steady work to empty out those hundreds of gallons with a hand pump. Anything could happen in a couple of days, anything at all."

Bess brought Sonya's coffee and rolls. "You're looking better this morning," she told Sonya.

"Feeling better, too."

Bess gingerly touched Sonya's bruised neck. "Hurt bad?"

"Not much. Not so long as I don't turn it too suddenly."

"The best thing for that is an onion salve."

"Oh?" Sonya said.

"I make it myself," Bess explained.

"I've never heard of that."

"It's the best thing for strained muscles which is, after all, about what you have. Strained muscles. The only difference is, in your case, someone else strained them for you."

"Onion salve," Sonya repeated. "I think I'll forgo the pleasure."

"I'll make some anyway," Bess said. "You may change your mind. It really works. Draws the pain right out."

"How?" Rudolph asked, smiling at her. "Does the stink make the patient forget about the pain?"

"Doubting Thomas," Bess said. "You see if it doesn't work." She turned to Sonya. "It'll take about an hour or so."

"Really—" Sonya said.

Bess touched her shoulder to stop her. "You'll thank me afterwards," she said. Then she returned to the kitchen.

"Some woman," Rudolph said.

Alex said, "She used onion salve on Tina once."

"I smelled bad," Tina said.

"For days," Alex said.

"Like a liver dinner," Tina said.

Sonya laughed out loud, as delighted by the children's good spirits in the face of their predicament as she was by the little girl's sense of humor.

The children returned to their pancakes.

To Saine, Sonya said, "What's this about the Blenwells' boats?"

"Both scuttled," Saine said. "Their cabin cruiser was hit the same way as *Lady Jane*. And Ken's catamaran had a hole chopped in the bottom. Three holes, in fact. Bill went down to borrow one of their boats last night, and that's when the damage was found."

He had stopped eating, even though he had more than half his breakfast on his plate.

Sonya wished she could look away from him and talk only with the kids, for they were, in their innocence, still fun to be with. Saine, on the other hand, was going to depress her even further.

"So how did you get word to Joe and Helen about what's going on here?" she asked.

She had not touched her food yet, and now she realized that she hadn't really wanted it.

"We were going to use the Blenwells' radio-telephone," Saine said. "But it was damaged, just like ours."

Sonya felt dizzy.

Saine said, "They keep it on the ground floor, in the back of the house, in a rather isolated room. It was easy enough for someone to pry open a window, slip in and do the job."

"That wouldn't be necessary if the man who did the job already lived in Hawk House," Sonya observed.

"You believe Ken Blenwell would isolate himself along with us, chop up his own boat, scuttle the other?"

"I forgot," she said. "You and Ken are good friends, aren't you? And you're reluctant to finger a good friend."

Saine colored. "I wouldn't say we're good friends."

“Kenneth Blenwell said it.”

“Oh?”

“He respects you quite a bit. I don't remember his exact words, but he implied that he liked you, and that the feeling is mutual.”

“It is,” Saine admitted. “He's a very level-headed man, a good man.”

“Who wants to kill the parrots?”

Saine looked perplexed. He said, “What's that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it says.”

“Kill the parrots?” He frowned.

She said, “And maybe kill the ch—kill some-thing else, too.”

“Us, huh?” Alex asked.

“Not you,” Sonya said.

She didn't want to frighten them. The longer they could face the situation as if it were one big game, the better. She knew what it was like to be young and helpless and terrified of death, and she didn't want them to experience the nightmares that she had known as a child.

“Sure, us,” Alex said. “Who else?”

“Eat your pancakes,” Saine said.

“I'm almost done.”

“Almost isn't good enough.”

“Eat your pancakes, dummy,” Tina told her brother. “They're good for you.”

“So we're isolated,” she said to the bodyguard.

“Quite effectively.”

She tried not to let a tremor show in her voice, but it was there anyway. “Joe will probably call, sooner or later, to see if everything's all right here.

When he can't get through to us, he'll know some-thing's happened. He'll call Guadeloupe—”

“He'll think it's the storm,” Saine interrupted.

“Storm?”

He looked surprised. “You didn't see the sky?”

“I didn't open my drapes this morning.”

“Come here,” he said.

He rose and went to the window, pulled aside the drapes and showed her the muddied sky. Brown-purple clouds, ugly and massive, so low they seemed within her grasp, scudded quickly northwestward, thick and heavy with water. The sea, in the glimpse she had of it far down the beach, looked high and angry, with a great deal of froth.

“There's a hurricane moving this way, a center that formed up two days ago but only reached hurricane proportions last night. It's the seventh of the season—they're calling it Greta—but it's the only one that's formed up near *Distingue*, so far.”

“You mean we're in its path?”

“Probably not,” he said.

“You don't know for sure?”

“Not yet. It's headed directly this way, but it's a hundred and twenty miles out, and it'll probably veer considerably before it reaches us. We won't get the hurricane itself, just the unpleasant fringe effects—lots of wind and rain. How bad that gets depends on how soon Greta veers. The closer she gets before making a directional switch, the worse we'll get pounded.”

“Should we go to Guadeloupe, to a larger island?” she asked.

“Maybe. But we can't. The boats are useless, remember.”

She said nothing. She could not think of any-thing *to* say.

Saine let the drapes fall back into place, and he turned away from the window. Quietly, so that the children wouldn't hear him, he said, “Has a good night's sleep refreshed your memory any?”

“How so?”

“Have you recalled anything more about the man who tried to kill you in the garden?”

“No,” she said.

He sighed. “These next couple of days are going to seem like a whole lifetime.”

“Or even longer,” she agreed.

## FIFTEEN

Sonya decided to carry on in their normal routine, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened or was about to happen—as if the sabotaged radio-telephones, the ruined boats, and the approaching storm were all parts of some monstrous fantasy that was, admittedly, unsettling but, nonetheless, only fantasy. She tutored Alex and Tina until two o'clock, with Rudolph Saine sitting by them like an overgrown child who'd wandered into the wrong classroom. They ate a light lunch at two, and Sonya asked the children what they'd like to do, for recreation.

“Can we go to the beach?” Alex asked.

“It's not the weather for swimming,” Sonya said.

“Not to swim, just to watch,” the boy said.

“Watch what?”

“The waves. When the weather's bad, we get these monstrous waves that're really keen.”

“Isn't there an indoor game you'd like to play?” Sonya asked.

“I want to see the monstrous waves,” Tina said.

Sonya looked to Saine for help.

The big man rose. “If it's monstrous waves they want to see, it's monstrous waves we give them.”

“Get your jackets,” Sonya told them.

They stepped across the hall, with Saine watching, and got their windbreakers from the closet, were back in a moment.

“Stay close,” Sonya warned.

Alex took hold of his sister's hand, and the little girl did not object, as she normally might have. She stood close beside him, casting glances his way, as if he were capable of protecting her and were not merely a fragile, nine-year-old boy.

This gesture did not escape Sonya's attention, and she wondered whether, despite their apparent good humor and playfulness, the children didn't understand the gravity of the situation more than they let on to the adults around them. Or perhaps, rather than a conscious understanding, their caution was on a primitive, physical level, an unconscious reaction to a broad spectrum of pressures that they did not even realize they sensed.

Outside, a good breeze was blowing from the southeast, pushing northwestward, less forceful at ground level than it was up where the big clouds were herded along. It set up a soft, rustling sound in the palm forest, a sinister hissing, but was otherwise innocuous. It was somewhat difficult to imagine it growing in force until it could uproot palms and drive waves halfway across the island.

They went across the edge of the formal gardens, almost directly over the spot where Sonya had lain, unconscious, the night before, took a set of steps down to the gray beach.

“See!” Alex cried, pointing to the unruly waters.

Just as he had said, the waves were huge, eight or nine feet high, curling in toward the beach with brutal force. That elemental savagery was as hypnotic a show as the boy had promised.

“There's a ship!” Alex cried.

“Where?” Tina asked.

He pointed.

Sonya followed the direction of his outflung hand and saw, far out on that boiling cauldron of a sea, the dark shape of a long tanker which wallowed up and down like some living creature unaccustomed to savage waters and searching for a way out. Even at this distance, she was able to see the high sheets of white spray that exploded along the tanker's bow each time it slammed through another wall of moving water.

It occurred to her that the savage ways of Nature could be far more dangerous than anything a

human agent could do—even if the man in question were a certified lunatic. She fervently hoped that Greta would by-pass *Distingue* . . .

They walked near the water's edge, the children five paces ahead of them, and they did not say much of anything.

“Chilly,” Sonya said.

“A bad sign.”

When, in a few more comments, they had ex-hausted the subject of the weather, they lapsed into complete silence.

Ahead, Alex and Tina had found three-quarters of a crate washed to shore by the stormy seas, and they were clambering over it, playing with it as all kids play with boxes. Sonya and Rudolph walked past them a few feet, then stopped to watch over them. The game the two were playing was inexplicable, but they were both enjoying it; Tina was giggling so hard, as Alex popped in and out of the huge crate, that her small face was cherry-tinted at the cheeks and nose.

Sonya looked for the freighter.

It was gone.

Farther along the beach, however, another show was in progress, one that appeared to be quite lively. About twenty paces away, half a hundred sand crabs, and perhaps twice that number, were thickly congregated around some object which, like the wooden crate, seemed to have been washed ashore. They scuttled over it in such numbers, with such devotion, that they reminded Sonya of flies on honey, and they obscured the general outline of their prize.

“Isn't that strange?” she asked Saine.

“The crabs?”

“Yes.”

“Probably a dead fish that washed ashore—and now they're having a real feast.”

“They'd eat dead meat?”

“That's about the only kind they eat. They're scavengers, not genuine predators.”

“An unpleasant diet,” she said.

“At least they keep the beaches clean,” Saine said.

“It's an awfully large fish,” she said.

“Could be a dead shark or porpoise.”

The crabs scuttled back and forth, tossed around by the foaming waves that sluiced over half of their prize.

“Will they devour it all?”

“All but the bones.”

She felt uneasy.

She was not sure why.

“Rudolph—?”

“Hmmm?”

Alex popped out of his box.

Tina giggled and slapped at him.

“Something's wrong,” Sonya said.

The bodyguard was instantly alert.

His hand had gone to his holster.

“Nothing like that,” she said.

“What, then?”

She nodded toward the crabs.

“What about them?”

“I'm not sure, but—”

“It's not pleasant, I'll agree,” he said, regaining his composure. “But it's a perfectly natural scene, an ecological cycle that takes place a million times each hour.”

“No,” she said adamantly.

“Sonya—”

A heavy wave, taller than all of the rest that had been so regularly preceding it, swept in from the dark edges of the sea, rising twelve feet above the surface, curling down like a water hammer. It began to break, swept completely across the crabs and their meal, scattering the determined crusta-ceans before it.

When the roiling waters poured back into the sea, baring the beach again, they left the crabs' meal free of pincered diners for one brief moment, and the outlines of the thing were, at last, pains-takingly clear and recognizable.

“My God,” Saine gasped.

Sonya gagged.

The crabs rushed in again.

In a second, they had obscured the thing once more.

The kids noticed the shift in their elders' attention, sensed that something special had just happened and, laughing, waving their arms, ran away from the broken crate toward the congregation of crabs.

“Alex, stop!” Sonya screamed.

Her damaged throat, which she would have thought incapable of that volume, produced a hoarse, terrified explosion of sound that stopped the children in their tracks.

Alex turned and said, “Sand crabs won't hurt you.”

“They run when you get close,” Tina said.

“I don't care,” Sonya said, with all the authority she could muster. “You come back here right now, right away, this instant. Do you understand me?” She had never taken that tone with them before, had never needed to, and she saw that now they were cowed by it.

They walked back, not sure why she had yelled.

“What'd we do?” Tina asked, slightly fright-ened.

“Nothing, angel,” Sonya said. “Just start back for the house. Walk slowly. I'll catch up in a minute.”

They did exactly as they were told, holding hands again, not looking back, as if they now understood, however vaguely, that they had almost seen something they were never meant to see.

Sonya and Rudolph, standing close together, as if sheltering each other from the wind—or from something more terrible than wind—looked at the crab-covered lump.

“You saw it?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I'm afraid,” she said.

“It can't hurt you.”

“It was a man,” she said.

“A corpse.”

“Same thing.”

“No. He can't feel what the crabs are doing to him. He's playing a part in that ecological cycle, just as a dead shark would.”

She nodded. “We better go see who—who he is.”

“Probably a sailor who went overboard.”

She nodded.

Saine said, “You catch up with the kids, stop them and wait for me. You don't have to see this.” Before she could object, he walked briskly off toward the corpse, scattering the crabs before him.

Sonya turned and, shaking uncontrollably, ran to catch the kids, stopped them, and kept their attention away from Rudolph and his grisly investigation.

“Are you mad at us?” Tina asked.

“No.”

“We thought you were,” Alex said.

She knelt in the wet sand and drew them both against her, hugged them tightly, felt how slight and defenseless they were. She almost started to cry—for them, for herself—but knew that tears would help nothing, and she fought back the urge to let go.

An eternity later, Saine returned from his exploration, clearing his throat and spitting in the sand —as if he could expel the after-image of what he had seen in the same fashion that he might clear his mouth of a bad taste . . .



## SIXTEEN

In the kitchen, at Seawatch, Bess entertained Alex and Tina with a game of Old Maid, at a small card table which she had opened beside one of the big, multiple-paned windows. In the middle of the room, sitting side-by-side on stools at the built-in work table, Sonya and the bodyguard spoke in soft voices, trying to grow accustomed to their morbid discovery.

“What could you tell about him?” she asked.

“Not a lot. The crabs had done their work.”

She shuddered.

“It was a man,” he said. “Late twenties or early thirties, white, relatively well-dressed.”

“Drowned?”

“No.”

She looked at him oddly.

He said, “I think he was killed.”

She picked up her coffee, took a long swallow.

She said, “How?”

“The crabs hadn't gotten to all of him, yet. His one arm was relatively untouched. I saw what I'm sure were knife wounds.”

“If he was washed ashore, he might have been cut by coral.”

“He wasn't washed ashore.”

“What?”

The children squealed with harsh laughter at one of Bess Dalton's bad jokes.

Saine said, “He was lying in a depression in the sand.”

“So.”

He took a swallow of coffee.

“So,” he said, “it looked disturbingly like a grave, an oblong hole a couple of feet deep . . . The sea had begun to smooth its edges and to fill it in around the body, but the lines were still notice-able.”

“Someone buried him there? Why in such an unsafe spot?”

“Perhaps the burial was a hasty affair. And, anyway, the tides are usually not fierce enough to reach that far up the beach and wash out the loose sand over the grave. The killer simply had a bit of nasty luck, what with the arrival of a storm in the area.”

“Still,” she said, “if the waves hadn't washed him into sight, we'd have smelled him—when we walked by.”

“The crabs would have tunneled to him and picked him clean,” Saine pointed out.

“Even buried like that?”

“Yes.”

“I win, I win!” Tina shouted.

An unserious argument began to take shape over at the Old Maid table, probably fomented by Bess to tease the kids.

“But who could he have been?” Sonya asked.

“John Hayes,” the bodyguard said.

Startled, she said, “How do you know?”

He produced a slip of pink paper, wrinkled and damp. He said, “This is a stub from a motorboat rental service on Guadeloupe. It has his name and home address, but it's been so soaked in seawater that it's nearly unreadable. Still, you can make out the name.”

She looked but did not touch.

“Where'd you get it?” she asked.

He said, "In his trousers pocket."

"You touched—that thing?"

"It was only a corpse."

"Still—"

"I thought there might be identification on it, and there was." He tucked the slip of paper into his pocket again.

"Now, we have to face what to do with it," she said.

"The body?"

"Of course, the body."

He said, "We leave it there."

"For the crabs?"

"What would you have me do?" he asked. "I could move it off the beach, but the crabs would follow. The only other alternative is to wrap it in a blanket, bring it to the house and dump it into a freezer. Do you think that would make everyone feel better?"

"Oh God, no!" she said.

"Then we leave it where we found it."

"What if the sea takes it away?"

He said, with feeling, "Good riddance!"

"But," Sonya protested, "isn't it evidence? Isn't it important to show the police what we saw—"

"John Hayes will be reported missing, by some-one—wife, mother, sister, girlfriend. And we'll have this slip of paper, and we'll be able to testify about what we saw out there. That'll be evidence enough."

She thought a while. "What was he doing here on *Distingue*?"

Saine said, "I would guess that, somehow, he was in cahoots with the man who wants to hurt the kids."

"Madmen don't work in pairs!" she said.

"A point which John Hayes learned too late."

"He was killed by whoever's after Alex and Tina?"

"I think so."

Earlier, on the way back to the house, he had asked her not to tell anyone what they'd found until they had a chance to talk about it. Now, she discovered why he felt a need for secrecy.

He said, "I'm going to ask you to continue to be quiet about this. I don't want anyone to know we saw that body."

"Why?"

"Because I have an ace up my sleeve that our knife-toting friend can't know about. I now have a slight advantage."

"How so?"

She tried to take a sip of coffee but found that her mug was empty.

"If we can hold everything together until this storm breaks and until someone on the mainland decides we're in some sort of trouble out here, if we can keep the kids safe, then I have a chance of nailing our crazy friend, whoever he is. I can take this slip of paper back to the boat rental place, learn the address that's been washed off, and find out just who John Hayes was—and who he knew. If I'm not getting senile, I believe I'll find that John Hayes was friends with someone on this island, either in Seawatch or Hawk House."

"And that someone is our man," Sonya said.

"Exactly."

"I'll keep it quiet."

"Thank you."

They sat for a long moment, watching the children playing cards with Bess Dalton.

Sonya said, "They almost saw—"

"But didn't."

"I scared them with my scream."

He said, "I was trying to call out to them too, but I couldn't get any words out. I just stood there moving my mouth, like a ventriloquist's dummy without his master."

Sonya looked at the bodyguard as he continued watching the children, and she thought again about the contradictions of his personality. The same man who could coldly search a decomposing corpse's pockets could not find his voice to warn the kids away from that same grisly object! He was in no way an ordinary man—a curious blend of brutality and sensitivity.

Without knowing why, she asked, "Have you ever been married?"

He nodded. "Once."

"Children?"

"A son."

"How old is he?"

"He would be eight now."

"Would be?"

"He wasn't a healthy child. He died of heart trouble when he was three, congenital coronary disease."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"So am I," he said, watching the Dougherty kids. "So am I."

## SEVENTEEN

The man was angry with Fate.

It just wasn't fair that some people had every-thing they could want in this world—while other people lacked everything and always would lack, no matter what they did. The world was out of kil-ter, spinning all wrong, and life was a mockery. Men were clowns, nothing but clowns, playing out a bunch of silly routines that lacked wit and made them seem like cement-headed fools. Men were clowns. And hopes were illusions. You could never hope for anything and receive it. Except for a favored few, those who had everything.

Like the Doughertys.

He hated the Doughertys.

Fate had been absolutely philanthropic when it came to the Doughertys. They had money, so very much money, more money than anyone could expect to spend, reasonably spend on reasonable things, in ten lifetimes. They were healthy, well-educated, admired and respected by the people who counted, other people like them. They had such a lovely family, such a happy family, two beautiful children for whom they could buy or do anything.

It wasn't right.

What did he have? In comparison, he had noth-ing. The Doughertys had everything, and he had nothing.

Jeremy, of course, would even things up.

That was fair.

Balance the inequities Fate created.

And before long.

He already knew the perfect moment. He had it all set up, and no one would be able to do a thing to stop him.

He had been improvising so furiously, that he had been afraid of slipping up somewhere, but now he saw it, in crystal visions, how it would work, and he knew he'd not made a single mis-take. In a little while, Jeremy would use his knife again.

## EIGHTEEN

When the rain began to fall, hard as hail and in sheets so dense that it cut their view from the kitchen windows to a mere ten or twelve yards, Bess switched on the portable radio that sat atop the refrigerator and tuned in to a weather report.

“Hurricane Greta, seventh of this season,” the announcer told them, “is now predicted to maintain its northwestwardly movement toward the island of Guadeloupe where twelve-foot tides are already being recorded. Government officials at the marine watch station at *Pointe-a-Pitre* have issued warnings to all ships at sea and are presently completing calls to outlying islands to learn whether anyone there requires assistance in leaving their homes to weather Greta on the mainland. The *Pointe-a-Pitre* docks are closed, and all the ships in that area have been ordered to stand anchor in the Bay and ride the storm out at a safe distance from the piers and berthing slots.

“The United States Weather Bureau, operating out of San Juan, reports that Hurricane Greta is now packing winds slightly stronger than one hundred miles an hour, with a storm front some twenty-six miles wide. It is picking up speed and moving in a northwestwardly direction at approximately eighteen miles an hour and is expected to reach the Guadeloupe area sometime before midnight tonight.

“Anyone requiring the assistance of the island government in reaching a port of safety should either telephone one of the three following numbers—”

Bess switched the radio off.

“If it doesn't roll right over us, it'll come damn close,” Henry Dalton said. “Better bolt the shutters in place.”

“You sound like you've been through this before,” Sonya said. They had congregated in the kitchen, as if seeking mutual comfort from the screaming winds and the thunder—both the Daltons, Mills, Helga, Saine, the children. Only Bill Peterson was missing, for he was still aboard the *Lady Jane*, trying to clear her of seawater with the use of the hand pump which, ingeniously, he had hooked up to a bicycle frame for greater efficiency.

“Oh, my, yes,” Bess said. “We're old hands. We've weathered out two or three other storms over the years.”

Dalton and Mills went to tend to the shutters, which were all external for the ground floors, internal on the second and third levels.

“Be some broken glass to clean up when this is over,” Helga said. “Not all them upper windows are going to escape.”

Henry Dalton slammed the shutters together across the outside of the largest kitchen window, slid bolts into place, while Mills tended quickly to both the smaller windows.

The room grew darker.

Bess got up and turned on another light.

“Will we go into the storm cellar?” Alex said.

“That's fun!” Tina said.

“We'll see,” Bess told them. “But we're not the types to run from any little blow, you know.” She spoke in imitation of some salty old sea dog.

“I thought there weren't any cellars in Seawatch,” Sonya said, slightly confused. She didn't much like the idea of hiding in the cellar like a rat in flight from its own fear. “I thought a cellar would flood with seawater.”

“It's not a genuine cellar,” Bess explained. She pointed to a white door at the far end of the room, a door which was recessed into the wall beside the large refrigerator. “The storm cellar's attached to the house instead of lying under it. The ground slopes up at that side of Seawatch, and the storm cellar is built partly into the hillside. Concrete, all reinforced. It's not a perfect shelter, mind you, but it's a sight better

than the house when the wind really gets bad and the rain comes as hard as a wa-terfall.”

“How long will we have to stay in there?” Sonya asked.

Bess shrugged. “Depends. If the storm passes us at a decent distance, we might not have to use it at all. If it passes right over us, as it looks as if it might, then we’ll be in there a day—maybe two.”

“I’ll be glad when this is over,” Sonya said.

“That makes a bunch of us,” Bess said.

Sonya could not help but remember Lynda Spaulding’s melodramatic warnings about hurri-canes. Right now, as the rain pattered hard against the windows and they waited to find out how bad it was going to get, those warnings did not seem silly and melodramatic at all. They seemed frighteningly real and valid.

Indeed, almost everything that Lynda Spaulding, in her moments of jealousy, had predicted was now coming true. Everything except for the stories about Voodoo, of course. Thus far in her Carib-bean adventures, Sonya had not encountered any-one working a Voodoo spell on anyone else. No mumbo-jumbo, no chants or curses. She supposed that was *something* to be thankful for, at least.

At that moment, Bill Peterson opened the door, had it ripped from his hand by the fierce wind. It banged back against the wall with a terrific crash that sent Sonya halfway out of her chair and brought every eye in the room immediately to the young man.

Bill came in, followed by the wind and rain like a giant claw that was trying to snatch him back, and he struggled to shove the door shut against that claw’s insistence.

He turned, that chore completed, and smiled at them, drenched clear through, his clothes pasted to him by the rain, his hair hanging in thick, wet clumps, made darker by the water. “I think we’re in for a spell of bad weather,” he told them, grin-ning.

“You’ll catch your death of cold,” Bess said.

Helga was on her feet. “I’ll make coffee for you.”

“Be back in a jiffy, then,” Bill said. He went up-stairs to change his clothes.

When he came back, a couple of minutes later, Helga proved true to her word and gave him a cup of steaming coffee, which he took at the work table, sitting on a stool. He folded his hands about the cup, warming himself, and he drank it like a man fresh from the desert and willing to swallow anything liquid.

“How’s the boat?” Saine asked.

Bill glanced at him.

“Bad,” he said.

“In what way?” Saine asked.

“I’m getting nowhere with her.”

“Why?”

“I was making a little progress, mostly because of the bicycle rig I’d hooked up to the hand pump. I’d gotten the water level in the lower decks down to, oh maybe two thirds of what it had been when I found her last night. It wasn’t going smoothly or quickly, you understand. But steadily. Then this damn rain came up.” He scowled into what was left of his coffee, like a gypsy into a teacup.

“So?”

“You could stand out in this stuff and drown,” Bill said. “It’s that damn heavy. Of course, when I was working the pump, I had to leave the deck door open in order to run the pump hose over the side. As a result, the rain was catching on the upper deck like water in a swimming pool. It fol-lowed the deck slant to the hatch door, poured through the door and down the steps and into the hold—almost as fast as I was pumping it out. And it was all falling on my head.”

“I see.”

“When the storm’s finished,” Peterson went on, “I can get things hooked up and started all over again.”

“By then,” Saine said, “it won’t matter.”

Everyone stiffened, unconsciously, when the bodyguard made that unpleasant pronouncement.

Saine, realizing what he had said and how it had been interpreted, explained himself, “I mean, by the time this storm’s really over, Mr. Dough-erty will know something’s wrong here, and he’ll be trying to get

through. He'll have alerted the po-lice on Guadeloupe, and help will have arrived.”

Everyone eased back again, some of the tension draining out of them, though no one seemed to be as relaxed as he had been before Saine's *faux pas*. They had become especially intrigued with the ap-proaching storm, engrossed in the violence of Na-ture, and this far greater spectacle had momentar-ily relieved them of their worry for the children. Now that worry was back, twofold, and there was no way to be distracted from it, fully, again.

Henry Dalton and Leroy Mills returned from closing the shutters on the ground floor, stripped out of their water-beaded slickers and then, at Bess's insistence, from their shoes and socks.

Helga made more coffee while the two men went to shut the second and third floor windows, and when they returned, she had also set out sev-eral plates of cookies and pastries which everyone, rather half-heartedly, was helping himself to.

The next hour passed slowly, punctuated by three weather reports on the radio.

The first:

“Winds up to a hundred and ten miles an hour at the worst of the storm as Hurricane Greta moves closer to Guadeloupe on a steady northwest track. Inhabitants of the outlying island have, al-most without exception, reported to *Pointe-a-Pitre* for shelter, where stores have been closed for some hours and shutters have been bolted against the fierce wind and rains that are moving in advance of the storm itself.”

The second:

“Captain Richard Spiker of the *Janse Pride*, freshly into port on Guadeloupe, reports that Hur-ricane Greta is one of the worst storms he has seen in twenty years of seamanship in the Caribbean. He reports towering seas, and an almost unbeara-ble wind that managed to put the *Janse Pride* in a heavy list to port during the last few hours of her frantic drive for Guadeloupe.”

The third:

“The United States Weather Bureau operating out of San Juan, Puerto Rico, predicts that the hurricane will pass through the vicinity of Guade-loupe between ten-thirty and midnight tonight. U.S. reconnaissance planes, scouting the perimeter of the storm, report, from analysis of aerial pho-tography, that the tides are running extraordinar-ily high. On this warning, the shopkeepers and homeowners living near the docks at *Pointe-a-Pitre*, have begun to move all furniture and goods off the ground floor, in the event the seas should breast the docks and pour into the lower streets of the city.”

They talked, nervously, between the extended silences when they were listening intently to the weather reports and stories of imminent disaster on the radio, and they made a lot of bad jokes that somehow seemed, to them, quite funny. Only the children were clearly unimpressed with the danger posed by Hurricane Greta, for they played to-gether as they always did, relaxed, pleased with themselves, competing in age-old games and in other games of their own manufacture. And they never wanted for a genuine smile or laugh, which made the adults' forced humor seem all the more phoney.

Bill Peterson came and sat next to Sonya, trying to cheer her up. He seemed to be aware, more than the others were, that this was her first experience in a major storm and that, piled atop all the other horrors of recent days, this was almost too much for her to cope with.

He held her hand.

She welcomed that.

He surprised her, after a while, by leaning close to her and whispering, “I'd like to talk to you alone.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“About Saine, about the things that have been going on,” he said, in a voice so low that Saine could not have heard him.

“When?”

“Now.”

She said, “Where?”

He thought for a long moment, then suddenly got to his feet, pulling her up after him.

To the others in the kitchen, he said, “Sonya and I are going to the library to look for a couple of books to pass the time.”

Bess said, "That's the feeblest story of its type that I think I've ever heard."

Sonya blushed, but could not protest.

Bill said, "You're a gossip, Bess Dalton, un-principled, a common scold like they used to put in the stocks."

"But I tell the truth," she said.

"I'm afraid you don't," he said. "We really are going to find some books, because we've been enormously depressed by the company we've been forced to keep, and—"

Bess smiled wearily. "Oh, go away, go away. Everyone knows it's you two who've brought this air of defeat in the first place."

No one paid them much attention when they left the kitchen.

No one except Rudolph Saine.

In the library, Bill closed the heavy teak door and leaned against it for a moment, a finger raised to his lips, listening intently, as if he thought they might have been followed.

In a moment, satisfied, he stepped away from the door and led Sonya to two facing, black leather reading chairs, put her into one and sat down across from her.

He said, "How can we convince Saine that, all this time, he's been looking in all the wrong places for his man?" He spoke in a low, calm but de-manding tone of voice. His face was creased with lines of worry, his thin lips tight and in harmony with his squinted, concerned eyes.

"Has he been?"

"You know he has."

She fidgeted.

She said, "I'm not sure what I know."

"You know who's the likeliest suspect?"

"I do."

"Sonya, please."

She said nothing.

"Once, just Sunday night, you didn't hesitate to say who you most suspected. You were very adamant about your conclusions, then."

"I guess I was."

"You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

She thought a moment. "No."

"Good. Because if you have changed your mind, I think I can argue you back to your original suppositions."

She leaned away from her chair. "You know something?"

"I've had a couple of—unsettling experiences," he admitted, gripping the arms of his chair so hard his knuckles whitened.

"When is this?"

"Last night, Sunday night."

"And these unsettling experiences of yours—" she said, afraid of what he would answer "—they had something to do with—"

"Kenneth Blenwell."

She got up and began to pace.

He remained seated.

"Rudolph swears it can't be Blenwell."

"I've heard," he said, bitterly.

"Why do you think he's wrong?"

As if he had been afraid she would not ask that question, the one question he had been waiting for, and pleased that she had, he suddenly relaxed and let it all pour out, almost as if he had let it run through his mind a few hundred times, practicing the story until he had it to its most effective version.

He said, "Last night, when I found the *Lady Jane* scuttled, I came and told Saine and suggested I go down to Hawk House and borrow a boat from the Blenwells. Though there's a hell of a lot of mutual



animosity between the families, it seemed to me that they'd not be so stubborn, in a case like this, as to refuse us a boat. Saine told me to go ahead."

"I know."

"Yes, but you don't know what happened at Hawk House."

"Their boats were sunk."

"More than that."

She returned to her chair, sat down, waited.

"Ken Blenwell answered the door when I knocked," Peterson told her. His eyes were far away, as if he could even now see that meeting in perfect clarity, as if it were just now unrolling for the first time. "He was wearing a pair of filthy white jeans that were water-soaked almost to the knees, and a pair of white sneakers that squished with water when he walked. He looked as if he'd been doing a piece of pretty strenuous work, just before I'd arrived. He wanted to know what I was there for, and I got right to the point . . ."

"Who the hell would want to scuttle your boat?" Blenwell asked when Bill finished his story.

He seemed suspicious, as if he thought Peterson had some other motive for being there at that hour of the night.

"Rudolph Saine thinks it might be the same character who made all the threats against the kids," Bill explained.

"Why would he do that?" Blenwell asked. "What percentage would there be in it, for him?"

"He could isolate us," Peterson said.

"You're not isolated so long as *we* have boats," Blenwell said.

"But he might not know that."

"I suppose . . ."

Blenwell stepped back, motioning for Peterson to enter Hawk House. The foyer was poorly lit, and the house curiously still except for the overly loud blare of a television set tuned to a cops and robbers story.

Blenwell, seeing Peterson's grimace at the rat-a-tat-tat of a phoney submachine gun, smiled and said, "My grandparents watch a lot of television these days."

Peterson nodded and said, "If I could use your radio, it might not be necessary to take one of your boats."

"Of course," Blenwell said, then stopped as if jerked on puppet strings. "What's wrong with your own radio?"

"Someone smashed it."

Blenwell looked worried. "Rudolph has no idea who might have—"

"Perhaps an idea, but no proof," Peterson said.

Blenwell looked at him oddly, then said, "Of course. Well, you can use our radio-phone, sure enough."

They went the length of the hall, past the lounge where the television set vaguely illuminated two old, motionless people who stared intently at the gray images that danced before them. At the end of the hall, they went into a small, back room which was isolated from most of the house—and here they found the Blenwells' set, as damaged as Dougherty's set had been.

"You don't seem surprised," Peterson had said, when Ken Blenwell discovered the trouble.

"I'm not."

"Oh?"

"I'm sure this man who's after the Dougherty kids is mad," Blenwell explained. "And madness, rather than breeding stupidity, usually generates abnormal cunning. He wouldn't have smashed your radio and overlooked ours."

"You make him sound like a damned formidable opponent," Peterson said, not trying very hard to conceal his irritation with Blenwell's off-handed manner.

In the orange light of the lamp that rested on a pedestal beside the ruined radio-telephone, Blenwell

grimaced, wiped at his face as if he were suddenly weary, and said, "Well, my friend, to date, hasn't he proved himself to be just that?"

"He won't succeed."

"We hope."

"I know."

"Then you know much more than most mortal men," Blenwell had said, looking at him oddly again, as if probing for something, trying to guess how much—of what?—Peterson might know or suspect.

Peterson had turned away from the other man and walked to the door. Over his shoulder, he said, "Where are your boats?"

"I'll take you to them," Blenwell said, shoulder-ing past Bill, taking him across the kitchen and out the back door. He walked hurriedly over the rear lawn, to the beach steps and then down. In the center of the cove, in a boathouse alongside the pier where Sonya had first seen Blenwell, they found the sailboat and the cabin cruiser.

Scuttled.

Blenwell just stood there, smiling ruefully at the boats as they lay like rocks in the water of the boathouse, so heavy with water that they were not rocked at all by the tide that rolled through the open doors.

Peterson, his mouth abruptly punk dry with fear, said, "We're really in a tight jam, now, aren't we?" He looked at Blenwell, puzzled by the other man's equanimity in the face of his personal losses, and he said, "You expected this, too, didn't you?"

"It occurred to me," Blenwell admitted, "that if he'd destroyed your boat and your radio, he might also have visited my boatshed. In fact, I thought it highly probable."

"You're taking it awfully well."

"It's done."

Blenwell turned, and he walked away from the two boats, out of the boathouse and back toward the mansion.

Following him, Peterson noted his dirty trousers and the slowly drying water stains from cuffs to knees.

"Surf fishing tonight?" Peterson had asked.

Blenwell turned.

He said, "What?"

Peterson motioned at his wet slacks. "I wondered if you were surf fishing?"

"Oh. Yes, I was, in fact."

"Catch anything?"

"No."

Back at the house, Peterson said, "You don't have a gun, by chance, do you?"

"Why do you ask?"

Bill said, "I think tonight might get pretty rough up at Seawatch. Our man's obviously on the island, and he clearly intends to make his move, his big move, soon. All this other stuff is mickey mouse, just setting the scene for what he really wants to do. I'd feel a lot better if I had a gun. If anything happened to those kids, to Alex and Tina, I'd feel just awful . . ."

"Doesn't Rudolph have a gun?" Blenwell asked.

"Yes, he does. But it's the only gun in the whole house, hardly enough in the circumstances. We could do with a bit more protection." He hoped Blenwell didn't see his real reasons behind these questions.

But the other man looked at Peterson for a long, uncomfortable time, again as if he were probing Peterson's thoughts, were trying to find out exactly how much Peterson knew—about what?—or suspected—about whom?—and as if he had some personal stake in the outcome of this extrasensory investigation.

At last, he said, "No, I have no gun."

"You're sure?"

"Naturally."

"It wouldn't even have to be a handgun, a pistol or revolver. If you have a rifle—"

"No guns at all. I don't believe in guns," Blenwell said.

"Your grandfather?"

"There isn't a gun in Hawk House," Blenwell had insisted.

Peterson felt that it was time to drop that line of inquiry before Blenwell realized what he suspected. As pleasantly as he could, he said, "Well, thanks for your help."

"Good luck," Blenwell had said.

Peterson had come home, empty-handed.

His story finished, Bill let go of the arms of the library chair and folded his long-fingered hands together, as if the telling of the tale had somehow relieved him of an inner agony and given him a sem-blance of peace. To Sonya, he said, "At least, now, I feel fairly certain that Blenwell doesn't have a gun. That would make him twice as dangerous as he is." It was clear to Sonya that Bill no longer had the slightest doubt about who their man was.

"Of course," she pointed out, "he never has threatened, whoever he is, to kill anyone with a gun."

"Still, I feel better."

"Why are you so sure it's Kenneth Blenwell," she asked.

His arms returned to the arms of the chair, his fingers gripping the leather like talons.

He said, "His entire attitude was suspicious. He wasn't in the least surprised about the ruined radio or boats. And there was the condition of his clothes, the wet trousers, as if he had been standing in water—as if he had been out sinking a couple of boats."

"He said he was surf fishing," Sonya said.

"No," Bill said. "I asked him if he had been surf fishing, and he said that he had been—after a confused hesitation. You see, Sonya, I supplied him with his alibi for the wet trousers, and all he had to do was agree with me. And he did."

"Then he was lying?"

"Definitely."

"How do you know?"

"You don't go surf fishing in trousers," Bill said. "You either wear a bathing suit or shorts. Or, if you do wear trousers, for some odd reason, you roll them up above your knees."

"That's pretty flimsy evidence—"

But he was not finished, and he interrupted her before she could say more. "And even if you've got some weird reason for surf fishing in your streetclothes, you don't go home, when you're done, and walk around in the house wearing dripping pants and wet, muddy sneakers."

Sonya nodded, but she did not have anything to say this time.

"And when I asked if he'd caught anything, he said he hadn't—a very convenient situation. If he'd caught a couple of snappers or almost anything of interest, I would have asked to see it—out of simple sportsmanlike curiosity. He realized that; I know he did."

"You've told Rudolph about this?"

"First thing, when I came back from Hawk House Sunday night."

"And?"

"He said it didn't mean anything."

"He's got a great deal of faith in Kenneth Blenwell," Sonya agreed. "That's about the only person he seems to trust."

"That's just the problem," Peterson said, "that illogical trust." He got out of his chair and began to pace, swiftly, agitatedly, his hands clasped behind his back. "Saine goes blind, deaf and dumb every time that someone points a finger at Blenwell—and yet Blenwell is the one with the best reasons for wanting to hurt the Dougherty family." He turned and faced her, repeated, "Blind, deaf and dumb. Well, blind and deaf, any-way. He's not dumb on the subject; he's quite vocal about Blenwell's innocence. Why in the devil's name is Saine so stubbornly unrealistic on this one, single point?"

Miserably, she said, "I don't know."

“Nor do I.”

She got up, too, but she did not pace with him. She felt that she didn't have the strength to pace, to do anything but hold herself erect as if she were waiting for a blow against the back of her head. If she started walking back and forth, her nerves would tighten up like springs and, in moments, also like springs, would go *boing* and snap into ruin. She just stood there in front of her chair, awkward, like a fawn learning to stand by itself, legs trembling, unsure, afraid.

“There are two main possibilities,” Peterson said.

“What possibilities?”

“Saine may be ignoring Blenwell simply because he likes him as a friend and doesn't want to have to suspect a friend. That's unlikely. I think Saine would actively consider his own mother if the case called for it.”

“And the other?”

He looked at her, as if he wondered if he could trust her with his second supposition, then sighed and said, “Saine and Blenwell are involved in some mutual—well, enterprise, here on *Distingue*.”

For a moment, she did not see what he was driving at, and when she did understand, she rebelled at the possibility. “You can't think that Saine and Blenwell are working together—against the children?”

“I don't *want* to think it,” Bill said. “God knows, it's the most horrifying notion I've ever had.”

“Rudolph is so concerned for Alex and Tina,” Sonya argued. “He's genuinely concerned, worried about their welfare.” She remembered how Saine, in one of those rare moments when he had let his guard down, compared Alex to his own son, now dead. Could such a man, possessed of such deep sorrow and containing it so well, actually perform the hideously sadistic acts that the madman had threatened, or even sanction them by a friend or associate?

“As I said,” Bill repeated, “I don't want to believe it, not for a moment. But it's a possibility that shouldn't be overlooked. Kenneth Blenwell could have been the voice on the telephone. If he'd disguised his voice even slightly, no one in the family would have recognized him.”

“But how could he be sure that Saine would be hired as bodyguard?” she asked.

“Maybe he wasn't certain. Maybe they didn't know each other before Saine came to *Distingue*. But maybe Blenwell made Saine such a good offer that he couldn't turn it down.”

Shocked, Sonya said, “Then you think that, maybe, Blenwell offered Rudolph a sum of money in return for a chance at the children—and that Rudolph, knowing what this madman had threatened to do, accepted the money and said okay?”

“I suspect something of that nature might have happened,” Bill said, “but with a couple of important differences. Blenwell is the obvious main suspect. When he first came to *Distingue*, Saine probably saw that as clearly as we do now. Perhaps he exerted himself toward proving or disproving Blenwell's guilt—and proved it. Perhaps he went with it, first, to Blenwell, with the intention of clinching his suspicions. Perhaps Blenwell explained that he did not intend to kill the kids, that those threats had only been so much stage dressing to terrify the Doughertys. Perhaps he convinced Saine that all he wanted was to eventually scare Dougherty into selling the island. Then, perhaps, he offered Saine a sum of money to remain quiet about things. Saine, realizing the children never would be hurt, and being human enough to be swayed by cold cash, took the money and walked away.”

She thought about it a while. “That's a possibility,” she agreed. “I can't ever see Rudolph letting anyone harm the kids. But I can see him making a deal if the kids will not be hurt—just barely see it. But at least it's a little acceptable.”

“Remember, we're still theorizing,” Bill said.

“Well, let's hope we're right,” Sonya said. “If this is what has happened, then the kids are perfectly safe.”

“Are they?”

He stopped pacing, looking at her, his eyes full of fear.

“Well, if this theory of yours is correct—and, Bill, it's the most logical, maybe the only logical thing I've heard yet—then no one really wants to hurt Alex or Tina. All that Blenwell wants to do is scare everyone, a goal that he achieved remarkably well.”

Peterson was silent for a time, standing before a wall of books, letting his eyes run over the colorful bindings. At last, he said, "Suppose that Blenwell convinced Rudolph that he didn't want to hurt anyone, least of all two defenseless children, that all he wanted was the island. But also suppose that, in reality, he was lying to Rudolph. Suppose, no matter what he convinced Rudolph of, he really does want to take a knife to the kids, really does want to kill them."

Her legs shook harder.

She said, wanting to believe that it was true, "Rudolph wouldn't have been fooled easily. He's a very good man at his job. Sometimes, I feel he can see right through me, right into the center of my mind and know what I'm thinking."

"Me too," Bill said. He stopped examining the books. "He's made me feel like a butterfly pinned on a collecting tray. But remember, Sonya, that a madman—let's say, in this case, Blenwell—can be terribly clever, cunning and quite convincing."

"Bill, I don't know what to think anymore!"

She was trembling visibly now.

He went to her and encircled her in both his arms, holding her to him like a father with child.

Fat tears hung in the corners of her eyes.

"Now, now," he said.

She wiped the corners of her eyes.

He said, "I didn't mean to frighten you, Sonya. I just wanted to let you know what I suspect, ask you for your help. You're the only person I felt I could talk to."

"My help?" she asked.

He let go of her with one arm and offered her his clean handkerchief, which she took and used.

"Thank you," she said. "But how can I help? What can I do?"

"Saine seems to like you better than anyone in Seawatch," he said, brushing a strand of her yellow hair away from her cheek.

"Since I was almost strangled," she said, "he no longer considers me a major suspect."

"Well," Bill said, "perhaps you can get to him where I've failed, open his eyes."

"About Ken Blenwell?"

"Yes."

"I've tried before."

"Try again, and again," he said. "We haven't anything to lose."

"I guess not."

"And I'm convinced," Bill said, "that sometime during the storm, Blenwell's going to make his move."

"I'll talk to Rudolph," she said.

"Good." He kissed her, lightly on the lips, then more firmly, taking her breath away.

"I'm okay now," she said.

"Sure?"

"Very."

He looked at her critically, holding her face in one hand, like an artist holding his creation up to good light, and he said, "I can't even tell that you've been crying."

"I wasn't, really," she said. "Just a tear or two, which can't be counted." She smiled at him.

He made a funny, mock expression of bedazzle-ment, holding a hand over his eyes to shield his vision. He said, "God, what a smile that is! It's like the light of the tropic sun!"

"Or a hundred stars," she said sarcastically.

"That too."

She laughed, pushed him back playfully and handed over his dampened handkerchief.

"I will frame it," he told her.

"No, you'll launder it."

He grew serious again. "Now, you're sure you're feeling all right, good enough to facing everyone in the kitchen?"

"Yes," she said. "I've felt better but I've also felt worse. Now, should we get back out there before

Bess takes it in her head to come looking for us?"

He grimaced. "I love that old woman, but—"

"She tells bad jokes."

He laughed. "That too, now that you mention it."

She started for the door.

"Wait!" he called. When she turned around, he pointed at the stacks of books and said, "We'd bet-ter not go back empty-handed, or we'll really be adding fuel to the fire of rumors."

## NINETEEN

During their simple supper and twice during the card games that followed it, as the staff kept each other company, listened to the weather reports and waited to see how bad the winds and the rain would get, Sonya brought up the subject of Ken-neth Blenwell in conversation with Rudolph Saine. All three times, his reaction to her suggestions was as it had always been before, and she got absolutely nowhere with him, as if she were trying to roll a boulder uphill.

Once or twice, when her failure to convince Saine was terribly evident, she saw Bill Peterson throw her an agonized look, and she knew exactly how he felt. Each time, she shrugged her shoulders as if to say, "What can I do more than I have already done? Isn't this a hopeless game I'm playing?"

By nine o'clock, the weather report said that Hurricane Greta had slowed its advance on the Guadeloupe area and was nearly stationary now, whirling around and around on itself, kicking up tremendous waves and forming an outward moving whirlpool of winds that were more terrible than anything that had been recorded since 1945. These winds and waves were being felt throughout the Caribbean, especially in the Guadeloupe area, but at least Greta had stalled for the time being.

"Maybe there'll be no need for the storm cellar after all," Bess said, relieved.

"Awww," Alex said.

"No pouting," Bess warned.

The boy said, "But that's not fair! We're hardly ever here during the worst of the hurricane season, and we hardly ever get to see a really good one. We been in the storm cellar only two times before—and one time, we was only there for an hour or two. What kind of danger is an hour or two? That's no fun."

"Can't we go in the cellar anyway?" Tina asked.

"Where the two of you are going to go," Bess said, "is straightaway to bed, under warm covers."

"Good idea," Saine said.

"What if the storm gets really bad tonight, with really monstro waves?" Alex asked.

"Then," Bess said, "we'll take you out of bed and cart you down here to the storm cellar."

"Promise?" Alex asked.

"Promise."

"Will you wake us?"

"We'll wake you," Bess said. "Cause if we didn't, we'd never hear the end of it."

Rudolph scooped up the two children, one in each thick arm, and he held them at chest height, as if they weighed less than nothing. They giggled and pretended to struggle against him. He took it in good humor and escorted them upstairs to their room.

Sonya went across the room and sat next to Peterson where he was peeling an apple. She said, "I didn't have any luck with him."

"I saw."

"Now what?"

"Now," he said, carving away the last of the peel and putting down the knife, his hands moving expertly, as if he'd spent a life peeling apples, "we pray a lot, and we keep our eyes and ears open for the least indication of something unusual."

"You think tonight's the night?"

He took a bite of the apple, chewed it carefully and said, "Not unless the storm arrives tonight. Whenever Greta hits us, full force, that's when he'll strike."

"How do you know?"

"He's a madman," Bill said. "And lunatics are affected by great displays of nature. Their frenzy is magnified."

“Sounds like you've been reading some psychol-ogy textbooks.”

“Browsing,” he admitted. “I wanted to know just what we might be up against.”

The next weather report said that Greta was moving again, on her original course, though her rate of advance had slowed. Her internal winds, however, had risen. Weather Bureau planes were finding it almost impossible to do any further de-tailed surveillance.

With that bad news like a lead weight on her mind, Sonya went to bed shortly past nine-thirty.

Rudolph Saine answered the door of the chil-dren's room, his revolver in his hand and his body slightly tensed for quick movement. When he saw who was there, he holstered the gun and said, “Can I help you, Sonya?”

“I don't know,” she said. She looked past him and saw the kids were at least in bed, if not asleep. “All evening, I've been hinting to you about some-thing, and you've been studiously ignoring my hints. Now, I've decided to use the blunt approach.”

“About Ken Blenwell,” he said.

“Yes.”

“You want to know why I refuse to consider him a suspect?” He was watching her closely, as he had watched her, once, when he had considered her a potential suspect.

“I would like to know, yes,” she said, a bit surprised that he knew before she asked, had phrased it exactly as she had intended to, in a manner that seemed to make Saine himself slightly suspect.

“He's helped with my investigation,” Saine ex-plaind.

“How?” She remembered Bill's theory of a payoff.

“He's done some footwork for me that I couldn't go to Guadeloupe to do myself,” Saine said.

She had not expected this. “Footwork?”

“When I first came to *Distingue*, when I first talked with Ken, he gave me what has amounted to my only promising lead in all this time. And since I couldn't go racing to Guadeloupe to follow up on it, he checked it out at my direction.”

“What did he find?” Sonya asked.

“Something interesting, but not incriminating. He gave me my one principle suspect, but I've had to wait for the man to make a wrong move before I can do anything.” He sighed. “Thus far, every move he's made has been cautious and dis-turbingly right.”

“And who did Kenneth Blenwell point you to-ward?” she asked.

“I'd rather not say just now.”

“I think I have a right, as the governess and—”

“I'd rather not say just now,” he repeated.

There had followed an awkward silence, mutual goodnights, and Sonya had gone to bed, won-dering if Saine was lying to her, or whether he was telling the truth. She had also to wonder if Blen-well had purposefully misled Saine, just as she and Bill had earlier discussed . . .

She lay in the center of her bed, wearing blue jeans and a blouse, foregoing the comfort of paja-mas so that, if Hurricane Greta should come close during the night and a rush for the storm celler was indicated, she would be presentably dressed. She could not seem to find a comfortable position, and she kept twisting and turning, lying now on her back, now on her side—though never on her stomach, since, with her back to the room, she kept feeling that someone was sneaking up behind her, an unreasonable fear, since the room was locked. The metal buttons on her jeans pressed into her hips, and her sore neck throbbd slightly —however, most of her discomfort was mental, not physical.

The day had passed, and she had not yet written out her resignation. Of course, even if she had written it, there was no one to give it to, for Joe Dougherty had not returned from California as she anticipated he would when she first considered quitting. And even if he were here, he would be locked in like the rest of them, isolated both by the madman's actions and by the pressing weight of the tropical storm which was rapidly closing in on them like a heavy blanket, a hard and musty and uncomfortable blanket.



She wanted out of this gloomy place. Since she had come here to forget her dead grandmother and her long-gone parents, she had had more occasion to be reminded of them, instead, than she would have had if she had remained in Boston. She wanted out.

She thought about Rudolph Saine, glum and duty-bound, of his concern over Leroy Mills' mother, of his sentimental recollection of his own son—of what kind of fiend he just might be, below the dependable and somewhat attractive surface . . .

And Mills, dark and watchful, reluctant to talk about himself, giving an air of secrecy, of quiet planning and careful calculation . . .

It was useless.

She suspected everyone.

Everyone except herself and Bill Peterson. And if she wanted to be fair about it, she would have to add Bill to that list, for she had no proof that he *wasn't* the madman. What a mess, what a tedious and awful mess this whole thing had become. Where were the parties she had expected, the people who knew how to enjoy life? Why, instead, was she surrounded with these gloomy people, in this gloomy place? What was her punishment for?

In time, growing increasingly nervous and farther from sleep by the minute, she took a sleeping tablet and lay down again, finally succumbed to the gentle drug and fell into a chiaroscuro world of vivid nightmares that formed in her mind, one after the other, haunting her fitful sleep.

A screaming banshee woke her.

She sat straight up in bed.

Even when she had rubbed her eyes and was fully awake, the banshee continued to scream, its voice high and sharp, its cry a sickening ululation without meaning.

For one awful moment, she thought that it was one of the children screaming in pain and terror, and she was certain that the madman had done the impossible, had gotten into their room and over-powered Saine and taken out his knife . . .

Then she realized that what she heard was the wind, an incredibly powerful wind that was tearing at the windows and hammering across the roof of Seawatch more than a story overhead, a wind so relentless that the walls must be standing only by the power of a miracle. When she lay still, trying to feel how the house was taking it, she thought she sensed a distant tremor in the floors and walls.

She looked at her bedside clock and saw that it was a quarter to five in the morning, Tuesday.

She got out of bed, somewhat wobbly from the sleeping pill, and went to the windows, pulled open one of the shutters on a vision of Hell: rain dropping straight to the earth like a curtain of bullets, heavy and thunderous; the nearest palms bent nearly to the ground, like humbled worshipers, one or two of them already uprooted and leaning preposterously with the wind, kept from crashing over entirely by nothing more than a few random tap-roots; in the distance, closer than it should be, whiter than it should be, the sea danced high and threatening.

As she watched, mesmerized by the natural fury, a palm branch struck the window, driven there by the wind, made a hairline crack in the glass and was whirled away.

Startled, realizing how easily the window might be broken, she swung the shutter into place again, bolted it.

At the same moment, above the maniacal cry of the storm, someone knocked at her door.

She went to the door, leaned wearily against it, her ear pressed to the teak, and she said, "Who is it?" But her sore throat had produced only a vague sound, and she was forced to repeat herself.

"Rudolph!" Saine shouted.

She fumbled with the lock, slipped it out of place, and swung the door wide open.

He was standing in the hallway with both the children, one of them clutching each of his huge hands. They were pleasantly excited by the unexpected drama Hurricane Greta had provided, still somewhat sleepy-eyed, but waking up fast, cute and achingly innocent in their animal-decorated pajamas.

"What is it?" she asked.

Saine said, "The storm's here, or almost here. We're retreating to the cellar."

“Is it that bad?”

“You can hear it. And it'll be worse, shortly.”

“What's the radio say?”

“I don't think we could get anything on it,” Saine said.

“Of course,” she said, feeling foolish.

“I'll grab warmer clothes for the kids,” he said. “Be ready when I come back for you.”

“What should I bring?”

“Toothbrush and a jacket,” he said. Then, with the children still in tow, he hurried back down the hall again.

She was ready when he came back, and he escorted her toward the main stairs. When they were halfway there, a window smashed in one of the second floor rooms behind them.

Sonya said, “Shouldn't we see about that?”

“We can't fix it now,” Saine said. “The shutters are tight enough to hold back most of the water. And Mr. Dougherty can afford some damage.”

They started down the stairs, to begin a new day. Sonya knew it was going to be the worst day yet in Seawatch.

# BOOK FOUR

## TWENTY

The rest of the household was already in the kitchen, drinking hot coffee and making a quick breakfast out of rolls, butter and jam. They all wore jackets or windbreakers and looked as if they expected to make a long and unpleasant journey. None of them was pleased by the prospect of one or two days in the storm cellar while Seawatch was blown into so many sticks of matchwood around them.

“Sleep well?” Bill asked, bringing Sonya a cup of coffee with sugar and cream, as she liked it.

“Fairly well,” she said. She knew that she had had nightmares, but at least she could not remember what they had been. Except for the bloody-mouthed banshee which had really been the wind.

“We’ll be all right,” he assured her.

“It sounds so strong, the wind.”

“Last weather report, before the radio became just a big static machine, said a hundred and twenty mile-an-hour winds at the roughest points of the storm, and waves already over the seawall at Guadeloupe. But Seawatch was built to endure that kind of thing, not forever but for as long as it takes Greta to pass through.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I am.”

She said, uneasily, “It’s now that you expected something to happen—to the kids.”

“They’re not safe in the storm cellar yet,” he said, watching the two cheerful youngsters as they chattered at Bess Dalton, pulling their jeans and shirts on over their pajamas. “But I think I might have been wrong. I hope I was. If we can just get through this storm, until there’s a chance of help getting here from the mainland—”

Henry Dalton and Leroy Mills began to remove blankets from a closet near the storm cellar door, and then transferred these bulky items into that small, concrete room.

“What are those for?” Sonya asked.

Peterson said, “If our generator gets knocked out and there isn’t any power for the auxiliary heaters, it can get chilly in a damp, concrete room—even in the tropics.”

Sonya wondered how the kids, who had twice before gone through this, could still look upon it as a valuable and exciting experience, and she wished she had a little of their verve.

“Sonya?” Helga called, from the table in the center of the room, surrounded by containers of food and the makings for sandwiches.

“Yes?”

“Would you help me make some sandwiches and get food ready? We don’t want to have to come out of there more than’s necessary.” She nodded toward the cellar.

“Sure,” she said, getting up. “I’m sorry I didn’t think to offer help. I guess I’m not myself.”

“Nor are the rest of us,” Helga said. She had rarely been so talkative. Now, as if realizing her sudden volubility, she silently set to buttering and mustarding slices of bread.

Bill Peterson came over and helped the two women until, in ten minutes or so, the sandwiches had all been made, the fruit and pastries and other foodstuffs packed into several cardboard boxes which he carried into the concrete bunker. He passed Helga as he came back from his last trip, offered to take the final carton she held, and was amused when she refused. “I’m done out here,” she said. “I’m not coming out again until the sun shines.” She scurried away from the roar of the wind and rain which had picked up noticeably in the last five minutes.

Besides themselves, only Bess, Rudolph and the children remained in the kitchen and, in a moment,

Rudolph went off with the youngsters, down the main hall toward the stairs.

“Kids!” Bess said.

“Where’s he taking them?” Sonya asked.

“They were all for the big adventure, tough little warriors and all that. Now, when it comes right down to it, they want all their pacifiers to keep from bawling their heads off.”

“Pacifiers?”

“Rudolph had to take them to their room to get their favorite stuffed animals and their games.”

Sonya smiled. “That makes me feel better. I hated to see the kids being more courageous than me.”

“And than me,” Bess said.

Something large and solid was blown against the back door of the mansion, made a booming sound like a cannon.

“Probably one less palm tree standing in the woods,” Bess said.

Surprised, Sonya said, “I knew the wind could uproot them—but I didn’t know it could blow them around like twigs.”

“Oh, easy, easy!” Bess said. “And before it sweeps through here and blows me away like a twig, I’m heading for the cellar.” She scuttled across the kitchen and through the heavy, white door.

As soon as she was out of sight, Bill said, “I don’t like this at all.”

“What?”

“The kids upstairs at a time like this,” he said, his face a mask of concern.

“Rudolph’s with them.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“Everyone’s in the cellar, otherwise,” she said. “No one else is upstairs with them.”

“Blenwell might be.”

She wanted desperately to prove his fears were foolish. “How could Blenwell have gotten into the house? It’s locked up like a drum, with all the downstairs windows shuttered.”

“He could have a door key.”

“How would he get it?”

“How did he, evidently, get one to the New Jersey house?” Bill asked. He took hold of her hands. “Go to the cellar with the others.”

“Where are you going?”

“Upstairs. Blenwell could surprise Rudolph. But he couldn’t surprise and overpower the two of us.”

Sonya shook her head, amazed, and she said, wonderingly, “Half of the people in this house are as courageous as a dozen mountain climbers rolled into one.”

“I’m not courageous,” he said.

“Sure,” she said.

“Not really. All I do is what has to be done, by someone, sooner or later. I learned that lesson from my brother: a man must do what is clearly needing done; if you run away from something unpleasant, it only runs after you.”

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” she said.

“A very dear one,” he said.

“You never mentioned him before.”

He smiled strangely, as she had never seen him smile before, and he said, his voice rapid now, as if anxious to finish the conversation and get upstairs, to help Rudolph with the kids, “Oh, yes. My brother Jeremy is one of the best men that I’ve ever known. He’s not afraid of anything at all.” He squeezed her hands and ran across the kitchen, toward the main hall. “Go to the cellar! Now!” he shouted, over his shoulder, competing with the booming voice of the storm.

Then he was gone.

Sonya stood in the same spot where he had left her, as if she had been rooted to the spot.

The uprooted palm tree slammed against the back of the house a second time, leaving a hollow echo in the kitchen.

Finally, she took a step toward the safety of the storm cellar, but stopped long before she reached it.

She knew, without being able to say how she knew, that the crisis was upon them and that, in a very short time, perhaps within the next few seconds, the long-awaited disaster would have come to pass . . .

## TWENTY-ONE

As she watched the kitchen clock, Sonya felt as if someone had managed to interfere with the proper flow of time, and that a minute was passing only a fraction as swiftly as it was meant to, as it always had before. Indeed, each second was more like a minute, and the long red sweep hand on the clock face appeared to crawl forward about as fast as a child might be able to move a stirring stick through a bucket of New England molasses.

Finally, a minute had passed.

And another.

The wind screeched and wailed, trying to tear the sides of the house open and get into the creatures hiding in its depths; she could almost convince herself that the wind had become, through some evil magic, a sentient creature.

A third minute passed.

She went to the entrance of the hallway and looked toward the stairs, was disappointed not to see Bill, Saine and the children. What if Blenwell *were* in the house? And what if, despite what he'd told Bill, he had a gun? Would she have heard two gunshots—one for Rudolph, one for Bill—above the roar of the wind and rain? She doubted it.

A fourth minute passed.

Molasses . . .

Five minutes since Bill had gone up there, eight or nine minutes since the bodyguard had taken the children to their room to get their stuffed animals and games. It seemed, to Sonya, that that was plenty of time to complete a simple errand.

She walked the length of the main hall, constantly hoping to hear the four of them tramping down the steps, but by the time she had reached the bottom of the staircase, she knew her hope was going to remain nothing more than an insubstantial wish.

“Hey!” she called from the first step.

The wind overwhelmed her call.

She looked back toward the kitchen, the storm cellar entrance she could no longer see, thought of the safety there and, unaccountably, all alone, went quickly up the steps to see what was detaining the others.

The second floor corridor was especially dark now that all the windows were shuttered, the drapes drawn, and no lights left on. It was so gloomy, in fact, that she almost tripped over the body before she saw it. It was lying in the middle of the corridor, outside of the children's room, still, deathly still.

She stooped and touched it.

It was quite bloody.

“Rudolph?” she asked.

He didn't answer, couldn't answer, would never speak again.

She stood up, gagging, but she did not pass out. Later, she would wonder what kept her moving, what special strength she had never known she had.

Stepping carefully, as if she thought the rest of the corridor might be littered with countless other shadow-hidden dead men, she walked the rest of the way to the door of the children's room, which was closed and sinister-looking.

She put her hand on the knob.

She twisted it as far as it would go.

The door wasn't locked.

She looked back at Rudolph Saine, as if she thought he might have gotten up from his puddle of blood and become a living man once more, as if she suspected his death had been a very elaborate

practical joke—no, a very elaborate *impractical* joke. But it was not any prank; it was much too real for comfort, for sanity, for hope. He had not moved, and he would never move again.

She pushed open the door, part way.

The room was well-lighted, but she saw nothing to disturb her thus far.

She pushed the door open further and stepped into the room, her hand still tight on the knob.

The children were lying on the bed, tied with what appeared to be lengths of wire.

“Sonya, look out!” Alex cried.

She started to back step, had the door ripped out of her hand, and staggered forward, off balance, into the bedroom.

“Welcome aboard,” Bill Peterson said, smiling at her, holding the long, deadly knife up where she could plainly see it.

Tina was crying, and Alex was trying to shush her.

In a voice that sounded nothing like her own, Sonya said, “Bill, it can't be you, not you of all people.”

“Madam,” he said, “I'm afraid you're mistaken. My name is Jeremy, not Bill.”

## TWENTY-TWO

Though she was only twenty-three years old, and though she had been raised in one of the most civilized countries and eras in the whole span of recorded history, Sonya Carter did not find death to be a stranger. Not a friend, surely, but not a stranger either; more like a well-known enemy that she still feared, passionately feared, but whom she had found she could talk with. She had seen death many times, beginning at the age of ten, when, having claimed her parents, he was a face-less entity, never fully glimpsed, hovering in the background, a force that she could not readily identify but which she understood had changed the entire course of her future, her life to be. She had seen him again, during her nurse's training, and there she had gotten a closer look at him, had seen him take people away while they slumbered— or while they kicked and screamed and cursed him every inch of the way. She had seen him do his work suddenly, without warning, and she had seen him dawdle, as if he enjoyed the agony of his victims the way a cruel child would enjoy cutting a leg from a frog and watching it try to hop away from him. She had seen death on the beach, shrouding a rotting corpse, feeding the crabs, silent and sandy, particularly loathsome, and she had seen death in the corridor of Seawatch, seen it in the form of an old friend, Rudolph Saine, ghastly and familiar both. But in all of these encounters, she had never seen a more terrifying death, a more horrifying glimpse of him than the one she saw in Bill Peterson's eyes, lurking behind Bill Peterson's twisted face.

“Why?” she asked.

He said, “Everyone has to suffer sometime in their lives, sooner or later, because that's only fair.”

His voice was different, not at all the voice of Bill Peterson. If she had not known him well, she would have thought that this actually was some twin brother of his, some maniacal relation. But he was too much like Bill, and he wore Bill's clothes. As impossible as it seemed, he was Bill. His voice was nasal, too reedy, filled with a self-righteous sneer that made her blood run cold and her hands grow as clammy as two dead fish.

“That's no answer,” she said.

“I held a trial.”

“For what crime?”

“For the crime of not having suffered.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Yes, it does,” he assured her. “I held a trial, being my own judge and jury, and I passed sentence.”

“On little children?”

He glanced quickly at Alex and Tina, momentarily confused.

“You're talking nonsense, Bill.”

“Jeremy.”

“You're talking nonsense, Jeremy.”

He sneered at her again, regaining his composure, only momentarily ruffled. “I passed judgment on their parents. Their parents have been sentenced to suffer.”

“By having their children taken from them?”

“That's it, yes.”

He waved the knife to indicate the kids.

She was surprised at how calm she was. All the tension that had been building and building since that first day she had come to the island, all her nasty apprehensions and the long pressure of anticipation drained rapidly away from her, leaving her pure, unsullied, refreshed and feeling remarkably capable even in such a dangerous situation as this.

Perhaps she was also partially buoyed by her training as a nurse, for she had been taught how to talk to mental cases, how to reason with them as much as they could be reasoned with, how to force them to



do what she wanted them to do.

Perhaps, too, her calmness was based on such an intense fear that, had she not gotten calm, she would have been utterly immobilized, terrified into a trancelike state that would not have done her or the children any good. But if that was the case, she didn't want to think about it.

"Give me the knife," she said, holding out her hand.

He just stared at her.

"You'll get hurt very badly, when they catch you, if you go through with this, Bill. Now you don't want hurt, do you?"

"I'm not Bill."

"Yes, you are."

"My name's Jeremy."

She sighed. "Jeremy, then. Do you want to be hurt, badly hurt, when they catch you?"

The sneer returned.

He said, "They won't catch me."

"How can you run away?"

"In a boat."

"You destroyed the boats."

"I've got my own."

"The *Lady Jane*?"

"Not the *Lady Jane*, another boat, my own special boat. I've got it hidden where no one will find it."

A particularly harsh gale struck Seawatch, moaned beneath the eaves like a creature out of a nightmare, throaty, seeking.

He held the knife more tightly than ever.

She said, "It's not really your boat, is it?"

"Sure."

"It's really John Hayes' boat, isn't it?"

He jerked as if she'd struck him.

"Isn't it?"

"No."

"That's a lie, Jeremy. It's Hayes' boat."

"How do you know about Hayes?"

"You killed him, didn't you?"

The point of the knife dropped and was correspondingly less wicked looking. She had impressed him, stunned him.

"I killed him," he admitted.

"Why?"

"He was a fool."

"Why was he a fool, Bill?"

"My name is Jeremy."

She sighed. "Why was he a fool, Jeremy?"

"He thought what I told him, at the start, was the truth. He thought we were doing all this just to blackmail Joe Dougherty." He laughed bitterly. "You see, a complete fool."

"What was Hayes' part in it?" she asked. She was genuinely curious about this, but she asked the question chiefly to keep him talking, the longer he talked, the less likely he was to act; at least, that was what the psychology textbooks had said, if she remembered them right. Besides, if she could keep him talking long enough, someone from the storm cellar would come to see what was holding her and Saine and the kids up.

"He made the telephone calls," Peterson said.

"In New Jersey?"

"Yes."

“Was he also the one who broke into the house there and left the notes?” she asked.

“No. I did that. I got keys to the New Jersey house from Bill.”

“Bill Peterson?”

“That's right,” Jeremy said.

She thought she saw a weakness in his fantasy, here, and she tried to drive a wedge in that chink. “Then Bill is involved in whatever you do. Maybe they won't catch you, Jeremy, but they'll catch Bill. They'll make him pay.”

“They can't do a thing to him,” he said. “Bill didn't know why I wanted the keys.”

“He must have suspected, eventually.”

“Not Bill. He's too level-headed a guy. He'd never be able to understand something like this— about the trial and being judge and jury, about the need for everyone to suffer.” He paused, licked his lips. “No, no, Sonya. Bill is too naive ever to un-derstand.”

She abandoned that track and went back to the subject of John Hayes, the dead man she and Saine had found on the beach. She said, “Why didn't you make all the telephone calls yourself? Why use Hayes?”

“No one would recognize his voice,” he said.

“But they wouldn't recognize *your* voice, either.”

“Of course they would.”

“Why?”

“They know me, of course.”

“They know Bill, not you!” she said.

The conversation had gotten to be something like a scene from *Alice In Wonderland*, nearly nonsensical, but she felt that through the nonsense she was reaching him, just barely, just a little, but reaching him beneath the layers of insanity.

He had been shaken by her statement, and he had no answer for it.

She started in on him again, quick, before he could regain his composure. She said, “Why did you ever conceive of hurting Alex and Tina?”

He looked at the children, back at her, lifted the point of the knife until it was angled straight to-ward her slim throat, only a couple of short feet away from a clean, quick, deadly slice.

He said, “The Doughertys have always had things so good, too good, better than they deserve. They've never suffered, and someone had to show them that suffering was necessary.”

“You're talking nonsense,” she said, sternly.

“No—”

“Yes you are. What are your real reasons be-hind this whole affair, Jeremy? Your *real* reasons.”

He floundered for a moment, then said, “Bill could have such a much better job than he does.”

“How?”

“With the Blenwells.”

“They offered him a job?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“When?”

“About a year ago.”

“Why would they offer Bill a job, when they know he works for Mr. Dougherty and when they don't care at all for the Doughertys or their people?”

“It was a deal,” Jeremy said. “A special deal. They offered Bill this job, same job at their place that he now has at Seawatch. All he had to do, to get it, was talk to Mr. Dougherty about selling Seawatch, maybe snoop around a little and see if Dougherty had special reasons for holding on to his part of the island.”

“What do you mean—'special reasons'?” she asked.

“They thought he might intend to build a resort hotel, or something like that, if he could get all of the island for himself. They wanted to know if that was true.”

“Was it?”

“No. And poor Bill,” Jeremy said, “was too nice a guy to figure out any way of driving the Doughertys off *Distingue*. Here were the Blenwells, will-ing to double or triple his salary. Here was a chance for him to have something nice for the first time in his life, maybe a boat of his own, a real nice cargo sailboat, and he was too nice a guy to figure out how to drive the Doughertys off *Dist-ingue*.”

“But you solved that problem for him,” Sonya said.

“Yes, I did,” Jeremy said. “I figured if I could make the family run to *Distingue*, I could kill the children here, just like I threatened, cut them all up. Then Joe Dougherty would fall all over him-self to unload his share of the island. He'd never want to live here again.”

To keep him off balance, Sonya said, “I still don't see why you had to kill Hayes.”

“He wanted to go through with the kidnapping, what I told him we'd do in the beginning. A month ago, I told him it was off, that I'd decided we couldn't get away with it. But he wouldn't let up on me. Sunday, when he found out the Doughertys were gone, he rented a boat and came over here to *Distingue*. He was getting in my way. I had to kill him.”

She thought she heard something in the corri-dor, outside, but she could not be sure if it was someone who had come up from the storm cellar, or whether it was only a noise that the storm had made.

Sadly as she could, as if she sympathized with him, she said, “But Jeremy, you won't help Bill at all, if you kill Alex and Tina. The Blenwells never meant for you to go this far to get the Doughertys off *Distingue*. When they realize what you've done to help Bill get that job, they'll never hire him.”

“They don't have to know it was done for Bill,” Jeremy said, smiling slyly. “They never have to know.”

She thought fast, still listening for a repeat of that noise from the corridor, and she said, “If you do escape, do you realize who they're going to blame for Rudolph's death—for the children and for me?”

He looked blank.

“Bill,” she said. “Bill's the only man that's not in the cellar. Nobody on *Distingue* even knows about you. So Bill will become your fall guy. They'll send Bill to prison in your place.”

He grinned.

He said, “I thought of that.”

A trace of fear lay beneath her calm again, but she tried to keep it small, to keep it from burgeon-ing and taking over. She was beginning to see that his madness was too entrenched, and that she could never really shake him up badly, crack him open.

He said, “I'll cut Bill a few times, not seriously, but deep and with a good bit of blood running. Then I'll dispose of the knife. He can give them a description of me, tell them that I cut him and that he fell and passed out. He can convince them that I spared him because I probably saw him bleeding and thought he was dead. No one will suspect him for long, if at all. He's too nice a guy. Everyone knows that he is.”

By now, she had realized that the noise in the hall must have been made by the storm, for she had heard nothing like it again, and no one had appeared to help her. She could think of nothing further to say to this madman, nothing to delay him any longer; and if she could not keep him en-gaged in conversation, he would step forward in a moment and put that knife under her chin, very deep under her chin. Her only hope now was to distract him, to turn and try for the door. If he gave chase, she ought to be able to lead him down-stairs, where a cry for help would be heard.

She turned, without warning, struck the edge of the open door, and spun clumsily through into the hall.

He grabbed her almost at once.

The knife came up.

Remembering the fight in the bougainvillea arbor, she stamped down on the same foot she had injured then, harder than she had before, grinding hard to the right.

Though he had been able to conceal his injury to this point, had not needed to limp, that portion of his foot had been particularly tender, and now it erupted into white hot pain.

She jerked loose of him.

He swung the knife.

It sliced along the upper part of her left arm, drawing blood but not digging too deeply.

She stepped back into the kids' room and, in one fluid series of movements, slammed and bolted the door, making them temporarily safe from the man who was now calling himself Jeremy but had once been a new and special friend.

## TWENTY-THREE

Sonya had not, for a moment, believed they would be indefinitely safe in that second floor bed-room, even though the door was bolted. Bill Peterson was a strong, vital, young man who would be able to kick in even one of these sturdy old doors if he were given a few minutes for the job. She did not think that they could afford to sit by and hope that, before he had smashed the latch, someone would have come up from the storm cellar to see what was delaying them. She was sure that, already, someone had most likely decided to come looking for them. But what chance did men like Henry Dalton and Leroy Mills have against a man like Peterson, when Peterson had so easily dispatched with someone like Rudolph Saine. A mad-man, with his system pumping extra adrenalin, could often have the strength of three or four men his size and weight; and even without this advantage, men like Mills and Dalton would have been no match for him. They might make it up the stairs, against his wishes, but they'd never get close to this room or to rescuing her and the children.

As soon as she'd locked the door, she ran to the bed and twisted the wire loose of Alex's wrists, told him to get the other length off his feet, then freed Tina.

"What are we going to do?" Alex asked.

Tina was still sniffing, but was getting over her fear with remarkable speed.

Sonya did not respond, but went to the window and opened the interior shutters just as Peterson delivered a first, solid kick to the far side of the door, just about where the latch was. She slid the window up, letting in the blunt fingers of the storm, letting in Greta's voice and thereby dulling the sound of his second kick which, nevertheless, she was sure was as effective as his first had been in loosening the latch screws and gaining him entry.

"Look here," she told Alex.

He stood beside her, rain pelting his face through the open window, and looked out at the roof of the first floor porch. "You want us to get down there?"

"You first," she said. "It's a flat roof, and it shouldn't give you much trouble if you don't stand up on it. The wind will blow you off if you try to stand up straight, do you understand?"

He nodded vigorously.

Peterson kicked the door.

A single screw pinged loose, and the latch rattled.

"Stay on your hands and knees," she said.

He had crawled onto the windowsill, facing her. She took hold of his hands, helped him to squirm out, groaned as she took his weight on her arms. She leaned forward, trying to put him as far down as possible, dropped him when his feet were only eighteen inches from the porch roof. He fell, dropped to his knees at once, and crouched there in the high wind, as tenacious as a little animal.

"Your turn," Sonya told the girl.

"I'm scared," Tina said. She was pale and trembling, and she looked utterly unable to withstand even a few seconds in Greta's ferocity. But she was going to have to withstand it, and for longer than a few seconds.

Sonya kissed her, gave her a big hug. As kindly and firmly as she could, she said, "You'll be okay, angel."

"You coming, too?"

"Of course, angel."

Peterson was calling to her from the hall, but she did not listen. He had nothing to say that would change her plans; they had only one chance of escape, and they must take it quickly.

She repeated the routine she had used with Alex, letting Tina dangle from her hands, above the black porch roof. She was two and a half feet from safety, a more dangerous distance than Alex had been, but

when she fell, her brother grabbed her and held her, making a more difficult weight for the wind to move around.

Peterson had stopped talking and was kicking the door again. Another screw pinged loose, and the whole latch slipped, close to being torn completely free.

Sonya sat on the window ledge, dangling her legs a moment, then pushed off and fell to the roof. She landed on her feet, which surprised her, felt the wind tug at her, crouched, scurried to the kids and directed them to the edge of the porch roof, helped them jump to the lawn eight or nine feet below, followed them.

Kneeling in the grass, she turned, squinting as stinging whips of rain lashed across her eyes, and she looked back at the bedroom window from which they had come.

Peterson was there, his face twisted in rage, his hands gripping the sill, as if he were about to follow them, a decision she fervently hoped he would make, for they would then have a chance to get inside and to the storm cellar, a small chance, but something, anyway. Instead, he turned abruptly away from the window, disappeared.

He would be on his way downstairs.

She had no door key with her, and they would never be able to break a window in the door and get inside to the storm cellar entrance before he met up with them.

She stood, bent over by the ungodly hammer of the wind, her hair skinned tightly back from her head, drenched despite the plastic windbreaker she wore, her whole body stung by pellets of hard rain, like thousands of determined gnats or mosquitoes. She had hold of the children's hands, and she drew them close to her, aware that they would be feeling the murderous anger of Greta more fully than she.

"He's coming after us!" Alex yelled.

"I know," she said.

Tina had to hold her head down, to keep from suffocating in the dense sheets of rain that battered her small face.

"What can we do?" Alex asked. He was taking it all very well, she thought, and that gave her the nerve to say what she had to say, as ridiculous as it was going to sound.

Screaming to be heard above Greta's deep and unfeminine voice, Sonya said, "We're going to go to Hawk House, to see the Blenwells."

"Across the island?"

"Yes," she said.

She wasn't sure they'd heard.

She said, "We can get help there! Now, hold tightly to my hands. Don't let go of my hands no matter what."

She felt their fingers tighten around her palm, and she tightened her grip as well.

"Try to walk as fast as you can for as long as you can," she said. "Don't ask for a rest unless you just can't go another step." She looked closely at each of them. They looked like two bedraggled puppies, and she couldn't see how they would ever make a mile and a half in the middle of the worst hurricane in almost thirty years. But they had to. They *would* make it simply because they had to; they had no other choice, other than to wait for Peterson and to die.

She kissed Alex, then Tina.

"Come on, then," she said.

She started forward, her head bent so that the rain did not blind her, and she was happy to see that the children had either copied her posture or had come to it naturally. That was a good sign. Maybe not good enough, but something, anyway.

The first few steps were not so hard at all, even with the wind driving them a step sideways for every three steps forward, and she felt that, if she could reach the shelter of the palm forest, they might find the going just easy enough.

Every now and again, she raised her head to be sure they were still moving in the right direction and, as they neared the edge of the long lawn, she turned to see if Peterson was after them yet.

He was nowhere in sight.

Her heart leaped at that, and she got them started, even faster, for the shelter of the big trees.

# BOOK FIVE

## TWENTY-FOUR

Seawatch was at the point-end of the island's first hill, perched on the brow, with its lawn extending across the crest of the hill until the palms began on the far, downward slope and continued for the length of the island's spine, or at least until they were cut down to form the grounds around Hawk House more than a mile away. As Sonya led the children down that first small slope, slipping and sliding in the wet grass, moving toward the start of the palm thicket, she was surprised to see that the tiny glen at the hill's base was awash with brackish-looking water. The rain kept her from looking very far to either the left or the right, but so far as she *could* see, this slopping, choppy stream continued. She could not, or would not conceive that this might be part of the sea, that the storm had driven the waters this far in from shore, and so she assumed that what lay below was simply the rainwater which had run off from this hill and the next.

Though the stream appeared to be no more than a foot or two deep, its surface was deceiving, for it came nearly to her hips. If it had had any currents in it, she might have found it impossible to carry both children across, which she managed, now, in two trips.

Climbing even the gentle slope of the second hill proved a supreme challenge, for they all three slipped and fell repeatedly, as if they were on a greased ramp. At last, when they did reach the top, they were into the thickest growth of palms and cut off from at least a third of the wind's battering ram.

The going was still not easy, not by any stretch of the most vivid imagination, not anywhere so easy as Sonya had hoped that it would be when they got this far. Even at two-thirds its real volume, the wind was staggering and, when it gusted by an additional twenty and thirty miles-per-hour, it tore through the trees like fusillades of cannon fire, knocking them against the boles of the pine trees and, sometimes, driving them uncontrollably to their knees in the mucky earth.

And, if they gained an advantage from the windbreak effect of the trees, they had to suffer another torture they would not have been faced with in open land. The wind, already with a voice like a herd of mastodons, made the brittle palm branches rattle and scrape until the resultant din was almost more than human ears could take. She hoped that she would not have to tell Alex or Tina anything important, for even with her mouth to their ears, they would have trouble hearing her above the chorus of chattering fronds.

Occasionally, but less often than she would have liked to because the effort required and the time lost made it dangerous to do very often, she turned clear about and looked to see if Peterson was anywhere in sight, her heart in her throat each time, sure that he would be there, frighteningly close, still holding his knife.

But he was not.

They were alone.

After one of these pauses, she turned to go forward again and leaped in fright when a coconut and several palm branches crashed to the earth five feet ahead of them, torn from their moorings by the wind. Had they taken another two steps, one of them might have been killed or received a skull fracture from that coconut.

Now, in addition to Peterson and the wind and the rain and the slippery ground, she had another thing to worry about.

They stepped across the fallen boughs and hurried on.



## TWENTY-FIVE

In a short while, the land began to fall away again, into a slippery incline, as the second hill in the island's chain rounded off and fed into another small glen. Here, as in the first depression which they had crossed, the water swirled between the boles of the trees, up to Sonya's waist, ugly and choked with what appeared to be seaweed.

She could hardly believe that the slimy stuff was what it seemed to be and, after she had carried the kids across, one at a time, making four trips through the water, she scooped up a trailing mass of this floating vegetation, and she saw, when she looked at it more closely, that it was indeed seaweed and that this must not merely be rain-water that had run off from the hills on both sides.

They climbed the hundred foot slope of the third hill, keeping to their hands and knees so that they could make better time, their faces down so that they saw little more than grass filmed by water, their hands digging into the grass for support, inching toward the top and level land where they could get up and walk again.

Sonya was over halfway up the slope when she realized that Tina had fallen behind, rather far behind. Letting Alex to go ahead alone, she returned for the little girl and half-dragged her along.

At the top, Tina gave her a weary but big smile, and Sonya repaid that with a strong hug, hugged Alex too, and sat down with them to rest, before going on.

She had no idea how far they'd come.

And she had even less of an idea of how much farther they had to go before they'd reach Hawk House.

However, she would not let herself think of failure. She had to make the most of her famed optimism which Daryl Pattersen and Lynda Spaulding, at the university, had first made her aware of. Her back ached from the base of her spine up and across both shoulders, as if she had been squeezed into a brace meant to torture. Her neck was afire once again, and had driven spikes of pain into her head, right through the top of her skull, so that the rainwater seemed to be seeping into her brain and scorching trails across the top of her cerebellum. This did not worry her, because she knew that over-exertion and the pains of exhaustion could be cured. Her legs, however, were another matter altogether . . . They were all quivery with the strain they'd taken, and had she been even willing to consider the slim possibility of failure—which she was not—she might have doubted their ability to get her up when the rest period was over and to carry her on however long was necessary; she might have expected them to turn rubbery, to bend, wriggle and finally buckle under her. She might have expected to drop on them, soon. But since she was permitting no thought of failure, she was only worried that, once they reached Hawk House, her legs might give out on her for good, forever.

She worried a good deal about the kids, for if she were this exhausted, what must they feel like? Of course, she had helped them along most of the way, and she alone had fought the resistant waters in those two flooded gullies which they had had to cross. Still, she knew that they must be very tired indeed.

She hoped they weren't close to surrender.

She looked at Tina, who was huddled miserably against her side, the small head slick with water, and she knew she'd soon have to begin carrying the child the whole way, not just up the sides of the slippery hills, but on the level ground as well.

That was okay.

She could manage that.

She couldn't, however, carry both of them.

She looked at Alex, afraid that she would see him on the verge of surrender, too. For a moment, she thought that he had already given in, and her heart sank. He was leaning against the bole of the tree, his legs splayed out before him, leaning far forward, as if he had collapsed and were unconscious.

If he were, they were finished. They could try to wait the storm out, here in the woods, hoping Pe-terson would not find them. But that was a small hope. The storm would rage for at least another day, and they would all be dead of exposure by then.

Abruptly, Alex moved, and she saw that he was not, after all, unconscious.

She looked closer.

His legs shielded an ant hill which the storm had partly eroded, and he was watching a few of the brave little worker ants trying to repair, de-spite the wind and water, the damage that had been inflicted.

Unbelievably, mostly because Alex was shield-ing them with his legs, the couple of dozen tiny ants were winning their desperate battle to restore the integrity of their earthen home, oblivious of the greater fury of the storm, concerned only with this unimportant bit of destruction that it had caused.

The boy seemed to sense that he was being watched. He turned and looked at her, a bright smile splitting his cherubic, mud-streaked face, looking not a little bit like his father.

Sonya felt like crying with happiness.

But she knew that took energy and might be misinterpreted. She could not afford to dampen his spirits, even accidentally.

Instead, she reached out for the boy's hand.

He took hers.

She nodded toward the ants, still unable to make herself heard above the wind and the clash of the palm boughs overhead.

He looked at the ants, then back at her. With one hand, he pointed at the ants and, with an in-clusive gesture, at all three of them.

“Yes,” Sonya said.

Her voice was carried off instantly, but at least he had understood what she meant. The ants were a sign of good fortune, just as the shark, days ago, had been a sign of bad times to come.

She roused them then and led them across the top of the third hill, angling them toward the shore-edge of the forest in hopes that she could get a glimpse of the sea and understand why the gullies, between the hills, were so water-logged.

Ten minutes later, when they reached the thinned-out edge of the palm forest, a place where they could view the seaward slopes of the hills, the beaches and the sea beyond, Sonya wished that she had not been so curious. What, after all, could she gain by knowing the first thing about the con-dition of the sea? Nothing. Her only problem was getting to Hawk House for help, into the safety and protection that Kenneth Blenwell might be able to give her. She had no obligation to report on the nature of the seas when she arrived there. She could gain nothing by this stupid exploit—but she could lose a portion of her hope, a fragment of her carefully nourished optimism. And what she saw, when she looked down the hill toward the sea, brought her terror back to her and made her think, again, that their long march from one end of the island to the other, was ridiculous, sheer folly . . .

The Caribbean was aboil, foaming and tossing.

A sick brown color, the water heaved up and subsided with such drastic rapidity and to such ab-surd extremes that it looked like nothing so much as a pail of water that some large man had taken in his hands and which he was shaking furiously.

Waves higher than a house, higher than Sea-watch, crashed toward the shore, exploded on the rocks, on each other, and were diminished only slightly by these collisions, swept clear across what had once been a wide beach.

The beach was gone . . .

The sea had devoured it.

Impossible.

But true.

The towering waves boomed against the base of the hills, moving as fast as freight trains, rolled over the palms that were growing on the bottom of the slopes and which they had not completely torn away yet, and crawled to within a dozen feet of the top, a huge, dirty, lapping tongue that was insatia-bly hungry.

She felt as if the sea itself had singled them out as its targets and was straining mightily to reach them.

Where the land fell away between the succession of low hills, the sea surged into this gap, forming the hip-deep pools of water which she had twice before struggled through while carrying the children in her arms.

When she realized that, on the other side of the narrow island, the other arm of the sea would probably be doing much the same thing, and when she pictured how *Distingue* must look from the air at that very moment—it would not look like an island at all, but like an isolated string of tiny knolls, five or six hilltops, the last one on either end sporting a huge house at its crest—she shuddered and turned quickly away from the raging ocean, having seen far, far more than she had wanted to.

Impossible.

But true.

Alex, however, was fascinated by the scene and did not want to leave it so soon.

Tina had reacted much the same as Sonya had and, from her first sight of this watery monster, had refused to look at it again.

Sonya tugged at the boy's hand and got him turned around.

Holding tightly to both of them, her heart racing, determined not to be upset by what she'd seen, but upset anyway, she plunged back into the denser regions of the palm forest, heading again toward Hawk House.

## TWENTY-SIX

Jeremy saw the three of them running across the lawn and into the first of the palm trees, but he did not realize, for a moment, what Sonya had in mind. While he watched, they had nearly been blown from their feet half a dozen times during that short journey; only a fool would attempt to run the gauntlet of the hurricane clear to the far end of *Distingue*, more than a mile away. Instead of that, he was certain, she intended to get the kids into the trees, without him seeing where they had gone, then hide them there until such a time as it was safe to bring them back—either until the storm ended and help had arrived (which might be day yet), or until the others in the storm cellar learned about Saine and found who the villain was. She would expect them to overpower him, Jeremy, and make it safe for her to lead the kids back to Seawatch.

He chuckled.

At first, when she had locked herself in that room, and when he had broken the door down only to find them gone through the window, he had been more furious than ever in his life. He would have killed anyone just then, no matter whether they had already suffered enough in their life or not.

Now, however, he was calm again.

He watched them duck into the trees and laughed out loud.

He was not completely over his anger, but now that he knew where they were and had already decided how to get at them, he felt in control of things again, and he was not worried. When he caught them, he'd spend a little extra time carving up the woman before he killed her, a few extra minutes of pain so that she would better understand what he was trying to do, what his mission in life was. But that was all. Otherwise, he would carry on with the plan just as he would have if she had not pulled that trick in the upstairs hall and locked him out of the kids' room.

Careful to keep out of sight of the palms where she had entered them, he went down the seaward side of the hill on which the house was built, and always keeping the sea at his side, crept around the hill, so that he would eventually enter the palms just slightly behind them.

He felt good.

He carried the knife, even out here in the wind and rain, opened and pointed straight ahead of him.

He was surprised to find how high the sea had come, and he felt it surge at his feet once or twice as he skirted the side of the hill, like a cold-nose nudge from a favorite dog.

Following the edge of the hill, he reached the first narrow ravine where the land fell for a short space before rising again, saw that the depression was filled with a thick finger of seawater. He was sure she wouldn't try crossing that, with two kids, not a woman alone, and he finally turned inland, expecting to come up behind them.

In the heart of the island, crouching down out of sight in the water-bottomed gully, the roar of the disturbed palms made his head ache pretty badly, though nothing so insignificant as a headache could turn him back.

Not now.

Not so close the kill.

Rather—not so close the execution, the punishment, not so close the application of the sentence which he, as the judge, had so long ago decreed.

Besides, though the wind in the palm boughs was grating on the nerves, it also reminded him of the noise that might be generated by a thousand raging sword fights . . . Two thousand blades singing and smashing off one another . . . And that image was not altogether unpleasant. Swords were sharp, all honed and glistening, with tips fine enough to peel an apple with . . . And he had a special fondness for sharp things, more than a sportsman's interest . . .

He crept up the gully, into the trees on the top of the second hill, and he peered out between the

jumble of dark boles, looking for a sign of movement.

He saw none.

He moved, first, to the right, being careful not to lose his footing, keeping a low profile, hidden by trees and brush, and he looked for the woman and kids. When he saw nothing to the right, he went left, and even when he had no success there, he was not unduly worried. He began to circle the whole broad hilltop, peering in, hoping to spot them as if they were animals in their natural habi-tat and he a visitor to this complex zoo.

Ten minutes later, he had not found them.

Not a trace.

He stood in the rain, oblivious of it, of the wind and even of the music of sword fights.

He realized that the woman, the crazy damned woman, had taken the Dougherty kids deeper into the island, and by the grace of some sixth sense, he also knew that, as ridiculous as it sounded, she in-tended to take them all the way to Hawk House.

Where there was help for her.

“No!” he shouted.

But shouting at the wind didn't make the situa-tion any better, didn't make the truth any less true.

In his excitement to be after her, consumed by both disbelief and by fear that she would succeed in her goal, he turned and ran toward the third hill in the island's chain, tripped over an exposed root and went down, hard, his knife turning back on him like a slippery eel and gouging the palm of his right hand.

Blood dripped into the sand.

He looked at it, disbelieving.

He sucked the wound, examined it when he had it sucked clean, watched new blood well up.

It wasn't so bad.

Not bad enough to stop him, anyway.

He stood, picked up the knife, looked at it with new respect.

This was the first time that he had ever been hurt by his own knife, and he felt like a betrayed father, amazed at the scandalous doings of a bad son.

He carefully folded the knife.

He put it in his pocket, where he could get it easily when he caught up to the three of them.

Then he started after them at a more reasonable pace than he had first employed—though, he was sure, at a pace that far outstripped their own . . .

## TWENTY-SEVEN

Between the third and the fourth hills, in the third ravine that they had to cross, Sonya found that the brown water was deeper than it had been either of the first two times she had had to wade through it. She tried crossing it alone, without either of the children in her arms, to test its depth, and though she tried it at several places along its banks, she found that it always rose to her chin and would, in a few more steps, go well above her head before she would reach the other side and the slopes of the fourth hill.

She would never be able to carry Alex and Tina across a pool so deep as that, not even if she could hold her breath and carry them high above her head on rigidly extended arms.

And she did not have that kind of strength now.

She had not even had it when they'd first set out from Seawatch—an eternity ago.

Yet she would not let the obstacle defeat her. If she stopped now, Peterson or Jeremy or whatever you wanted to call him would be onto them before long. She looked back at the kids, saw that Tina was lying on the ground, her head in her brother's lap, while he sat with his back against a palm bole. They were both nearly coated with mud so that they appeared to be little Negro children, and still they were cute, more precious than anything else. Certainly, more important than the condition of her legs and her back.

She studied the pool, which was approximately thirty-five feet across, only dangerously deep for half that distance or, at most, for no more than twenty feet. It was a width that kept her from walking it under water, especially with one of the kids as a burden, but it would be a relatively simple thing to swim across.

She could not expect Alex or Tina to swim it, of course, not in their present condition, for they were minute-by-minute closer to utter collapse. But if she could find . . .

A couple of minutes later, she located a three-foot-long log which lay in underbrush hardly more than thirty yards from where they had stopped. She strained, hefted it off the ground and held it across her arms as if it were a baby, and, struggling with it as if it weighed a ton instead of, maybe, forty or fifty pounds, she carted it to the edge of the pool and dropped it into the water, watched it sink, rise. She pushed it off a ways, so it would be in deeper water.

It floated.

She waded in, pulled it back, stuck it in the mud at the edge of the water, and went to get Alex.

Tina, still with her head in her brother's lap, had fallen asleep, despite wind and rain and all the worst that Hurricane Greta could throw at them. When Alex slid out from under her, she continued to sleep, nice a tiny spirit, an angel. Like the scene, earlier, with the ants, Sonya counted the child's peace, in the midst of chaos, as a sign of good fortune ahead.

Alex, when he saw that Sonya wanted him to more or less ride the log across the pool, while she swam behind him using her feet to stay afloat and her hands to push with, thought that she had come up with one of the neatest ideas since the bicycle.

Of course, *he* didn't have to push.

He waded into the water with her, until it had risen to the middle of his chest, waited while she went ahead a bit and left the log wallowing in deeper water. She returned, picked him up, carried him out to where the water rose slightly over his waist, settled him onto the log and directed him, with her hands, to lay on his belly and clutch his ark with hands and knees.

He got the knack of it straight off.

Gently, gently, she released his weight, let the log take it and, in turn, let the water take it. She was immensely relieved to see that, though the log went under, a good part of the boy atop it remained above the surface and that he had only to keep his head raised in order to get his breath.

He seemed happy.

In three minutes, she was happy too, for she had gotten him to the other side without incident. She turned around and started back to get Tina, who still slept so peacefully in the mud and rain on the other shore.

The closer she drew to that shore, the more she began to fear that, just as she was getting to the child, Peterson would appear at the crest above, as bedraggled as they, the knife in his hand . . .

She gained the shallow water, stood up, pushed the log into the mud, to keep it from drifting out of reach and stranding them on this side. She went to wake Tina.

Peterson had not yet appeared.

The ants were right.

The little girl rubbed her eyes with two balled fists, looked blearily at her surroundings, obviously bewildered by what she saw, looked up at Sonya as if she could not place who she was and as if she were about to start crying.

Sonya's heart went out to the girl, for she knew only too well what it was like to wake up in a strange place and not know how you had gotten there. It was an experience she had suffered too often, and it was a fear which, all these years later, all mature and adult now, she could still not forget.

Magically, things seemed to click in place for Tina, like pieces of a puzzle. She smiled, tentatively, and she reached up with both hands, asking to be held.

Sonya carried her back to the water, got the old log in place, pushed the log and carried the child into the deeper regions of the pool.

Tina still blinked, sleepily, but she seemed to understand what Sonya wanted her to do. She took hold of the log almost as well as her brother had, holding her head high even though she did not sink quite so far as Alex had.

Sonya cast one last, apprehensive look back at the far shore, saw nothing moving, began the last trip across the pool.

They made the crossing without incident. On the other side, Sonya cast the log adrift and struggled up the next slope with the children beside her. This rise proved easier to negotiate than any that had come before it, because it was spotted with all sizes of rock outcroppings which they could set as goals and which they could use to steady them-selves when the grass grew treacherously slippery underfoot.

At the top, she stopped, not to call for a rest period, but to catch her breath and to look back across the top of the other hill, which was now on the same level as they were. She thought that, far off in the twining palm boles, she saw movement that was unlike anything the wind might cause, the purposeful advance of a man on foot.

She turned to hurry the children along and found that Tina was asleep again.

She woke her, stood her up and brushed her muddy hair away from her face, hoping that would somehow make her feel fresher and more awake.

It did not.

Her small eyes fluttered, closed, even as she was on her feet, and she swayed towards Sonya.

The woman caught her, saw that even this near-fall had not awakened the child, and knew that from here on out, she was going to have to bear the extra weight the whole way.

Alex seemed sturdy enough yet, or perhaps he was keeping going only on that male chauvinism that even little boys seemed possessed of, unwilling to admit that he could ever grow weary sooner than a woman.

Then she saw that something else might also be motivating the boy to go on. He was watching the hilltop across the ravine, and he too appeared to have seen that man moving in their direction.

Before their stalker could catch a glimpse of them, she urged Alex forward and, following with Tina cradled in her arms, hurried closer to Hawk House, conscious that their time was running out and that their chances of escape had been greatly reduced.

## TWENTY-EIGHT

He was gaining on them.

For the past ten minutes, he had been sure that they were nearby, just ahead, not far ahead, barely beyond his range of vision, and he had been equally sure that, before the hour was out, he would at last have them in his hands.

As he ran, he slapped his knife which bounced around inside of his trousers pocket, and he knew that, soon, he would have the opportunity to use it, according to the plan—even if the plan, since this chase had begun, was not as clear to him as it had once been. For a while, as he ran, he tried to recall exactly why this thing must be done, these lives taken, and couldn't exactly do it; parts of the story remained blank for him, not different than they had been but totally blank, as if someone had taken an eraser to his mind and obliterated a number of important things. But that hardly mattered. Just to use the knife . . . That was what counted, to use the knife, the sharp thing . . . And he knew he would have a chance for that. This certainty, like his realization that Sonya had herded the kids toward Hawk House and had not merely hidden them in the fringes of the forest, came from the same sixth sense, the same superhuman source, from the same privileged psychic pool that produced his special superiority as judge and jury over others. This he knew, and in his mind it was a sharp thing . . .

Once, when he gained the brow of the third hill after a number of hard falls on the slippery slope, his bleeding palm broken open wider in one of those tumbles, and when he was running fairly hard again, he felt that he had gone right past them, past the three of them without seeing them, felt that they must have grown too weary to continue and that they had dropped down in a thick clump of brush. Yes . . . He felt certain . . . They had hidden, and he had passed right by them in his headlong rush to get them in his hands . . .

This feeling became so strong, so demanding, that he slowed his pace for a bit and seriously considered doubling back on his tracks, just to make sure that such a thing, such a potentially disastrous thing, had not happened.

But he hadn't gone back, in the end, because he recognized the source of his crazy urge to retreat.

It was demon-sent.

It was inspired by the forces that would like to see him lose his chance to pass his judgment and deliver his retribution. It was a cheap, a downright shoddy, attempt to detain him, to delay him from his most righteous duty.

Realizing this truth, he plunged ahead once more, at top speed.

Now, he came to the third and largest of the pools where the sea had rushed in between the hills and, since he was drenched to the skin anyway, he waded out into it until he could wade no farther, then dove forward and swam to the far shore where he thought, in the soft, wet earth, he could see signs of their passage.

The fourth hill was rocky and, therefore, easily topped, a welcome change from the greased grass he'd had to lumber up before.

At the top, sucking in air as if it were to be outlawed in an hour, he looked along the table of this hill and thought he saw, at the far end, three figures disappear over the brink.

He touched his knife which was still in his pocket, and he ran after them, joyous, half the island behind him and half ahead, the perfectly isolated place for what he had in mind.



## TWENTY-NINE

Two hours earlier, not long after dawn, Kenneth Blenwell had spent half an hour fastening down the shutters on Hawk House, not long before Henry Dalton and Leroy Mills had performed the same chore at the other end of the island, in Seawatch. He had worn a heavy canvas rain slicker with a hood that closed tight around his face by means of a drawstring that tied beneath his chin, and he had still felt damp and chilled to the bone before the job was a quarter finished, his own body heat trapped under the slicker and turning cold the perspiration that filmed his skin.

Standing outside, facing a window, swinging the heavy wooden, tin-backed shutter panels into place and working the rust-stuck bolts through their loops, he had felt as if a couple of hundred malicious children, with slingshots and a supply of ripe grapes, were using his back as a target. From previous, similar experiences, he knew that the quickest way to get this routine finished, the easiest way to endure the punishment of the wind and the rain, was to let his mind wander and forget what he was doing . . . He would move from window to window like some sort of robot, an automaton who need only fall into a familiar work pattern and did not need to think, letting his mind dwell on other matters; then before he realized it, he would have rounded the house and closed down all the windows. Therefore, he began to consider the mess over at Seawatch, Saine, the Dougherty family, everyone who was involved with the strange threats against the Dougherty children . . .

He wandered through these mental images much like a man strolling leisurely through a museum, considering each of the many characters who was involved in this real-life drama, turning them around in his mind, but rather quickly rejecting them and choosing, for a longer consideration, Miss Sonya Carter .

..

He was a young man, some said a handsome young man, and he was wealthy and educated— with a degree in literature—and he had seen a great deal of the world, from England to Japan, from Chile to Sweden. He had, according to popular modern mythology, all of the qualities for a great romantic, a ladies' man . . . Yet, until he had seen the Carter girl, he had never pictured himself as a romantic, and certainly not—as he had been continually imagining since—as a family man. He tended to be cynical, wary of people professing friendship, and felt it unlikely that he would ever experience a close, love-relationship with anyone but his grandparents, with whom he shared a special closeness originally born of mutual dependency but now gone far beyond that.

Then he had seen Sonya Carter.

When he first glimpsed the *Lady Jane* moving slowly across the mouth of the cove, he had been surveying the horizon for large cruise ships, an idle hobby that he sometimes spent hours at. He realized that Peterson was not alone and, still convinced that Peterson was the most likely suspect in the recent Dougherty family incidents, trained his glasses there to see who might be with him. Even at that distance, seen only through a pair of field glasses, she had mesmerized him. Not by her looks, so much (though she was quite lovely), but by her smile, her attitude . . .

In prep school, when he was a teenager, the other kids had begun to call him “The Raven,” because they said that he matched the gloomy personality of that bird in Poe's famous narrative poem of the same name. He had endured his nickname without comment, though he had naturally not much appreciated it.

He was not gloomy at all, he felt, but merely being realistic. The world was not, as most of his frivolous classmates seemed to think it was, the proverbial oyster. Certainly, many things in life were pleasurable, and he enjoyed himself whenever he could. But you had to be on the lookout for the bad, for the upsets and the disappointments. Most of these prep school kids had lived all their lives, to date, in wealthy homes where doting parents had supplied them everything they wanted and twice everything that they needed. Until they were on their own, until they risked emotional involvement with the world,

they could not realize that it contained things you had to be wary of. He realized it, because he had his mother's history of madness haunting him, and he was plagued by the memory of that awful day when the news of her suicide had come and his grandparents, though they knew she was insane, had grieved so deeply, so terribly at her loss.

In college, too, he had been known as a pessi-mist, an image he at first attempted to void himself of but later embraced because, if they all believed it, he could be let alone, friendless. He enjoyed his privacy more than the average student his age, and he convinced himself that he also enjoyed being without any companions at all.

These days, he liked to think, he was in a much lighter mood, far less likely to become despondent over events. He had developed a sense of humor that pleased his grandfather immensely and, though it was based on a cynical outlook on life, a sarcastic approach to almost everything he encountered, it was still a genuine sense of humor, proof that instead of depressing him, these days, the inanities of life did little more than amuse him.

When he had seen Sonya, laughing out loud, head thrown back, her yellow hair streaming in the sea breeze, her whole attitude one of carefree optimism, he had been struck, had been struck hard, as if someone had punched him in the center of his chest, directly over the heart, and he'd had trouble breathing. Then, of course, in that first moment, he had been attracted to her only as one magnet might be attracted to an unlike force, in-trigued by the evident differences between them. She was, he had seen in that single, long-distance glance, quite his emotional opposite, and because of this, she was unique. He'd met other optimistic people, naturally, scads of them, but none so purely gay and open as this girl appeared in this brief and indirect contact.

The first meeting, of course, had been a complete disaster. He had been nervous at meeting her, surprised to find her on the beach near Hawk House, and he had not reacted well.

Neither had she.

She seemed to rebel at the sight of him, and she misinterpreted his nervousness for—he later realized—malicious antagonism.

Then there'd been their first meeting with his grandparents, a disaster to outdo all others. He loved them both, dearly, and he sometimes forgot that their age had made them different people, in other's eyes, than those he saw them as. They were no longer sparkling conversationalists, and their passion for television was almost unbreakable. When they had rambled on about the details of the threats against the Dougherty kids, *he* had known they were not really ghoulishly interested in the gore, but that they were merely going on as old people often did. When Walter snapped at the girl, *he* knew the snap was not intended to sound mean, but chiding. But, of course, Sonya could know none of this.

What a botch that afternoon had been!

He had learned, from Rudolph Saine, later, that she was far too optimistic, a very naive and innocent young lady who had been early attracted to Bill Peterson's surface glitter, his facade of care-free charm, and that she had not seen the thinly disguised restlessness that shifted rapidly just below his surface. He knew then that he had probably lost her and would most likely never be able to communicate properly with her, but he did not give up thinking about her.

He worried for her.

When he had first talked to Saine, months ago, had first heard all the details of the Doughertys' problems, he had pointed out that he was fairly sure Bill Peterson had been away from Seawatch for several weeks at the same time the threats were being delivered in New Jersey. He had supposedly been on a vacation. He and Saine had hit it off at once, recognizing, perhaps, their mutual distrust of most of the world, and he had gone to Guadeloupe, at Saine's request, to see if he could track down Peterson's whereabouts during the critical time period when things had been turned upside down in New Jersey. He was able to trace Peterson to a Miami-bound private plane, but lost him there, in the records of the commercial airlines, where he could easily have employed a false name. This was little for Saine to form an opinion on, but added to his own observations of Peterson, the big man had centered much of his attention, from then on, on the boat captain.

And now Sonya was becoming friendly with Peterson, too friendly for a girl whose outlook on life

left her intensely vulnerable to danger and hurt.

Blenwell closed and bolted the last ground floor shutter and, his thoughts drifting to Seawatch again, began to wonder just what was going on now, at that fated house, as Hurricane Greta iso-lated them even further than ever . . .

He had wanted to be there now, ever since the boats and radios had been destroyed, because he was sure the madman was about to make his move. But in the middle of the worst hurricane in thirty years, his place was at Hawk House, with his grandparents, who might need him. Even if the storm did not tear the house down, the excitement of the wind and noise might fatally weaken the heart in one of them. He could not leave them by themselves, even though he knew Saine could use his help.

Inside, he closed the interior shutters on the upper floors, one by one, still an automaton with his thoughts elsewhere.

Standing at the last window, with his hands on the shutters, staring out at the final piece of the rainy world which was still visible from Hawk House, he hesitated to close them, for his thoughts took a sudden and particularly nasty turn. He had great faith in Rudolph Saine, and he doubted very much that anyone, even a madman, could over-power that giant. But just suppose that Saine grew careless, or that the madman was more cunning than anyone could have suspected . . . Suppose he struck at Seawatch and, suspecting that Blen-well knew who Saine suspected, decided to come after the Blenwell family too.

He shuddered.

Such a possibility was predicated on the cer-tainty that the killer would eliminate both the Dougherty children, Rudolph Saine, and anyone else in Seawatch who might be able to connect him with murder.

He didn't want to think about such a bloodbath.

Especially not with Sonya up there . . .

He looked at the skies: black, low, moving fast, broken up by sheets of hard rain.

He looked, too, at the sea: towering, fierce, crushing the island in its watery vice, narrowing *Distingue* to a tiny strip of land, a strip of wind-battered mud.

Walk a mile in that, to kill those in Hawk House while the hurricane still raged? That seemed unlikely. Such a trek could be deadly. Only a madman . . .

He pushed the shutters open.

What in God's name was he thinking? Of course only a madman would walk the length of the island in a hurricane, but it was a madman that they were dealing with!

He left the shutters open.

He pulled a chair up to the window, and he went to load the rifle he had told Bill Peterson he did not have.

## THIRTY

In the fourth ravine, between the fourth and the fifth hills, not so terribly far from the sanctity of Hawk House—she hoped, she prayed—they came across the dead body of a shark. It was floating in the dirty water that had coursed in between the low hills, its belly up, its toothy mouth frozen in a hideous grin that Sonya felt she had seen some-where before but which she could not place . . .

. . . and then *could* place. It was the grin one saw, in horror films, on the face of a death's head, a skull smile both broad and utterly unhumorous, the sort of cheap theatrics that, in films, had made her chuckle but which now brought her no amuse-ment at all.

She turned the children away from the thing and led them quickly along the shore of the pool, so that they could cross without coming into con-tact with the shark's corpse. They had seen it al-ready, of course, for she had not been quick enough to turn them before it had bobbed into sight, and she knew that they would have dreams about it for many nights to come.

For the most part, she was not so much dis-turbed by the grisly scene because it was stomach-churning or because it was another encounter in what seemed an endless string of encounters with death—but she was most disturbed because she could not decide whether the shark, this time, was a good omen or a bad one. In one sense, because it was dead, it might represent a previous threat now dissolved. And in another way, because it was dead and grinning at them, it might mean . . .

She shook her head and tried to get hold of her-self.

Weariness was closing in on her like a gloved fist, and it was causing her to go off on useless tan-gents (like thinking in terms of good luck and bad luck, good omens and bad omens), and this was a trend she could not permit to continue.

The pool, this time, was not uniformly deep and permitted an easy crossing at one point, thirty or forty feet from the dead shark, where the land be-neath the invading sea rose up almost like a series of stepping stones.

She carried the children across, one at a time, her arms aching like sore teeth which she longed to pull from the sockets and gain a modicum of re-lease.

That done, the hill remained ahead.

She didn't want to go up it.

She had to.

Cautiously, because the rise was slippery and studded with flat rocks which were no good to use as handholds but which would strike a good blow if she fell on one of them and hit her head, she moved crabwise up the slope, taking Tina with her, casting anxious glances backwards at Alex who, though doggedly following, was beginning to lose some of his all-important pep. Once, she lost her balance and, in trying to cradle Tina and keep the child from being injured, fell and struck her head on one of those rocks which she had intended so hard to avoid.

Dizziness swept over her . . .

She felt she would pass out.

And sleep . . .

She gritted her teeth, then bit at her lips, pushed up and, puffing, went on, drawing her breath in great, wracking sobs which, fortunately, the storm covered. She could not have borne to hear that sound of absolute desperation, not here when she needed every ounce of her supposedly bottomless optimism.

At the top of the hill, she wanted to relax, to sleep.

She knew she must not give in to the urge.

She wanted just to lie down, stretch out on the soft earth and close her eyes for a couple of min-utes.

She wouldn't sleep.

No, she'd not sleep because she dared not to sleep, but why couldn't she just stretch out for a rest . . .

. ?

No, not even that.

The most she would permit herself, by way of a breather, was a brief stop, at the top of the hill, with the fourth gully and the fourth rise behind them.

She put Tina down, watched the child stir, mumble and blink at the world for a moment before tumbling into sleep again.

The example was tempting.

She looked away.

She rubbed the back of her neck, then her eyes, felt the place on her arm where Peterson had slid the sharp blade across her flesh: that had already stopped bleeding, though the edges of the wound were purled and purplish.

She looked at the sky.

Blackness but not night . . .

Where the trees were forcefully parted to let it show through, it was like an open mouth, swiftly descending to devour the earth. She could still not believe that it could put down so much rain, so rapidly, even though she had been driven temporarily half-deaf by the fall of that rain, even though she had been soaked deep and long by it. Even as she looked up, the water stung her open face, made her close her eyes for fear of being blinded.

She lowered her head.

She leaned against a palm bole and sucked air into her lungs, moist *alt* that made her feel almost as if she were on the verge of drowning, that made her puff in desperation.

Although Hurricane Greta and the journey from Seawatch were very painfully real, she could barely bring herself to believe that any of this were happening. How had a girl like her, a girl who had set out to enjoy life, not terribly strong and not interested in heroics of any kind, end up in such a predicament? She turned to look back the way they had come, at what seemed an eternal confusion of twisting, looping palm boles, and she could find no answer there. It was almost easier to believe that this was entirely fantasy.

With a crash that made her squeal and whirl away from the tree against which she was leaning, three large coconuts and a bundle of palm boughs crashed down about five yards away, waking Tina who, though her voice was inaudible, began to cry.

She had slept through the storm because it was a continuing uproar, a familiar and almost hypnotic lullaby sung at top volume. But the sudden explosion of the coconuts had been like a sour note in that lullaby, a harshly jangling chord that ruined the building effect, and it had been disconcerting even to her drowsing ears.

Although Sonya had hoped for another minute or so of rest before she had to take Tina into her aching arms again, she did not hesitate to bend and lift the child, cuddle her close and murmur sweetly to her, though murmurs were useless in the scream of the wind.

Tina slowly recovered her nerve.

She stopped crying.

Sonya wiped rain from her face, only to see more rain pour across it, wondered whether all of them would survive this crazy journey, even if they did reach Hawk House safely. Once in a warm, dry house, they would have to take immediate steps to thwart pneumonia and have a doctor over from Guadeloupe the moment that the weather improved sufficiently to permit that trip.

Through the film of water, Tina looked up at the young woman holding her, dark eyes locking with blue eyes, and even though she was a child and supposedly incapable of sophisticated communication with an adult, she passed a wealth of emotion in those short seconds, fears and hopes that Sonya was able to recognize at once and sympathize with.

She hugged Tina closer.

She said, "I'll get us through."

At about the same moment, she became aware that Alex was standing before her, trying to get her attention. She bent, as if to try to hear what he had to say, then saw that he was frantically pointing

toward the flooded glen out of which they had just come.

Knowing what she would see before she looked, she turned and stared into Peterson's eyes.

## THIRTY-ONE

Kenneth Blenwell sat before the unshuttered window, watching the rain-swept lawn, the dip-ping trees that looked a bit like frantic dancers in a new style discotheque. He winced each time that something—perhaps a leaf, a tiny branch, a bare palm frond, a piece of paper carried from who-knew-where, clouds of dust and small pebbles—slapped against the glass with the force of Greta's big, invisible hands behind them. He knew that something might very likely be blown against the window at just the proper angle and at just the right speed to smash the pane and shower him with dangerously sharp shards of flying glass, but he tried to be watchful for such a thing, and he re-mained, fairly faithfully, at his post.

Once, he went for a cup of coffee, telling him-self that he was being the perfect fool and that nothing could happen in the three minutes or so that he would be gone.

But he'd come running back, breathless, slopping coffee on his hand, certain that he'd chosen the crucial moment to take a break and that he was missing what he had been watching all this time for.

The lawn had been empty.

He sat down.

He finished his coffee.

He watched.

Time passed as slowly for him as it had for Sonya, earlier in the morning, when she had waited in the kitchen of Seawatch for Rudolph Saine and Bill Peterson to return from the second floor with the kids. He kept looking at his watch, frowning, holding it close to his ear to see if it were still working.

It always was.

He went and got another cup of coffee and took his time returning to the window, so that he would not feel like an utter fool when he looked out and saw that the lawn was unpeopled and that the storm was still the focal point of the scene.

Fifteen minutes later, he went to see how Wal-ter and Lydia were getting along in the storm cel-lar. The place was as comfortably furnished as their regular living room, though the concrete walls gave off an unmistakable chill. They coun-teracted this irritant by wearing coats and draping their legs with afghans which Lydia had made her-self. They were sipping wine and reading, clearly upset that they must miss their television programs for a while, but functioning nonetheless, in their usual style.

“You should be down here too,” Lydia warned him.

“I will be, shortly.”

“What's taking you so long, anyway?” his grandfather asked.

“Tying things down.”

“Never took this long before.”

“I'm getting old,” he said, smiling.

Hattie, the maid, was there too, reading, sipping cola instead of wine. She smiled at him, a rare thing these days. Though he had often been angry with his grandparents for keeping her on just be-cause, after working a lifetime for them, she had nowhere else to go, he was now glad that they had ignored him. She was grumpy, aging faster than ei-ther Walter or Lydia, though they were senior to her, and she was no longer a particularly efficient housekeeper and cook. But her presence was a tes-tament to his grandparents' generosity and their concern about people they touched. She reminded him of how Walter and Lydia had been, when they were more vital, recalled to him the thousands of other kindnesses he had seen them extend and which they had extended to him. For that reason, despite her grumpiness, Hattie was good to have around.

“I'll give you just another fifteen minutes,” Lydia said, looking at her watch.

“And you'll spank me if I take longer?”

“No, but your grandfather might.”

“She doesn’t speak for me,” Walter said, chuck-ling.

“Why not?” she asked him. “I always have in the past.”

The old man threw Ken a meaningful glance. “This woman,” he said, “has been my lifelong bane.”

“And you hers,” Ken said.

The old people laughed.

“I’ll be back,” he told them, when he had ascer-tained that they were comfortable.

“Fifteen minutes!” Lydia called after him.

“I heard!”

Behind him, as he walked away, he heard Wal-ter say, “Don’t nag the boy, my dear. To us, he’s still a child, but to the rest of the world, he’s a grown man, more than a grown man.”

He did not hear her reply.

Upstairs, he sat down in his chair once again, pulled it up to the window and stared toward the edge of the palm forest, resuming his vigil.

He thought about Saine, the Doughertys, Sonya . . . But because there was no new data, no new experiences, since he’d early thought of these things, he was covering ground that he had been over before and, in the case of Sonya, thoughts he had given way to a thousand times in the last couple of weeks . . .

Before the fifteen minutes had passed, he began to feel like the village idiot, sitting at his watch-tower, waiting for an event that, in all logic, would never transpire. He was worrying his grandparents for no good reason. Though he didn’t think that Greta would manage to rip Hawk House apart, it was possible that he could receive a severely lacer-ated face from the flying glass if the window be-fore him should be broken—and that would be enough to have the old people in hysterics.

Perhaps he needed more coffee.

But he didn’t want it.

He fidgeted.

He thought of Sonya again.

Laughing . . .

Riding the boat, hands gripping the rail, her blonde hair streaming out behind her . . .

She was whiteness, he blackness. Together, fac-ing the world together, what would they make of it, in such contrasting colors, half in pure white and half in gloomy black. The cynic in him an-swered that question with a sneer: they’d make gray together, unrelieved, depressing gray. He laughed bitterly at his ability to always bring him-self back to the reality at hand, back to the moment.

Sonya was not yet and probably never would be his responsibility, while, on the other hand, those old people in the storm cellar downstairs were definitely his responsibility. As he had once trusted in them to protect him from harm and make him comfortable, they now, perhaps uncon-sciously, had switched roles and depended on him to do the same for them. He must forget “what ifs” and tend to the “what is,” to Walter and Lydia and, yes, to Hattie.

He stood up, abruptly convinced that nothing would be gained by remaining here and watching for a madman in a hurricane. He was a bit angry with himself for even having seriously considered such a ludicrously melodramatic development. He was the realist, after all. He was the cynic. He did not believe, as so many people did, in a life that was like a motion picture, where drama arose at the exactly necessary point . . .

He pushed his chair back and drew closed one of the shutters.

He took one last look at the lawn.

Wind, rain, glowering clouds, dancing trees, nothing more.

He swung the second shutter around in order to bolt it tightly to the first half that was already in place.



## THIRTY-TWO

Jeremy came over the brow of the hill and, digging his heels into the mushy earth to keep from losing his balance and falling to the bottom, he started down toward the sea-flooded ravine, yet another of the watery obstacles which had become familiar and hated. He had gone a third of the way down the hill before, out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw something more than green vegetation and gray rain at the top of the next slope, beyond the pool. He looked up, gasped when he saw the woman, Sonya, standing with her back to him, holding one of the children.

The other child was nowhere in sight.

For a moment, he could not move.

The sight of her made him realize he'd not really expected to catch them, no matter how hard he'd tried to convince himself that he would. And, coming upon her unexpectedly like this, his memory was jarred so that he could not instantly recall why he had been chasing her . . . He could not think of her name or what relation she was to him and, when he was honest, he could not exactly remember who he was, himself. He stood there in the pounding rain, sweating, his brow furrowed, desperately trying to recall what this was all about.

Then the other child, the boy, came into sight, looking down into the ravine and, instantly, discovered his pursuer, turning to the woman to tell her that the gap had been closed.

In the same moment, Jeremy remembered that he was a judge, that he had held a trial, that he had passed a sentence and must now see that it was carried out. The Doughertys must suffer, must understand what life was really like. That was fair.

He took out his knife.

The three people above turned away from him and disappeared into the trees, but he was not worried, for he knew he would have them shortly.

He started across the pool, his knife held before him again, the blade gleaming in the rain.

## THIRTY-THREE

Sonya was not a violent woman; violence re-pelled her, for it was so closely associated with death and unhappiness. Yet, when she saw what must be done in order to save their lives, she did not hesitate, even briefly, to do it, though she knew that she might end up killing a man who had once been Bill Peterson.

Perhaps it was just this thought, couched in just those terms, that made her able to perform a violent act against another living creature—the painful realization that he was no longer that man whom she had known and had felt affection for and, having gone so far over the edge of madness as he had, would never be that man again. Either Jeremy, the black side of his schizophrenic personality, would rule the mortal shell from now on, or he would become a catatonic case for the mental wards, a staring and helpless vegetable without any personality at all, far beyond the help of any branch of modern medicine. She would not, then, be killing a friend, but an absolute stranger. Indeed, if you wanted to be blunt about it, she would not even be attacking a man, but a *thing*, a living and moving being that was less than a wild animal.

But she would have to act fast.

She had maybe three minutes, or four.

No longer.

She put Tina down again, stood her on her feet and tried to make the little girl understand that she would no longer be carried.

Tina blinked at her, on the verge of tears again.

*No, please, Sonya thought. Don't cry.*

If Tina didn't fully grasp the import of their situation now that Peterson had nearly caught up to them, her brother, Alex, did, for he grabbed hold of his sister's hand and held it tightly.

Relieved, Sonya stood and pointed through the palm forest, in the general direction of Hawk House, and indicated that she would be along behind them in a minute or two.

Alex turned away from her and tottered off, pulling Tina with him, not moving quickly but at least moving, not with much of a chance of survival but at least with a small chance, a tiny one. If she could stop Peterson without getting hurt herself, they would make it yet. But if she was hurt and could not catch up to them, they'd die. They'd die even if she'd killed the madman and he could no longer reach them, for they were almost sure to lose themselves in the storm and die of exposure during the long night ahead . . .

Sonya turned away from them.

Peterson had still not crested this hill; he was still down there in the ravine.

She went quickly to the fallen coconuts and pulled away the palm boughs that half-concealed them. Each of the three fruits was as large as a cannon ball, and each looked about that deadly.

She tried to pick up two coconuts at once.

Couldn't do it.

They were too big and heavy for that. She needed both hands for each of them, and she lost valuable seconds fumbling with two before she realized this.

She dropped one of them.

As quickly as she could, legs rubbery, she carried the other coconut to the edge of the hill, careful not to let herself be seen by Peterson, who must by now have crossed the pool below.

She went back for the second coconut.

She put it by the first.

She retrieved the third, lined them up.

Looking at it, she realized what a puny arsenal it was, and that she could hardly afford to miss him, even once. But she did not see what else she could do, at this point, except to go on with it. She hadn't

the time to run all over the hilltop in search of other shaggy missiles.

She lifted the first sphere.

She stepped to the edge of the slope, where he would be able to see her, and she looked for him.

He was halfway up the slippery grass incline, trying to make it on his feet and not his hands and knees.

She raised the coconut overhead.

He sensed her, looked up.

He threw his hands up to protect himself, lost his balance, and fell backwards, to the bottom of the incline.

She realized that she had lost the precious ad-vantage of surprise, now, but she did not throw the coconut yet. She wanted to hit him when he was on the hill, so that, with a little luck, he would lose his balance again and fall to the bottom, hurting himself in the process, perhaps even breaking a leg.

For a moment, they seemed stalemated.

He stood by the pool, looking up.

She stood atop the incline, looking down.

He held the knife.

She held the coconut.

Then he started up again.

He came at a run, jumping from side to side in-stead of making a direct line for her, covering ground in the manner he had been taught in the army, in the war.

She waited.

He was halfway up, his neck strained into corded ropes of muscle, his head thrust out ahead of him, bent in an odd manner to give himself the best balance and the lowest point-of-gravity.

She threw the coconut.

He tried to run under it.

It struck the center of his back and bounced off him, struck hard enough to drive him down onto his stomach, dazed.

She picked up the second missile.

She was shaking uncontrollably, as if she had a severe fever, and she could not manage to get rid of the vision of that first direct hit, which re-mained behind, playing over and over again as if on some internal motion picture screen. She saw the brown ball arching . . . She saw it come down on his spine, saw it bounce . . . He crashed for-ward into the mud, his face driven into the mud so that he must have gotten a mouthful of it . . . And she could almost feel the excruciating pain which she had caused him. Having done that, having hurt him like that, even if he were less than a human being right now, she felt unspeakably sick and knew, if she survived this ordeal, here was the ma-terial for new nightmare aplenty.

Nevertheless, she was resolved to continue this almost comic battle with coconuts and to take whatever moral punishment was her due as a result of her brutality. She had not started this private war, after all; she was an unwilling combatant.

He lay still for long seconds.

She wondered if he were dead or unconscious, but she knew she did not dare leave him there without being sure, for he might be hoping to trick her and then come close behind, when there was no slope for her to fight him on to her advantage.

At last, he moved.

He raised up on his hands.

Shook his head.

He looked around himself, then up at her.

She threatened him with the coconut she held.

He looked around him, on all sides of him, con-centrating closely on the grass and mud, as if he couldn't figure out what it was—then he came up with the knife which had fallen from his hand when the coconut had hit him.

He inspected it.

It was in fine condition.

Holding it out before him, not attempting to stand now, he started up the hill again, on his knees, battered by rain and wind but seemingly unaware of everything except Sonya.

She waited another moment, gauging the distance, until she felt the time was right, then threw the coconut as hard as she could.

It arched . . .

But the wind was very strong, not strong enough to lift away so heavy an object, though forceful enough to deflect it. Because of the wind, the second missile missed him altogether.

He grinned at her.

He was only forty feet away now.

The knife looked longer than a sword.

She turned and picked up the last coconut.

He stopped smiling when he saw it, and he concentrated on making better time on the glass hill-side.

He had no way of knowing, she discovered, that this was her last missile. He might think she had an endless supply of these and that she could, with a better aim, hold him off for a long while, or permanently injure him.

This, however, was a psychological advantage she would not have much longer, for he would soon know that she had nothing else to use against him.

For the most part, he kept his face to the ground, moving toward her like an insect oblivious of the world above it. Now and again, however, at fairly regular intervals, he raised his head to look at her and to gauge the angle of his ascent. She picked up the rhythm of these upward glances and, when she felt he was just about to raise his head again, she threw the coconut with all her might.

He looked up.

He screamed.

It caught the side of his face.

He went backward, head over heels, to the bottom of the rise, fell half into the water and did not get up or move.

She waited, trembling, on the verge of throwing up but not sure if she had the time for that.

He lay still.

Water lapped at him.

She thought of going down there and turning him onto his back, to see if he were dead, but the memory of what his strong hands had almost done to her in the bougainvillea arbor kept her where she was.

She saw the knife where he had dropped it, more than halfway down the hill, its point directed at her, its red handle like a small beacon in the midst of the drab, storm-painted earth. She wondered if she could risk going that close to him so that she could get hold of the knife and deprive him of his most dangerous weapon. She remembered how fast he had run up the first section of the slope, jumping from side to side and digging his heels in like a soldier taking enemy ground during an offensive action, and she knew she would have to turn and renegotiate half the hillside while he would be chasing her . . . Yet, she thought, now, that he *was* unconscious, and she knew that, when he came to, even if that was while she was retrieving the knife, he would not have the wits about him to give immediate and competent chase. And if she could have the knife . . .

She started over the brink of the hill and had taken four or five steps when he shuddered, thrashed about, and tried to get his hands under himself.

Terrified, she turned, scrambled to the top again, and ran after the kids.

They had not managed to get very far, no more than a third of the way across the flat top of the hill.

She scooped Tina up and urged Alex to make better time than he had thus far.

From somewhere, she did not know where, though it might have been from a terror that was greater than any she had ever known before, she found a new supply of energy. Her legs were rubbery, but they drove her on with renewed speed; her back and arms felt as if they would require major surgery to ever be right again, yet they were laced with new strength that made Tina seem less of a burden than she had

before.

The sounds of the storm seemed so loud now that she felt as if they were coming from within her head and not from the land around her; she felt as if she could buckle under the demanding explosions of the sound alone.

At the next slope, she turned and looked back, hoping to see that they were unpursued.

For a few seconds, it seemed that way, seemed safe. Then, she caught sight of him, weaving drunkenly between the trees but nonetheless closing the distance between them.

## THIRTY-FOUR

Because the depths of the ravine between these last two hills was not so great as it had been in each of the previous geographical divisions of the island, the pool of seawater across which they had to go was not nearly so much of an obstacle as those which had come before it. Indeed, it only reached to Sonya's knees and slightly past Alex's waist. They were able to walk across the pool together, while Sonya carried the little girl, and no time was lost in making a second trip to ferry one or the other of the children to safety.

In other ways, Nature seemed suddenly to have chosen their side. The trees grew even thicker than before, cutting the whip of the wind in half and making advancement a good deal easier. The slope of this hill was more gentle than those before it, and while it was not rocky, it was also not grassy, composed of spotted clumps of vegetation and a lot of loose sand which, while shifting under their feet, was preferable to slick grass.

On the hilltop, they ran forward, zig-zagging more than before, to get between the closely grown trees, aware that, not far ahead, the dark-ness of the forest seemed to erupt into light, but not able to interpret this sight until they stumbled, exhausted, around the last of the thick palm boles and shuffled into the open lawn that ringed Hawk House.

Sonya paused, unable to immediately accept the sight of that fine old house, for she was more willing to believe it was a fantasy, a figment of her imagination, than the actual place. She had hoped to reach here for so long, and she had prayed so desperately, that now she thought her mind might have fantasized what she wanted because, other-wise, she would never obtain it.

But, fantasy or not, she could not afford to re-main here and stare at it. The lawn was a good hundred and fifty yards across and, when they had gained the door of Hawk House, they might still be far from salvation. She had thought, earlier, but had refused to consider, that once they reached the Blenwell's place, they might find it boarded up and its inhabitants all out of earshot, in their own dry storm cellar. If that were the case, Peterson would catch them on the Blenwell door-step and provide an especially ironic ending to the whole gruesome affair.

She started forward, walking fast, no longer able to run, with Alex stumbling by her side.

The wind, here in the open, hit them so hard they went to their knees, as they had on the lawn of Seawatch—how long ago? Each time, they got up and went on.

Tina was no longer in the mood to sleep, but clung to Sonya like a burr to wool, her head over the woman's shoulder, her face buried in her warm neck.

It was Tina, because of her position, who first saw Peterson and, screaming directly into Sonya's ear, warned the woman a moment before he crashed into her and knocked her down, like a bowling ball upsetting the last pin on the alley floor. She landed in a painful tangle of over-exerted arms and legs, every strained muscle crying out at this final indignity, whimpering help-lessly to herself.

She rolled to get away from him, for she felt he must have his knife with him and that he must already be driving it toward her back, and in the process of her panicked escape from this imagined nearness to a swift death, she lost hold of Tina.

She spit out grass and mud, looked up.

Peterson had passed her and was chasing Alex toward Hawk House, and he was almost on top of the boy.

Involuntarily, Sonya screamed.

Peterson clutched the collar of Alex's jacket and swung the boy around as if he were nothing more than a sack of potatoes. He threw him down and, as Alex tried to stand again, slapped him hard alongside the head, knocking him uncon-scious.

Sonya got up.

She was scared, but she was also furious.

She had to stop him.

But he was the one with a weapon.

She looked around for Tina but could not, at first, catch sight of her. Then she saw that Peterson seemed to be running across the lawn without real direction, and she followed his intended path, where Tina sat in utter defeat, watching her assailant charge at her but unable to do anything to save herself. Though Peterson had not finished with the boy, he seemed maniacally determined to strike out at each of them first, as quickly as he could, no matter how great the risk that as he ran from one to the other, his first victim might escape.

Sonya took a few steps toward Tina, then saw that she would never be able to reach the girl before Peterson did.

## THIRTY-FIVE

As he was closing the last half of the shutters over the window where he had kept his watch, Ken Blenwell caught a quick flash of movement by the edge of the palm trees and, though he was quick to attribute it to his imagination or to the storm, he pulled the shutter open part way again and had another look.

A woman and two small children had come out of the trees and now stood at the edge of the lawn, leaning into the wind, filthy and soaked and obviously beaten. Though they were too far away for positive visual identification, he had no doubt that they were Sonya Carter and Alex and Tina Dougherty, even though it seemed impossible and un-reasonable that they had come the length of *Dis-tingue*, by foot, in the middle of the storm.

They started toward Hawk House, trudging like refugees, huddled and dark and forlorn.

Then, behind them, another figure emerged from the palms, this one a man who stopped just where the woman had stopped and looked after them.

Saine?

Not big enough.

Henry or Mills?

Too big for them.

And Dougherty wasn't home, so it must be Pe-terson.

As Blenwell watched, aware that danger was coming and that his place was out there with the woman and the two kids, not here by the window like a man of stone, Peterson ran forward and slammed into Sonya with his shoulder.

Both she and the child crashed forward to the ground, rolled, and then became separated.

Then Peterson leaped past them, making for the boy who, having seen this first attack, was now running full tilt for Hawk House, weaving on weak legs and losing ground all the time.

Blenwell whirled away from the window, grabbed up the rifle that stood against the chair, and ran into the hall.

When he reached the kitchen, his feet pounding on the tile floor, he heard Lydia calling to him, though he had no idea what she was saying.

“Stay there!” he shouted.

He fumbled with the door latches.

She was still calling his name.

“It's okay!” he shouted. “Don't leave the cellar!”

He pushed open the door.

Wind hit him.

Rain soaked him in the instant and pummeled past him to clatter on the hard kitchen floor.

Against the wishes of the wind, he pulled the door shut and, holding the rifle to his side, hoping the rain would not damage it and make it useless, he went onto the lawn and hurried toward the bat-ting figures down near the palms.

Despite the fact that the storm made running all but impossible when you were headed into the wind, as he was, he reached the scene before Pe-terson had managed to kill anyone. Alex was lying on the ground, either exhausted or stunned by a blow from Peterson who was now running clumsily toward the little girl. Sonya stood, helpless, watching all of this, her shoulders slumped, her hands spread out in front of her as if she were pleading with someone, though there was no one near to her.

Blenwell went down on one knee and raised the rifle to his shoulder. He had done a lot of target practice with the gun, and—when he was de-pressed and forgot that they were not responsible for his problems—he considered using it on Dougherty's parrots. But this would be the first time in his life that



he had ever used a gun against a man.

He sighted in, estimated the movement of the wind and allowed for it, then slowly squeezed the trigger.

The gun jerked against him, but he heard its re-port only as another sudden growl from the storm.

Peterson kept running.

He fired again.

The madman was spun around, like a tackled football player, his speed cut in the instant, and he went down, hard.

He stayed down.

It was over.

## AFTERWARD

Though it had been filtered through the perfume of the bougainvillea vines that grew over the one end of the front porch of Seawatch, the breeze still brought them a tang of sea and sand. Of course, few of the bougainvillea's flowers had survived Greta's wrath, and not many new blossoms had opened yet, but still the refreshing sea smell was a delightful surprise to Sonya and Kenneth as they sat side-by-side in two antique rattan rockers. It reminded them of the sea when it was tame, of the pleasures one could get from the sea—and those were aspects of its majesty which they had not had occasion to think about for some days.

Looking out on the peaceful green lawn, the stately palms, the glimpse of white beach and the placid sea, Sonya could hardly understand how such a peaceful place could have turned, for two long days, into a nightmare of rage and destruction, both human and natural.

The storm had gone three days ago now, and the Doughertys had been home almost as long. Bill Peterson, whom Ken had shot cleanly through the neck, had been taken back to Guadeloupe for burial by his family which was stunned by what had happened. The police had come and gone, as had the doctors, and now there was no more excitement.

Thankfully.

She had spent a full day or longer, during the storm, in Hawk House, bundled into a guest bed. The Blenwells had treated her and the children as best they could; and Sonya and her two charges had slept most of that time, recharging batteries, blissfully unaware of the concern paid them by everyone in that mansion, including Hattie.

After that, when the weather had cleared substantially, they had been able to return to Seawatch where they were greeted like three modern Lazaruses all raised from the grave. Bess, Henry, Leroy and Helga had all been certain that they were dead, for Saine was dead and Saine was much tougher than they were.

Since then, she had rested, could hardly get enough of rest, and of Helga's food, which tasted better than she remembered it.

Each day, Ken came early in the morning, went on walks with her, sat with her on the porch, played cards with her, and slowly became more and more of the romantic young man which he had always had the potential but never the desire to be.

Now, as they were commenting on the sudden fresh sea breeze, Joe Dougherty came out of the front door and took a chair next to theirs, so they were sitting around a small, white wrought iron cocktail table. He said, "Two days ago, or better, you said you wanted to resign as tutor and governess for the kids."

"Well—" she began.

He held up a hand to stop her.

"I'd be the first one to admit that you have excellent reasons for wanting to get away from the Dougherty family forever. And when I told you that I intend to remain on *Distingue* despite all that's happened here, I saw how you paled." He cleared his throat. "But I've never been one to run from pain or bad memories, and I won't start the practice at this late date. Besides, because of this affair, I'm finding it more and more difficult to seriously consider going back to the crowded suburbs and polluted air of New Jersey. I'll stay—that is, if Ken here is finally willing to accept me as his neighbor."

Ken blushed. "I was always so sure that an industrial man like yourself, someone who always has his finger in a lot of pies, would be hell-bent on turning the island into a tourist trap."

"You believe I haven't any such designs?"

"I do now. But I was always so afraid you'd ruin *Distingue*."

"I've not known it long enough to love it like you do," Joe said, "But I'm getting there." He looked

back at Sonya. "I'm willing to accept your resignation and break your contract, but I do wish you'd change your mind about leaving."

"Well—" she began.

He stopped her. "Let me finish. I find you to be one of the most valuable employees I've ever had. You're intelligent, cheerful and amazingly courageous. When a professional bodyguard couldn't protect my children and keep himself alive, you took them under your wing. When you were put into an impossible situation, you performed the impossible solution and saved both yourself and my kids. I owe you all I have."

"If you'd let me get a word in edgewise," she said, a smile on her face, "I'd save you all this embarrassing repetition. I've decided not to leave you, the kids or *Distingue*, after all."

He looked blank, for a moment, then broke into an enormous Irish smile. "What changed your mind?"

"Ken," she said.

He looked at the two of them, smiled and said, "Oh, it's like that, is it, now?"

"It may be," Ken said. "Eventually. Right now, we're just getting to know each other. For the last three days, I've learned a lot from Sonya, more than I thought anyone could teach me now that I'd grown up. She's shown me a brighter side of life, a more pleasant outlook on things than I'd ever known I could have. I've gained—I guess you'd call it perspective."

"And you?" Dougherty said, looking at Sonya. "I still haven't heard what he's said to you that's made you rethink your position."

She said, "I've always avoided people who seemed sober or serious, always opted for friends who were fun-loving and cheerful—and even giddy. I wanted to run from the bad memories associated with *Distingue*, but I also wanted to get away from Leroy Mills' secretiveness which I once thought sinister and now see is only his way. I wanted to get away from Henry's once-a-week grump. Now I see that it's not much to endure that in order to work with him on the days he's himself. I was the opposite of Ken, too eager to experience only the best parts of life, and I too needed balance. I think, from him, I've gotten a little of that."

Dougherty got to his feet and, still beaming, said, "Well, then, may I tell Helen and the kids that you've changed your mind and are going to stay on after all?"

"Please, yes," she said.

When he was gone, they remained seated in the rattan chairs, holding hands, looking out at the palms.

He said, "Ummm, smell the sea."

She sniffed and said, "Isn't it a beautiful day? I still have a sore neck, and I'm stiff in all my joints still, but otherwise it's a perfect day. I've probably had better days, but right now I can't think of them and don't particularly want to."

"Rightly put," he said. "There, look at the sea-gulls playing tag in the sky!"