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TAMARACK

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ABSTRACT

TAMARACK

By

Karen Diane Stevens

This is a third person narrative. It is work of fiction set in the northern lower peninsula of Michigan. Although this is not a history, the flavor and atmosphere of the area are represented through the context of actual events that did occur or could have occurred from the lumbering era at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, to the present.

Four major characters act within this time frame. There are Beatrice Gordon, raised in the lumber camps, who inherits the timber holdings of her father, and Margaret Clarkson, her granddaughter, who in turn claims this legacy. David Marston, a young lawyer, aids Margaret in her search for a missing heir--the fourth actor in the drama. However, this is primarily Margaret's story as she searches not only for a forgotten cousin, but also for her relationship to a land and a past which are her inheritance.

CHAPTER 1

She realized she had been clutching her hands together. She looked at them--intertwined, indistinguishable, the left from the right--with the look one might give an objectionable, knowing stranger. They couldn't belong to her, these thin, pale betrayers. She stuffed them into the pockets of her coat, clenching and un-clenching them to relieve their stiffness. Of course, she had come out quickly and forgotten her gloves, and now, brought suddenly awake by the pain in her hands, she broke her gaze away from the mesmerizing blossom of fire unfolding from where the bell-tower of the courthouse had been and saw her neighbor, Mrs. Dawson, coat carelessly thrown over her long flannel nightgown, and Mr. Dawson, casually lighting his pipe as though he were at a picnic, and Miss Piper, the new shcool teacher, hands clasped under her chin, her face captured by the illuminating blaze in an expression of wonder, almost rapture, and at the edge of the circle, held at the collar by his mother, a small boy was hopping on one foot and then the other, pointing, "Now the bell-tower's gone! See, that one whole side is crumbling! Gee, that smoke goes up for miles and miles!" The whole town, it seemed, had turned out to watch the courthouse burn and was sharply delineated into

those who, like herself, watching, and those black figures limned in red darting in and out with hoses, shouting orders or admonitions, fighting what was surely a hopeless struggle.

The births, deaths, mortgages, deeds, and crimes of the county littered the ruined lawn of the courthouse. Beatrice watched the young man who was the new county clerk breathlessly trying to restore order to the scattered records that had been hastily stuffed into every available box or lifted wholesale in desk drawers or file cabinets. With the building a torch at his back to light his work, he opened and closed files, glanced at this paper and that certificate and supervised the loading of the chaotic jumble onto the flat bed pick-up that Fred Porter had backed onto the grass. A sudden gust of wind lifted a loose pile of documents and shook them like feathers onto the ground. With the tow of his shoe the young clerk captured a loose sheet and then another.

"Poor man," thought Beatrice as he lifted his arms skyward in a gesture of helplessness, "And so young to be so burdened with the saving of all our secrets. Many of us would wish them to be lost forever." She chuckled to herself, drawing a curiously raised eyebrow from the woman at her elbow.

"Well, it's not so funny to us, you know. This county can't afford to replace this courthouse...and all our young men overseas. I don't know what's to laugh at!"

"Oh, hush, Sally, and tell your husband not to worry. Folks here have seen worse. We always find the wherewithal to rebuild."

"Well, no one was hurt and that's a blessing."

Beatrice chuckled again.

"How can you laugh?"

"I'm sorry, Sally, just a private thought. I was hoping they'd lose some land contract records in that mess." Beatrice turned and went back to her house where the shades on her bedroom windows glowed pink till dawn in the reflection of the fire.

She willed herself to sleep, to forget the past burning four blocks away. It was a minor excitement, after all--just wood and papers and expendable, remembered sweat reducing to vapor and ashes as would have happened eventually, in some manner, when she and all the others were gone and the world continued its cycle of destruction and growth, growth and decay without their supervision. The fact that she lay sleepless, or worse yet, stayed to witness the final crumbling of the timbers her father had delivered to the freshly-cleared site fifty years ago would change nothing. The courthouse was built the year before she was born, but it seemed she knew how the tamarack and pine, and some hardwoods for paneling and moldings had been felled and skidded and then lifted to become the beams and rafters or planed into siding and nailed into place with donated time and skill. She knew the smell of the horses and of the new

wood and of the thick, warm varnish. "There," her father would say as they passed a timbered, lumpy field just before the township cemetary, "There is where we got the tamarack for the courthouse." And, "Look there, Beatrice. That clearing on the side of Marlatt Mountain." Beatrice's gaze would follow his nod to the haze of hills in the west. "Maple from that hill went into the paneling in the courtroom...and the railings. That's where Punky Marlatt was killed when a sleigh full of logs slid sideways and then rolled over. The sandboy thought it was his fault, but I always figured Punky braked too hard. That ever happens on one of the hills you're working, Beatrice, you get out of the way...fast. Don't even think. Just scat, you hear? He was just a boy. Seems to me one of the horses had to be shot, too."

She wondered if she should donate the timber from section forty to the new courthouse, not knowing that this time around it would be built of cement blocks and faced in brick and that the basement would always be damp and cool and the courtroom above, hot and stuffy in all seasons.

"Sleep, foolish woman," she told herself, closing her eyes to the fire-tinted windows. "Let the past burn. The future will take care of itself."

Margaret had been dozing. The dolomite slab beneath her was warm in the August sun and after a half-hearted attempt to sketch the clouds over the lake, she had given in to the temptation to stretch out on the pitted grey rock, her face to the sky. She dreamed of walking in the center of the island, through the stand of virgin hardwoods where it was still and hot and she felt the mythical Indian monster, the Windigo, behind her, his breath on her cheek. He was old, creaking like the cedars scraping one another in the wind, and without substance, a pungent, tantalizing whirl of leaf smoke. She knew the Windigo was displaced. He was a night monster and in her dream it was daylight so she was unafraid.

The cedars ringing the island moaned more loudly and she woke to see that the sky had turned grey and the top sheets of her sketch pad were flapping in the wind. Around the curve of jagged shoreline rocks, a man approached her, clumsily jolting along the uneven surface. Later, she told him she had thought for just a moment, that he must have been the Windigo, for he was large and bear-like, with dark, curly hair and darker, animal eyes and was furthermore out of place. He hailed her with a sweep of his arm, nearly stumbling into a crevice.

Sitting cross-legged on the rock, she quickly braided her hair, gathered her drawing materials and rose, waiting. "There's going to be a storm, you know," she called across

the diminishing distance between them. "Did the fishermen bring you?"

He looked beyond to the clouds rapidly piling into black boulders along the horizon and then, blankly, back to the tall, thin woman balanced like a sailor on the overhanging rock. "The fishermen?"

"Did they drop you off on the Northern end? Watch out, you'll get your feet wet." He was just below her, now, where the waves whimsically washed between the slices in the cliff. He scrambled up beside her.

"I came over in an aluminum boat. Tied a line to one of the trees leaning over the water. It was a nice, smooth ride over." He smiled innocently, extending his right hand. "I'm David, David Marston."

Margatet looked at the manicured nails and gave him her own paint-stained, much-neglected hand. "Pleased, I'm sure." She suddenly hoped he hadn't detected any sarcasm. "I'm Margaret Clarkson."

"Yes, I know. I came to see you."

"Oh? Did my office send you?" She noticed a kind of abbreviated attache case tucked under his right armpit. "I knew it! You're Phil's lawyer! He wants the surveyor's compass. I knew it! I get the box repaired, have it mounted, and he wants it. Oh, who cares. He can have it. Tell him he can have it. It doesn't matter."

The man shifted uncomfortably, his glance following hers to the telltale leather case.

Margaret tilted her head to the ominous sky. "Poor Phil. You and I are going to be better friends than you and he are. I'm basically a much nicer person, besides. Don't be alarmed," she laughed, "I meant because of the storm. Look, it's coming from the northeast."

He turned his bear shoulders to where she pointed. "Is that bad?"

"At this time of year? Yes. That's a winter wind. A Nor'easter is bad anytime, though." She tucked a black strand of hair back into her braid. The increasing wind whipped it loose again.

"I understand you're staying in the lighthouse. Can we talk there? There's no reason to glare at me. Wait until you know me better." He tried his most disarming smile. She didn't smile back. "Look. I don't know anyone named Phil, except for a drunk I represent twice a year on a DUIL. I don't know anything about a...what did you call it?"

"Surveyor's compass."

"Right. This is about your grandmother."

"Beatrice?"

"Yes. Beatrice Gordon."

"Oh. Well." Margaret felt her chest echo the low rumble that came out of the northeast sky in a rolling, steady monotone.

"Can we go inside and sit down?" He motioned to the lighthouse.

As though she hadn't heard him, Margaret murmured. "Look how fast this has come up. You tied that boat to a tree? Give me that." She grabbed his case and ran with it and her drawing things to the edge of the lighthouse grounds where a makeshift picnic table would provide temporary shelter. "We'll have to get your boat first." She half-hopped, half-ran back to him, pulling on weathered tennis shoes, then was past him, already skittering along the rocks he had so cautiously navigated just moments before.

"Wait," he shouted, "I thought it was best to leave a boat in the water during a storm. Isn't that what they do in hurricanes?"

"Oh, come on. You leave a ship way out, maybe, anchored. An aluminum boat? It will either smash on the rocks...I mean smash." She hit a fist into her palm. "Or the motor will be stove right through the bottom by morning. Or both!"

She had shown no signs of slowing her progress so he had little choice except to follow, shouting against the wind, "But I'm only going to be here a few hours."

"Fat chance! You ever hear of a three-day blow? Come on!"

The storm moved across the lake toward them: the wind forging the water into battering concrete in a visible line, following the advance of the clouds; and the rain, first dimpling, then inseparable from the curving waves, each

larger than the last. Flapping against them like live things, their clothes strained to follow the wind into the whistling trees. Margaret leapt from rock to rock and David followed, forgetting his clumsiness. There wasn't time to be afraid, or to question. He followed the woman in front of him, her arms outstretched like a tightrope walker's.

They heard the boat before they saw it. Like a Chinese gong it boomed regularly to the rhythm of the waves with an occasional jarring, scraping sound which signaled that it was hitting the rocks and bouncing away, slapping on the water--boom, boom, boom--then smashing against the rocks again.

Stretched beyond themselves, they flew across the rocks, mindlessly entering into the surrounding fury, breathing in its wild strength and growing large and fearless and as savage as the Windigo. Their only purpose seemed always to have been to save things, to resurrect. A term since the fall, a comic wrestling match tag team which functions without words, emitting only grunts and indignations, they lifted the boat, she on the bow line, pulling, he in the water to his chest, groping for a foothold on the slippery rocks, waves breaking over his head, sputtering, waiting for the next wave. Now! Now! Now! Up! Over!

Afterward, with the boat beside them on the rocks, they sat dripping and shivering, laughing the way people do after they have done something foolish and dangerous and are just

beginning to realize just how foolish and dangerous it was. They sat until the cold became stronger than the desire to marvel at the waves, even larger now, and white-tipped, coming at them head-on. Finally they walked back to the lighthouse to light a fire in Margaret's small woodstove, unzipper her single sleeping bag, lay it flat on the bare oak floor and make wordless, uncomplicated love while the Windigo moaned in the cedars.

When Margaret was at the age at which children compare possessions, she had bragged that her father owned "a whole island in Lake Michigan". This was not quite the truth--much of the interior was state-owned--but close enough not to be a complete lie. Everyone was duly impressed. An island suggests sandy beaches, quaint summer homes. Downstate Michiganders get a gleam in their eyes when they hear the words "lake frontage". In fact, the elements that made the island special also made it quite worthless: its inaccessibility, its stubborn terrain, its harsh climate. It was a dolomite formation left behind by the huge glaciers that scooped out the Great Lakes, part of a chain of islands strung out from the tip of the Garden Peninsula of the Upper Peninsula like rags on a kite tail. Separated by four miles of usually choppy water, it was rarely visited. Other islands in the chain had better

harbors for sailboats out of Chicago or Green Bay. The only profit her family would ever realize from it was when the Federal Government paid her grandfather for a small parcel at the south end on which to establish a lighthouse station. Abandoned in the late fifties when most signal systems on the Lakes became automated, the original building still stood, gutted of its generator, wooden cabinets, plumbing facilities and anything else worthwhile. After the death of her grandfather, Margaret's father had intermittently listed the property in the "Detroit News" classified section: "Own your own island! Beau. site N. Lk. Mich, quaint lthouse, 500 acres, dvmt pot., 288-3104 for details.". He hoped that an eccentric millionaire would bite and was rabid when just such a fool paid one million for Little Summer Island further to the north. It was never developed. Too many problems transporting building materials. At the time of his death, the listing began, "Be King of an Island", trading on the reputation of the Mormon James Strang of Beaver Island who actually had himself proclaimed king of the Mormon population in that area where he ruled from 1850 until his assassination in 1856. After her father died, Margaret removed the ad.

Since then, the island had become her retreat--for a weekend, or a week, and now, at the tail end of her divorce, for a full month. One of the commercial fishermen from the mainland had delivered her at the end of July and would pick her up at the end of August. A citizen's band radio was her

only link to the mainland. She had spend her days increasing her portfolio of textile designs. At night she had sat in the uppermost room of the lighthouse watching the lights of the huge ore carriers splitting the darkness between water and sky.

She was used to partitions in her life. Work belonged in one cubicle; her dissolving marriage with Phil was in another. There was a space for thinking--by herself, usually, over long, solitary lunches. With Phil gone, that space had expanded. There was a cubicle reserved for laziness. That was different than thinking. On the island, the partitions began to overlap, and then to disappear. The only divisions became the difference between waking and sleeping, daylight, shadow and darkness, warm days and cool days, wind and calm. On her way north, she had stopped to see her grandmother in Charlevoix. Together they had talked the night down--sitting by a window overlooking the lake, watching the changing light--and Margaret had felt the walls leveling even then. In her grandmother's presence there was the same sense of timelessness she had found on the island. Rather, it was a feeling of time condensed, cantilevered, as though the Indians who had first summered there, drawn north for metal for weapons and ornamentation from the great iron ore and copper formations in the land of the Gitcheegumee, then the European settlers who had established a small fishing village on the same site as the earlier Indian nomads--pieces of blue and white china plates, bone buttons

and charred lines showing the burned foundations of their cabins several layers deep in the earth, the scanty evidence of their presence--and still later the lumbermen who had only partially succeeded in their attempts to log the islands, ultimately foiled by the ice and shifting winds of the capricious lake, and now the commercial fishermen who had formed a cautious symbiosis with their world of wind and water--as though all these spoke at once to her a kind of gentle, drumming lament. Her grandmother's voice had had the same rhythm.

Beatrice's father had been a lumberman, come north a poor man looking for a fortune. Margaret never knew if the story were true, of George offering to trade a jar of sour cream for room and board for he and his wife on the trip north from Ohio. That was in 1885. Margaret liked to imagine the young, hatchet-faced man bartering with some apple-cheeked farmer's wife for a place in the barn, his wife in a kerchief on the wagon beside him. Very likely the story was a fabrication, but it was what Beatrice had told her, and it was a good story.

Beatrice had grown up in the lumber camps. "My boots were always caked with something," she had told Margaret. "I wore boots like the boys wore, the heavy kind that lace up to your calf. There I'd be with my girl's dress trailing in the mud--'pick up your skirts', my mother would holler--and my lumberman's boots. There was always mud. Winter, summer, the same mud came back to plague me. Seems

I spent hours on our doorstep scraping those boots. I could never convince my mother that if I left them to dry it would be easier to clean them. Then I could just whop them on the side of the house and the mud would fall off in big chunks. No, every day it seems I cleaned those boots. Funny how those things stay with you. I still never wear shoes in the house." She had stuck out her feet clad in two unmatched men's socks.

"I liked the horses best. In the winter, even if you couldn't have heard where they were working, with the rattling of chains hitched to the sleighs and the funny swishing sound the runners made on the ice tracks, you knew where they were. Their breath came out in white puffs and a steam rose from their backs and haunches and they smelled like work. I could find my father by following the smell and the little steam engine puffs. Dad was a teamster at first, then a foreman. Then he had his own camps.

I was what they called a 'sandboy'. To slow down the sleds on the hills, I threw dirt on the ice runs just in front of the horses. It was a job usuallly done by a man. You see, you had to throw just the right amount, at just the right intervals, so it took a certain degree of judgment. By the time I was eleven, I was an expert, just like any man. There was a boy opposite me on the track with the same job. That was your great-uncle Larry, the one with the freckles--not a real uncle, you know. The dirt was from a pit dug in the side of the hill. Every night the outer

layer froze solid so we had to break through ground like concrete to the loose stuff below. Every morning it was the first thing we did. We'd fill our buckets, lug them to the track, throw out the dirt in a fine scim and then, dancing a jig in imitation of some lumbermen, silly with liquor, whom we had seen once outside Mowery's Hotel on one of our rare trips into town, we would wait for the horses.

We could hear the horses and my father, who was a teamster at that time, a long way off. 'Steady, steady, Buck,' he'd say. Or he'd 'click, click, click' with his tongue. And sometimes a whip would crack just as they approached the grade. We'd see the logs piled on the sleds first--like some huge pyramid--and then the horses' heads bobbing, nostrils streaming smoke. When they came down the hill, I sometimes wanted to run--it was like a mountain coming right at us--but we had to stay on the edge of the track in case they needed more dirt and be ready to throw it right between the horses' hoofs and the sled. It was frightening, but it was stately, too. There was the mountain of logs and the arch of the horses' necks and my father standing on the front of the sled, his face grim, reins tight. When I was about eight, Queen Victoria died. I saw pictures of her funeral--so grand. Somehow it reminded me of my father and those horses coming down the hill."

"I still don't quite understand," said Margaret. Grandmother Beatrice is dead and you want me to sign some papers."

"To allow the estate proceedings to begin. The bank holds a mortgage on one of your grandmother's properties. They hired me to commence proceedings."

"Commence proceedings...I like the sound of that. Lovely redundancy with sibilance. They can do that? With or without my signature?"

"With or without. It's faster with, so I decided to find you. Faster or not, it's certainly been interesting," he added. He turned his chair so he could watch her and the storm. "Do you get many like this?"

"Two or three a summer. I was once here in November. That was a storm. This comes close to that same intensity, I must admit. Unusual for August. So you're acting for the bank. Does that mean I've inherited alot of debts?"

"Not really. This particular property was insured against her life, but the bank can't collect until the estate is probated."

"I suppose you'll advise me to read everything thoroughly before I sign it? I mean, you are a lawyer."

"If you prefer. Then I can explain anything you don't understand. It's really a very simple formality."

"I don't prefer. Do you have a light? I always misplace my lighter." She tilted her chair back against the wall and swung her legs against the table edge. "That stuff

bores me. I'm sorry. I'm sure it's important." There was a long silence. David arranged some papers on the round table and Margaret smoked. "I saw Beatrice just a month ago. It's hard for me to believe she is gone. Of course she was very old, about then she always seemed old to me. Funny, isn't it?" The chair came down with a thud. "You're sure I'm the only heir?"

"Well, your mother died five years ago?"

"Yes."

"There are no other living children, no living brothers or sisters, husbands, grandchildren, cats or dogs...or will. You're the heir...heiress."

"Yes, heiress." There probably isn't much to inherit, she thought. The little house in Charlevoix, the family house in North Branch, some property. She felt guilty for being curious as to how much she had profited from Beatrice's death. Phil had been heavily insured and she had often thought about what she would do with the money if he had died. Of course, she had considered a quick car accident or a lightning bolt as the cause--something fast and final, no lingering illness that might be accompanied by inconvenience or guilt. It would have been easier than divorcing him. He could have done the honorable thing and gotten himself killed. She assumed hers had been a natural, if cold-blooded fantasy, and it was with a great deal of self-deprecating humor that she had indulged it.

"You're smiling. What are you thinking?"

"Shocking things. Are you insured?"

"Of course, Life, home, car. Oh, and malpractice. Enough to keep me out of jail and to bury me. Why?"

"Nothing. I was just laughing at myself. Suddenly I feel lonely. Not even a dog or cat I can call family." She meant to be flip, but it didn't come out that way and she did in fact, feel alone, no longer quickened by the storm and the tight little vacuum of the lighthouse. The man opposite her crossed his legs, slipped one hand under his armpit and began to tap his spoon on the rim of his coffee cup. "You're a frustrated musician."

"What?" His brown eyes met hers.

"A drummer, maybe."

"Oh, hah! No...just didn't want to intrude on your thoughts...was giving the rain some accompaniment."

The rocks below the window were a strange, glaring white in the diminishing day and Margaret tucked the impression away--white on grey, a study in white on grey, she would call it.

"I had a terrible time trying to find you."

"Really?"

"Your office didn't even know exactly how to get hold of you. All they had was the phone number of the Fairport Grocery. Your secretary said something about a CB radio."

"Yes. Babe, from the store, contacts me if it's an absolute emergency. She didn't call me about you."

"Apparently I'm not an emergency. Besides, I didn't tell her I was coming across.

"You should have. She would have advised you against it."

"It was nice when I left."

"So you said. But the local people here pay attention to weather reports. Their lives are structured around them."

"Margaret."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry no one was able to reach you in time for the funeral. The bank didn't retain me until afterwards. Beatrice had made arrangements for her funeral in advance. Did you know that?"

"I'm not surprised. That would have been like her. I am sorry I didn't know sooner, but it's no one's fault but my own. I chose to be hard to find."

"Well, anyway, when I did locate you, it seemed more considerate to notify you personally. A message via CB radio didn't strike me as proper."

"Thank you. You are a nice person, aren't you...even if you don't know a damn about boats."

"Is that a prerequisite for your regard?"

"Obviously not. Do you understand what happened?"

"I think so. We made love."

"I don't even know you."

"That bothers you?"

"No, but I think it should."

"Margaret, meet David. Come here and let me hold you."

Instead, Margaret gave him her hand and looked at him in the reflection of the window where they both appeared to be floating in smoked glass like double exposure snapshots. "I liked my grandmother. She was certainly different...difficult. She didn't want to be liked, never apologized for anything she had ever done...because she was never wrong, you know. She was one of the most <u>certain</u> people I have ever known. In her presence you were just kind of swept along...with her calling the shots."

"A bit overwhelming."

"Yes...but I liked her."

"Yes."

"It's interesting how much a part of us other people become...and we don't even know it. Don't look so solemn. I'm not going to be saddened by this. All the parts Beatrice gave me were good parts. I'm glad for that...more coffee?"

"No, thanks." He stood and stretched, easing his shoulders in a circular motion. "I used muscles today I didn't know I had. I spend too much time behind a desk."

"Are you from North Branch..or Charlevoix...where is your practice?"

"I'm from Grosse Pointe, originally. Practice in North Branch."

"Oh, a flatlander. How did you land up north?"

"A what?"

"Flatlander. Anyone south of Town Line 16. I can see everyone's been too polite to call you that. Don't look hurt. It's not a swear word. You probably fit in well or you'd have heard it whispered behind your back in the shadowy recesses of the local bar."

"A flatlander, eh?"

"If I ever saw one...why North Branch?"

"My folks had had a cottage there for years. After a while with a Detroit firm, it seemed like a good alternative. I already knew alot of the people. There are only two other lawyers in town. I'm a country boy at heart. What else can I say?"

"You're still a flatlander...unless you were born and raised there...and your grandparents, as well."

"Were you? Born and raised in North Branch?"

"No...but my grandmother...but you must know this...was raised in North Branch. My mother met my father when she was in college. We came up for the summers, just like you."

"Then you're a flatlander, too."

"Not as much as you are. It's a fine distinction. Do you like it?"

"Being a flatlander?"

"You know what I meant."

"I love it. It's so 'small town'. Every one knows everyone else. I go for coffee in the morning to this little restaurant and it's very comfortable to be included

in the discussions about the weather, or bear-baiting, or the new sewer system."

"Doesn't it bother you that everyone knows your business?"

"Why should it? I don't give anyone much that's interesting to talk about. Now that I'm divorced--yes, I'm divorced, too...seems to be the state of the world...I suppose they watch me pretty closely to see whom I take out for a drink. My secretary told me there's always speculation about whose car is in my driveway overnight--that kind of thing. It's not malicious. I suppose it's a kind of entertainment. I can live with it."

"I don't know if I could. At least in a city you can have some privacy."

"And you came here to get away from all that privacy?"

"You're laughing at me." Margaret looked out the window again, searching for the white rocks, now only shadowy hulks in the darkness. "I don't know why I'm here," she thought with irritation. She had always been sure of what she wanted and couldn't explain the restlessness that had seized her in the past year, as though having worked with colors all her life she neeeded to find a new one. She couldn't remember when the colors from her office above the Detroit River had all begun to look the same, and the view of the tugboats working had lost its charm, and everything she sketched seemed to be a re-make of designs she had done years before. She supposed it was when she discovered

Phil's lackadaisical attitude toward infidelity. "You're so small town, Margaret," he had said. She later wondered if she had left him solely because of that statement. That he could reduce the confusion and hurt and anger she had felt to such an asinine, simplistic homoly had left her speechless. With his boundless capacity for putting blame in her corner he had deftly made infidelity her problem, not his, because she couldn't comprehend the concept of casual sex. She couldn't tell him then of how she felt her uniqueness being stripped away, that sense of being special and wonderful to somebody dropping from her like a garment. It was like seeing through adult eyes the image of herself as a child in dress-up clothes--the ball gown nipped in at the waist with one of her father's old ties, mother's old costume jewelry slipping from her narrow wrists, the black straw hat that could have doubled as a wastebasket, all tipsy with its weight of plastic flowers. The child felt beautiful. You could tell by the way she two-stepped in front of the mirror, her smile hiding dreams of her own secret destiny. And Margaret saw that it was all wrong, blowsy and awkward, a ludicrous joke. She wasn't different. She was funny. And here she was--with a man she hardly knew, with whom she had madly coupled after only a cursory introduction--feeling anything but casual. Phil was wrong. Sex was never casual. Nothing that happened between people was casual. You could pretend it didn't matter, but every

human contact left its mark, somewhere, in some secret, unacknowledged place.

"Margaret?"

"Hmmm?"

"What do you do for light around here?"

"Oh. Candles. I'm sorry. I've gotten so used to waiting for the dark to come. Civilized people turn on the lights, still, do they?"

"Even in North Branch. What are those lights...way out there?"

"An ore boat."

"Just one? It looks like two separate ships."

"I know. Have you ever seen one in daylight?"

"No."

"They have a long, flat center section with a big box on either end. The boxy sections are what you see now. I used to wait for the lights on one end to catch up with those in front. You know what?"

"What?"

"They never do. They stay equidistant, divided by that black space between."

"Of course."

"What a sensible response, David."

"You'd like to see them catch up?"

"Yes!"

"But they can't, you know."

"Oh, I know, but I like to imagine them gaining. Perhaps I've been on this island too long. Is there anything happening out in the world more important than lights moving across the horizon?"

"Not really."

"So I thought. Here's the candle."

Something was wrong. It was long after David had fallen asleep beside her, finally resigning his body to the unaccustomed hardness of the floor, that it came to her. Then she wanted to wake him and tell him what it was--the thing she had remembered.

She had been thinking of her grandmother, and then of her mother, also gone, and of her father, angry and bitter in his long dying of cancer when she was twenty. She stretched out her full length, lifted the blanket with her feet and settled them again, the edge of the blanket tucked underneath. When she was in college she had slept like that on a bare matress with just a blanket tucked around her. The clean sheets delivered every Thursday remained neatly folded at the foot of the bunk. She never seemed to have time to make the bed properly and after a while, it didn't matter to her. She preferred the blanket cocoon method. It was a slovenly practice, Phil had said once, returning early

trom an overnight business trip to find her arranged like a mummy on their kingsized bed.

Why would anyone choose to live alone, Margaret wondered, not only alone, but also cut off from everything familiar? Aging people hung on to the familiar, didn't they? Weren't they reluctant to leave their homes, the landscapes with which they were comfortable? North Branch had been Beatrice's home for eighty-three years. She knew every foot of the surrounding county--had owned much of it at one time. Why had she left a place in which she had been a dominant presence--successful in the lumbering industry, shrewd in land transactions, a respected voice in local politics--to spend the last five years of her life in a small cottage in Charlevoix where she had no ties? Of course Beatrice was always an eccentric--long before she became old enough to gracefully qualify for that distinction. Was it eccentricity, then? Did Beatrice blanket-wrap herself--like Margaret--as a protection against vulnerability or to protect her own solitude? She had never wondered before, but now, with the windows rattling in the wind and the cold reaching up through the thin sleeping bag, sneaking under the edges of the blanket which she tucked more snugly around her, she knew there was something wrong. Something was out of place.

Margaret catalogued the relatives--not many on her mother's side. Beatrice had been an only child, and she had had two children of her own--two girls. One had died? Or

had she? The courthouse had burned in 1943 and most of the records had been destroyed. The woman who would have been Margaret's aunt had dropped out of sight at that time. And wasn't there talk of a child? Someone who would be close to Margaret's own age?

Margaret remembered the family albums: brown-tinted old photographs of lumber camps, the men holding a long, almost belligerent, unsmiling pose; her mother at four, sitting on a velvet-draped shelf, legs crossed at the ankles, blue bow and rosy cheeks tinted by hand; pictures of the old town with square wood frame stores and plank walks and horses tied to hitching posts; Beatrice beside her first car. And she remembered all the blank spaces on the black pages where photos had been and had been removed, the white corner attachments still glued in place.

Something was wrong, missing like the pictures, and Margaret, listening to the storm and the man breathing beside her, knew at once that there must be another heir, a woman or a man her age, someone who belonged in those blank album spaces. Suddenly she realized she had always known this.

David pushed aside the hand that was shaking him and turned onto his side. The shaking wouldn't stop. "David, David." Was it morning? There was a place in the middle of

his back permanently fused into a solid complaint. It couldn't be morning. "David! There's someone else. A child. Not a child. Someone my age, or older, now. I just know it!"

"Slow down Margaret. What are you talking about?"

"A child. Another grandchild. Beatrice's grandchild. Born to her daughter, Helen, the wild one Beatrice never, never mentioned."

"Wait, wait. For godssake!" He raised his wrist. "It's five in the morning!"

"So?" Margaret sat back on her heels, laughing.

David stretched and rubbed his hand across the night's growth of beard. The woman was crazy, he concluded. Five o'clock in the goddamned morning and she was laughing, already. He had a strong urge to grab her and pull her down on top of him. She'd struggle a bit, but he'd tumble her under him. She could at least have given him a chance to brush his teeth if she insisted on being so bright this early in the goddamned morning.

"How does one brush one's teeth around here?"

"One goes down to the lake. You have a toothbrush?"

"My finger. Can I borrow some toothpaste?"

"Later. It's too early."

"That's what I was trying to tell you."

"Who cares about teeth. This is important!" She waited for him to respond and then added inconsequentially, "You've got funny feet."

He tucked his feet back under the blanket and glared at her.

"I can't help it. I think all feet are funny. Yours aren't really all that remarkable. I'm sorry. I came on you pretty abruptly."

"You're not making any sense."

"I know, but I've been lying awake for hours thinking about this."

"Do you make coffee this early in the morning?"

"Oh. Of course. That would be nice of me, wouldn't it? Do you want to get dressed? I mean should I leave and come back to make coffee or well...what?"

"Margaret, you're being ridiculous." He closed his eyes and tried to envelope back into warmth and oblivion. "Wake me when the coffee's ready."

"I'm not sure why you want to do this. The inheritance may not be much, but right now, it's legally yours. Why spin your wheels looking for someone who in all likelihood doesn't exist?"

She looked intently into the empty coffee cup, as though it might hold a logical answer. "I don't think I can explain it to you. You'd have to understand my family. I'm not sure I understand it myself, not in words, anyway. It has to do with justice, I think, and a childish anger at

never being told the truth. Did you ever feel--as a child--that there were things--adult things--that you should be told, things that hung out there in a kind of darkness, always threatening, and if you were told what they were--if someone just had enough sense to know how much you needed to know, how much protecting you was really more frightening than your knowing--you could handle it better? Better, in fact, and with a less biased acceptance than those adults who were little more to you than shadows, themselves?"

"This has something to do with finding the phantom grandchild."

"Yes. Oh, yes. Because, you see, Beatrice...I loved her, admired her...but she was a pistol! Grim, unforgiving--a tough lady. She never talked about Helen, the daughter I told you about. She was capable of shutting things completely out of her memory--things she disliked or dissaproved of. And she had so much presence, that no one would ever dare call her to task. But she's dead now. And if Helen did have a child and that child grew up denied, sitting out there in some dissapproving darkness, I want to know!"

"Do you know how difficult it will be to find someone born in 1943? You can't imagine the havoc the courthouse fire caused. There are still problems getting titles cleared."

"Maybe 1943 isn't the right date. I just think it is. The question is, will you help me? I don't quite know where to begin."

"Well, I know where to begin, but I'm not a detective. I always wanted to be a detective. David Marston, P.I...has kind of a ring to it..."

"I think I'm going to like you."

"How fortunate. Now can I go back to sleep?"

"What? We have to be on the watch for shipwrecked sailors. The storm hasn't died down much. I can hardly tell the difference between the water and the sky."

"The water has white tips on it."

"Whitecaps. You're right. How clever of you. You'll probably be the first to detect the sinking ship. Won't you be proud of yourself?"

"Have there been any shipwrecks here?"

"Oh...many. Really."

"Let's sleep for just a little while. We'll hear the men shouting on the rocks, won't we?"

"Perhaps. More likely we'll just find their mangled bodies washed ashore."

"Gruesome."

"Yes...but if you don't want to be ever vigilant..."

"I don't."

"Heartless man! Neither do I."

CHAPTER II

The Indians believed Mackinac Island was formed after the four winds had deposited the first traces of earth on the back of a primeval turtle living in the depths of the lake. According to some legends, its creation marked the beginning of the world. God himself was born there, and the first man and woman rose there from the heart of the sun. Hiawatha is said to have lived in the limestone caverns eaten away by the waves on the eastern shore. The spirit of the Great Turtle still moves ponderously beneath its burden of earth.

It did look like a turtle with its black shell rising out of the late afternoon indigo of Lake Huron. Margaret couldn't tell whether it was facing east eternally greeting the morning, or west, where the sun was now about to spear itself on the middle supports of the Mackinac Bridge. The Grand Hotel spread itself along the southwestern ridge, its long, white porch glowing pink now against the green hill. More squares of burnished white ringed the shoreline or dotted the southern slope like lighted windows. A line of

white stone wall slashed the center of the hillside horizontally. A canon blast from the old fort thundered across the water.

"The governor's on the island," said Margaret. David held his hand to his eyes to focus on the tiny flag flying above the Governor's mansion and nodded.

"Guess it got too hot for him in Lansing."

"It's always too hot in Lansing. Where will we find these clients of yours?"

"Well, with luck, on Dick's boat...with cocktails."

"Oh."

"If they're not there, we'll check all the bars."

"Well, the search could be fun." Margaret leaned forward to watch the prow cut the water into a frothing "V" that leapt away from the boat in two white curls. It made her think of wide-spread legs and penetration. She looked ahead again, fixed on the lighthouse set away from the island on a small rocky mound and turned to grin at David who stood with one foot on the railing, his right hip lightly nudging her left.

"Why the grin?"

"Oh, I just love being on a boat. It's so open. I always feel kind of mixed in with the earth, the sea, the sky." She spread her arms melodramatically, expounding to the audience of waves beyond the railing.

"Two boat trips in one day. You should be on top of the world."

"Oh, yes." She turned to face him, her back to the water, arms on the white railing. "Have you ever noticed that there is always a wind near the water? Even on the stillest of summer days, you'll find, oh, a breeze at the very least."

"I've never thought about it."

"Well, that wind was created by the Great Manitou, especially for all his troubled human children so when they walk along a beach, the wind will sweep all their worries out to the big lakes where the fishes gobble them up."

"Really."

"No. I just made that up, but I'm sure if he'd given it some thought, the Great Manitou would have arranged it."

David drew a line along the hollow of her cheek with his forefinger. "I'll have to remember to walk you along a beach when you're troubled."

She shrugged. "Maybe a fan would work as well. Who knows?"

The benches behind them began to rustle with activity as the ferry neared the dock and the great confusion of "fudgies" gathered their children, extra sweatshirts, bikes and cameras in readiness for the island assault.

Margaret and David had left her retreat early that morning, driven separately to Mackinaw City and boarded a Straits Transit Ferry, The Island Queen. They were to meet one of David's clients who had been staying at the boat marina on Mackinac Island with some friends. This was the

other business he had mentioned to Margaret when he had first met her three days ago, and was his initial excuse to travel north to find her. He had intended to treat the journey as a small vacation. However, he hadn't intended to become stranded on an island during a storm and hoped that his client hadn't suffered from his delay. Whatever trouble he had gotten into couldn't be too urgent, as he had called David on the return leg of a fishing trip in Canada, estimating his arrival on Mackinac four days hence. David suspected the legal matter was a minor one and that Dick's invitation was more social than business oriented. He hoped that was the case. Mackinac Island was the perfect place to begin a romance. Certainly Margaret's island possessed more of the tempestuous elements that sparked moments of passion. David recalled the first night he had spent there with the rain on the roof and the swirling lake applauding an intimacy which neither he nor Margaret had planned...or questioned. Mackinac Island, with its horse-drawn carriages and zig-zagging bikes, the majestic Grand Hotel and curlicued Victorian mansions was a throwback to a quieter era when romance moved at a gentler pace. At least that was the myth that drew thousands of tourists daily. When they left, they invariably took with them a quantity of rich fudge from one of the many candy shops along main street. Thus, in the gradual, insidious manner in which specific viewpoint becomes blanket prejudice, all northern Michigan tourists came to be known as "fudgies".

David and Margaret fell into line behind a family of fudgies, identifiable also by the "smile" buttons they wore on their matching windbreakers--even the youngest, a little girl clinging to her father's shoulders with the aid of a back-pack contraption, sported a big, round, yellow button with a black smile printed on it, its upper edge creasing her plump neck--and crossed the metal gangplank leading from the hold of the ferry to the massive dock. "Don't you just love the Island?" said David, adjusting his shoulder tote and looking for a break in the throng moving down the dock.

Margaret dodged a young bicyclist who had ignored the "Bike-Riding Forbidden on Dock" sign and grabbed David's hand. "I figure it's something you have to go through. Sorry," she added in response to David's quick look. "Culture shock. I've been away from civilization too long. I'd forgotten how wonderful humanity is 'en masse'. My grandmother used to say she loved to see the tourists arrive, spend their money and leave. Love to see'em come; love to see'em go. It's a terribly hypocrytical attitude, perhaps."

"Snobbish, might be a better word."

"Oh, that hurt. You're right. Besides, in spite of the rabble, Mackinac Island does manage to be quite special. If you're with the right person."

"And have you been here before with the right person?"

"Only with church groups and, once, my mother. And a girl friend when I was in college."

"Do you always walk so fast?"

"Yes."

David reflected that Margaret was bringing her wild island with her, right into the jaws of Michigan's best attempt at cultivated nostalgia. Oh, well.

No one was on the cabin cruiser, so Margaret and David walked the marina's T-shaped dock looking for some sign of his friend among the other boaters. It was a gentle time of day, almost dusk, and the lake was still. The only movement of the boats came when a rolling wake from one of the incoming or out-going ferries swept across the bay causing them to nod smugly or bob demurely, depending on size. They passed a man in calico patch trousers squatting in front of a charcoal grill. As he turned his steaks he whistled a little melody in the clear, sweet tones that signal an afficionado of the art. If he's ever down and out, thought Margaret, loses everything, has to sell his boat, he can make his living as a whistler. She wondered about the market for whistling.

A man in red duck pants watched them solemnly from his deck chair and lifted his glass to them with "Good Evening".

Descending a chrome ladder to the lower level of a fifty-foot cruiser at the far end of the dock, a lady in a white pleated skirt and navy silk blouse glanced at Margaret and David idly before giving both hands to the suited man

who had come to assist her. She gave him a look of mild irritation which spoiled her carefully sculpted make-up and continued the descent. Another couple waited for them beside the boat. She turned to them archly and said, "Well, how am I going to get out of here?" and then allowed them to awkwardly tug her onto the pier as the suited man guided from behind, hands on her waist. Once on the steady planks, she adjusted a chain on her bodice and started toward the lights of the town, barely waiting for the others, sweeping indifferently past Margaret and David and the solemn drinker and the whistler and the other parti-colored birds of the marina.

Galley lights began to appear one by one. There was the faint click of cutlery and here and there radio music. Beach towels fluttered desultorily on the steel cable railing of a sailboat where a young girl, bulging around the edges of her blue jean cut-offs was readjusting them precisely with a great deal of bending and leaning. With the increasing darkness, each boat became a vessel not quite capable of containing the privacy which trickled out of its hairline cracks to mingle with the other separate lives temporarily secured by bowlines and thick electrical cords to the wooden link to the mainland.

"They don't appear to be here," said David. "Let's see what's happening on Main Street."

They chose a table in the center near the grand piano and settled into the cool, dim interior of the bar. White light from the streetlight sliced through the open door, a false moon causing Margaret to shift in her seat to avoid its glare. David faced her, his back to the door so that he was outlined in light, a black, faceless shadow until her eyes adjusted to the contrast.

Cane-bottomed chairs clustered around square tables, a dozen or so duplicates of the one her grandmother had once had sitting in the hallway of the house in North Branch. Lining the walls were low settees upholstered in soft golds and above them, pink Victorian sconces glowed like moths.

The pianist had paused, flexing his fingers in his lap and in an attitude of reading, as though his repertoire was posted on the keyboard. "Light Blues" must have flashed. The clear, fluid notes of The Mommas and Pappas' "Monday, Monday" rippled against the noise from the fans.

They hadn't noticed the man to their left on the settee nearest them until he stood to close his briefcase. He was short but his arms and legs appeared unnaturally long, hanging out of a white t-shirt and baggy bermuda shorts as though they didn't belong to him. He thumped his briefcase with a closed fist once, twice to the beat of the music, fumbled his glasses from nose to table top, adjusted his dead cigar amidst his grey beard and began to fling his arms about. Margaret tried not to stare. She glanced at the people scattered around the room who were also trying not to

stare, faces stiff with indecisive smiles, not sure yet whether to be embarrassed or amused by this caricature. The man shuffled from behind the low table in front of the settee brushing his feet toe-heel in a beat to match his arms. He whirled, clapped his hands, snapped his fingers and crab-walked down the narrow strip of open floor. Margaret realized he was dancing.

The music switched to "Scotch and Soda". It was one of the few songs to which she knew all the words and she had an insane urge to stand and sing, to complete the floor show. She and the dancer would form an act, go on the road, bar to bar, creating surprises. The man whirled again, smiled at his accomplishment, arms and legs tossing in a rhythm that matched, but not quite, that of the graceful music.

"Oh, what a spell you've got me in, ooh..."

"What did you say?" David leaned forward out of the shadow.

"Nothing. Just the words of the song. You know. 'Give me lovin', Baby, I-ee fee-ull high'," she sang.

"Don't look at me like that. I'll drag you right back to the boat!"

"What a threat!"

"Don't laugh. Here, give me your hand."

"Back to the boat?" She tilted her chair slightly, pushing away from the table.

"You are silly. I was teasing. Here, your pulse is racing. You okay? Heat get to you?"

"I'm fine. Fine. Should I dance with that man?"

"Shhh...he's coming back."

"To ask me to dance."

"Crazy people should dance together, maybe."

"You're sure you're okay?" He peered closely at her, comically studying her eyes. "The boat ride was too much for you."

She laughed in response. "We haven't been waited on yet."

"Here she is." The dancing man skirted the approaching waitress with a fandango arch and stomp. The waitress pretended he wasn't there.

The music changed to "A Summer Place". She noticed that the piano player was blind and thought it was a shame he couldn't see how the man enjoyed his music. Perhaps she would tell him. What would she say? "There's a man dancing to your music. All alone. It's a kind of tribute."

When was the last time she had felt this way, as if nothing she did could be a wrong move? That centennial summer up North. First the pageant. They had done "Our Town". She was Mrs. Webb. "Walleee...Emileee!" She had called. Had to force herself to let out those long, shrill notes on stage. Then the cocktail party with the Lieutenant Governor present and Phil proud of the little chicken

turnovers and Grandmother's house with Margaret as hostess. Then the "Official" dinner at Thunder Bay Ranch and the drive home.

They had driven through tunnels of trees, slowly, watching for deer. It was the kind of mildly humid late-summer night in which deer like to move. Silver trunked poplars flashed on the curves.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"Taking it off."

"Right here? Now?"

"Why not? No one can see me, can they?"

"What if the Lieutenant Governor drives past?"

"It was probably a boring evening for him. We'll liven it up."

"You looked nice in that."

"Thank you." Her voice lifted on the "you". It was a black, silk dress, ruffled, high-necked, made for the centennial, authentic down to the jet buttons she was struggling with--a school marm dress which had made her feel incongruously elegant.

He braked for a deer which bounded out, paused on the center line and turned to look at them before completing the crossing, white tail flicking disdainfully.

"She saw me. She doesn't approve."

"She's jealous."

She tossed the dress and underthings into the back seat.

"Margaret! At least fold it. You're a real slob, you know?"

"Oh, come on. A free spirit!"

"I like that. I like that! A free spirit!" He laughed and couldn't stop. They both laughed at nothing all the way home.

"That's Chopin!"

"What?" She leaned toward David.

"The music. That's weird. Chopin in a bar. I mean, don't you find that weird?"

"Our man likes it." The man was now seated. Only his disembodied arms moved, swooping in an arc that oddly mimicked the melody.

"Well. They're not here."

"Where to, then?" She would absolutely refuse to gulp her drink. A man in green pants had once told her over dinner that it was a crime to gulp good bourbon. He wore the pants to let everyone know he had a boat in the harbor. Probably wore them in the laundry, she reflected, waited in the bathroom till they were dry. She tried to remember if she had ever seen him without the pants. This year's color seemed to be brick-red. She took a gulp of her drink. "Huh? Where to?"

"Inns of Mackinac. That's where all the single women are. They'll be there."

"Lead on, MacDuff!"

"That's a misquote."

"I know. I like the way it sounds, though. Don't correct me. Lead on, MacDuff."

When they left, the man was dancing again.

The Inns of Mackinac was beyond the main business district at the end of a dimly lit street flanked by somnolent summer homes and St. Anne's Catholic Church and Parrish. The central building hung on a slight rise as part of a larger structure which had once housed the Moral Re-Armament movement, then, later a Christian College and was now a large inn. Little had been done during each transition to soften the dormitory atmosphere of the outbuildings, yet what had once been a convention center and now housed the bar and dining area possessed, if not charm, then a certain fascination. Above the sunken dance floor, the roof rose in a cone of wooden beams. In the very center of the dome was a circular painting of the world. On one side along a wide hallway above this area were ceiling-high murals, remnants of the Moral Re-Armament occupants who had advocated "world-changing through life-changing", under the leadership of the Lutheran evangelist Frank Buchman. The

international fellowship stressed absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. After his death, and when the movement took on the appearance of a business, the absolute purity of motive behind all the unselfishness and love came under an unfortunate cloud of rumor and litigation and Moral Re-Armament retreated from the island beset by financial woes.

From the murals a strange conglomerate of people looked over the dance floor, among them J. Paul Ghetty, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Chiang-Kai-shek, Dag Hammarskjold, Mahatma Gandhi--all had the same hopeful expression. A nimbus of inner, superior wisdom shone from their faces so they seemed not representations of real people, but of saints, lifted beyond themselves by the beauty and glory of self-sacrifice for the multitudes who stretched out to them, expectant that largess of spirit would lift them, too, to the ranks of the enlightened. It was doubtful that the principals of the murals, if, indeed, they even knew of their existence, would have been flattered by inclusion.

David and Margaret missed seeing the murals. They had just ascended the stairs to the terrace entrance when four men and two women lurched out of the double doors. Trailing them were two younger men. "There they are," sighed David. "Whatever has happened, I can get them off on a plea of temporary insanity."

The foremost man had the slightly bowed legs and rolling gait of a sailor. Intensified by drink, his advance

toward them reminded Margaret of a clipper ship in a full gale.

"David, David, David," he cried, grabbing David's shoulder and shaking him, then clapping him soundly on the back. His other arm encircled a sandy-haired woman whom he drew forward. "This is Mary. Isn't that a lovely name? Lovely Mary. Aren't you lovely? I'm Dick...and you're...?

"Margaret."

"Mary, lovely Mary. This is David. David and..."

"Margaret," supplied David.

Mary gave Dick a look of pained indulgence and whispered something to him which made him giggle. "Oh, she's a real party girl. That she is." Mary smirked. "Now this is my friend and my lawyer. Very confidential fellow. Very confidential, aren't ya, David. Shhh," he added comicallly, stumbling a little, finger to his lips.

"Who are they?" asked David, indicating the two younger men.

"Oh, college kids. Don't know them. Kind of joined us inside. Smart asses."

The group headed back toward town, David and Margaret in the lead, the boisterous men and laughing women making a little floating island of noise within the vacuum of silence that hung between the houses. Two of the other men, hands in their pockets were talking earnestly, punctuating their remarks with elbow pokes to the ribs, at which either one or the other would double up with laughter, slightly delaying

the progress of the entire retinue. Behind them, intermittently hampered by their guffaws, a large, heavy floridly handsome man and a healthy blond with broad hips sang "Roll me oh-ver, in the cloh-ver..." After them came the two slight young men in t-shirts with alligators on the left breast. One with glasses kept reaching forward to the blond. His shorter friend simultaneously drew him back, muttering.

"David," whispered Margaret, "Are these men criminals?"

"Of course not. They're just businessmen from Rogers City. They're a bit crazy, is all, just having a good time. Away from the little woman, you know."

"Do you specialize in crazy clients?"

"Well, I hadn't planned it that way."

"Roll me oh-ver, in the cloh-ver," Margaret sang lustily.

"Oh, God, it's catching!" David put his hand over Margaret's mouth and pulled her against him. "How can I kiss a laughing woman?"

"Try."

Behind them a series of dull thuds sounded. The street was suddenly silent except for explosive grunts and an ominous thrashing of bodies against the pavement. The large, singing man and one of the young men who'd been walking behind him were gripped in a furious embrace. They rolled once, twice, then again, elbows flashing. Margaret saw a pair of glasses lying near the curb and ran to

retrieve them. She heard shouting. Lights came on in several houses. Then all the men were grappling, fumbling to pull the two men apart.

A dark stripe of blood shone on the young man's face. "Oh, shit, my nose! You broke my nose!" He sat with knees spread, rocking forward, gingerly feeling his face. "Oh, shit!"

More lights came on. A door opened and someone hollered, "What's going on out there?"

David grabbed Margaret and whirled her in the direction of the marina. The blond woman hung on his other arm. "Get her back to the boat! And this other one, too!" Mary appeared at his elbow. "Fast! The police will be here before we can spit! They don't tolerate this kind of thing here!"

"His glasses."

"Give them to me."

Margaret moved both women onto the sidewalk and began to run, pulling them along by the cloth of their shirts. They had almost reached the entrance to the marina when two policemen on horseback thundered past them. Margaret slowed instantly to an innocent stroll, releasing the women, and glanced back. The street was empty.

"I don't believe it! I just don't believe it!" David leaned against the mahogany railing and continued shaking his head. "What started all this?"

Sitting on the green plastic carpeting covering the after deck, his back against the hull, the large man lifted his head from his knees and said peevishly, "Damn college kid. Obnoxious smartass."

"Stupid, too," said Dick, sliding into place beside him.

"Yeah, stupid, too," echoed a voice from the galley. The two elbow-poking men had stumbled down the galley steps and were feeling their way forward to the v-shaped cushioned sleeping section beneath the bow where they would soon be snoring loudly.

"He was bothering Vicky all night. Kept touching her. Didn't he know better than that? What are kids learning these days?" the large man continued plaintively. "And look at these pants! How can I explain these grass stains to Marge? Did we really have to slide down that bank and hide in the bushes for godssake? I haven't been in the bushes since I was a teenager!"

Dick had wrapped his arms around his ribs. In an agony of laughter and hiccups he panted, "Throw the goddamn things away, Larry! The bushes...oh, the bushes."

David raised his hands in supplication and dropped them heavily to his thighs. Margaret sat on a deck chair which had "The Captain" embroidered across the back. Unaware of

her reaction to a situation he found foolish in the extreme, he avoided looking in her direction. Margaret had quietly escorted the two other women to their boat, also anchored in the marina. It was a thirty-foot cutter which their husbands had obligingly sailed from Port Huron to provide their spouses with a temporary vacation home on Mackinac Island while they returned to the hot city. The husbands were expected back for the weekend. Dick and his friends would be gone by then, leaving the two women with interesting memories which, unfortunately, they could recount only to each other. It is unbearable to have to keep a salacious secret. Forbidden exploits paradoxically demand an audience. For a brief moment, Margaret served that purpose, a circumstantial intimate of the two women who chattered in thrilled undertones about their low-life adventure. In the time it took to walk from one end of the dock to the other, Margaret was treated to anecdotes unraveling the entire evening, from its inception on the dock and Dick's "Welll...we can't let two lovely ladies spend the evening alone", through the hilarious dinner at the Grand Hotel where Larry had wanted to play the cello. ("The quartet was just scandalized. And did you <u>see</u> the look on the waiter's face), to the grand finale of the brawl in the street ("If I'd told Larry what that kid had been saying to me <u>all</u> evening, that fight would have started alot sooner, believe <u>me</u>!"). Their husbands were so "borrrring". And wasn't tonight just "something else". Margaret left

them short of an invitation to morning coffee and ran back to David and the other men, her sandals slapping hollowly on the planks.

She had not been frightened by the fight. Like an old soldier too long from the front, she had welcomed the surge of adrenalin that gave her actions a precise edge. Leading the women back to their boat she had been an acute commander, every nerve alive to detection and circumvention. Now, in the afterglow of the moment, she wondered about herself. On the island, during the storm, the feeling of being sharpened, that illusion of being lifted, driven by something outside herself, yet remaining surely in control, had been the same. Far behind her home in Standish when she was ten there lay the crumbling stone foundation of a bar. Long grass sloped up to the top of the exterior sides. The interior yawned twelve feet below the narrow rim. Broken grass and gravel-scattered the floor. She had been absolutely forbidden to play anywhere near the barn nearly hidden in the evergrown field, but that had been a spur rather than a deterrant and she had spent a considerable portion of one summer crunching along the edge of the wall. Only a few more feet to the corner, don't trip on the jutting steel support, turn, leap over the gaping window space. Counting one, two, three, four she would time herself traversing the square. If she fell to her right, she would tumble into the grass; on her left the gravel wickedly winked in the sunlight. Steadily she increased her

time until she thought she could fly around the foundation and the twelve-foot drop on the one side held not more threat than the green slope on the other.

She knew why the bullfighter entered the ring, why people drove too fast, climbed mountains and hung by their teeth, spinning from slender wires. Very little of it was noble, but you knew you were alive, knew it in every nerve.

She shivered in the damp night air and rubbed her forearms absently. The boats were dark shapes rocking gently in a slow swell. Like muffled oars, the voices of the men in Dick's boat ahead to her left dipped sluggishly into the water.

Certainly the scuffle had been a disgusting, drunken display of male arrogance. She smiled to herself. Life was strange. She was strange.

"I suppose you wonder why I wanted you here," Dick said.

"I was hoping it was purely social, but you did say you thought you might need some legal advice." David crossed to Margaret's chair on board. He leaned toward Dick, elbows on his knees. "You almost needed me to get you out of a Mackinac Island jail."

"Do they have a jail here?"

"I don't know. Maybe they just keel-haul you on the ferries. We almost found out."

"I know, I know. Just listen. You know the bridge, Big Mac..."

"Dick, is this a riddle?"

"Calm down. I'm sorry we embarrassed you in front of your nice, new girl friend. You're a nice girl," he said in Margaret's direction.

"Thank you."

"I'm listening." David clenched his hands together and the big man got to his feet and headed down the companionway.

"I can't stand to think about it. Goodnight."

Dick dismissed him with a curt wave ressembling a salute. "David, I think we're in trouble."

"So, I'm listening."

"You know the toll booth on the bridge. Well, last Monday, the six of us were heading north, you know, to Canada--fishing. We had my wagoneer. Towing Larry's new boat. Beautiful, brand new boat. Borrowed a trailer from my cousin Ron to haul this new boat." He rubbed his hand across his forehead as if to erase the image of Larry's new boat. Well, you know the toll booth."

"I know the toll booth, Dick."

"Yeah. Well, we started out with a couple of six-packs. You know how that is. Drank all the way from Rogers to the bridge. We get to the bridge and Mo--he's

driving--he says...you know how crazy he is...he says, 'How many of you guys vote we go across without paying the toll?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, I voted against it, but it was only me against those other three."

"Oh, no."

"The guy in the toll booth held out his hand, smiling and everything and Mo kind of waved at him and we just kept going."

Margaret put her hand over her mouth, sensing her laughter would not improve David's mood.

"As soon as we'd done it...as soon as we'd done it," he emphasized, "We knew we were in trouble. They always have a state trooper on duty at that information center. Even at night. Did I tell you it was at night? It was at night. So we figured we could lose the cops if we exited right then and went through St. Ignace. So that's what we did. And we raced through all these side streets going ninety miles an hour and suddenly Sam looks back and says, 'Didn't we have a boat?'"

"You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding, David. The boat was gone."

"This is a true story. You're not putting me on?"

"Could I make this up? This is gospel. How can you laugh?"

"I'm sorry, but it sounds like the three stooges...no, the four stooges." David drew his hand downward over his

face, sobering his expression with its advance, then coughed explosively from the effort. Margaret grinned up at the sky. "So what did you do then?"

"What could we do? We tried to retrace where we'd been. We saw where we'd knocked down some mailboxes and a little further on...there was the boat."

"Was it okay?" This, from Margaret.

"Well, from the road, you know, it looked great. Nice new blue paint shining under the street light. Looked like it was leaning against a tree. Larry nearly pissed his pants with relief, you know. Then we walked around the other side. That tree had split it right down the middle!"

"Oh, oh...oh, I'm sorry. I know it's not funny, but..." Margaret covered her mouth, sighed shakily and said, "Then what?"

"Well, after we shut Larry up, we pulled the boat off that damn tree, loaded her on the trailer and went down to my bother's lumberyard."

"Your brother, Joe."

"Yeah. You know Joe. We left the boat and trailer there in the yard. Put a note on Joe's office door saying I'd explain everything when I got back. The boat and trailer are still there."

"And?"

"And then we went fishing. Oh, come on you guys. This is a big problem. Joe said the police have been around the lumberyard all week. They traced the trailer license to my

cousin in Rogers City. Is he mad! We're in deep shit. I mean, how do we get back across the bridge?"

David wiped the corners of his eyes and said sotto voce, "You get this big rubber raft..." Margaret barely caught her chair before it tipped backwards.

"Come on, you're a lawyer, for godssake!"

"Okay, Okay. You'll probably have to pay a fine. Leaving the scene of an accident. Other than the mailboxes, did you damage any other private property?"

"I don't think so."

"I'll talk to the bridge authority. We're not talking about a felony. This is a misdemeanor. Some fines may be involved, but I think I can get you back across the bridge." He sighed. "Can't you keep that crew in line, Dick?"

"I told you, honest to God, I voted against it."

The boat faced the island. From their vantage point on the bow, Margaret and David could see the lights of town and occasional straggler passing through the streetlights and on again into the dark. Voices and music from the bars and swelled and subsided as doors opened and closed. Beneath them were the twin engines of the snoring men, and in the galley, Dick sat on one of the collapsible bunks talking to Larry who grunted in his sleep. Like a cause refusing to die, the night was sputtering into morning.

"Look, it's the dancing man." Margaret pointed to the business district where the row of hotels and stores funneled into the quiet stretch of road beside the wide lawn below the fort. His head was down, hands in his pockets. He was wearing a drooping cloth hat and in the darkness could have been mistaken for any other tourist winding down the evening with a stroll back to his hotel. He walked in the center of the road, his sneakers slinging out loosely from his knees as though kicking at the packed remains of the horses that the street sweepers had missed.

When he reached the yellow circle of the first street light he skipped and whirled, then advanced to the darkness. In the next streetlight he traced the edge of the light on the pavement with one swooping sneaker and then the other. Down the silent avenue he proceeded in this manner so that Margaret and David were treated to a new choreography in each succeeding light. Here he dangled his arms, snapping his fingers; there he cross-stepped; a final flourish of sneakers and he was gone into the lane of trees and houses, playing to an audience of crickets.

Margaret and David both let their breath out slowly. Drawing her knees up to her chin and looking at David through the darkness, Margaret said, "I've always wanted to do that."

"Dance in the streetlights?"

"Maybe that, too," she chuckled. "Goodnight, Mrs. Calabash."

"Yes, Jimmy Durante. I remember that."

"We're showing our age. No, I meant about the bridge. Not paying the toll. Can you imagine the look on the tollmaster's face? I've always wanted to do that."

"Haven't we all."

CHAPTER III

They drove from Gaylord to Charlevoix on M-32, winding in and out of pine stands and cutting through potato farms where the irrigation equipment stood like huge metallic birds in the harvested fields. Opening the house in Charlevoix and looking for any traces, any mention of Helen, in letters or documents, was the first step in finding the heir Margaret was convinced existed. David had checked the death records of Cheonoquet County and had found none naming Helen Gordon or any Helen--assuming she may have married--whose age would have approximated that of Beatrice's daughter. Of course she might have moved to a different county. The most likely possibility, however, was that her death certificate had been destroyed in the fire and re-instating it had not been deemed necessary by Beatrice.

"The wind is really strong. Look at those trees."

"Yes. Did you see that gas station sign? I'll be surprised if it's standing when we come back."

She nodded. The car skidded slightly over a scattering of gold, wet leaves plastered to the pavement. "Be careful. These leaves are more dangerous than ice this time of year."

"Really?" The car slowed imperceptibly. "This car isn't good in the wind. They have problems racing them because of the weird aero-dynamics."

"Oh." The broadside of the car quivered cooperatively.

"Does this make you nervous?"

"Oh, no. Just the opposite." She shifted to face his profile. "I have a friend who's a meteorologist. On the most beautiful, blue days...and we have few of those in Michigan, you know...few enough so that any intelligent person is damned grateful for them...well, on the most beautiful days, he'll look around him in disgust and bemoan the fact that he wants some really good weather. I'm beginning to understand what he means. I think I agree with him. Give me some real, wild weather. This is gorgeous."

"I think you're a bit wild."

"What a wicked grin you have. No," she laughed, "I'm not, but this does something to me, you know. It's as though I'm right on the edge of danger, but I'm still safe. As long as I don't make a foolish mistake, I can cheat nature a little.

"What kind of mistake?"

"Oh, like driving too fast."

He slowed again, reached for her hand and swiftly kissed a knuckle. Around them, hills rose prickly and grey like porcupines, the trees fringed sparsely with the last clinging gold of the sugar maples burning through the rain. Margaret wanted to protest that it was too early for the

trees to lose their leaves and for the tamarack to look like burned and dying evergreens. The September wind threatened to strip the last color before the week-end was over. Soon the hills would be blue in the distance--a deep, wet navy--and then with the snow, a lighter blue-grey with the tips of the hardwoods melting into a misty haze trimming the edges.

Throughout the north country are sagging relics of a difficult struggle. These are the weathered old farmhouses, abandonned shoulders hunched above partially cleared land that still grows a full harvest of stones that will never be gathered to finish the porch or the chimney, or the wall, or even to be dumped around the base of a solitary tree in the middle of the field. The houses are stripped bare of paint and grace until they are only charcoal etchings. Some of these monuments to failure are hidden deep in the woods at the end of trails overgrown with weeds. Some are still in evidence beside the main highways. Each has an accompanying apple tree--often a grove of apple trees--that draws deer on autumn evenings. David and Margaret passed these black houses and other farmhouses that had been remodeled or were in the midst of remodeling. Porches had been braced, wood frames had been replaced by clean-lined, maintenance-free aluminum siding. New black roofs gleamed in the rain. Piles of scrap lumber sat beside the driveways. The recent facelifts resulted from new oil money funneling down to surface owners or to those lucky old residents who had had

enough sense-or stubbornness--to hold on to their mineral rights.

"Charlevoix the Beautiful" is a lovely little vacation town overlooking Lake Michigan. An interesting class system attends the northern migration of tourists and it has to do with location. Generally speaking, the interior attracts campers, hunters, fishermen and power boaters. The coastline draws sailors, golfers and skiers. "Fudgies" can be found in both places. Regardless, there is more money, or at least the appearance of more money on the coast: the housing is more elaborate, the pleasures more expensive, the restaurants better, and the populace more clothes-conscious. Margaret couldn't imagine Charlevoix as a final resting place for her grandmother. Perhaps the view of the lake from the front window of the little yellow house was what had appealed to her. For a woman who had been surrounded by trees all her life, the continuallly changing water may have been a welcome diversion. Otherwise, the area was far too polished for someone who had cussed like a lumberjack.

"Left, now," said Margaret. "It's just before the Belvedere Club. Left again."

The yellow salt box was at the base of a steep grade dropping down from the road. Above and to the right as far as they could see, were elegant Victorian homes, lavish

reminders of the first wealthy summer residents from Chicago whose heirs still paid dues to refurbish the tennis courts belonging to the Belvedere Club. The red geraniums on each porch had financed several local green houses over the decades. Beside them, Beatrice's modest home was a poor, unadorned relation.

"I thought it would look different without Grandmother. I wonder how she felt with those at her back."

David turned and looked at the mansions, then back at the trim little house. They walked to the front and mounted the porch.

"Actually, she probably didn't even notice them, knowing Beatrice," reflected Margaret. "The last time I was here, we sat watching the river. She must have done that much of the time."

"We could almost be back on your island."

"Yes." The wind had grown stronger and the water in the Charlevoix River was thrashing against its banks.

Margaret cupped her hands and looked in one of the front windows. Nothing had been moved: the rocker was still in its place by the window; the fuchsia china lamp, purchased with Holden Gift Stamps still sat on a doily on the round table in the corner, the man and lady painted on its fat belly looking across the room in vapid, pastoral smugness. "Everything looks the same. Dustier. My key fits the back door. Let's go around."

"Do we know what we're looking for?"

"Yes. Papers. Official-looking papers. Documents. Old letters." He watched her curiously. She was moving about the small parlour touching everything, leaving mousetracks in the dust on tables and arms of chairs. "Were you that close to your grandmother?"

"I thought so. I don't know. I doubt if anyone really was." She opened the desk compartment of the ceiling-high secretary and started poking into the cubbyholes. "Did you ever read Nancy Drew?"

"Hardy Boys."

"Well I feel like Nancy Drew."

"I feel like Tom Hardy."

In a sense, it was easy. Beatrice had not been a methodical clerk--or, rather, her filing system defied standard interpretation. However, all her papers were in the secretary. Correspondence of all kinds--bills, letters, even clipped recipes and outdated coupons--had been pigeonholed according to dates of receipt so that moving from section to section was like progressing from one time frame to another. In the lower drawers were old ledger books from defunct companies whose accounts were detailed in Beatrice's neat, square hand. Her life was laid out chronologically like an impressionistic painting. The precision with which the colors were dotted onto the canvas could only be appreciated from a distance where they defined a pattern.

"I could sell this stuff to a research organization or use it myself to write The Rise and Fall of the American Dollar," said Margaret.

"How about Time and the Bills?"

"An American Tragedy?"

"That's been done before."

"Oh?"

Finally they sat on the floor, the contents of the desk surrounding them in toppling mounds of years. "I think I have all the letters. Listen, I think this is the earliest. It's dated 1918. Imagine! She was twenty, then. Right at the end of World War I." Margaret flourished the letter and bent to read.

"Wait!" His tone was urgent. "Don't look so stricken. This is exciting...but unexpected." He fished some documents from the pile in front of him. "Your grandmother owned alot of property?"

"Inherited from her father. But she sold most of it, I thought."

"Did she ever say anything to you...about what to expect from her estate?"

"Goodness, no! What a topic of conversation: 'Grandmother, are you leaving me lots of money? I can hardly wait!' Really, David. Of course I knew there was some land...and this house and the house in North Branch."

"Apparently she did sell a considerable amount. Most of these are land contracts paid off many years ago. There are some deeds to land she kept, too."

"Well, I assumed that. Now, can we get on with the really exciting part?" She gestured with the letter.

"Margaret, she retained the timber and mineral rights on all this land."

"I don't understand."

"You don't understand!" He ran his hand through his hair which remained bristled in seeming agitation.

"Well, I don't. I'm not a lawyer. I'm not supposed to understand!"

"I'm sorry. Don't blaze so."

"Don't say such inane things! Why should I understand? I'm stupid because I don't understand something I'm not equipped to understand?"

"Sit down. Kiss me." Margaret simmered. "Please." She kissed him hard to demonstrate residual anger, tipping over several piles of correspondence in her fervor.

"Thank you. I love enthusiasm in a woman."

"David, will you explain?"

"Of course. You know how you said your grandmother couldn't have left much to you?"

Margaret nodded.

"She sold most of her land, lived in virtual isolation here the last five years of her life?"

Nodding, again.

"Margaret, you own over ten thousand acres of timber and mineral rights. You can lease those rights. In this pile of papers is a small fortune. Now...do you still want to read those letters?"

It was late afternoon. Dust motes hung over the rocker by the window. That never changes, thought Margaret. Women all over the world shove dust from one place to another. In between, it's captured in the sunlight, waiting for the dust god to choreograph a string of descending glissades. Dust must travel, she thought. Dust must--carried by the trade winds, sweeping across the continents in storm clouds, picked up on clothing by travelers in Persia and re-deposited in Iowa. The dust in this room was probably from Australia...yes...definitely Australian dust waltzing Matildas.

"Yes," responded Margaret, "Now, more than ever."

They read the letters and sifted through the other papers by the light of the china lamp then walked to "The Grey Gables" up the hill for dinner. It was a pleasnat stroll into the past. Once a gracious summer home, "The Grey Gables" had lost none of its charm in the conversion to a limited capacity restaurant. White linen tableclothes draped tables of varying shapes and sizes in what had once been the living and dining areas. Margaret and David sat on

the enclosed porch where the cut glass candle holder on their table reflected the flame wavering in a slight draft. Margaret accepted the cold air about her ankles as a small price to pay for authenticity and enjoyed her meal. It was late when they returned to her grandmother's to gather things together and load them into the trunk of David's car. In between the sheets of one of the heavy ledgers she slipped the letters she would read and re-read over the next few months.

"Whose idea was it to come this way?"

David loosened his hands from the wheel and rested his head on the back of the seat. In the illumination of the car lights a screen of grass brushed against the hood. A maple leaf blew onto the windshield and was held fast by the wind and rain. He switched off the lights. "I think we took a vote."

"Like Dick and his buddies."

"Yeah. We should have taken that as an omen."

"What happened with them?"

"Paid a fine. One of the owners of the mailboxes threatened to sue, but settled for having his mailbox restored--personally--by Larry. They had to pay twice when they went back across the bridge. Dick said that was the worst part."

Margaret shook her head. "They were awfully funny."

"I guess. I can't believe I landed in the ditch. You're going to think I'm a terrible driver."

"Can't trust you with a car or boat. Why do I feel safe with you, I wonder? Are you okay?"

"I should be asking you that."

"Well, I'm fine. It's the driver who goes into shock, you know."

"Really?"

"Really."

"It happened so fast...and on a straight stretch of road, too."

"What do we do now, David? Shall we hope the mounties come by?"

"Funny."

"Maybe they'll find our bodies in the spring...in a compromising position, I hope."

"They'll assume we were sharing body heat. Let's check the damage."

Tilted nose down into the ditch, the car seemed ready to dive into a sea of grass. On the right and on the left rose the thick trunks of two maples.

"Thank God we missed those," breathed Margaret. "We could have been split in half like Larry's boat."

"Pure luck. I had absolutely no control."

"Let's pretend it was skill. I'd feel better that way."

They had decided to take an alternate route back to North Branch, following a winding, seldom traveled road that switched from blacktop to gravel without warning. Had they not skidded headlong into the ditch it would have been a lovely drive.

Swearing under his breath, David moved around the car, kicking the wheels and bending down to check the undercarriage.

"Do we wait 'til spring?"

"What would you say to a walk in the rain? Or would you rather stay here and I'll go for help?"

"I love walking in the rain."

The road led straight into a row of trees whose branches joined overhead to shut out the sky. Then it curved downward toward a black void. Midway through this tunnel they came upon a wooden sign twisting in the wind which pointed to a narrow, dirt trail. David leaned close to its rough-sawn surface. "I don't believe it! I know where we are!"

"That's comforting."

"I knew it was around here someplace."

"What?"

"A hunting club. I know one of the members."

"Does this mean we're rescued?" Margaret hugged her shoulders and shivered beside him.

"You're cold."

"Wet."

"I'll carry you." He lifted her before she could protest and held her tightly against his damp jacket.

"David! This is silly!"

"Just until you're warm again."

"I won't get very warm this way. You're wet, too."

"It makes me feel as though I'm doing something, though. I'm sorry about this mess."

"It's all right. Put me down."

He settled her down abruptly and strode ahead into the dark.

"Would you really feel better if you carried me?" Margaret called after him.

"I said I would."

"Well, don't leave me here alone..."

"I didn't mean to...I just feel foolish."

"Come here, you big brute. Carry me to safety."

They lurched awkwardly down the rutted path. Margaret started to laugh and David, too, until it became impossible for him to carry her further. Finally they compromised and walked hand in hand down the center grassy hump.

"Well, well...is this one of the dancing girls?"

Margaret resisted the urge to close the top button of her blouse as the man advanced, floating through the smokey room like a fog-beleaguered ferry. Four cigar-decorated

heads at the table from which he had risen turned toward her, squinting with gargoyle curiousity. David stood scowling in the doorway at her back.

"Of course." She raised her arms. "Do you waltz?" They fumbled into a clumsy jog which landed Margaret unharmoniously against all of the scattered chairs and finally the heavy oak table of the lodge's kitchen area. His wool shirt smelled of cigars and English Leather.

It was euphemistically called "The Doctor's Club", David said. Probably because the original members were local doctors. However, the building had none of the presence of the professional, polished, well-heeled, tasteful, if leisurely country club atmosphere which the name evoked. The low-slung brown frame building had little charm. It was simply a large old cottage modified to the needs of twenty-six members who used it occasionally either singly or en masse as a hunting lodge, gambling retreat or blind pig. Tonight it was full of smoking, gambling and drinking men in L. L. Bean shirts.

David stepped into the room, hand out-stretched, "Good evening, Judge. Margaret, this is Judge Starling."

"Why David...howthehell are you? You decided to come after all."

"Actually, I forgot this was the night for the pig roast."

"There's still some left. Hey," he called back to the smoky room, "Can we get some plates for these folks here?"

"Thank you, no," interrupted Margaret, "We had some trouble on the road..."

"Skidded into the ditch about a mile back..."

"On our way back from Charlevoix..."

"Is there a phone here?"

"Have a drink first. Hey, let's get these folks some drinks." Another man emerged from the central room and walked over to the bottles littering the kitchen counter. "Say...you're all wet! Come on in and sit down. I've got a jeep. We'll get you out." He put an arm around each of them and they shuffled into the fog. "You know everyone, I think, David."

"Sure." David grinned and shook hands all around. "Hello, Sheriff, nice to see you too...Richard...Margaret, this is our State Representative...Saul! You sonofagun. Long time."

Margaret smiled and tried unsuccessflly to put her tangled hair in some order. She settled into a chair in front of a round table where a bourbon and water appeared at her elbow. David, Judge Starling and the bearded man David had introduced as Richard left her to watch the card game while they drove to the beached car in the Judge's jeep. When they returned, she was paying on twenty from her dealer's Black Jack hand, and had already paid back the quarters loaned her by Saul.

"That's a morning job," pronounced the judge, dropping heavily onto a sagging frieze sofa.

"He's right." David clasped her shoulder possessively and looked at her cards.

"We've got plenty of beds here." The judge gestured vaguely in the direction of the ceiling and Margaret noticed a narrow stairway on one side of the room leading to what appeared to be an attic. "It won't be too private," he winked at David, "but its dry. Do we have some extra blankets?"

"Always have extra blankets," said Richard coming from the kitchen with a full drink.

"Then you're all set!" The judge slapped open palms on his thighs and rose. "Bathroom's around this corner. Not very fancy. Not even very clean." Everyone laughed as he continued to the room in question.

Margaret slept on the top bunk, David on the bottom bunk in the corner of the cavernous attic. "David," she whispered, are you still awake?"

A hand appeared at the edge of the mattress and groped for her leg. She leaned over and searched for his face. "I can't sleep. I keep thinking about those letters."

"Me, too."

"I wonder if that Dr. Bunting is still alive."

"Oh, I think so. He must have been a young man in 1943. I dealt with him on an abuse case...oh...two years ago. He works out of the clinic in Alpena. Founded it, I think. Good old family doctor. I'm sure he's still around."

"All the blood is rushing to my head."

"Come down here."

"Do you think I should?"

"Everyone's asleep." Snores rumbled from the other end of the room. She slung her legs over the side of the bed, slid down and crawled in beside him.

"You're naked!"

"Aren't you?"

"Are you kidding? With all these men? I hesitated about taking my watch off!"

A low laugh came from his throat.

"Shhh..."

"I can't help it. Do you want me to call Dr. Bunting?"

"Not right now, but yes...soon. I suppose you have other work to do..."

"I always have work to do. I have clients dripping out of the electrical sockets, whining out of the telephone to remind me of all the work I have to do. I think I deserve some time with a non-client to remind me there's a real world out there."

"I'm not a client?"

"You'll need a lawyer, I expect. Especially after what we found today. And if you want me to do the paperwork for you, let me know. And I'll call Dr. Bunting and set up an appointment. But let's wait awhile before you put me on the payroll. I can't get involved with a client."

"No?"

"Very bad practice."

"And when you made love to me on the island...was that a...let me see...a conflict of interest?"

"Ah. No." His voice took on a judicial tone. "As soon as I found you and you signed the waiver and consent forms, my responsibility to the bank was over."

"We made love before I signed anything."

"A small technicality. Well, it was a slim rationalization, at best. I did worry about that. I said, 'David, this is a conflict of interest.'"

"And then?"

"I said, 'What the hell, one more mistake in my life can't make that much difference.'"

"Am I a mistake?"

"You don't feel like a mistake. It feels right to play Frank Hardy to your Nancy Drew. I wonder it he made love to her."

"To Nancy Drew? That's blasphemy!"

"I know. I felt terrible when I said it."

CHAPTER IV

North Branch is like many northern Michigan towns. A child of the lumbering industry, it is situated on a river which in the early days served to transport the logs to market. Railroads brought more flexibility, but the fast-flowing rivers were initially essential. The settlement flourished for a brief time in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the kind of free-wheeling, rambunctious manner we Americans associate with the old west. We forget that all the wilderness areas similarly progressed from saloons to churches. They were all the "West".

At one time the lumbermen had their choice of seven gin mills in North Branch. A house of prostitution offered other comforts. There is one recorded murder from those times. Jake Harkness shot Harley James, the owner of Seven Acres Bar when he was refused another drink and asked to leave the premises. Harley did not die. That wasn't the murder. Harley's wife, Isabelle, baking pies to be delivered the next day to Camp Fifteen, entered from the kitchen behind the bar, leveled a rifle at the retreating Jake and cured him permanently of his bad humor. Poor Jake, a quiet man except on Saturday nights.

When the major companies pulled out of the area, the town drew its sprawled, wanton limbs into a fetal position, rolled up like a porcupine to wait out the long hibernation until prosperity struck again. It never came. Instead, like the luckier of the towns in which Pine was King, it cautiously extended one talon and then another to slowly limp along into the twenties and thirties. Occasionally, spurts of activity--the growing tourist industry, for example--brought refinements and renewed enthusiasm, but it would never again have the bustling, raucous energy of the rag-tag lumbermen roaming its streets.

Beatrice was a child when the first sidewalks were poured, sidewalks still in existence, in fact. She had watched them pulling up the old wooden slat sidewalks and along with the other children, was allowed to look for coins which had slipped through to the dusty dirt beneath. The foreman and crew watched, smoking and sweating silently under the red maple in Mowery's yard that was felled the following year to make way for telephone poles.

North Branch was one of three communities in Cheonoquet County. Pleasant Valley lay to its east, Marion to its West. When the territory separated from Alpena County in 1881, the three towns vied for recognition as the County Seat. The State Legislature had named Pleasant Valley. An 1887 vote to move the seat to more centralized North Branch was defeated. A second vote in 1893 established North Branch as the place of county government, but Pleasant

Valley refused to relinquish the records. They were finally retrieved, in the dead of night, from the private home in which they had been concealed. A vote favoring Marion the following year was ruled invalid by the Board of Canvassers who discovered irregularities in the tallying procedures. Apparently no theft was necessary this time and the records were peaceably, if disagreeably returned to North Branch where a courthouse was already under construction. No one was named in any of these questionable activities, but no one forgot; the rivalry between the three communities continued, to be transferred finally and irrevocably to the athletic fields. Football, basketball, and baseball became the seat of final arbitration. When the courthouse burned in 1942, speculation as to its origin fanned the flames, but the number of possible arsonists canceled out the probability that any one of them had actually lit the match. There were too many motives and no evidence. But every disaster brings some benefits. Gossip thrived in all three communities. Even today, there are some old ducks who say they know who started the fire and are waiting only until "certain people" die before they will speak out and solve the mystery. Hopefully, that time will never come. An expose cuts off all possibility for supposition. Supposition is lots more fun.

In the early morning hours Margaret would awaken and walk about the house. She thought at first it was the silence that woke her. When the three bars closed at 2:30 and the town lay cool and hollow below her bedroom window, she thought it must be the absence of activity that interrupted her dreams and took her from room to room, touching the furniture. The previous week Jack, the oldest Beckett boy, had picked up an open-ended oil drum stamped "Deposit Litter Here We Care About North Branch" and hurled it through the plate glass window of Thom's Pizza Parlor across the street. She had missed all the excitement, but had awakened in the aftermath and seen the gaping hole and the scattered glass fragments on the sidewalk. When she heard later that Jack Beckett had been the culprit, she had not been surprised. Everyone knew about the fued between the Beckett's and the Thom's, though the reasons for it changed from season to season.

On Summer Island, she had slept soundly, the water and the wind singing just below her consciousness. In Ann Arbor, in the first small apartment she and Phil had rented, a basement apartment with layers and layers of noisy college students above, Phil had told her she slept like one drugged. It was conditioning, she decided. Then she remembered that as a child visiting her grandmother in this house during the summers, she had done the same thing--threaded through the shadowy house, past her parents' room, past her grandmother's room where once she had seen

through the open door her grandmother's amazing long hair released from its braid, spread across the white pillow, grey on white.

Margaret had opened the house, as she had done everything the past year, on a whim. Unlike many pieces of her childhood, this one place had not changed. It still stood looking out at the world throught the fringed lashes of the two trees balancing its residential island between the hardware store on one side and the drug store on the other, and she decided that if there was any place she belonged then it must be here. One reconnaissance voyage to Summer Island and another to Detroit for her belongings were sufficient to establish residency. She arranged to do some free-lance work for an advertising firm whose vice-president had been a friend of her ex-husband's, delivered the last of her designs to her own agency and promised more, talked to the gallery in Ann Arbor that handled her paintings and moved into her grandmother's house. It wasn't strictly legal, but there was, as yet, no one to object to her claim. If Margaret found another heir, she was prepared to bargain for the house, or perhaps, by then, she would have found another place to belong. She didn't really think about it. She just moved in.

There was a small cubby hole of a room leading off her bedroom. It was half an octagon with high latticed windows that faced east, south and west. Hanging on the upper story of the old house like a comic monocle it gave the impression of leading a charmed life, always precariously poised, yet miraculously remaining in place. Like many of the closed pockets in the house, it was too hot in the summer, too cold in the winter. Beatrice had insisted on closing it off--"wasted space", she called it. "With all those angles, how can a person even fit a decent piece of furniture in there? And all those windows to clean!" she'd despair. So it met the fate of three out of the four rooms in the upper story, shut up to accumulate dust and that musty smell peculiar to disuse which suggests not the unapologetic odor of decaying humus, but the somehow shameful mildew of age that clings to worn linoleum.

The room, with its abundance of natural light, made a perfect studio. Margaret began to rediscover the countryside she had known as a child, and the discovery led her back to the little light-filled room and to painting.

"What's that?"

"Nothing, yet. It's going to be that line of blue hills over there." Beyond a series of low fields the land billowed into dark swells. Margaret and David were taking

advantage of the lingering October warmth to squeeze out one more picnic at an old lumbering site. Margaret sliced off a thread of alizarine crimson with the edge of her palette knife, smeared it into a dab of blue and frowned. She added more crimson and the blue took on a slightly purple cast. She brushed this onto the canvas.

"You put it on like that? Just solid?"

"To begin with. The darker, furthest color goes on first. Then you work forward, getting lighter and lighter. Highlights come last. That's how you give the illusion of depth, perspective."

"Sounds simple."

"It is. Making it look like hills and trees...that's a different trick."

"Technique, you mean."

"Of course. Technique. We artists are just full of technique. And tricks."

"I'm disillusioned. You aren't in agony, either. You're supposed to be prostrate with creative agony."

"I am. I am. I just hide it well. I'm really seething inside, brimming with creative energy."

As a rule, Margaret disliked landscapes. With the exception of the Masters like Turner and Constable, or El Greco, Wyeth and the French Impressionists, she found them either simple imitations of nature or blurred attempts at sentiment. The Masters were fine. Amateur renderings--those she disliked. Pictures just to look at.

And there were plenty of those around. She felt amateurish herself when she did a landscape. Furthermore, you had to be very careful with texture in a landscape when Margaret's inclination was to liberally score a canvas with color so you felt you could wade through it. Perhaps she could do that, make it seem that one could enter the forest on the hill that looked like a blob of purple, separate the solid color into individual trunks and limbs, see the light filtering through the dark mass, be inside and outside at once. She sighed. "I don't like landscapes."

"Then why are you doing this?" David rose impatiently. "Is that the railroad grade?"

"Yes. Don't get lost."

"How can I get lost? I'll just follow the grade."

"You'd be surprised. It drops away into the swamp and then everything looks the same."

"Okay. I'll get lost while you sit here and do something you hate."

"I don't hate it. I'm just not good at it! I lack any particular vision."

"I thought all artists had 'vision'." He rose and headed down the slope toward an open field.

"So I'm not an artist."

"Of course you are. Don't you get paid for what you do?"

"That's not the same!" She looked around for something to hurl at him. Brushes and paints were too expensive to

waste on temper. She flung a handful of dry grass into the wind where it drifted back futilely onto her sweater sleeve. A piece stuck to the wet oil on the canvas. "Oh, phooey!"

Margaret leaned on her elbows and watched David's receding back. Between her outstretched legs the portable easel and canvas glared impersonally in the October light. She looked at the blue-purple streak on the canvas and at the blue-purple hills beyond and at the black-green pines in front of them and the brown, gold, red and auburn maple and birch and oak and poplar in front of them and the tamarack with golden quills, and tried to imagine the layers on canvas moving closer and closer.

When the leaves of the hardwoods had settled, the Tamarack would remain as the last hold-outs against the encroaching winter shadows. Indistinguishable against the other greenery till this last moment of autumn, the only evergreen to lose its needles now hung out fairy fingers. In the deepest green of summer and in the black bark of winter it was a masculine tree. In the burnished fall and bright young green of spring it was the maiden of the northern forest--delicate, spritelike, ellusive, fleeting.

When Margaret was a small child, she had gone with her grandmother Beatrice in search of the site of one of the old lumber camps that her great grandfather had run. In the region of the Black Swamp northwest of North Branch they drove on a narrow dirt road until they could go no further with the old pick-up, and then walked through the spongy,

matted grass of late April through a stand of trees and into a bleak field, through more trees and into another, larger field until they came to a long, regular ridge that looked to Margaret like the work of an enormous mole. "The railroad grade," Beatrice had said with satisfaction. "The sawmill was there; this was the cross-haul; here they loaded the logs with a jammer; over there--the pay shack." Her pale hands and wrists, like escaping birds, had jutted out of the red hunting jacket.

Margaret had tried to see the pay shack and the sawmill and the steam jammer, but the empty silence of the field and her grandmother's pointing fingers and her own boggy shoes were too real. And, too, it seemed to her that Beatrice's vision was so intense that if she, Margaret, really tried to imagine the camp, that their combined thoughts would result in a kind of exhortation and the field would erupt with the ghostly activity of suspendered men and machinery with visible gears grinding out the smell of freshly-sawn wood onto the heavy spring air.

They had walked the railroad grade into the trees, Beatrice taking long strides and Margaret scrabbling alongside in her wet shoes; and Beatrice had talked all the time about where there would be wild strawberries and fiddle ferns and Jack-in-the-Pulpits, and triliums and morels, maybe, if the careless downstate sons-a-bitches hadn't cleaned them out the year before and left no spores behind. And she talked to the tamarack as though they were people,

saying, "Wake up. Dont't you know it's April? Let's see some green! Wake up, you lazy bones!"

Margaret, listening wide-eyed, felt herself tremble with the trees and had whispered," Wake up, wake up, you old lazy bones. Wake up. Wake up," till thr green seemed a powerful frothe within the black branches, churning and aching in her, too, impatient to burst into lacy, newest color.

Then, ploughing back across the lumber camp clearing beside Beatrice, now muttering, "Catch our death ot cold. Look at your wet feet, Meg. Lord, your mother will shoot me!" Margaret had squeezed her eyes shut and felt without fear the pounding of the old dead engines, seen the men, arms raised, palms out, "Stop!"

"I didn't get lost."

"So you didn't. You're a real woodsman."

"You did all that while I was gone?"

"Technique. Once you know the technique the rest is easy." She grinned. "It's not finished, of course."

"Well, I like it. So far, anyway. It's pretty."

"Pretty!"

"Well, what should I say? 'I don't know much about art but I know what I like?' I thought you said you weren't good at landscapes."

"I'm not, but this one might be okay." Margaret wiped her brushes and started putting them into her case.

"What's this going to be." He pointed to a blank oval space to the right of the canvas.

"People walking the grade."

"Me?"

"Sorry. A little girl and an old woman."

"That's our dancer." Margaret ran the wooden tip of a brush lightly along the sketched lines of a slightly crooked tree trunk.

"It's a tree, Margaret."

"Well, yes...a tamarack. But don't you think it looks a bit like our dancer?"

"Hmmm. I guess. Looks more like a tree."

When Beatrice had moved to the smaller house in Charlevoix, she had taken some of the furniture, sold much of the rest, leaving only the fading wallpaper and mirrored mantel as evidence of her Victorian taste. Margaret had always found it strange that her grandmother, who could most often be found wearing high-top boots, surrounded herself with lace antimacassars and Waterford, stranger yet, that she had left the big old house on Main Street for a quaint, but nevertheless drafty, box of a house. Margaret wondered about that as she wandered through the near empty house at

night. Her own things were spare-lined--Shaker antiques, an old hand-hewn sideboard, an oak rocker, brass lamps--an eclectic montage that gave her pleasure in their contrast to the ornate mantel and rose-strewn walls that she would recover some day.

She wondered if she was lonely. Of course David was there. His steady pressuring for a commitment beyond sleeping together was not unwelcome. She looked forward to seeing him each day. Often they shared dinner in his tiny kitchen behind his law office, or in her own rambling country kitchen where they talked of repairing the cupboard doors which sagged clumsily. At five o'clock they would go to happy hour, when drinks were half price at the North Branch Hotel, a block from David's office. Margaret would sit studying the wall-sized paintings by Jim Foote--forest scenes of deer and elk and of a solitary fly fisherman barely distrubing the wildlife absently acknowledging his presence. Along the back wall of the bar, logging tools were hung on barn-board paneling: skidding tongs; a long, hooked "canary", a cant hook, a broad axe that looked as though it had belonged to a medieval warrior. "Your grandmother donated the cross-cut saw," said the owner, a black-haired little woman who served them with quick, fussy motions.

And old friends stopped by--white-haired and effusive contemporaries of her grandmother who were delighted to see a Gordon back in the old house, and friends of her mother

who talked of their own children and the colleges they had attended and where they were now and how Margaret had probably played with them during her summer vacations, and yes, she had. She remembered them and the mothers were pleased.

She decided she was not lonely, but she walked through the house at night, wondering about secrets.

There had been alot of secrets in her family. No mysteries, but things that were just never openly discussed. There was the secret about an Indian ancestor who must have been Beatrice's mother--Margaret was never sure. She had once seen an old picture of an Indian woman standing beside an asymmetrical log cabin in the middle of nowhere. On the back had been written "Sarah". When Margaret had found it loose in the black pages of one of the tattered family albums, her mother had said, "I wondered where that had gotten to," and slipped it into her dress pocket. Margaret had never seen it again.

Then there was the secret about Uncle Larry who wasn't really an uncle but who had lived with her grandmother's family from infancy to age twelve, and had appeared, according to Beatrice, "like a freshly-peeled egg", on their doorstep. At twelve he had run away, but apparently without hard feelings because every year thereafter he had sent a Christmas card to "The George Askew Family", then to "Mrs. Beatrice Gordon and Family" until his assumed death in 1964. No one ever saw him again after his initial disappearance,

but Beatrice said she'd recognize him anywhere. "You can't get rid of freckles," she'd say.

Of course no one ever spoke of Beatrice's other daughter, Helen, who would have been Margaret's aunt and had been beautiful and wild, with straight black hair and startling blue eyes. Margaret had been told she looked like her. It had never been phrased as a compliment.

On her father's side was Uncle Rollo who had alot of money and who had walked into the Black Swamp one night and never come back. Some said his gimlet -eyed wife had done him in; others thought he'd run off to avoid asking her permission to leave. Still others said he had left a note for his mother saying "Don't worry, I am all right".

Margaret had never known any of these people. From the patchwork of old photos and snatches of adult conversation she constructed a crazy-quilt family mythology. Uncle Rollo, for example, alternately peered at her with disembodied eyes from the forest behind her house, or rollicked in San Francisco or Las Vegas, an overflowing blond on each arm, laughing at the memory of his embittered wife thrashing broom-like through the swamp in search of him.

As she grew older and more acceptable as a repository for adult gossip, most of the pieces fell into a pattern. In many cases, Margaret found she preferred the more outlandish creations of her childhood to the real facts. Sarah, of the photo, had been an embarassment to her

offspring who kept her virtually locked away during her senior years, denying her presence, her "Indianness" even to themselves. Perhaps it was understandable that they sought to eradicate this evidence of their own racial mixture during a time when Indians were still considered savages, but Margaret, an enlightened child of the sixties, felt their denial an outrage and for a time sported fringed leather over blue jeans and moccasins and beaded headbands to Grandmother Beatrice's and her own mother's horror, in affirmation of her roots and as what she hoped was retribution for Sarah.

Rollo, it turned out, had not only left his wife, but a number of capriciously begotten little Rollo's. It all became quite confusing when they grew up and one of them fell in love with Rollo's legitimate daughter. Margaret's mother was scandalized. Margaret was amused by the irony and continued to think of Rollo as a lovable scoundrel.

Uncle Larry had left in search of his real parents and ended up selling real estate in Duluth, Minnesota. Not a very glamorous denouement as far as Margaret was concerned. She would rather have had him ride the rails for a while, perhaps pick oranges in Florida and pan for gold in California before becoming a famous author. Ordinary people sold real estate.

There was one puzzle that was never solved, though. Beatrice's daughter, Helen, was never discussed within the family. Margaret had heard her obliquely referred to by one

of the local gossips as "that girl of Beatrice's who got herself in trouble". And another time, the same woman claimed Helen had died in childbirth and her baby with her. The woman, Sally Dawson, always spoke with the authority of the intimately informed so Margaret easily accepted her chatter with a grain of salt. Sally had nothing good to say about anyone. If there hadn't been people in her vicinity who were real or imagined reprobates, fornicators, wife-beaters, arsonists, or just generally miserable, she would have led an extremely dull and unhappy life. Still, on the subject of Helen, Margaret had listened to Sally eagerly, and as she grew older, the image of the ill-fated daughter had stayed with her.

So, in the the autumn after her grandmother's death, Margaret walked through the house at night. Sometimes she re-read the letters they had found in the Charlevoix cottage--not turning on a light, but standing near one of the front windows, reading in the blue light from the street and wondering about the secrets.

CHAPTER V

April 30, 1918

France

Dear Bea,

At mail call today I got five letters--all from you. Perhaps that is the best thing about this. After months of no mail you get a real bonanza. The months in-between are hard, though. Sometimes I feel so isolated from everything that is warm and alive and real--as though I'm moving about in a vacuum. Someone says "Go here, do this," and I do it, but it is like watching someone else using my body. Then our life together, home, you, even clean sheets, seem like an incredible dream. I try to convince myself that the craziness here is not the reality. The picture of you on the porch swing in front of that wonderful, ordinary house was almost a shock. There you are, looking beautiful and serene and whole, shining out at me with such hope, such life. It is as though you are saying "These things still exist, Paul". Wear that dress for me when I come back and we'll have our picture taken together on that very spot.

I wish I could tell you more about what is happening here. I can say that we seem to be a welcome sight to the civilian population. The reports you heard about our initial march through Paris were not exaggerated. Even in the smallest villages we look like a traveling flower garden, with all the flowers tossed to us from shop windows. Children run right up to us, chattering and imitating us, playing at being "doughboys". Once I swung a small boy up onto my shoulder, and he waved and cheered while I marched along as though it was the most commonplace thing to do, and the crowd began singing "Le Marsailles". At that moment I really felt as though we might be the saviours half the world expects us to be. I hope so. One has only to see the weary horror written on the faces of the seasoned French and British troops to know that this war cannot last much longer if civilization the way we know it is to survive. You know how I felt about this war. Remember the nights at Carol's apartment when Elton and I would rail on and on about the futility of getting embroiled in Europe's petty quarrels, and then as the war continued, about protecting American trade? Such wasted words, words, words. The reasons don't matter any more. There can be no reason for the terrible price I see paid day after day. But there has to be an end. I don't believe in anything but that. And soon. I don't think anything will ever be quite the same again.

I meant for this to be a cheerful letter. Forgive me for rambling. I started by telling you how I feel cut off

from this madness much of the time. I had a strange experience the last time we were under fire. I was so afraid--yes, I can admit that to you and you will understand. We are all afraid, all the time. It is like being forced to live with someone you first despise intensely and then grow to accept. Fear keeps us alive. I was afraid and then I thought you were there, just about to touch me on the shoulder. So close. Perhaps you are my guardian angel. Perhaps there is something to believe in.

I look at the picture you sent and imagine myself on the sidewalk leading to your front steps, you smiling, rising to meet me. I miss you so, my dearest Bea.

Love,

Paul

"Beatrice. Beatrice! The mail ready? Snap to! Harley's leavin' now for town. Ah. So you've got it all together. Right on top of things ain't ya. That's my girl."

Beatrice slipped the well-creased letter back into her skirt pocket as George tossed the neatly tied bundle she had handed him to a short, wiry man whose red muffler was only a slightly darker shade than his face. "Lose this and it's your job, Mulholland. Can't abide carelessness." Poor

Harley had lost a mail delivery one winter five years before when his horse had shied and both of them had rolled into the river. George had never let him forget that appocrophal mishap.

"Wait. Bea. Did you get that bid in on Section 30?"

"Yes, Papa."

"And the letter to Gus Shute?"

"Yes, Papa."

Harley eased into the saddle with the martyred air of the faithful and chucked his horse forward.

"And Harley. Come right back. The girls at Mowery's can get along without you for tonight."

The little man didn't bother to answer, but set out at a resigned amble toward town where he would drop the mail at the post office and then nurse a drink for an hour at Mowery's Hotel before heading back to camp with a bottle of gin tucked in his jacket to keep him warm. The old man knew that regardless of his ragging, Harley would not be bent from this persistent ritual. George's harping was a ritual, too. Like the sun coming up. Neither he nor Harley would have altered a gesture of it.

"Papa, why don't you let Harley take the truck? This <u>is</u> the twentieth century." Beatrice opened the ledger book for her father to examine. At the end of every day he poured over the precise markings in Beatrice's red and black script, the smell of sawdust and pine sap and kerosene reduced to neat columns on pale green sheets. He had never

doubted that he would make money, lots of money from the dying end of the great lumber era. He had come north with a third grade education and an eye for opportunity, and he had done it. There it was, his small empire. Like the rings on an old pine stump, the flush years and the dry years etched a story of expansion on the green pages. He had helped build a town, by God. His lumber was in the courthouse, the school. He employed over two hundred men. His chuckle was the rattle of dried pine needles.

"The horse knows the way. You can't give the truck its head and believe it'll get you home." The ledger closed with a soft thud as air swooshed out reluctantly like spent money. "Cards?"

"Gin?"

"Pitch."

"You always win at Pitch."

"That's why I like it." George reached into the drawer beside him for the cards and a half-full bottle of bourbon. Beatrice set out two coffee cups, filled them both to the two-thirds level and then she added coffee. "I always like a little bourbon with my coffee."

Beatrice smiled at the old joke.

"You should have been a man."

"So you've often said." Beatrice's mouth tucked up and in at the corners. "Deal."

"And you shouldn't be spending your life this way, moving with me from camp to camp. You should stay at the house in town."

"It makes me feel like a bean in a gigantic rattle." Beatrice fanned out her hand and schooled her face into and expression that she hoped was bland bordering on despair. She had him, oh, she had him. What a lovely hand! "Besides, you need me. Four."

"Lead," said George.

"Clubs." A grim silence descended, broken only by the slap, slap of cards on the worn desk top.

"Beatrice?"

"Yes?" She took the trick, looked at it and added it to the others at her elbow.

"Beatrice, you know he's not coming back."

"Yes. It's been too long. I know that." Her dark eyes met his blue ones directly. "I have never been a dreamer, Papa."

"Perhaps you should be. We all need our dreams. I had mine."

"Oh, no. This was not a dream." She glanced out the window latticed with frost fingers to the wheel-rutted lumber yard. "This is your sweat. And your bad back. And your frost bite."

George unconsciously wriggled his toes within the cracked leather boots.

"Pah!" She continued. "Dreams are for poets, maybe. Would this have happened if you had sat around just wishing it into existence?" She made another sound of dismissal deep within her chest.

"But I had a plan."

"A plan is different than a dream."

"Maybe. Maybe. I don't think so."

"It's been nearly a year and you still keep that letter close to hand."

"To remind me not to dream."

George took a diamond trick with his ace. "You're supposed to put a ten on that, Beatrice. Where's your ten?" Beatrice trumped his heart lead with her ten of clubs.

"There!" Beatrice paused, looked directly at her father, demanding him to return the stare. "Plans don't always work out, do they?"

"You can still go back to school. You're very young, Bea. You'll get married, have more children."

"They won't be Paul's children. No. There is no reason for me to go back to Michigan Normal. There are too many memories of Paul there. I belong here. This is mine, too."

"You can stay here, with Paul's child, <u>your</u> child in the next town? You'll see him, you know. When he's five, ten, as a young man. It can't be helped."

"Nonsense. It's a big county. The Prices don't know who the mother was. You did take care of that?"

"Of course. They were more than happy to get a child, no questions asked. They've named him Jeremy."

"I guess I don't want to know that. Please, Papa. I can forget that part of my life. I have to. Leave it alone. The Prices are good people. We did the right thing, and I don't regret that decision. The child will never know they're not his parents--not from me."

He sighed. "I don't like to see you wasting your life here, Beatrice. You'll grow bitter. A woman needs a family. I want grandchildren. Did I work this hard all my life for nothing? It was for you. You can have anything you want. Travel. Buy some fancy clothes. Look at you, my daughter in made-overs!"

Beatrice laughed. "You can't shame me, Papa...or bribe me...or appeal to my vanity. Maybe I have a plan, too. Don't worry so. Who else would keep your books? Who else would play pitch with you in a drafty old pay shack? Who else would put up with your scowling fits or tell you when you're wrong. Oh, yes, you are...often." She laid down her last card. "Hah! High, low, Jack and the game! Sometimes I win, Papa. Sometimes I win."

George thumped a large-knuckled fist on the table, threw his grey head back and laughed with a roar that shook the windows. "Ain't you something! Ain't you something!"

March 5, 1920

B. R. Askew
Askew Lumber Company
North Branch, Michigan

Dear Mr. Askew:

In regard to your recent request for cars for loading from your banking grounds at Camp Eight, this is to inform you that the Boyne City, Gaylord and Alpena Railroad has no cars available at this time for that purpose. Checking our spring and summer distribution schedule, it appears that none will be available for at least 120 days from this date.

Sincerely,

Martin J. Huston
General Manager, B,C,G&A

March 22, 1920

B. R. Askew
Askew Lumber Company
North Branch, Michigan

Dear Mr. Askew:

In response to your recent letter, let me assure you that our policies regarding disbursement of flat cars are based solely on supply and demand, contingent, of course, on our ability to meet the needs of our customers. You must be aware that the summer logging season increases the demand upon our facilities to burdensome limits. It is simply impossible to provide you with cars at this time and continue to serve our other customers at full capacity.

Your implication that our decision may have been influenced by the fact that Mr. Whitson, owner of the B,C,G&A, is also one of your major competitors, is certainly erroneous.

Regretfully yours,

Martin J. Huston
General Manager, B,C,G&A

April 15, 1920

B.R. Askew
Askew Lumber Co.
North Branch, Michgian

Dear Mr. Askew:

The B,C,G&A indeed feels an acute responsibility to its customers. "Serving the North Country" has always been our

motto. We regret that our decision concerning cars for your Camp Eight banking grounds will seriously damage your business. However, we must "look to our own backs", as the saying goes, in protecting our own interests.

May I remind you that your firm can continue service with us by hauling to the main line which will have empty cars available on a first-come, first-served basis. Understandably, this is an inconvenience, but not a "death blow" as you so dramatically put it.

Sincerely,

Martin J. Huston
General Manager, B,C,G&A

April 28, 1920

B. R. Askew
Askew Lumber Co.
North Branch, Michigan

Dear Mr. Askew:

This company does not respond to threats! The decision not to provide you with cars was made by the entire board, not by Mr. Whitson, alone. Your continued allegations that he, as a competitor, could influence our board policies against our own best interests border on libel. Further, we

do not consider ourselves a monopoly as you can always return to the river to float your logs to market in Alpena.

Our decision stands.

Sincerely,

Martin J. Huston
General Manager, B,C,G&A

Beatrice sat on a rise above the track and methodically surveyed the placid scene below. The tamarack, just coming into green, screened off the rails to her right and left; yet she knew they ran straight coming from the west, and then again, straight southeast. The train would have plenty of time to stop. She had worried about that. She didn't really want anyone hurt. Just before the bend to the west the engineer would be slowing in anticipation, anyway.

Eight cedar logs lay across the track directly below her, the last felled just moments before, chained and skidded in place. From her vantage point they looked like a handful of jackstraws dropped carelessly by a giant hand which at any moment might begin playing "pick-me-up". On either side two men sat or lay in various attitudes of relaxation, oblivious to the damp ground, heads back to the May sun, smoking and chatting idly, arms crossed on slowly rising chests, or elbows on knees, hands dangling. Except

for the rifles at their sides they might have been on a picnic.

Beatrice grinned with satisfaction and tucked a strand of hair back in place under George's grey felt hat. Since her father's heart attack and death the year before, she had by degrees slipped into the habit of wearing his old clothes--not through any fixation or attempt at preserving his memory, but because they were at hand, and when it became evident that to run the logging operation successfully she, herself, would have to be present at the work sites, female trappings became superfluous and troublesome hindrances.

Perhaps it was more than a surface affection, though. She found herself checking the books at the end of every day--as he had done--and periodically reviewing her holdings, laying out the county maps on the scarred desk top--as she had seen him do countless times--and tracing with her finger the sections marked in red which indicated ownership. There were notations in pencil in each section. "T" meant simply "timber". "WT" showed the section was being worked. "NT" meant it was cleared. "FT" pointed to near-future sites to be considered when the present site was finished. Also noted were the names of owners of adjacent parcels with a separate code for desirable or possible appropriation. The map was a long-range plan covering many years of anticipated operation, a visible, strategical focus. Beatrice found it not only a source of reassurance,

but also a directional blueprint. If, in the early evening, as the men trailed into the bunkhouse opposite the pay shack and saw her in profile--head bent over the desk, hands clasped in front of her--and thought she was lost in prayer, they were only partially wrong.

It was during one of these vigils, in the midst of her dilemma with Mr. Whitson and his railroad, that a solution appeared shining out of the map like lighted lines of scripture attending divine inspiration. The railroad line, like stitches binding the county together north and south, just grazed one of her red property lines. She looked closer to be sure, then streaked to the files and furiously leafed through the land descriptions, found the one she wanted and compared it to the block on the map. She was not mistaken. The line passed through a corner, just a corner. It was enough.

Now, waiting to hear the low, rumbling approach of the train coming back on the spur to the main line, she thought of her father, confident that her action here today would have met with his approval and would have moved him to a broad, lusty enjoyment of the situation.

The men rose in response to the singing in the rails and Beatrice simultaneously saw the puffs of smoke moving along above the trees. Then the chukka, chukka of the air compressor got louder and louder, accompanied by three short blasts of the whistle and one final long, strident shriek as the engine groaned to a stop inches from the obstruction.

Beatrice wiped her hands on her pants' legs and started down the hill to the rattling of the complaining cars settling into place.

A man had jumped out of the cab. He was tall and large-boned, with sandy-colored hair springing out in damp curls--an unlikely halo fringing his striped hat. His round face was hardened into flat, speechless fury. "Goddamn, cock-suckin', mother-fuckin' son-of-a-whore!" he exploded, and grabbing his hat, flung it to the ground where its feeble "whump" mocked his frustration. The men at the log pile stood silently, guns hanging limply in the crooks of their arms. The man spotted Beatrice descending the rise and he strode forward, fists knotted, blue eyes blazing. "What the hell is going on here? Are those your damned logs? Who the hell are you?"

"I am B. R. Askew of Askew Lumber Company. And who are you?"

"I'm Robert Gordon," he spat, "And that's my engine you've stopped?"

"And this, sir, is my land!" Beatrice reached up and with a motion surprisingly like his own, threw her hat down next to his, swung her dark hair in an arc over one shoulder and stretched an arm back to indicate the sweep of the track. "Now...do I get those cars?"

The engineer blushed into his sandy halo, his gaze caught by the unexpected roundness beneath her flannel shirt, looked ruefully at the hostage train, took a deep

breath and said through stiff lips, "Yes, ma'am. I guess you do."

August, 1943
Norfolk, Virginia

Dear Mother,

This is not the best place to be in August! How I long for Michigan where at least you can find some shade. It's so humid, here...and the roaches! I can hear them skitter for cover when I turn on a light at night. Ugh. Mary and I had to put cardboard rings around the legs of the crib, even, to discourage them.

Mary has been so helpful. Her husband is on the same ship with Joe so we have a lot in common to talk about--and to worry about. Joe's other sister is in New York--something to do with the base hospital. His brothers haven't been assigned yet, but we assume they are headed for the Asian Theatre as latest orders were for San Francisco.

Margaret is growing like a weed. I think she will look like you and Helen--has your coloring. I hope she won't be quite so stubborn.

I know you don't want to hear about this, but feel I must say <u>something</u>. Helen is, after all, my sister and I love you both. I really don't understand all the to-do about Jeremy. He sounds perfectly nice to me. I thought

you approved of teachers, and it seems he's "crazy" about Helen (according to her, of course). Surely the fact that he's five years older than she can't be all that objectionable. I thought that in your day girls married men old enough to be their grandfathers. Daddy was eight years older than you. Besides, Helen has always been ahead of herself. What she needs is someone older, like Jeremy, to settle her down. So, you see? I've wiped out any objections on that score.

Helen wrote and told me that you haven't spoken or seen each other since the day she brought Jeremy to the house. Surely you knew they had been seeing each other? I wish I had been there to keep you both reasonable. I know how fresh Helen can be, but she is young and always has thought of herself as some kind of tragic heroine ever since she read Girl of the Limberlost. I can imagine that she breezed in and out with little more than a toss of her head in between. Of course, you know they are married. The baby is due next spring. Did she tell you about that? Her letter wasn't completely clear on that point, but I gathered she wasn't as honest with you as she wished later she had been. Now that Jeremy's enlisted, she's all alone. I know she's seeing Dr. Bunting, but knowing Helen, she's not taking care of herself. She spoke about the baby sort of off-hand, as though it wasn't important.

I know this has happened very fast for you, but Helen never was one to explain her behavior. She lives in her own

little world, never telling anyone anything and then suddenly it's an accomplished fact. Remember how she was about cheerleading? We didn't even know she was trying out.

Anyway, I wish you'd patch things up. I'd like to have a family to come home to when this is all over. It just seems that with the men all away, it's time for us women to stick together. I know you were counting on Helen marrying that "nice Tyler boy" who's going into pharmacy, but he is so dull--really! Certainly you know Helen better than that. Just be glad she didn't disguise herself as a man and go off to fight the war single-handedly.

I've taken some pictures of Margaret to send you, but they haven't been developed yet. Will get them to you soon. Also, one of Joe in his uniform. He looks so handsome.

Glad you got the contract for RR ties, but wish you wouldn't work so hard. Is it true there are women working in the woods now? I swear, if it weren't for Margaret, I'd be in a defense plant right now! Anything to bring Joe home faster.

Write when you can.

Love,

Ann

It had been like peeking through separate panes of a window giving onto the same room, thought Margaret. Her grandmother had kept business letters, postcards, thank-you notes--one from Margaret, herself, in a childish scrawl expressing thanks for a Christmas gift of oils. Margaret remembered that gift. Her mother had been concerned that the paints would be too difficult for her to use, skipping, as they did, the basics of charcoal sketching and water colors and moving the ten-year-old Margaret into the big time of canvas. She was right. Margaret had wasted the expensive oils in garish, wonderful splotches of color, creating violent rainbows, impossible birds. She had never forgotten the smooth, important-looking tubes errupting with pungent magic, or the implication that her grandmother expected she was capable of appreciating the gift. It had been like a secret between them. Her grandmother fully expected Margaret would create something beautiful someday. Margaret came to expect it, too.

Only one of the letters pointed to a child, her cousin. The others--tiny flickers of light into the past--somehow had seemed to her just as important.

So. Her grandmother had had a lover who had been in World War I. Did they have lovers in those days? Margaret hoped so. It was much more poignant that way. And her husband, a railroad engineer, Grandpa Gordon, had left the family to follow the diminishing rails south and then west. His scanty postcards had been misspelled and sanguine. And

Margaret's mother had actually considered leaving her husband. How had Beatrice replied to daughter Ann to make her change her mind, Margaret wondered. Such lovely disclosures. Perhaps she should feel like an eavesdropper, vaguely despicable. Instead, she felt fuller, corners illuminated. She had had a friend in high school who never would walk down the hallway to her bedroom at night without a pillow clasped tightly behind her head with both hands. Her pillow-blinder allowed her only to see straight ahead. If there was someone behind her or on either side, ghoulishly waiting to strike, she didn't want to know about it. Margaret had never been afraid of what might be behind her; rather, she was propelled by it, yet always looking over her shoulder, seeking for what it was that drew her back while shoving her forward.

When they lumbered the white pine, they took logs with diameters taller than a man. You see them in the old brown-tinted pictures, loaded three-deep on the sleighs, breaking the imagination. How did they get them on there? What gigantic hand lifted them in place? How can the horses pull them? Beside the horses stands a man in a beaten felt hat and suspenders, his hand raised as though to indicate that even he cannot reach to top of the pile--a meaningless gesture. But of course, they are massive.

Then the hardwoods--maple, birch, ash, oak, beech--were felled, exposing deeply swirled grains that pulled you down into mysteries, secrets of their growing.

Not as impressive as the white pine or as valuable as the hardwoods, swamp timber like cedar and tamarack became the major lumber of the last large logging operations in the north long after the other trees had diminished or, in some regions, disappeared completely. The swamp timber is still lumbered. Fast money was made on the white pine and hardwoods. Marketing the swamp timber was less lucrative by volume, but still sufficient to make rich men out of the heads of local outfits that stayed when the larger companies pulled out. It was during this latter era that Beatrice's father, and then Beatrice, were active.

Margaret had known Beatrice after the lumbering hey-day, when the excitement was past, and the lumbering concerns still in existence harvested swamp timber for pulp wood to be used in paper and press board and paneling--"wood products", they call them. Beatrice hadn't made the transition into the pulp business. She carried the past with her into semi-retirement.

"My husband never liked the tamarack," Beatrice said. Margaret and she were inspecting a cattle ramp and holding pens Beatrice had had built for auctioning eighty head of cattle from her farm in Pleasant Valley. The tenant-caretaker was too old to handle the calving in the spring and his old joints complained with every bale of hay

he spread for them in the winter months. Beatrice didn't really regret the sale. The farm had never paid. As a pension system for old lumberjacks who had refused to die or to work when Beatrice had stopped lumbering, it had been successful. Now the last of these, Kyle Boden, was swapping tales in the Mio Nursing Home and the cattle were scattered across the fields like bits of agate. In the late afternoon of summer the new wood of the ramp and holding pens shone white. Margaret had held her breath, waiting, while perspiration formed on her nose under the sunglasses. She had never heard her grandmother talk about her grandfather.

"Called it a 'shanty tree'," Beatrice continued. "No good for anything but a shanty, he'd say. And sometimes they have a bend in them. You'll see a whole stand with the bend in nearly the same place. See?" She pointed toward a cluster of trees in the swamp to their left. Sure enough, each tree had a slight crook, like a bent elbow, near the top. "That's another reason he called them a shanty tree. You use those to build something and automatically you've got a natural sag."

"Are they good for anything?" asked Margaret.

"Oh...lots of things!" Beatrice looked indignant. "I can't tell you how many thousands of board feet of tamarack I've sold for railroad ties. Very durable wood. And fish stakes. And the tall, straight ones...used to be alot of those, regardless of what Bobby thought. Those tall,

straight ones are all over the country. Guess what they're used for."

"Hmmmm...ladders."

"Ladders! Hah! Telephone poles!"

"Telephone poles."

"Yep...telephone poles. Don't rot." Beatrice hung her elbows over the top rung and hugged the fence to her. "But that was small potatoes to Bobby. He wanted the really big lumber. Pine. Hardwoods. Real big money in them. Fast money. Well, he was born too late for that." She laughed. "He went out to California, you know." Margaret shook her head 'no' and waited. "Yep," she laughed again. "He didn't know he was too late for the gold out there, too. Always wanted a big strike. Big. Something big."

"But I thought you made alot of money on swamp timber."

"Well, depends on what you mean by alot. By some standards, I busted my ass for nothing. Excuse me, old ladies aren't supposed to talk like that, but I was raised in a lumber camp."

"Do I look shocked?"

Beatrice examined Margaret's face and sighed. "No, you should be. What are you learning at that college?" Margaret opened her mouth to speak. "Don't answer that. We haven't got all day. What was I saying?"

"You were talking about busting your ass."

"Oh, yes." Beatrice gave her a quelling sideways glance. "I worked very hard for many years and yes, I made

quite a bit of money compared to most around here, but that took patience--time, work and patience..and alot of worry. That was too much for my Bobby to handle. Furthermore, I was the boss. I suppose that would be hard for any man to handle. Oh, well. He wanted excitement. I never blamed him for leaving. Everybody has to do what they have to do. Remember that. Don't ever blame people for acting in character. We're all human." She paused. "Well, all that's left now is the land. I made some bad investments. Those oil wells!" She shook her head. "But it was fun. Damned if it wasn't worth it!"

Margaret watched her grandmother's harsh profile, beautiful in its harshness, settle into grim immobility as she looked again in the direction of the bent tamaracks.

"Listen to me preaching as though I knew what I was talking about. That's a sign of old age, I guess...or a perogative. I can pretend to be wise." Her face broke into a wide grin. "I never thought I'd ever be old enough to talk such nonsense."

"It's not nonsense, Grandma."

"Of course it is. Nobody really learns from anyone else's experiences. Not really. I doubt if we learn from our own. We just like to talk about ourselves."

"I like to listen."

"And you've always been a very polite child, Meg...a bit cheeky, but polite. No, you'll make your own mistakes.

Don't listen to fools like me. Nobody's ever as wise as they sound. We just get older."

Margaret ran her hand along the rough new wood, searching for its grain. "Is this tamarack?"

"This?" Beatrice slapped her palm on the board. "This is pine. Never buy anything made of pine...too soft," she added absently.

From the nodding tips of the grass, cicadas arched, clicking and singing ahead of the women swishing back to the rutted path which wound through the fields where the cattle moved slowly, each step a contemplated effort. Years later Margaret would remember the grasshoppers tsk-tsking like old ladies whispering, and her grandmother's thin, straight back scything toward the hunched red truck; years later she would stand by a window in the front room of the old house, reading in the blue light, and stroking the window frame, wondering if it was pine, or birch, or maple, or tamarack.

CHAPTER VI

Tightly curled bangs above the nurse's white forehead looked attached to the cap rather than to her person. Margaret imagined them applied each morning rather like false teeth. "We found the file you wanted. It really would have helped if you'd known a last name. But Dr. Bunting has a remarkable memory and once I located the old Pleasant Valley files, he knew just which one it was. I'm sure I don't know how he does it. If we'd had the last name, I could have found it myself without bothering him." Her pointed chin screwed itself into a knot for added emphasis. "We were here until six last night anyway and then stayed to look through those old files. Of course, Dr. Bunting keeps everything. Dr Bunting says you never know when you'll need a family history. Oh, my, I can't <u>give</u> you the file. You'll have to see Dr. Bunting. This is confidential information." She gripped the file to her thin chest and Margaret envisaged herself wrestling the woman to the floor for its possession. Dr. Bunting, himself, must decide how much can be told you. You <u>are</u> a lawyer, Mr...?"

"Marston."

"Yes, Mr. Marston. Come right this way. Dr. Bunting can only see you for five minutes. He has a very full schedule today."

A baby wailed in confirmation, hip-twisting himself down the slope of his mother's lap. A man dozing in a corner chair started, glanced with irritation at the child and returned his grey, stubbled chin to his splayed hand. At least ten other bodies waiting for inspection sat in resignation on orange and turquiose naugahyde chairs lining the reception room. The yellow air sagged between cone-shaped ceiling lights.

"How does she walk down the exact center of the hall that way?" whispered Margaret.

"Shhh. Just follow Mamie Eisenhower."

"No, That's the chicken lady. From the cartoon. There's this big fat rooster and a little widow hen. That's who she is."

They were ushered into the presence of himself and his wondrous memory with tight-lipped disapproval from the chicken lady.

Himself was elderly, grey and bespectacled, out of place among the plumb corners, shiny chrome and plastic of the clinic he headed. His office appeared a vacuum for all the detritus missing from the rest of the building. Worn books slumped unsteadily on battered shelves covering three walls. More books tottered in piles beside his desk which was nearly hidden from view by the most alarming disarry of

files and loose papers Margaret had ever seen in one place. Scattered over this like mouse-droppings were small rectangular papers which she supposed were phone messages. A small space precisely large enough for elbows and writing paper had been cleared in front of the chair to reveal a desk pad heavily marked with caligraphic doodling. It was an office belonging to a genius or an idiot. Margaret instantly felt at home.

"Ah, Bea's granddaughter. Of course, of course. Sit down. Sit down. And Mr. Marston, glad to see you again." They shook hands all around and Dr. Bunting gestured them into the two chairs facing his desk. Margaret removed a book and sat down.

"So you're Bea's granddaughter. I was sorry to hear about her death. Hard to believe she was eighty-three. Very active right up to the last, wasn't she. Understand it was her heart. She came to me about a year ago. Chest pains. Didn't like what I had to tell her, wouldn't agree to tests. Said she'd outlive me. In alot of ways, she did. Hah! Stubborn old woman. Took alot of history with her. Yes, indeed." Tobacco-stained fingers tapped on the manila file the nurse had relinquished to him.

"You do know what we've come to find out, Dr. Bunting," interjected Margaret.

"Yesss...and I find myself in an awkward position. Beatrice was a good friend. I don't know if you can understand how important that was in the old days. We go

back a long way. Things were different back then. If you wanted something, you had to fight for it. Then you had to fight to keep it. Beatrice was a fighter, all right. Loyalty was a premium virtue. That and integrity. Land deals were sealed with a handshake. Contracts were drawn up on the backs of envelopes. I once saw a timber rights transfer involving hundreds of thousands of dollars settled at a poker table." He paused. "I owe Beatrice alot. Some of her money went into this clinic. I had nothing when I came North. Except my medical degree. But Beatrice wanted a doctor for Cheonoquet County. She staked me and I stayed. She completely financed my first small clinic in Pleasant Valley, even provided a horse and buggy for house calls. I don't think many people knew that. She was that kind of lady. Didn't want gratitude, just wanted to get things done.

"Dr. Bunting, we're looking for someone who would legally be an heir," said David. "Surely, Beatrice wouldn't have objected to that."

"You didn't know Beatrice, I expect. She had her own brand of justice. We shook hands on this. She insisted. For her, that was the most binding of agreements. She made me absolutely promise that I would forget and never knowingly mention the events of that night. For her, this person would not exist, was no part of her. I don't know why," he said, in response to Margaret's unspoken question. "It was none of my business. I only know it was important

to Beatrice, so I gave her my promise. I refused to falsify documents, however, but then there was the courthouse fire, and legal documents--death certificates, birth certificates--many were permanently destroyed. I often wondered if Beatrice had anything to do with that. I speculated that she might want to wipe out any official evidence, as though that would completely obliterate the existence of the child in fact, as well as in substance. But no, I don't think so. That wasn't her style. Although she was a single-minded lady. Tough as nails."

Margaret sat forward in her chair and clasped her hands in front of her, fixing the grey-haired man behind the desk with a clear-eyed stare. "Dr. Bunting, I am Beatrice's heir. I, not Beatrice, must decide what is right, here. You know we can search the court files. If this person got married, or needed a passport, the birth certificate would be re-established. If necessary, we can ask everyone over the age of fifty, county-wide, what they might remember of Beatrice, her daughter, Helen, if Helen had a child, who she is...it will take alot of digging, but I'll find her...or him. Coming to you is just faster." She paused. "And quieter. Beatrice is dead, Dr. Bunting, and she left a sizable inheritance, more than I ever expected. I can't accept a legacy not rightfully mine. That's the way I am. I have my own sense of justice, too."

"I think I'll have a cigar. Only allow myself two a day. Will it bother you?" Margaret shook her head. "Can I

offer you one, Mr. Marston?" Another negative shake. He lit the cigar slowly, opened the file, looked first to David, then to Margaret and back down at the papers which he turned over one by one.

"Child born to Helen Gordon Price and Jeremy Price, April 15, 1943, female, Shirley Price."

"So she was married."

"Helen? Oh, yes."

"Is that all?" asked Margaret. "What happened to Helen?"

He turned over another sheet. "Helen Gordon Price, died April 20, 1943."

"Were there complications from the birth?"

"Margaret, is it important?" His glasses caught the glare from the window and held it so that his eyes looked opaque, bottomless.

"It's important."

"Took her own life. As I understand it, she learned of her husband's death over Germany, just days before she gave birth. He was a fighter pilot. Beatrice found her and came straight to me. She had hanged herself. A pity. She was a beautiful girl."

"And the child?"

"Beatrice asked me to take the baby to Jeremy's parents, Ada and John Price. I did that. Poor thing, cried all the way on those bumpy roads, as I remember. Only five days old, and ravenous, naturally."

The tension in the room had dissipated with the blue cigar smoke. Margaret leaned back with a sigh.

"That's all I know," he continued. "I assume the child was raised by the Prices in Pleasant Valley. Of course, if she married, which she must have done by now, her last name will be different. I imagine there are people there who will know. Old school teachers, perhaps. They keep track of such things. My wife is--was--a school teacher, so I know." He removed his glasses and wiped his eyes. "Now I know I'm getting old. I wish Beatrice were here to accept my apology."

"I'm here, Dr. Bunting...and I thank you...sincerely. Grandmother wasn't always right, just human like the rest of us."

"Yes. I never understood what happened. I knew Beatrice, knew her well, I thought. Then that day...she never even looked at that baby, you know. I remember that. So unlike her. She loved Helen, no doubt about that, so why not take the baby herself? That's what I expected. It's always bothered me."

They rose to leave. "Did Beatrice ever tell you about her oil ventures?" The glasses were back in place.

"Not really. I knew she literally sank most of her money in oil after she closed the last lumbering camp."

"Oh, yes. She was convinced there was oil in Cheonoquet County. Did all kinds of geological studies. Had me convinced. Talked me into investing in one of her

wells. And one night, she called me, all excited and said 'this is it, it's coming in tonight!'. I drove over and we sat all night long in the middle of this field, listening to the rig, talking, and drinking. Old Gurney Brown was there, too. Oh, the stories he could tell."

"And what happened?" asked Margaret.

"Nothing," he laughed. "Not a dang thing! All night we sat there. You never saw a sorrier bunch in the morning." He was still laughing as he showed them out. Then he sobered and turned to David. "You've got a handfull there," his head bobbed toward Margaret. "Like her grandmother."

Margaret shook his hand solemnly and said, "Those old days aren't gone, not really."

"Oh, they are, they are," he said, "But some things never change." He squeezed her hand, winked and turned back into his cluttered office.

CHAPTER VII

There was music coming from somewhere, an amorphous, impersonal drone drifting just beyond notice. It was a moment before Margaret identified it as the same kind of music one might find in a department store, music from invisible boxes, meant to be ignored, a peripheral inducement to linger and buy. Margaret found herself walking briskly to "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter" as was the woman, Shirley, ahead of her, her hips moving evenly--one, two, three, four. "And would we jog-trot if they were playing "The Grand Canyon Suite?" thought Margaret. Her heel clicks seemed amplified in the wide hallway which led past double glass French doors revealing a formal living room, a companion set mirroring a glossy dining table beneath a dull brass chandelier, then further, to the right, a row of solid doors which Margaret assumed must be bedrooms, and finally opened onto a cavernous room paneled in white birch to the peaked ceiling which descended on the right over a large, glass-enclosed pool and on the left over an equally large, open room. An oval, cream sofa faced the wall of windows overlooking the lake. They sat there in uncomfortable silence like ornaments on the ends of a scimitar.

"I'm glad you finally replied to my letters." Margaret located her cigarette case in the confusing maze of her purse and briefly relieved her nervousness with the familiar gestures of smoking. A brass ashtray in the shape of a duck sat on the round table leaning into the curve of a sofa. She pulled it toward her. Shirley Price Haines also lit a cigarette. Margaret re-adjusted the heavy duck so that it was midway between them.

"Yours and your lawyer's." This was delivered with a brittle edge and a jerky backward motion of her blond head that sent smoke from the "O" of her red lips straight upwards.

"Ceiling fans," thought Margaret.

"He's more of a friend."

"The letters were on his stationary. Was that meant to intimidate me?"

"Oh, no." Margaret paused. "Well, perhaps it was to persuade you of the credibility of this whole matter. I was sure you'd be somewhat doubtful. I mean, the circumstances are unusual. Quite a shock for you, I imagine. Legal stationary just seemed more convincing, more...legal." She clamped her mouth shut, feeling suddenly foolish, bubbling and spouting inanities against the wall of the cool woman facing fer. She had an urge to check for lint on her black suit. This wasn't going as she had expected. But, then, what had she expected?

It was now two months since she and David had talked to Dr. Bunting. From there they had gone to the high school office in Pleasant Valley to pore over old yearbooks and talk to Shirley's old teachers. They had remembered her--a bright girl, but moody, very pretty, very ambitious.

Small towns don't easily give up their own. You can move away, get married, have children, commit adultery, and die half way around the world and each event will be recorded in the local gossip column of the weekly paper "back home". Like Ariadne's ball of twine, the source of its power to propell itself remained a mystery. To be sure, this link with people who watched you skip stones on the beach, buy ice cream cones, squirm in a church pew, file up the aisle at commencement or get caught racing you father's car--this link is almost never broken. These people may be relatives or close friends, but are more likely "the Watchers"--ladies rocking on front porches, or teachers close to retirement, or mail men, or merchant's wives who seem to know everything about the town as part of their civic duty. They are to be commended, these Watchers. They keep us in touch even when we don't want to be.

"Shirley Price. Oh, sure...didn't she marry some big wig downstate? Older than her. Can't remember the last name. Who told you to ask me? Mrs. Hastings? Oh. Does she still teach English and Latin? Had my children <u>and</u> my grandchildren. Say...are you related to the Beldings out at Avalon Corners? You're sure? My, you look like that tribe.

High cheek bones. Yes, I used to know Shirley's grandma. She and me...thick as thieves." She had raised two intertwined fingers in confirmation and her black button eyes had sparked recalling intrigues. "Saw a peck of trouble, Ada did. I always say, though, God doesn't hand out more than a body can bear." She had sighed heavily, an old woman's bitter sigh.

"That Shirley was a pistol. But then, she married well. So I heard. Wedding was downstate. Fancy. Couldn't go, myself. Pleurisy. I just ache all the time. All the time. Doctor can't seem to do a thing." She started to shift her weight then thought better of it, considering the effort.

"Wish I could remember her last name, now. Stop by again, now, anytime. I'm always here. You're sure you're not related to them Beldings?"

"His name is Haines, Clifford Haines. Inherited some kind of factory in Detroit. I met him once when he and Shirl came up to close down the old Price house. Nice fellow. Handsome. Lots older than Shirley, of course. Came in. Shook hands. Just like you or me, you know? Needed some pool disinfectant. Now why would I have that? You know how many people in this county have pools?" He laughed. "Neither do I, but not many that I ever heard of."

He wore a pale green shirt tucked into brown polyester trousers. A pencil hung on a string from his middle shirt button. Margaret had watched in fascination as it bumped against the bulge above his belt.

"That Shirley was a pretty girl. Always better than the rest of us, you know what I mean? Although she was born here, same as me. Couldn't wait to get out of town. I remember at our graduation, thinking, 'she won't stick around long'. Guess I was half in love with her--all the boys were. Don't tell my wife if you ever meet her." The pencil went into a paroxysm of mirth against his chuckling belly. Margaret dragged her eyes away from it with difficulty. "Funny thing, though. They have a summer place--on Valentine Lake, I think. Quite a show place, they say. Couldn't stay away completely, eh? That's the way it is. Folks who move away just have to come back--one way or another. Once you've had a drink of the Thunder Bay River, you have to come back for more. That's what we say.

"I don't imagine they get up here much during the winter. Remember me to Shirley if you see her, eh? Haven't seen her in years. Tell her Bill Harwood says 'Hi'.

"You need any building supplies? This is the best stocked hardware and lumber in the county." He picked up a clipboard and jotted on it with the dangling pencil. "Well, you remember old Bill if you ever need something. I'll give you a good price, too."

Mrs. Clifford Haines. She had been there all the time. A real person with a husband, home address in Birmingham, a telephone number. Each prosaic detail seemed to Margaret like a major triumph. However, all overtures toward the woman who must be Margaret's cousin were rejected. Letters had gone unanswered. Phone calls had been met with indifferent denial of any possible relationship between Shirley Price Haines and Beatrice Askew Gordon. Shirley would sign no papers, see no one, acknowledge nothing. Margaret began to wonder if she, herself, was mistaken. Even though the facts supported her, it was clear that the woman did not welcome Margaret's intrusion, this whole strange knowledge of shadowy relatives and a legacy in the north she had been so anxious to leave. Only when Margaret had indicated that she would personally appear on Shirley's doorstep in Birmingham had Shirley agreed to a meeting. However, it was not to be in her home near Detroit, but at her cabin at Valentine Lake where she and a group of friends would be cross-country skiing over a long week-end.

Margaret could see a groomed ski trail sloping down to the lake where it dissapppeared from view and then re-appeared as a darker, shadowed streak against the glittering powder of a distant hill. Then it was lost among the trees. Shirley's friends must be out there, thought

Margaret. Except for the tinned music, they were alone under the immaculate neutral-colored peak of the chalet.

"Of course, this is ridiculous." Shirley swung one long leg over the other and leaning far back on the sofa, tilted her sleek head against the heel of her right hand. "Really ridiculous. This is all some foolish mistake concocted by a pack of lawyers. I despise lawyers, don't you? Always profitting from someone else's misery. I'm sure this Mr. Marston is taking terrible advantage of you, my dear. You can be sure no one will take advantage of me. I don't even know this Beatrice person and will absolutely refuse to be responsible for any of her debts, or inheritance taxes or anything. It's nothing to do with me. A big joke, really."

"Except for a mortgage insured by her death, she had no debts..."

"Well, regardless..."

"And we're talking about a considerable inheritance of land, mineral and timber rights. I thought you understood that."

"I didn't bother to read past the first line of most of your letters."

"So I gathered."

"Besides, it makes no difference. You should be happy. Now you can accept this lovely inheritance with no qualms."

Except for the coloring, it was like looking at herself: the high cheekbones; the tiny, flat place along

the bridge of the nose; the jaw narrowed to the squared chin; the hands, a combination of long-tapered fingers and flat, square, masculing palms. Margaret drew on her cigarette and flipped her hand at the wrist, thumb curled back like a hitch-hikers and watched in amusement as Shirley's movement so closely coincided as to be comical--the flip, the thumb, two hitch-hikers headed in opposite directions. As though recognizing the curious simulacrum in the vignette, Shirley abruptly leaned forward, crushed her cigarette into the duck's belly and glared at Margaret. "I don't want any of this," she said. "Even if I am who you think I am. I don't want to be. I only had you come here to make that clear. I saw that you would keep after me. I only want that to stop...and I want you to be gone and forgotten before my friends come back from skiing." She raised a clenched hand and pressed it hard against her mouth. Her shoulders began to tremble and she pulled her fist away then back, away and back, like a mechanical doll caught in the spasms of faulty wiring.

"Oh, wait...wait," Margaret reached across the table separating them, not knowing why she did, wanting to touch the rocking woman in some way, but not wanting to intrude with a touch, gesturing, instead, a comfort. "Please. I don't understand. I didn't mean to do this. I just wanted to meet you...to talk. I thought. I don't know what I thought. Yes, I do. I just wanted to be fair...and my family...our family...we're all that's left, don't you see?

I thought this was important. That I find you, I mean. Please. Oh, I'm sorry."

Shirley had stopped rocking and sat angrily dabbing at her eyes and blinking. "I won't cry!" I always cry when I get angry and it gets in the way, so." She looked at Margaret who was likewise running a finger carefully under her lower lid, checking for mascara.

"Yes," said Margaret. "Disgustingly feminine...and sloppy. I can never seem to win an argument with dignity." They both laughed. "I hate it because my nose always runs," continued Margaret. "It's hard to be convincing with a runny nose."

"I'm always afraid I'll have black streaks running down my cheeks. Grotesque."

"Your mascara's fine."

"So is yours."

Their laughter arced off the ceiling and swooped like some live thing into their throats. They sat for a moment, just looking at one another until Shirley broke the silence.

"Do you like my cabin?" Her mouth twisted with amused irony.

"I'd hardly call it a cabin. Yes, it's lovely."

"It's what I've wanted. For as long as I can remember. A cabin 'up north'...and a breathtaking home 'downstate' in a place called Bloomfield Hills or Birmingham or St. Clair Shores...one of those rich-sounding suburbs. Not much of an aspiration, perhaps, not like wanting to become an actress

or a ballerina or a brain surgeon, but it is what I always wanted. Things. Expensive things. Beautiful things. When I was growing up in Pleasant Valley, the summer people would come up in their long, sleek cars, towing boats behind them and children would get out of those cars looking like catalogue models, their hair perfectly cut, their clothing new. How did they manage, I wondered, to look so perfectly, cleanly turned out? Always? Oh, I know. I <u>am</u> grown up now. Nothing is quite as it seems. But <u>then...then</u>...I wanted to <u>be</u> them. I used to spend all my summer days at the lake, close to all that downstate money. I had a friend whose parents owned a small cabin there. It seems all we ever wore were our bathing suits. All summer. A bathing suit is a wonderful equalizer." Again, that wry twist of the lips. "I seem to be babbling, but there is a reason for me telling you all this. I guess you deserve an explanation for my attitude, for my denial of any relationship to you."

"You were afraid I'd embarrass you?"

"Certainly not. Dont' be angry. That's not at all what I've been leading up to. Perhaps, truthfully, not knowing what to expect, I wasn't looking forward to meeting you."

"Am I acceptable as a relative?"

"You <u>are</u> offended. Oh, I haven't begun this well at all. I sounds very shallow when I lay it all out. Perhaps it is, but being one of <u>them</u> seemed so important."

"Shirley, I was one of them and I wasn't rich or polished. I think I learned from Beatrice that those things aren't important. Do you know what she used to wear?"

"What?"

"Boots."

"Boots?"

"Big heavy leather work boots...and a hunting shirt. She was beautiful."

Shirley looked at her stonily.

"Did you ever see her?"

"I went to see her. Once. I was sixteen and had just gotten my driver's license, but I had planned for a very long time just how it would be. My grandmother, my father's mother, had told me all sorts of things about my father. He was handsome. His hair was blond, like mine, and his eyes were blue. He was smart, oh, so smart. I can't tell you how often I heard about him writing little plays and then talking his friends into performing them on the barn floor and charging a nickel for admission, or about how he was on the relay team that competed right up to the state level. He did only two things wrong. He married my mother and he enlisted in the Air Force.

"It's rather convenient to have your parents dead at an early age. You can devise all kinds of fantasies about them. Grandmother rarely talked about my mother. I only knew that my father had been hopelessly bewitched at the first sight of her and that she had died when I was born,

soon after he died heroically in the war. They became the focus for all my romantic imaginings. In every movie I ever saw, those were my parents up there on the screen, the misunderstood, passionate, star-crossed lovers. They fit all the cliches. And I was the living symbol of their love, a beautiful, fairy child with the tragic past of my parents' deaths to make me special. I was raised on lovely dreams, dreams of my own making, to be sure. Grandmother Price never encouraged fanciful thoughts. Her entire life was cleaning and gardening and church suppers--such dull things, when I knew my life would be...oh...glittering.

"I supposed I had other Grandparents someplace, and I questioned Grandmother Price. On separate occasions she told me so many conflicting versions--that they were dead, that she didn't know who they were, that they lived far away-- that I concluded none of it could be true and stopped pestering her. If she wouldn't tell me the truth, I'd find out, someday, on my own.

"Grandmother Price had a picture of my father. She kept it in her top, bureau drawer, wrapped in a small piece of blanket, like a baby. I used to think of it that way when she would take me into her bedroom which smelled of horehound coughdrops, take out the swaddled picture and unwrap it fold by fold. We'd sit for what seemed like a long time in her dim room until I began to squirm or pull threads from the chenille bedspread. I had seen the picture

so many times that I could draw it from memory, every shadow, even the photo studio logo.

"Once, while Grandmother was gone, I decided to see the picture myself, and under the picture, in that same drawer, I found other things--among them, a marriage certificate and my mother's maiden name, Gordon. So I made the connection between Helen Gordon and Beatrice Gordon. Beatrice was a legend! A woman who had run a lumber camp, drilled oil wells, an eccentric of sorts. There must be thousands of Gordons, of course, but I knew of Beatrice Gordon and had decided she was my phantom grandmother. I didn't tell anyone. It was my secret, making me more special.

"We should have a drink. I need a drink to tell you the rest." Margaret walked with her to the kitchen and watched as Shirley bartended. They returned to the sofa together with drinks and a bottle.

"Yes, I knew how it would be," continued Shirley. "I would walk to the house up the little concrete path between those two huge Chinese elms--they're still there, aren't they?"

"Yes. With every storm they lose a few branches. Last spring an entire limb fell across the walk. But they're still there--in spite of complaints from the telephone company. They have to be trimmed away from the wires each year."

"Well, Grandmother would be astonished, of course, but very pleased. She'd say something like 'My dear child,

where have you been all these years? I didn't know what had happened to Helen's daughter. I've looked and looked for you!' You see, I was so naive...no...stupid. I really thought...I really thought that she would be overjoyed to see her long-lost Granddaughter. It never occurred to me that she had purposely removed me from her life. Oh, no. She would want me, you see."

Shirley flung out an arm loosely from the elbow and her left leg, crossed over her right, simultaneously swung up to kick the underside of the table. The ice rattled in their glasses and Margaret was suddenly reminded of the dancing man and his loose-limbed shuffle.

"How many drinks is this?" said Margaret.

"Three, I think."

"Your friends have been gone a long time."

"Oh, them. They'll probably go for six miles. Who the hell cares. They're crazy. If they come back, I'll lock them in their rooms till you and I are finished--or good and drunk. Whichever comes first." They both laughed. "I didn't plan to tell you all this--especially about Beatrice. I was just going to send you packing. Now I can't seem to stop talking. Isn't that funny? I've never told this to anyone, not even my husband--especially not my husband." She interlaced her fingers around the base of the glass and looked through the space between her thumbs.

"I did go to see Beatrice Gordon. I walked down that path and up the porch steps. She invited me in. Probably

thought I was selling something for the school. You know the house?"

"From way back. And I'm living there temporarily. That was in one of my letters you didn't read."

"Yes. Well, you know the fireplace, with the mirror in the mantle? Beatrice stood there, with her back to the mirror and I sat on the couch, facing it. She may have been sitting at first. I don't remember. I just remember her standing in front of that mirror. I could see the back of her head, you see. Her hair was very long...grey, but long and straight. She had it in one single braid that hung to the middle of her back. Somehow that braid in the mirror made her look young and, oh...vulnerable, but her face--all planes and angles."

"I know. Grandmother was not a soft, grandmotherly type."

"Hah!" It came out like the rasp of a saw, ragged and dry. "Hah!" she repeated and pounded the knuckles of her fists together.

"I don't think I even had to tell her who I was. Just looking at me was enough. But I did. I can't recall exactly what I said, but as I spoke, she watched me, her face as grey as her hair and then her face settled into one hard piece, just solid, like that concrete walk, and when she spoke it was like concrete splitting. I had no right, no right, she said, to be alive. That's what she said...and more. Only I couldn't understand at first. I only could

stare from the mirror and that braid to her cold face and then back to the mirror as though if I looked hard enough the words would go away, or maybe I could fuse those two images together."

Margaret had moved around the sofa to hold Shirley's hands between her own. "What did she tell you? What explanation could she have...?"

"My father...my father was Beatrice's illegitimate son. No one knew. Not the Prices, who raised him. Not even my mother, who was Beatrice's legitimate child. No one knew. Beatrice had tried to tell my mother who had apparently run off without waiting for explanations. So she had told no one. It was her shame, she said, her secret, and I wasn't supposed to exist. I was an unnatural child come to punish her, to mock the one bit of real happiness she had ever known. I'm not even sure she was aware that I was there...not completely. In fact, I began to feel like some kind of ghost, or rather like some evil mist that had settled on her couch. She was talking to me, but more to herself. It was an eerie feeling and besides being horrified, I was frightened. I ran out of there. I think I tipped over a little round table at the end of the couch. I ran out of there and she was still talking."

Margaret thought of what she could have said. She should have asked questions. How could Shirley know that that their grandmother Gordon had told the truth? Did Shirley perhaps misunderstand? Were there records to confirm what she had been told? There were a thousand recriminations roiling in Margaret's head all that evening and for weeks later. She should have said something to convince Shirley that Beatrice's anger, her mistakes, the incredible force of her personality were gone now, didn't matter; but it would have been a lie. A kind lie, but a lie just the same. And Shirley would not have been fooled or consoled by amelioration. Sitting on the cream sofa, watching the snow shadows turn the grey of the sky, Margaret believed as Shirley had believed, that Beatrice had spoken the truth. Margaret could see the familiar swinging braid, angular face and tense body untangling a past she had torturously avoided. It explained the old letter Margaret had found so romantic. It clarified Beatrice's strange request of Dr. Bunting, and Beatrice's fury with Helen and total dismissal of any mention of her lost daughter.

"You know," Shirley said, I went home and stripped and checked my entire body for abnormalities. Anything. Moles. Hair where it shouldn't be. I counted my fingers and toes. It's funny, now." She laughed. "I'm 37 and I'm still not

sure I'm all right. I used to be so angry. How I hated that woman! Why did she tell me when she couldn't bring herself to tell her own daughter? Then it would have made a difference. Why did she have to make me feel that it was my fault when it was her fault? I wish I had been able to say those things to her that day. All I was able to do was to run. I was sorry when I heard she'd died because I had thought that someday I'd be able...capable, you know, of seeing her again and telling her how much I despised her. Maybe that is why I told you. I needed to hurt someone close to her to damage her memory."

"Do you feel better?"

"No. Relieved, maybe."

"You could have told anyone years ago and completely devastated her. Why didn't you?"

"And destroy myself, as well? I tried to tell you. I knew what I wanted. And I got it." Her arm swept the room.

"Why did you tell me?"

"I didn't intend to. But then I saw you and...it was safe to tell you...and necessary. Now you know why I want nothing to do with any inheritance. How could I explain to my husband this strange appearance of a grandmother who would never acknowledge me while she lived. He thinks my mother's parents died long before I was born. I even gave them names--Thomas and Amanda Johnston. Isn't that pretty? Distinguished? He was a doctor; she lived a very active social life--volunteer work and garden club. They lived in

Maine. So interesting to have relatives from New England. It gives one automatic polish." She smoothed her already smooth hair. "You see, if I didn't exist for Beatrice, she didn't exist for me. My grandmother was someone named Amanda Johnston, a good, gentle, woman who grew flowers."

Margaret rose. A group of skiers was moving slowly toward the house, poles flashing out and back, gliding like skating birds.

"You really can stay and meet them."

"No. I'll keep in touch. Let me know if you change your mind."

"You can be sure that won't happen." Shirley had risen, too. The music condensed and amplified in the hallway, ushering Margaret out in grocery cart splendor. Shirley's smile was a brittle attempt to return to the formality she had shown earlier. Margaret responded by holding out her hand, palm extended.

"Look. Our hands are the same." Shirley's hand rose involuntarily and the lines around her mouth sharpened. The women stood matching palms and fingertips, silently assessing the whorls and inundations, the smooth texture, the fragile, translucent skin, the sloping nails with delicate matching half-moon cuticles tipping narrow bones.

"Yes, so they are."

"Genes," said Margaret.

"Goodbye," said Shirley.

Margaret heard the skiers entering from the opposite end of the house as she left. Along the walk to the drive the snow was cut away in a precise ninety degree angle. The snow from the drive had been piled neatly to one side and someone--a caretaker, she supposed--had shoveled around the railroad ties which abutted the parking area to expose their trim creosite-blackened sides. The long, curving road to the main highway was plowed with the same ninety degree angle sharpness. Within the confines of the Haines property, the round Northern Michigan winter had been pared to a nicety.

No other cabins were visible, though Margaret knew of a cluster on the northernmost side of the lake. All the surrounding property was held by a total of five families who had consistently resisted the trend of other northern lakes which had become small communities of boxes tumbling over one another from the hills ringing the lakes, where patches of water were just visible, down to every available inch of waterfront. When Shirley had spoken of spending her summers at the lake, she had been referring to the kind of lake which supports a kind of tourist-resort clientelle--busy with speed boats and sunbathers. Valentine Lake, on the other hand, was still largely wilderness except for a few patches of carved and expensive civilization. It had originally been the site of one of the earliest logging ventures in the county. There had been a post office whose foundations had long ago disappeared beneath an accumulation

of maple leaves and pine needles and trees felled by their own weight or age or disease. In the spring triliums and new fiddle ferns obscured the rotting logs of an even older fallen cabin where on one winter evening two women had calmly discussed which of them would sacrifice herself in order to feed the children who would survive on her flesh. Then the menfolk, smelling of the cold, had returned from their month-long trek on foot to and from Gaylord, thirty miles west, with a tale of a broken leg and frostbite. On their backs they had carried food. The children, like the large-eyed deer mice of the Upper Peninsula, had scuttled from the corner and begged to be lifted. The wind had moaned around the cabin like the spirit of the Indians the women had seen crossing the lake in their men's absence and they had remembered the keen cries of the coyotes ringing the house the night before, their voices in ominous harmony with the wind.

Unknowing, Margaret drove past the clearing where the buildings had stood. Had Beatrice been alive, she would have told Margaret the story, would have told her, too, who owned the mineral and timber rights of the land she was crossing.

Margaret sat in the room with windows over looking the street. It would be hot and stuffy in the summer, she

remembered. The downstairs rooms would be cool and dark, while the heat rose to the second story and thrummed against the ceilings. Still, this was a perfect studio. She shifted some papers on the window seat and strained against a window jamb. Painted shut. David could fix it. Examining each of the windows in turn, she decided she would have a perfect cross-ventilation system if this window and that window could be opened. David would do that. In his office down the street he was preparing the release forms of a mineral lease with representatives from Cliff Petroleum. Margaret had tried to sound enthusiastic. There would be time for that. She had often thought high finance might be fun. Perhaps.

"I thought I'd find you here."

"Oh, I didn't hear you downstairs."

"I know. I called. Here are the release forms."

Margaret put the papers beside some sketches on the window seat.

"Are you okay? It's going to be hot up here in the summer."

"Yes. Do you think you can get these windows open for me?"

"Probably." He put his shoulder under the window frame, testing his weight against it. "Me and a crowbar. Are you all right? Really?

"I'm fine. Just fine."

"Say...you finally finished the landscape." The canvas sat on the easel facing the light from the windows. The glowing autumn trees drew inward to the dense hill forest behind them. The tamarack danced in the foreground. Two figures walked the dry grass of the railroad grade: one, her arms raised, red jacket flapping around her wrists; the other, smaller, looking up and listening. "But Margaret, your hair is black." He raised a strand of Margaret's dark hair and watched it slide across his palm.

"So it is."