

Dean Koontz (Deanna Dwyer) – Dance with the Devil

[Version 2.0 by BuddyDk - August 6 2003]  
[Completely new scan]

## THE HAND OF EVIL

The church was brick colonial, compact and trim. “It's the second oldest building in town,” Michael explained. “After Owlsden, of course.”

He ushered her into a darkened vestibule: then Katherine moved ahead of him, into the church proper, peering to see in the dim light that came from the tall, extremely narrow stained-glass windows. The church was rich with the odor of furniture polish and candle wax and worn leather cushions. She would never have thought that there could be anything in a church to terrify her . . . until Michael turned on the lights. The three massive candleform chan-deliers illuminated an altar that was formed around a twelve-foot metal cross.

Hanging from each of the crossarms was the gutted corpse of a dog . . .

### **PUT PLEASURE IN YOUR READING**

**Larger type makes the difference  
This EASY EYE Edition is set in large,  
clear type—at least 30 percent larger  
than usual. It is printed on non-glare  
paper for better contrast and less eye-  
strain.**

**DANCE  
WITH THE  
DEVIL**

**Deanna  
Dwyer**

PRESTIGE EASY EYE BOOKS  
PRESTIGE BOOKS • NEW YORK

# DANCE WITH THE DEVIL

Copyright © 1972 Deanna Dwyer  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the U.S.A.

**PRESTIGE BOOKS INC. • 18 EAST 41ST STREET  
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10017**

## CHAPTER 1

Katherine Sellers was sure that, at any moment, the car would begin to slide along the smooth, icy pavement and she would lose control of it. She had not had that much driving experience; this was her first time on really bad winter roads.

The sky was a gray metal lid clamped on the pot of the world, so low and flat that it looked as if she could just reach up and tap a fingernail against it. A fine, heavy snowfall—as if someone were adding salt to the stew in this pot—shrouded the Adirondack country-side and swept across the hood of the old Ford, lacing over the windshield. The wipers thumped steadily, a pleasantly reassuring sound, but not reassuring enough to calm her queasy stomach and her bad case of nerves.

Katherine hunched over the steering wheel and peered ahead, straining to part the white curtain that seemed always to be advancing towards her, though it actually arrived and passed her by many times. In the city, cinderling crews would have been at work long ago, spreading salt crystals and ashes in the wake of the big, thundering plows. But here, in the boondocks, the situation was something else again!

She was driving off the slope of a mountain, and the trees were breaking into open land on either side. Here, the snow seemed even worse, for the wind howled through the bare land as it could not in the trees, and it whipped the white flakes into thick clouds, and it buffeted the car and cut her vision to less than thirty feet. The road had more than two inches of snow across it, and her car's tracks were the first to mar that virgin blanket. Now and again, the Ford slid and shimmied as if it were dancing, though it had not yet gone far out of control. Each time she felt that sickening lurch of spinning tires, her throat constricted and her heart thumped maniacally.

It was not only the snow that bothered her, but the desolation, the empty look of the landscape. If any-thing happened to her here, on this narrow country road in the middle of nowhere, she might not be found for hours—and perhaps not for days.

It was not a very reassuring prospect, to say the least. It had the effect, though, of making her sit up just a bit straighter and stare just a little more deeply into the snow.

All things considered, however, Katherine felt positively exhilarated. The few moments of clutching terror, when the car wanted to be a sleigh, only served to heighten, by contrast, the delight and excitement with which she looked forward to the days that lay ahead of her at Owlsden house. She was beginning a new life with a somewhat glamorous job and unlimited possibilities, new friends and new sights. No snowstorm could thoroughly dampen her soaring spirits.

Gazing upon the world out of such optimistic eyes, she was certain to be more shocked than most by what she saw in the open doorway of the abandoned, half-ruined old barn at the base of the mountain. It was so awful, so disgusting, that it drained away her previously unshakeable exhilaration like icy water flowing from a tap.

In the door of the ancient, long unused barn, which lay back from the road about fifteen or twenty feet, what looked like a cat dangled at the end of a rope, strangled by the tightly pulled noose.

She drove to the side of the roadway and stopped the car directly across from that hideous spectacle. She could not bring herself to look that way, to see if what she had glimpsed at first was real or a trick of her imagination. Heaven only knew, the weather was bad enough to distort things, to make one think one had seen something different than what was actually there. But even as she tried to convince herself of that, she knew she had not been mistaken.

The open land hereabouts had been strung across with rail fences in some more optimistic age, but it had proven economically unsalvageable. It had the stamp of desolation now, unused and unuseable in the midst of normally abundant country. She had passed many trim, pleasant, prosperous farms on the trip up from Philadelphia; this pocket of decay looked even more forbidding by comparison. The trees suddenly seemed craggy, hard and black and leafless, reaching for her with abruptly animated branches. The snow, now that the wipers were not running, had drifted over the windscreen and appeared to be seeking a way to get through the glass and cover her up in soft, suffocating cold.

“Oh,” Katherine told the warm air inside the car, “I’m really being silly now!” She grinned and shook her head. Moving trees, malicious snow! What would she be thinking of next?

The cat.

When she looked at the barn, the snow was falling even more heavily than before, so that she could not be certain if the dark object dangling in the center of the open doorway was really what she had thought at first. It could be a trick of shadows.

She preferred to think that it was.

She was especially fond of cats. She had been permitted a cat at the orphanage, as a child, and she had owned a second cat, Mr. Phooey, when she was in college. The first had died a natural death; the second had been struck and killed by an automobile. Both times, she had found acceptance of the death hard.

And now this . . . Well, this was clearly none of her business, of course. Even if that were a dead cat up there, she had no reason to call anyone to account for it. Still, a cat was a cat, and all cats held a mystic bond with her Spike and Mr. Phooey.

She looked both ways, hoping to see another car approaching. This was the sort of thing a man should handle.

The road was deserted in both directions.

She got out of the Ford, pulled her coat collar up under her chin. Still, the wind bit her cheeks, turned her pert nose a bright red, and managed to force a few cold flakes down her neck. She closed the door and leaned against it, looking at the thing hanging in the doorway. She shuddered and looked away from it again.

Where the farmhouse had once been, there was now nothing but a burned-out foundation of charred field-stones and crumbling mortar. Weeds had sprung up in the man-made pit, evidence that the disaster had taken place a good many years before.

On her side of the road, there was nothing but open land, some crippled length of fence. She had not passed any homes for several miles, but she thought there might be a few ahead on the road. All of which was an excuse to keep from going up to that barn and looking at what hung in its doorway. She forced her-self to stop pretending, to stop looking at the scenery, and to get on with it. The poor thing, if it was a poor thing, shouldn't have to hang there like that.

She walked away from the car, crossed the slippery road and stepped over another broken rail fence. The land, beneath the snow, was rocky and all but sent her tumbling several times.

Why don't I stop right here? she asked herself. What can I do, anyway? If it really is a cat, who could I find to take responsibility for its murder, and who would care to prosecute them? A cat, after all, is only an animal. That might sound cruel, but it was a fact.

Even an animal, however, deserved a proper burial. Suppose she had let Mr. Phooey out in the cold, to rot when summer came around? No, she could not turn away. Even an animal deserved privacy in its death.

When she was ten feet from the doorway, she knew beyond doubt that it was a cat and not some trick of light or her imagination. Each step closer was painful. When she was directly beneath it, she could see what had been done to it, and she turned away, staggering into the snow. She bent over and was very sick.

A while later, she came back, white-faced and trembling. Her revulsion at the brutality had now turned to anger, and anger as hot as a July day, here in the cold of January. She did not think there were any limits to what she would be capable of if she ever got her hands on the ugly, sick people who had mutilated the animal.

Gently, gently, she untied the cord knotted at a nail above the doorway. The noose had dug so deeply into the cat's body that she could not easily have loosened that.

She laid the little creature on the purity of the driven snow by the barn door.

Both of its eyes had been taken out. Its forepaws were bound together by heavy wire, and clasped in them was a tiny, silver crucifix which had been broken in two. Three hatpins marred its belly. It had, to be mercifully short, been tortured without conscience before its tormentors had seen fit to let it die of

strangu-lation.

Kids! Katherine thought. Whining little brats who had never been brought up right, selfish children who had no respect for life or beauty. She had known chil-dren like that both in and out of the orphanage, spoiled by parents or by the lack of them.

If she ever got hold of them, they wouldn't sit down for a week, and they would be made to know, deep down, what a terrible, ugly thing they had done.

She went inside the old barn, hoping to find a shovel or the remnants of some tool with which she could dig a shallow grave. The gloomy structure contained only the light that was emitted through the ground door and the open loft doors above. She was halfway across the main floor before she realized the nature of the chalk markings on the hard earth. She had seen their like in books and magazines: a huge, white chalk cir-cle spotted with pentagrams in some pattern that she could not discern; words scribbled in Latin, some of which she understood and some of which were alien to her. These were the marks of devil worshippers, peo-ple who paid homage to Scratch, Satan, the same demon in a thousand names.

The wind screamed across the roof in an abnor-mally strong gust, rattled the loose shingles.

She found that she was shivering, although the air inside the barn was not all that cold.

She stared at the floor more closely until her eyes had adjusted to the poor light. In a few moments, she found the place where the cat had been tortured: ex-actly in the center of the huge circle, in the center of the smaller pentagram, where the earth was stained with blood. To either side of the pentagram, puddles of pale, hardened wax indicated where burning can-dles had been placed for the ceremony.

This is New York, she thought, stepping slowly back from the traces of evil. This is not some South-seas Island, some haven of voodooism and the black arts. This isn't some Louisiana bayou country where the old myths still have power over the minds of men.

But she could not reason the evidence out of exist-ence, for she could see it there in chalk and in blood, in white and black-red, before her eyes and within her reach. If she wished, she could touch it and stain her fingers.

A moment earlier, she had been hoping to run across those who had perpetrated this atrocity. She had not thought of them as adults; indeed, she still found it difficult to believe that grown men and women would indulge in such debased activities. People were nicer than that, smarter than that, saner too. Yet, while her optimism and her natural love of people made it difficult for her to accept the truth, her intel-lect knew that this was so. She prayed, suddenly, that her wish would not be granted, that she would never ever in a thousand years meet the people who had done this thing.

She left the barn and stood in the snow again, per-mitting Nature's breath, the cool wind, to cleanse her of the taint of evil which she felt she had taken on from the very air of that room. Her long, yellow hair streamed behind her like a flag, dazzling in the gloomy world around it.

Away from those odd markings on the barn floor, her back to the dead animal lying in the snow, the ter-ror should have left her, but it did not. It abated, cer-tainly, but an abiding fear remained where the terror had been and *would* remain for a long while yet. She did not particularly believe in such nonsense as devil worship and the calling forth of unclean spirits. That was all just so much superstition. To Katherine, all spirits were good, the spirits of angels. But she did be-lieve, now and very reluctantly, in people so warped that they could conduct such ugly ceremonies, and she wished to have the taint these people had left behind blown loose of her.

She could not go away without burying the cat, even more than she could not have done so before. If burying the creature did anything to upset the intent of the Satanic rituals, she was going to be sure to put it beneath the ground! In five minutes, she was on her way back from the car with a lug wrench which was used for changing flat tires. Its one end was sharply bladed for prying loose stubborn hubcaps, and it chipped into the frozen earth quite efficiently. In fifteen minutes, the cat was buried, snow thrown over its shallow grave to conceal its exact whereabouts. The ever-increasing storm would further cover all signs of her work.

She hoped that, if cats had souls—as she was sure they must—this cat's soul was now at rest, that she had saved it from whatever spiritual limbo the Satan-ists had wanted for it.

Returning hurriedly to the car, her coat frosted with snow, her hair now hanging wetly across her shoulders and no longer dry enough to be blown about by the wind, she put the lug wrench in the trunk again and got back into the Ford. She sat behind the wheel for a long moment, wondering about the grisly scene she had just encountered and letting the cold seep out of her like syrup from a tree. If this were New York State, if this kind of thing was common in these Adirondack wildernesses, then she was crazy for going any further. Sure, this was the chance of a lifetime, but ...

Snap out of it, she told herself. Think of what this job means to you in terms of your future, think of the interesting people you'll be working with.

Five days before her graduation, just after Christ-mas vacation and during the final burst of studying for end-of-semester exams, Katherine was called into the office of the Dean of Student Personnel, a small and cheery man named Syverson who wore a mustache and a chin beard and looked, she thought, like a lepre-chaun. She did not know what to expect, but she auto-matically expected something *good*. That was her way.

As it turned out, her optimism had been well-founded, for Syverson had gotten her the job she was now traveling to take. Companion and secretary to Lydia Roxburgh Boland, one of the dozen wealthiest women in the country. Her duties would consist of traveling with the old woman in the spring and fall, reading to her, discussing books with her and, in general, making her feel less lonely than she otherwise might. According to Syverson, the woman was sixty-four but quick, lively and a joy to be around.

"But why me?" she asked.

Syverson turned a bright smile on her and said, "Mrs. Boland is an alumnus of our school. She and I have known each other for a long time, before she met and married Roy Boland, when she was a graduate student and I was a sophomore." He sighed at the passage of the years, then continued: "Later, when I joined the administration, I handled many of Mrs. Boland's endowments to the school, set up the trusts as she wished them and established a system of auditing to be certain that her wishes were carried out even after her death. She trusts me and, as she says, respects my judgment. When she called and asked for a companion from the graduating class this first semester, she left it up to me to choose a girl who would most suit her temperament. Someone attractive, someone with a pleasant disposition and an interest in meeting other people, someone intelligent enough to like books and understand them. Someone, in short, like you."

The salary was excellent, the fringe benefits fine as well. It was a dream job.

She asked Syverson: "What's the catch? Is there one?"

He smiled again. "Yes, but just a little one. Lydia insists on spending summers and winters in the family house not far from Long Lake in the Adirondacks. It's a somewhat isolated place to want to live, especially for a young and pretty girl. She says the summers are mild enough for her with a great deal of greenery and that she would be lost without living through the normal whiter blizzards she has known since her childhood. Unless you would find the atmosphere too rural, too lacking in diversions for—"

But she had assured him it would be just fine. And here she was with a degree in literature, a broken-down old Ford, four suitcases of clothes and belongings and a very bright future.

No number of devil worshippers were going to dissuade her from what she saw as a predestined future full of nothing but good.

Besides, she asked herself, where else would I go but to the Roxburgh House, to Owlsden?

She had no close relatives, and her parents had died long ago, longer than seemed possible. The only stable reference point she had was her life in the orphanage, but she knew that would have changed, her friends gone into the adult world. She had no place to return to, and it was partly out of this personal isolation that her optimism grew.

She started the car and drove back onto the road-way. The storm was now more furious than ever and had added an extra inch of powdery snow to the macadam. The wipers thumped at their top speed but were barely able to keep up with the whirling snow. As the light seeped from the sky and visibility grew even less conducive to travel, she tried to maintain her speed to cover the last miles to the village of Roxburgh—which had been named for Lydia's father before the turn of the century—before darkness crept in completely.

Dusk lay on the land like a brown cloak as she topped the ridge and looked down on the small town of one thousand souls which constituted Roxburgh. The town was nestled in the snow and pines, a tight little place even for so few as a thousand. The lights twinkled in the blanket of gauze that draped everything; smoke rose from the chimneys; here and there, a car moved on the narrow streets.

Roxburgh was such a pretty place, pervaded by such a sense of quietude, that her fears were further dispelled until the terror the Satanists had left with her was only a black grain of sand in the back of her mind, niggling at her. She could be happy in a place like this, away from the frantic pace of the modern world, among simple people with simple dreams.

She looked up from the town and searched the far ridge for Owlsden. For a long moment, she could not see anything but swirling snow, the skirts of ghosts, cold sheets flapping in the wind and beating across the rocky hillsides and the bare branches of the dark trees. Then she saw it thrusting up against the slopes, huge. The house was like a phantom ship, some abandoned Spanish galley which still bore on through the turbulent sea and poked its prow through the fog at night to frighten sailors on passing ships.

The snow obscured it again.

And then it was back, jumping into detail as if it had advanced on her across the gap of the valley. It dominated the land, held forth like a sovereign on a throne. Its windows, in a few places, glowed from within, yellow and harsh. They should have seemed warm and welcoming, especially to a natural optimist like Katherine, but they were more like the eyes of dragons. The house appeared to be three stories high and as long as a regulation football field. It was half-hidden by elms and pine trees, and its black slate, peaked roof jutted above anything that Nature had placed near it.

The snow veiled the house once more; it might just as well never have existed at all.

Who would build such a fantastic home here, in the mountains, away from everyone and everything, away from the high society types who might appreciate its cumbersome, costly majesty? What sort of man had Lydia Boland's husband been—a madman? A dreamer with no regard for reality, with no love of common sense?

As she drove down toward the village, her optimism had not been turned off, even though she was now thinking in terms of dragons and madmen. Instead, her optimism had been dampened slightly, as curbed as it would ever be. She realized that she was among strangers where the customs and daily routines might be alien to her. Alien enough, she suddenly thought with a dismayingly morbid turn of mind, to include blood sacrifices and the worship of the devil?



## CHAPTER 2

Descending the ridge into Roxburgh was such a hair-raising feat that Katherine nearly forgot about the dead cat, the Satanic markings on the floor of the barn and the fact that she was in a strange land. The tiny grain of fear in the back of her mind became even tinier as a *new* fear rose to take all of her attention: she was going to kill herself in this descent. She wondered if the same madman who had designed the rococo Owlsden had also had a hand in the planning of the only road that entered Roxburgh from the east. Surely, no sane highway engineer would have made the grade as steep as this or would have carved the two-lane so narrow that it looked more like a lane and a half. On the left, a rock wall jutted up fifteen feet to the edge of the ridge and then fell away, a constant reminder that she had only two or three feet of berm to use in case another car approached on its way out of the valley. On the right, the land dropped away for two thousand feet in the space of a yard, the way strewn with boulders and trees and tangled brush. No guard rails dotted that far berm to give even the illusion of safety; a slide on the icy pavement could very well end in a fiery tumble to the bottom of the gorge.

Without the snow, it would have been a simple matter. But the white flakes had mounted on the macadam, as yet undisturbed by a plow or even by another vehicle that had gone this way ahead of her, and it hissed across the windscreen, obscuring her view even as it lay like greased glass under her wheels. She did not use the gas at all and tapped the brake carefully, gently, keeping as steady a pressure on it as she could.

Over the top of the ridge, too, the wind blew harder than it had on the top of the mountain where the trees and the contour of the land bled its force. It gusted in like blows from a giant, invisible hammer. When she was a third of the way down the tortuous track, a violent blast struck the car from the direction of the precipice, startling her. Involuntarily, she stamped on the brake pedal, jolting herself forward as the Ford went into a perilously swift slide toward the right. The smooth gray stone wall, flecked with growing patches of snow and marred only occasionally by the twisted root of a hearty locust tree, rolled toward her as if the car were standing still and the wall itself was the motivated object.

She almost pulled the wheel to the left, realized that would be the worst thing to do and would only aggravate the slide—perhaps even send the car completely out of her control. Worse than the stone wall was the precipice on the left.

She let go of the wheel, except to touch it lightly with her fingertips and take advantage of the first loosening she might feel.

The nose of the Ford turned at the very brink of a collision and angled back in the proper direction. Her right, rear fender scraped the stone so softly that it could have been mistaken for the asthmatic wheeze of an old man . . .

Another explosion of wind boomed in from the abyss.

This time, she did not over-react, but let the car move gently down the snowy track toward the bottom of the valley.

Five minutes more, and she was on level land, ready to get out and pray at the nearest church. She felt she ought to thank *someone* for helping her down that awful incline.

The roughly made highway fed into a more clearly defined street which she saw, shortly, was called Costerfeld Avenue. It was a somewhat grandiose title for a half mile of curbed macadam, but she would not have traded it for the poorly maintained state highway she had just left—not for a guarantee of wealth, health or immortality!

In half a block, the mountain behind her was cut off by the great shafts of enormous pine trees which thrust up on either side of Costerfeld Avenue like sentinels guarding the approach to the town. Already, they were laden with soft, white snow like mounds of cotton or the gush of shaving foam from a spray can. Also, on either side of the street, small, snugly built houses were tucked back at the ends of short walks, slid in among stands of lesser trees—birch, elm, dwarf pine, dog-wood. Perhaps, without the snow, it was a dirty place, as scarred and spread over with grime as any other neighborhood. In the

snow, however, it was transformed into an almost fairylike scene, a cut of the North Pole straight out of a child's storybook. Snow hung from porch railings, softened the sharp angle of steps, whitened dark roofs and made marshmallows out of stubby chimneys. Indeed, it was all so still and lovely that it slowly ameliorated the fear she had felt in the descent of the mountain, just as the descent had shoved her fear of the Satanists to the background of her mind.

Katherine Sellers *wanted* to be happy. It took very little, therefore, to influence her always-ready streak of optimism.

Apparently, there were four main streets in Rox-burgh, made up of the arms of two major roads which crossed in the center of the town to form a traditional "town square" with a small park in the center of it and stores on the outside of the circle. It would be interesting to explore the side streets and the curious little backwoods shops when she got a chance. But not now. Right now, the only thing that mattered was getting across the small town and finding the road that lead up the other side of the valley towards Owlsden.

Even as she thought that, the street broke from the pine boughs and began to angle up the other valley wall, only a few miles from the place where she had come down. Owlsden house waited at the top, looming over her, looking almost sentient, its dragon eyes glow-ing more fiercely the closer she drew to its gates.

But, in the end, she did not get very close at all. Though driving *up* the icy slope was a good deal less trying than the uncontrolled descent had been, it was not nearly so easy on the Ford which fought the ascent at every turn. The tires spun in the dry snow and, at times, she found she was losing two feet of ground for every one that she surged forward. Again and again, she would gain a hundred yards on the slope, only to lose it in bits and pieces as the car slid inexorably backwards toward the village.

If she had been superstitious, she would have said that this was an omen, a sign that she was not meant to reach Owlsden house.

At last, wearier than she had realized, she let the Ford drift to the very bottom of the slope and backed it onto a widening in the berm where a picnic table rested under a huge willow. There was nothing left but to walk the last leg of the journey. Perhaps someone up at the house could bring her back, in a heavier car with chains around its tires, to collect her suitcases.

She turned off the lights, shut off the engine, took the key from the ignition, and opened the door.

Cold . . .

The air seemed twice as bitter here as it had on top of the mountain where she had found and buried the cat. The wind howled down the long, narrow, steep-walled valley just as water gushed through the natural contour of the land. It whipped the pine boughs around until they seemed like the arms of some un-earthly dancers going through a frantic routine. Clouds of cold, grainy snowflakes snapped about her, stinging, seeking open cuffs, a crack at the collar, a gap between the buttons.

She turned toward Owlsden which lay a mile or bet-ter up the road from there and had taken only a dozen steps when she knew that she could never walk it. The steep grade would have her on her knees or sprawled full-length as much as she would be permit-ted to stand upright—while the wind, scouring the valley walls, would lift the hem of her coat like the cloth of an umbrella. She turned around and faced towards the town again, held her hand over her eyes to keep the snow out of them. It was nearly as far to the square in town as to Owlsden, but on level land where she would find sure footing. Tucking her chin down and squinting her eyes, she started to walk.

By the time she reached the square, it was just after six in the evening. The stores were closed, except for a grocery-newsstand combination and a cafe. She chose the cafe, crossed the tiny, bench-dotted park, and went inside, brushing the snow from her coatsleeves and shoulders as she did.

The cafe contained three men in lumberjack clothes: heavy plaid hunting jackets, sweaters beneath those, heavy jeans with legs that laced at the bottom and fitted neatly into heavy-duty, unpolished black boots. An old, white-haired man in a tattered sweater sat at a corner table, by a large window that gave a view of the square, sipping coffee and reading a newspaper. The waitress behind the counter and the man at the short-order grill were both plump, middle-aged, ruddy-complexioned and pleasant-looking.

She sat on a stool at the counter and said, "A cup of coffee, please."

“Cream and sugar?”

“Both, yes.”

The waitress fetched the coffee and put it down. “New in Roxburgh?” she asked, smiling pleasantly. Her teeth were even, white and broad.

“Yes,” she said, unbuttoning her coat and shaking her damp, yellow hair away from her face. “I’m going to be Lydia Boland’s secretary.”

“Really!” the waitress said, obviously charmed at that.

The man at the grill looked up and nodded, smiled. Evidently, Lydia Boland was a pleasant topic of conversation so far as these people were concerned.

“Yes,” Katherine said. “But I’m having some trouble getting up the highway to Owlsden.”

“It’ll be locked in for days!” the waitress said, shaking her head knowingly. “The Roxburghs bought the town two plows and a cindering truck so we wouldn’t have to depend on the State to clear our roads. It takes the State two weeks to get into places like this after a major snowstorm. But even with the local plows, the way the wind whistles through here and drifts the snow, it takes a few days to get things back to normal.”

“I’d imagine so,” Katherine said. She sipped her coffee. It was hot, burning a path down her throat, breaking up the cold in her stomach. “That’s why I thought I really ought to get up to the house before things get even worse than they are. Could I use your telephone to call Mrs. Boland and see if they’ll send someone down for me and my luggage? My own car’s much too light to make that steep grade.”

“So will their car be,” the waitress said, swiping at the top of the counter with a damp rag.

“But I can’t stay here when I’m expected—”

“Let me call around to see if I can find Mike Harrison. He’s got a Land Rover that’s equipped to go anywhere.”

“I wouldn’t want to cause trouble—”

“Mike wouldn’t be troubled,” the woman assured her. “He likes to show his machine to people, like a grown man with a toy—and he’d surely want to meet the town’s newest resident. I’ll warn you, though, that you’ll have to endure a wild ride up the road to Owlsden; Mike doesn’t spare the thrills when he gives someone their first demonstration ride in that crazy buggy.”

“If you really think he wouldn’t mind,” Katherine said, “I’d appreciate his help. I’ll pay him well enough for his trouble.”

“No need to pay,” the woman said.

“But—”

“I doubt he’d take your money, seeing as how he has more of his own than he can ever easily spend. His father owns a lot of timberland on up the valley and two of the largest planning and processing mills in the mountains. Nearly everyone in Roxburgh has worked or now works for him.”

“I see,” Katherine said. “But if he’s who you say, he’s probably busy with—”

“He hardly ever does a decent day’s work,” the waitress said, though her tone was not sarcastic but warm, as if everyone looked kindly upon Mike Harrison’s sloth. “I’ll get him on the phone. Be back in a snap.”

She walked along the counter and said something to the man at the short-order grill, then disappeared into the kitchen where, apparently, the telephone lay.

Katherine finished her coffee and placed enough change on the counter to cover the cost plus a generous tip to compensate the woman for her telephoning as well as for her counter service.

By then, the waitress had returned. “Found him,” she said. “He says he’ll be delighted to take you up there.”

“Wonderful!” Katherine said, thinking about the treacherous road she would have had to try again if Mike Harrison had not been available or willing.

“He says to give him fifteen minutes to get his Land Rover and be here.”

The time passed quickly as she waited in the cafe for Harrison, mostly because the waitress was a talker—and a good one, relating one anecdote about Harrison, the town, the Roxburgh-Boland, after

another. She was the kind of woman who laughed a great deal and who would have looked out of place without an apron around her waist, a grandmotherly type whose gossip was never malicious. Katherine knew that, whenever she had a day off and wanted to get a bite to eat outside of Owlsden, she would come back here for the conversation as much as for the food.

At a quarter of seven, with darkness full upon the land now and the snow falling just as fiercely as ever, Michael Harrison arrived at the cafe, his hair laced with snow, his face pinched into a bright red heartiness by the brisk fingers of the wind. He was a tall, rugged-looking, handsome man, only a couple of years older than Katherine. His face was cut in Roman lines, with a high, broad forehead, well-set blue eyes, a straight, thin nose, firm lips and a chin cut square and strong. His shoulders were wide, his carriage that of a man who knows how to handle himself in any situation.

He crossed the cafe and actually did a modified, courtly bow to her, something she had never expected to find here in the wilds. His smile was positively dazzling. "You're our new resident?"

"Katherine Sellers," she said.

"I'm Mike Harrison, and I'm pleased to meet you."

"Me too," she said. She had swiveled away from the counter on her stool, but she had not risen. He was such a gentleman and made her feel—even after that brief exchange—like such a lady that she felt she ought to abide by more ancient traditions of manner and remain in her seat.

"I didn't know Lydia was hiring a new secretary."

"Companion, actually," Katherine said.

"I told her how much she'll like working for Mrs. Boland," the waitress said. "Couldn't find a kinder lady."

Katherine noted that, as the waitress spoke, a strange look passed across Mike Harrison's face, held more behind his eyes than in them, concealed but still partly evident. It was a look of irritation at what the waitress had said and, perhaps, an expression of qualification or disagreement with her sentiments about the Roxburgh-Bolands. It was the first sour note, no matter how small, she had discovered in the heretofore sweet apple of the family name, and she wondered exactly what it meant.

"Well," Mike Harrison said, "shall we be on our way now?"

"Whatever you say," Katherine said, standing and buttoning her coat. "We'll have to stop at my car and pick up my bags before going to Owlsden."

"Fine," he said. "There's a storage compartment in the Rover that's big enough to move a household."

"Now you take care of her," the waitress warned him. "Don't you give her one of those insane roller-coaster rides like you give everyone else."

Harrison grinned.

"You hear me?" the woman asked.

"Sure enough, Bertha. I will treat our Miss Sellers as if she were a carton of eggs."

"See that you do, or you better not come back in here while I have a frying pan handy."

Harrison laughed, took Katherine's arm and escorted her from the restaurant.

The wind struck hard against her flushed face. The temperature hovered just above zero and, with the chill factor of the wind figured in, must have been a *subjective* twenty degrees below.

"There she sits," Harrison said.

He pointed across the street to a large, sturdily-built vehicle that looked like a cross between an armored car and a jeep. It was parked by the grass circle in the center of the square. The snow that had sifted over it in the few minutes he had been in the restaurant, had obscured the windscreen and softened the brute lines somewhat. Still, it was obvious that no amount of snow could stop this workhorse altogether, for it looked almost like power personified, a machine of pure force.

"What do you think?" he asked, obviously proud of the Rover.

"I'm no longer worried about reaching Owlsden," she said. The wind snatched her words from her mouth and carried them away, but not fast enough to keep him from hearing her. He smiled and nodded. "Does it have a heater?" she asked.

"All the luxuries," he said, taking her elbow and leading her across the slippery street. He put her in the passenger's side and went around to get behind the wheel.

The engine started the first time he tried it, a noisy, roaring behemoth of an engine.

"Not as quiet as a Cadillac, perhaps, but able to leap tall buildings in a single bound."

She laughed and settled back, relieved to be in Mike Harrison's hands.

He drove into the street, circled the park and started out of town in the direction of the narrow road that lead up to Owlsden, his hands tight on the wheel, his driving experienced and sure.

"Not even a little skid," she said.

"Wait until we start up the mountain!"

"Remember what Bertha said."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm not going to give you a heart-stopping thrill ride. In this weather, I don't need to."

Then, for a moment, there was an awkward silence, since all the banal conversation about the weather and the Land Rover had already been exhausted and neither knew the other well enough to know what to talk about next. He broke the silence after a minute had passed. "I wouldn't think a young, attractive girl like yourself would choose to move into a place like Roxburgh."

"That's where the job is," she said, lightly.

"There are other jobs, surely, in places with more lights, more glamour and more things to do."

"Solitude appeals to me," she said. "At least I think it does."

"You'll have a great opportunity to learn whether or not it does if you live long in Roxburgh!"

"And the job sounds interesting," she said. "Ever-yone seems to like Lydia Boland."

Again, she saw a subtle reaction pass through his features: a tightening of the jawline, a squinting about the eyes. She wished she knew him well enough to so-licit his obviously different opinion of the Bolands.

"Everyone does," he said. "Everyone likes them." But she was still certain that he did not like them very much at all.

"Your car?" he asked a moment later as they came within sight of the roadside picnic area where she had parked the Ford.

"Yes," she said.

He pulled the Land Rover up next to it. "If you'll give me your keys and tell me where the suitcases are, you won't have to get out of the Rover again."

"I'm putting you to a lot of trouble," she said.

"Nonsense."

"But I am."

He grinned. "Then I'll get even when we go up the mountain." He pointed ahead at the narrow, snow-laden roadway which looked, suddenly, twice as steep and harrowing as it had earlier when she'd attempted to climb it in the Ford.

He took her keys and got out, closed the door and clomped over to the Ford, opened the trunk and lifted out two cases which he brought back. A rear door of the Rover opened to admit the cases and, in a moment, the last two as well. He slammed it shut, locked it, got in behind the wheel again and gave her the keys.

He said, "It's a good thing you decided not to force your way up in that car of yours. Even if you'd been lucky and made it most of the way to the top, you'd have gone over the edge on the last turn. It's a menace for the Rover, let alone for something with worn winter tires and a high speed rear end, like the Ford."

Swallowing hard at the prospect of having pitched over the brink in the old car, she said, "How long will it take to get up there, in this?"

He looked ahead. "It's a mile and a quarter, but all steep and all icy. I'd say there's six to eight inches of snow . . ."

She waited while he thought it out.

"If I heed Bertha's warning and take it easy, we ought to be up there in fifteen or twenty minutes. All right?"

"Fine," she said.

He looked at Owlsden, what they could see of it from this angle. "I don't think I'll ever understand why anyone would want to build a house in such an unap-proachable place—or, for that matter, found an entire town in the middle of nowhere."

He slammed the Rover into gear.

They jerked as the engine groaned and caught hold.

They moved forward toward the road and the as-cent to the Roxburgh estate at the top of the valley wall.

Even the Rover wallowed a bit in the treacherous climb, though Mike Harrison did not seem to think the ascent was all that spectacular. While Katherine tried not to look out her window at the yawning pit that opened on her side of the road but found herself look-ing in fascination anyway, he talked amiably, as if they were out for a Sunday afternoon drive to admire the local scenery.

At last, because talking about anything would be better than staring into the ever-growing chasm beside them, Katherine joined in the conversation and brought up the dead cat she had found in the barn.

"Where was this barn?" he asked immediately, tak-ing his eyes away from the road for a second.

She told him. "It was absolutely terrible," she said.

"I can imagine."

"It was all that I could do to touch the poor thing, let alone to dig its grave. But, I guess, someone had to do it."

"You buried the cat?" he asked incredulously.

Again, he took his eyes away from the road and looked at her. She wished he wouldn't do that.

"Yes," she said.

"You shouldn't have."

The Land Rover slipped sideways with a ratcheting noise, toward the brink, corrected smoothly as Harri-son touched the gas and shifted down a gear.

"Whyever not?" she asked.

She tried not to think about how close they had been to loosing a wheel over the abrupt lip of the berm. This situation was trying her optimism as badly as the descent down the other side of the valley had. Perhaps this was another omen, a warning to turn back, go home, find another job in a more conven-tional atmosphere.

"The people who did that thing—the people who tortured and hung that cat are not sane, Katherine."

"I realize that," she said.

"Well, you should have gotten away from there as soon as you realized what had taken place."

"Someone had to bury the cat," she insisted.

"What if one of them—one of these Satanists had come back?"

"I thought, once they'd used a place, they wouldn't be too open about returning to it. I didn't think those kind of people would show themselves in public, in daylight. They can't be *proud* of it, after all."

He nodded, still handling the wheel expertly as the Land Rover crawled laboriously along the snowy track toward the dark, towering mass of Owlsden above. "Perhaps that's true," he said. "Especially considering the public outcry that goes up every time someone un-covers a trace of these Satanic goings on in Roxburgh."

"You mean that people around here find this sort of thing *regularly*?" she asked, her attention finally di-verted from the road altogether, for the first time.

"Not every day, mind you."

"But often."

"Yes. Every month or so for the last year, year and a half. Sometimes the ceremonies are done in dilapi-dated buildings, sometimes in open forest clearings. I imagine more are performed and go unnoticed than those we find clue to."

"It's hard to believe," Katherine said.

Terrifying her by the gesture and drawing her atten-tion back to the danger of the storm and the road, he raised a hand from the wheel and waved it to indicate the craggy mountains, the great forests, the thickly grown and yet somehow barren landscape. "Considering this place, this land, it wouldn't seem so

strange to me.”

“Please use both hands to drive,” she said.

He laughed. “We’re nearly three-fourths of the way up now, and you’ve not come close to death yet.”

“Close enough,” Katherine said.

The windshield wipers thumped faster as he turned them up, hollow and heavy like the rapid beat of a panicked animal’s heart as it escapes the hunter’s line of sight. Ice had formed in the corners of the wind-shield shortly after they left the cafe and now began to send tentative crystal fingers toward the center. He also turned up the blast from the heater, melting the hazy barrier that had started to form on the glass.

To get her mind off the road again, and because she was curious, she asked, “Hasn’t anything been done to find out who these—these devil worshipers are?”

“Oh, in a town as small as Roxburgh, there has been a lot of spying on each other, neighbor watching neighbor.”

“Nothing more?”

“What would you do?” he asked.

“The police—”

“Have no jurisdiction. Aside from the fact that they kill someone’s pet now and again—usually a cat—they don’t break any laws. Christianity is the *preferred* religion in the area, but not codified by law.”

“Well, then,” she said, “even with neighbor spying on neighbor, someone ought to have aroused suspicion.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” he said. “Besides, it’s equally likely that the Satanists are from another town. Within a thirty mile radius, there are a dozen villages ranging anywhere from five hundred to a thousand in population. It could be someone from one of those, leaving their hometown to perform the rituals and thus keep the heat off their own neck of the woods.”

“I see.”

“Are you frightened by the notion of devil worshipers?” Harrison asked, a touch of humor in his voice.

“Not really,” she said.

“You should be.”

“Oh?”

The Rover shuddered as it bumped over some obstruction in the road that was hidden by snow, sidled toward the ravine, came under his control again and ground relentlessly toward the final curve before they crested the top of the road.

“You don’t believe in black magic and the power of evil, do you?” she asked, teasing him.

“Of course not,” he said. “But you’ve got to be wary of people who *do* believe in things like that, because they aren’t exactly right in the head.”

“I suppose so.”

He frowned, his mind clearly on more than his driving. After a moment, he said, “Everyone in Roxburgh is afraid of them; everyone is waiting for something to break because of them, something bad. Only the Bo-land family poohpoohs the notion that they’re dangerous.”

“They do?”

“Yes. The subject has been brought up at the town meeting a number of times. Lydia always attends—and Alex, her son, usually does. They always make light of the subject, joke about it. The other townspeople respect them so much that the subject is usually dropped.”

“Maybe they’ve got the right idea—treat it lightly and let it evaporate eventually.”

“Maybe. But I have the feeling that it is the same as finding yourself in a pit with a tiger and turning away from it hoping it will disappear.”

“Aren’t you being melodramatic?” Katherine asked.

“Perhaps I am. But I can’t help but wonder if these Satanists will ever reach the point where they’re

tired of sacrificing things like cats and dogs and an occasional rabbit.”

“I don't understand,” Katherine said.

He did not look away from the road now, for they were entering the sharp turn at the top of the rise, where the right-of-way humped, creating a natural spillage toward either the rock wall on his side or the crevasse on hers. He drove on the wrong side, taking the risk of striking the wall rather than of toppling over the precipice. In a moment, they were up and over, striking directly along the driveway to the mammoth oak doors that fronted Owlsden.

He said, “What I mean is: suppose they get bold enough to try a human sacrifice?”

Relieved that the trip was behind her, Katherine's urge to be happy soared again. “Oh, for heaven's sake, Mr. Harrison, you really *are* into cheap movie plots now!”

“Mike,” he said. “Don't call me Mr. Harrison; I'm not that much older than you.” He wheeled around in front of the great doors and braked the Rover. “And it's surprising how often old movie plots have parallels in real life.”

The twelve-foot doors of the house swung open, spilling yellow light across the snowfield, making iced points on the giant pine needles gleam like jewels on the end of miniature spears.

“I'll get your things,” he said, opening the door and stepping out.

She stood next to him as he placed the luggage in the snow and closed the rear door of the Land Rover, and she was aware that his attitude of jolly adventurism was gone. Instead, he seemed anxious to be away from Owlsden, as if he feared the place. He kept glancing up at the dark windows, at the slate roof, at the squat, dark figure that stood in the open doorway, watching them.

“I'd like to pay you,” she said.

“Not necessary.”

“I really think—”

“My father is a millionaire, and I'll be a millionaire one day too,” he said. “Now, if you can tell me what earthly good it would do me to take cab fare from you, I might accept it.” He smiled as he spoke, his face as incredibly handsome as it had seemed the first moment she'd seen him in the restaurant in town.

“Well, then I don't know how to thank you,” Katherine said.

“Your company was thanks enough, the sight of a new face and someone with a fresh outlook.”

“You flatter me,” she said. “I really don't know what I'd have done without your help, and I don't think any amount of conversation and fresh viewpoint repays you for that horrendous drive or the one you have to make to get back down.”

“The drive is second nature,” he said. “And without me, you'd merely have spent a week in town before coming up here. Maybe that would have been better than—maybe that wouldn't have been so bad.”

The man standing in the doorway came out to them. He was Katherine's height, five feet four, very broad across the shoulders, a beefy man packed with muscles like a weightlifter. His face was swarthy, his eyes dark and deep set. His mouth was wide, his lips thick and his voice European yet accentless when he spoke. “My name is Yuri, Miss Sellers. I am the general caretaker of Owlsden, and I hope you haven't had any serious trouble getting here in this abominable weather.”

“Thanks to Mr. Harrison, very little,” she said.

Yuri turned to the younger man now and smiled. From the coarse look of him, one expected the teeth to be broken and rotted. Instead, they were fine, white, pointed and even. “Mrs. Boland would like to invite you to remain for dinner.”

“I wouldn't want to impose,” Harrison said un-easily.

“No imposition,” Yuri assured him. “We set an extra place and cooked for another, in the expectation that only your Land Rover would be able to ferry Miss Sellers up here.” The gentle, cultured voice seemed odd coming from the brutal figure of Yuri.

“No thank you again,” Harrison said. “Please give Lydia my thanks and regrets. But I must get back down the mountain before the snow gets too much worse.” That was a lie, since everyone seemed aware that no degree of terrible weather could phase him as long as he had the Rover.



He went around to the driver's seat, closed his door after him and put the vehicle in gear. He drove jerkily away from them, kicking up clouds of snow behind.

“Come along,” Yuri said, lifting two of her bags. “I’ll get your last two cases in a minute.”

He lead the way across the lawn toward the open house, oblivious to the bitter cold, the wind and the snow, though he was only wearing a light suit without benefit of even an overcoat, hat or scarf.

Katherine turned and looked back toward the edge of the mountain, not certain what she hoped to see. But, not seeing it, she suddenly knew: the Land Rover. It was completely out of sight now, even the glow of its powerful headlights swallowed in the white mouth of the storm. She felt terribly alone.

## CHAPTER 3

The rooms of Owlsden matched the grandeur of the outside, with none of the brooding darkness that had bothered her about its mammoth walls. The entrance foyer was wallpapered in gold and white, carpeted in gold, with a bright, crystal chandelier filling half the ceiling with dancing strips of colored light. The corri-dor that lead from it to the main perpendicular hall that ran the great length of the mansion was also car-peted in gold, the walls paneled in rich, dark woods. Inset in the ceiling were flat plates of light, a strikingly modern touch in comparison with the antiquity of the house. The furniture that she saw—a writing desk, an umbrella stand, a few occasional chairs, a pedestal or two with busts and statues on them—was all heavy, dark and pleasantly modern, not chintzy Danish but modern furniture with a style, a feeling of artistic merit and value.

Yuri lead her down the south wing to the main drawing room through a wide, paneled arch into a bright room with a wine-colored carpet, cream walls, bold modern paintings and furniture of vinyls and plastics and polished, stainless steel.

“Miss Sellers,” he announced.

There were two people in the room, an old woman and a man about as old as Mike Harrison, twenty-four or twenty-five. For the first time, seeing mother and son together, it occurred to Katherine that Alex Boland had been what is often called an “autumn baby” or “late blessing” having been born when his mother was forty.

Lydia Boland was a tall—a good five inches taller than Katherine—regal-looking woman. She wore her hair off her forehead and then suddenly swept down at each temple, covering her ears. Her complexion was milky and flawless, her eyes dark and bright, quickly taking in everything about her new employee whom she had only met on the telephone and by letter prior to this. She was wearing a lounging pajama set of dark blue with a conservative white trim on the cuffs and collar. She stood up from her plush black vinyl lounge chair and crossed to Katherine, unexpectedly em-braced her and—holding her shoulders and standing at arm's length—looked at her in unashamed evalua-tion.

“You're even lovelier in person than in the photo-graph,” she said.

Katherine blushed, felt her face redden, probably to a scarlet. She hoped they didn't notice. She said, “Thank you.”

“I think we'll get along famously. I *know* it.”

“I hope so, Mrs. Boland.”

“Lydia,” the woman corrected her.

When Katherine felt that the woman was waiting for her to repeat it, like a child learning a hard lesson, she said, “Lydia.”

“That's better!” Lydia said. “I hate being addressed formally, because it makes me feel old.”

“You aren't old, mother,” the young man said, crossing to them. “Just—gracious.”

Lydia laughed and put her arm around his shoulder. “He has his father's way with words. He's a liar, but I don't mind those kind of lies.”

“Do you prefer being called Katherine or Kathy?” he asked.

He was as handsome as Michael Harrison had been, but in an altogether different manner. He was as tall as Harrison, with the same erect carriage and a sense of power—though he was somewhat slimmer. He was not fair-complexioned like Michael, but dark, perpetually tanned as if he might contain a drop of gypsy blood or less romantically and probably more accurately, some Latin ancestry. His eyes were dark, darker than his mother's eyes, almost black. When he looked at Kath-erine, she had the feeling that he was staring directly *through* her at some alien landscape beyond. His lips were thin, almost ascetic, his chin firm but not so much like carved granite as Michael Harrison's chin was. His voice was smooth, like oil, the words rolling forth seemingly without effort. He could have been, Katherine decided, a matinee idol anytime from 1920 to the present, with but a few minor changes in dress and hairstyle to conform with the dictates of each decade.

"I prefer Katherine," she said, "though everyone thinks I must be a snob or something when I say that."

"Not at all," Alex said. "I think Katherine is a lovely name."

"I do too," Lydia said. "And I can see at a glance that you're certainly not a 'snob,' my dear."

"Thank you," she said.

Lydia clapped her hands together now and said, "But you must be starved by now!"

"The drive in used up a lot of energy," Katherine admitted. "I was on the edge of my car seat the whole way—not to mention the tension in the Land Rover with Mr. Harrison."

"He didn't show-off too badly, did he?" Alex asked.

She detected a distinct note of disdain in Alex's voice when he spoke of Harrison, though he presented the same outward appearance of mild curiosity and friendly interest.

"The waitress at the cafe in town rounded him up for me," she said. "She warned him to be on his best behavior."

"Sometimes," Alex said, "he drives that thing like a child on a toy of some sort. He can be downright dangerous."

"Don't exaggerate, Alex," Lydia said. "I think Mike is a fine young man."

"You think everyone's fine," Alex said without rancor.

"Well," Lydia said, "the nearest bath is straight down the corridor the way you came, under the grand staircase, if you'd like to wash up for dinner. We can show you your room afterwards, if that's all right."

"Fine," Katherine said.

"The dining room is at the far end of the corridor, beyond the stairs. We'll wait for you there."

The bathroom under the staircase surprised Katherine, for she had thought of it in terms of a simple powder room. More than anything else so far, it gave her a sense of being among the very wealthy, for it was terribly lavish, though in good taste. It included a shower stall, a sunken, marble tub, thick, red shag carpet, a double sink, a revolving mirror between the sinks, a television set in a wall recess and a case of bath oils, perfumes and powders. It was nearly as large as the average living room.

By contrast, she was surprised at how small the dining room was, for it was no larger than the bath, with a table to seat four, buffets along two walls, two out-sized oils on the other walls, and just enough room to sit down and eat and be served in comfort. When she commented on what appeared to be an architectural mistake or eccentricity, she elicited smiles from both Lydia and Alex.

"It's the smallest of three dining rooms in Owlsden," Lydia told her.

"Three?"

"They were never meant to be used simultaneously, though," Alex said, grinning.

Lydia said, "This is the intimate room for small diners, while the dining area across the hall is meant to service anywhere from eight to twenty. Upstairs, on the second level, a grand dining room for large affairs has not been used in a great many years. It can comfortably seat a hundred people, a hundred and twenty in a pinch. But I'm not much for entertaining. In fact, I'm not really that crazy for Owlsden itself. I thought it was a monstrosity of poor taste when I was a little girl, and I've never changed my opinion. I am, however, *fond* of the place, since so much of my life and the meaning of my life has been formed in these rooms."

As the dinner was served—beef stroganoff over rice, a salad and two kinds of wine, as Lydia said, "to help you taste the food more completely"—she was introduced to Mason and Patricia Keene, a middle-aged couple who took care of the kitchen, meals, serving and all related household chores. The woman was slim and attractive with large, round eyes like circles of soft gray velvet, while the husband was balding and somewhat like a stereotyped high school English teacher. Both seemed quiet and even withdrawn, though very polite and efficient.

The conversation flitted from topic to topic as they ate and was never marked by an embarrassing silence. Indeed, Katherine thought, it was almost as if the three of them had known each other for years and were accustomed to spending many evenings together immersed in conversation.

Dinner finished, they retired to the drawing room again where they were served coffee by Mason

Keene and tiny fruit-nut cakes by Patricia. Somehow, without later being able to recall just what had lead her into it, Katherine mentioned the strangled, tortured cat and the Satanic markings she had found on the barn floor.

“How awful!” Lydia said. “It’s the worst possible welcome I can imagine.”

“Michael Harrison warned me to be careful of such things,” she said. “He said that if I ever came across anything like that I was not to hang around it for fear the Satanists would return.”

“Silliness!” Lydia said. “What would they return for?”

“Perhaps they wouldn’t appreciate my mucking around in their chalk drawings and disturbing the body of their sacrifice—”

“Don’t listen to Harrison,” Alex said. The disdain-ful tone had come back into his voice, stronger than it had been before. “These so-called Satanists are proba-bly a few local teenagers playing some silly games to keep the adults up in the air.”

“But killing animals is more than a game—that’s ugly mischief.”

“Still, some teenagers can be ugly when they want,” Lydia said.

“I suppose.”

Lydia picked up one of the last pieces of cake and took a dainty bite from it. When she had chewed and swallowed, she said, “Anyway, even if it isn’t a prank, one can hardly take Satanists seriously. I mean, all those ghostly chants at midnight, drawing chalk circles and trying to summon demons, selling their souls . . . It’s so absurd that it’s nearly funny.”

“I guess,” she said, though she did not like the way they were so quick to belittle the notion of danger.

“Don’t let Harrison upset you,” Alex said, smiling at her over the last of his coffee, white trails of steam rising in front of his face so that it looked, at odd mo-ments, as if he were staring at her through an ethereal veil. “He never has been one for responsibility. His approach to the Satanists pretty much matches his irre-sponsible behavior in other ways.”

“Really, Alex,” Lydia said, “you don’t have to be that hard on the boy, do you?”

“I don’t like him,” Alex said flatly. His dark eye-brows pressed together over his nose as he frowned, and his lips were compressed as tightly as two pencil lines.

“I think he seems a fine, capable young man,” Lydia said imperiously, as if the subject were now closed.

“You’re generous with everyone,” he said. “Far too generous.”

Katherine wished she could derail this most recent line of the conversation and get back to more pleasant topics. She had noticed, all through the evening, that Alex Boland tended to look upon the gloomy side of things, tempering his mother’s bright and cheerful out-look on nearly every subject. His put-down of Michael Harrison, whom Katherine had liked a good deal, was like a black cherry on the top of his vaguely unpleas-ant fault-finding.

Lydia looked at her wristwatch for the first time that evening and said, somewhat surprised, “Good-ness, it’s going on eleven o’clock!” She smiled at Kath-erine and said, “I guess that’s s certain proof that we are going to get along well together—I didn’t notice a dull, dragging moment all evening long.” She stood up, dusting her hands together. “And I’m afraid that I have not been at all thoughtful. You haven’t even been shown your quarters yet—or given a chance to rest. You must be enormously weary after a day of driving in this weather.”

“I do feel ready for bed,” Katherine admitted.

“I’d imagine the covers are turned down,” Lydia said. “Your private bath contains extra linen and tow-els, but Yuri can show you all of that.”

“One thing,” Katherine said.

“Yes?”

“I’d like to know what time I’m expected to be up and around in the morning and if—”

Lydia said, “No trouble there. I rise at eight-thirty or nine o’clock in the morning—neither country-early nor rich-late.” She chuckled, a sixty-four-year-old woman who looked fifty and acted thirty-five. “I’m usually ready to dictate a few letters or clear up some other business by ten-thirty or so.

If you're available then, that's fine."

"Marvelous!" Katherine said, unable to contain her enthusiasm for the relaxed schedule.

In the orphanage, the morning began promptly at seven o'clock, rain or shine, no matter what the sea-son, except for Saturday when there was no school, no crafts and no church services. Then, you could sleep until nine or nine-thirty before the maids wanted in the rooms. In college, she had worked part time, odd hours. The job and her regular classes had precluded any lazy mornings. This position, then, was going to turn her into an idler if she were not careful—but a happy idler, anyway.

"Well, Yuri will show you to your room. He has al-ready placed your bags there."

When Katherine turned toward the arch, she discov-ered that the squat servant was waiting for her, framed by the arch as he had been framed by the massive front doors when she had first seen him earlier in the evening. He was smiling, all of his fine, white, pointed teeth showing. She had not heard his approach, and she barely heard his invitation as he said, "If you will come this way, Miss Sellers, I'll show you to your quarters."

"Goodnight," Katherine said.

They replied in kind as she passed through the arch in Yuri's wake, and Alex wished her a special "good sleep."

She followed Yuri up the dimly lighted main stair-case which was entirely of polished teak, so dark that it was almost black, so expensive that she did not want to consider the cost. Lydia's father had certainly been a show-off with his fortune. It was clear why Lydia, even as a child, had looked upon Owlsden as a mon-strosity.

Her room was at the end of the corridor on the north wing, second floor. It was nearly as spacious as the drawing room in which they had spent most of the evening. The bed was a massive four-poster without a canopy. The ancient headboard contained twelve clev-erly concealed drawers and storage slots which Yuri pointed out to her, one by one, smiling as she mur-mured her approval of the ancient craftsman's fine work. A crimson bedspread lay across the sheets, and two goose-feather pillows were plumped beneath it at the base of the headboard.

The furniture on both sides of the bed—a hutch, tri-ple chest, a large easy chair with a matching footstool, a full-length mirror on a stand that permitted it to be spun about or tilted at nearly any angle, a vanity and matching bench, two nightstands each with a lamp— was equally dark and massive and lasting in appearance, but it was comfortable furniture that she would soon feel at home with.

The bath which adjoined her bedroom contained a shower stall and a sunken tub and was quite as elabo-rate as the bath beneath the stairs on the first floor. The beauty cabinet contained a wide variety of oils, scents and powders, plus clean, plastic-wrapped combs and brushes. The wall closet held extra sheets and tow-els, though Yuri made it plain that her bed would be made for her every morning and that the linen and towels would be changed regularly.

One of the three closets which lead off the bedroom contained a waist-high refrigerator which had already been stocked with fruit juices, sodas, cheeses and a few other snacks. He informed her that she had only to tell Patricia Keene what she would like to have supplied her, and the refrigerator would be re-filled twice a week or as often as was required.

She loved it. It was perfect, or as close to perfection as anything she had had before.

"May I please also make a suggestion that might concern your safety and happiness in Owlsden?" Yuri asked.

The tone of the question, the strained expression on his broad face were at odds with the good-humored tour guide he had been only a moment earlier. "Cer-tainly," she said, apprehensively.

"Lock your door when you retire each night," he said. "The iron bolt is ancient but sound."

"Why should I lock it?" she asked, curious about the secretive manner in which Yuri had broached the subject. She was certain that he did not want Lydia and Alex to know what advice he was giving her.

Obviously, he did not want to explain the sugges-tion, and he looked down at the carpet, as if she would forget that she had asked. He said, "And if you are wise, you will not leave Owlsden for a stroll around the grounds—not once the hour of midnight has passed and not before dawn."

"Yuri—" she began, not a little exasperated by this sudden, mysterious turn in the conversation.

“Come here,” he said abruptly, walking toward the largest window in her room. He was confident again, sure of himself. It was clear that he had decided to tell her everything, the reasoning behind these odd bits of advice.

She went to the window and looked out.

The snow was still falling, more like a horizontal avalanche than a snowstorm as the wind drove it from left to right across the window. The view looked out from the back of the house on a lawn that was not clearly defined in the blizzard, toward an endless stretch of scraggly darkness which she took to be the forest.

“It must be a beautiful view by daylight.”

“Quite,” Yuri said. “But in darkness, at midnight and after, it is something else again.”

“Are you trying to tell me its haunted or some-thing?” she asked.

“Something,” Yuri said, “but not exactly haunted.” He wiped a thick hand across the sweat-dotted expanse of his broad forehead, then continued, “Twice in the last several months, I have stood at the second floor windows and watched strange lights and stranger figures cavorting down by the pines, at the very edge of the forest, not more than seven hundred yards from this window.”

Katherine felt chilled, though her room was adequately heated. She said, “What are you trying to tell me?”

He sighed. “Miss Sellers, my home is Romania, a dark but beautiful land in Europe. I was born there and grew up there and did not leave until 1942 when I fled the influence of the Nazis. In Romania, indeed in much of Europe, the people do not scoff at many of the things that you in America find so amusing. A belief in evil spirits, possession and exorcism, werewolves and vampires is as common a part of their lives as the knowledge that they must one day die in the natural cycle of things. I am an educated man, as I hope is evident, and yet I can see the wisdom in many of these beliefs and accept the knowledge of generations even if science laughs at it.”

“And you think there are werewolves in this forest?” she asked, trying to be light and airy, but not quite succeeding.

“Worse than that,” he said, a flicker of a smile passing across his thick lips, a smile that contained more of a sense of irony than of good humor.

“What, then?”

“Twice, I have watched a devil’s dance in progress.”

“A dance?”

“I know that you’ve heard about the Satanic cult that has been practicing its own brand of ‘religion’ in these hills during the last year and a half.”

“Yes,” Katherine said, not bothering to explain about the cat she had found.

“When these cultists welcome a new member to their ranks, a new soul designated for Satan, they perform a devil’s dance that is not unlike those I witnessed as a child in Romania. It is an age-old ritual of evil with the most frighteningly powerful ceremonial frenzy I have ever seen. The cultists pray to Satan as the bonfire is lighted, then they slaughter an animal and cast its blood into the flames. Blood is also splashed upon the earth in a circle about the fire, a preliminary guide to the path the dancers will take. In the middle of the dance, if the cult is performing it sincerely and if the new member is a desirable soul to possess, the devil appears in some form or other—perhaps as a dog or wolf, perhaps as a great leopard or black panther with yellowed eyes. He rises on his hindpaws and dances with the new member, to welcome him to the legions of the damned.”

“You can’t be serious,” Katherine said. At first, he had frightened her with his warning about the locked door. Now, when she could see that he was merely superstitious, the warning was less unsettling. She could fear prowlers and other human agents, but not spirits of another world. It was almost comical.

“I am very serious,” Yuri said.

She realized that she had hurt his feelings, and she said, “And after the devil has danced with the new cultist?”

“He punctures the throat of the newcomer with his fangs and drinks the blood—simultaneously

spitting his own hideous plasma back into the tainted body.”

“That’s positively grotesque!” Katherine said, turn-ing quickly away from the window and the forest beyond. “You Romanians have a morbid imagination, don’t you?”

“Perhaps it is not imagination at all,” he said, wip-ing at his face again, as if brushing off a cobweb that he had walked into. “Perhaps it is only *observation*”

“I’m sorry, Yuri, but I think that sounds silly; I can’t accept it. Understand that I wasn’t born and raised in Europe, but here in the United States. We teach our children that the devil is little to be feared and that all those other things—werewolves and vam-pires and so forth—are only real in the movies.”

He had crossed the room as she spoke and stood by the carved door. “I understand,” he said. “And please try to understand me, too. I was not attempting to frighten you, but was merely presenting what seemed to be good advice. Will you lock your door when you retire?”

Reluctantly, she said, “Yes.”

He smiled, pleased with even this small concession, and said, “Excellent! Goodnight, Miss Sellers.”

He was gone in a moment, closing the heavy door behind him, leaving her alone for the first time since she had entered Owlsden.

Katherine sat on the edge of her bed and looking into the full-length mirror that rested on its stand only half a dozen feet away, surveyed her appearance. She realized that her expression was drawn and haggard, the corners of her mouth turned down and touched with doubt. She looked as if she had actually been ter-rified by Yuri’s nonsense and would spend every night in Owlsden shivering in expectation of a vampire flut-tering close by her window. She suddenly laughed; the figure in the mirror laughed too. Seeing her smile reflected, she felt a great deal better.

As she prepared for bed, she had time to consider the little scene that had so recently been played out be-fore the window in this room, and she began to won-der if Yuri had motives beyond those that he claimed. He was obviously well educated and it was exceedingly difficult to believe that he was as superstitious a man as he pretended to be.

But what other motivation could he have? Did he mean to frighten her? If so, why?

When she was ready for bed, she found that her ruminations had driven away all desire for sleep. Her eyes felt as if they were pinned open and lacquered in position.

She opened her suitcases and unpacked them, hung her clothes in the two large closets and folded others away in the drawers of the hutch and the triple chest.

When she finished unpacking, she went to the win-dow and stared out at the snow and the distant woods where, Yuri insisted, the devil’s dance had taken place. It all seemed unreal.

She went to bed, slid beneath the covers, and reached over and turned off the bedside lamp. Dark-ness flooded into the room, deep and complete at first, then slowly lightening as the less-dark night sent pale, questing fingers of light through the uncurtained win-dows.

Everything was going to be fine, she decided. The job was perfect. She liked both Lydia and Alex Boland and as a change from the things she had known previ-ously, she liked the almost embarrassing luxury of Owlsden. The future could not be brighter. Except . . . except, what had Yuri been trying to tell her, and why had he *really* felt it necessary that she keep her door locked at night . . . ?

## CHAPTER 4

She sat straight up in bed, her heart thumping in her chest like a quickly-beating drum. She blinked her eyes at the intense darkness until she remembered where she was. The bedside clock, in glowing numerals, read 2:10. She did not know what had awakened her, but she knew it must have been a loud noise to have cut through the deep and peaceful sleep she had been enjoying.

Pushing the covers away, she got out of bed, stepped into her slippers and went to the window.

The snow was falling as hard as before and had covered everything in a soft, woolly blanket. Here and there, the wind had drifted the snow forming curiously lovely curves and sweeps of whiteness.

The night, but for the relentless wind and the hiss of snow on the windows, seemed as still as a graveyard. Certainly, there were no prancing cultists around a bonfire . . .

Suddenly she heard something: like a man groaning . . . just beyond her shoulder, groaning in pain.

She recognized now the sound that had awakened her. It was hollow, bled by the susurrations of the wind against the house, but still chillingly threatening.

Turning away from the window, she tried to place it, decided that it was coming from the corridor rather than the night beyond the glass.

As she walked toward the door, she recalled Yuri's concerned admonition to keep her door locked and to avoid going out of her room during the night hours, and she wondered, only briefly, if this strange moaning sound was one of the things that he had been trying to warn her about. Then she sighed in disgust at her even momentary consideration of the Romanian's superstitions, ashamed that she had let the gloomy, sullen mood of the chill night get to her so badly.

The moan came again. It was definitely in the main corridor and not too very far away from her door.

The sound *was* odd indeed, but within the realm of sensible explanation, she felt sure—not a vampire or a werewolf, not a banshee, not the beseeching call of a devil seeking souls—something altogether common and unharmed.

She opened her door and listened until the sound came again, like the soft cry of someone in pain. She placed it very near at hand, though she could see nothing close by.

Stepping into the hall, she silently closed the door. She let her eyes adjust to the deep darkness which was relieved only minimally by the very weak light that passed through the tiny casement window at the end of the hall on her right. In a few minutes, when she could see fairly well, it became obvious that no one else inhabited this half of the main corridor. The half of the hall beyond the stairwell was too far away and too dark for her to see clearly. But that didn't matter, for the noise was nearer at hand.

The cry came again, much longer this time but still tantalizingly indefinable. It might be someone in pain—or it might be nothing more than the wind blowing through a nook in the roofing.

Curiously, it sounded as if it were generated directly overhead, not more than a few feet away.

She looked up.

Nothing . . .

There was a door across the corridor, and it seemed the best place to look first. She knew, from Yuri's comments as he had led her to her room earlier in the evening, that no one slept in that room—at least, he had not mentioned it to her while pointing out the bed-chambers of other members of the household. She crossed to the door, pulled it open and found a set of dusty stairs leading upwards into a Stygian pool of darkness.

She had brought a flashlight with her, and now she was glad that she always thought of the little things when she packed. Returning to her room, moving silently so as not to wake anyone in the house if the strange noise had not already stirred them, she found the light and brought it back to the stairwell. She flicked it on, shone it on the worn, wooden risers which, judging from the patina of dust, had not been trod in several years.

The cry sounded again.

Standing in the open doorway, she could hear it far more clearly than ever, drifting down the steps



from the unused third level.

It occurred to Katherine as she stood there at the bottom of the stairs that this was none of her business, this odd cry, and that she would be far better off if she turned right around, went back to her warm bed and tried to get some sleep. That would, however, be something of a concession to the doubts which Yuri had placed in her mind, a concession she was loathe to make. Superstitions. No one in Owlsden had any reason to hurt her. On the contrary, they had every reason to treat her well. Besides, her curiosity had been so strongly aroused that she could not deny it and then hope to find any sleep.

She started up the stairs.

They were so well-made that none of them squeaked under her.

At the top, she had still not encountered anyone or anything that could have been making the odd noise. She shone the flashlight behind her and looked at the scuff marks that her slippers had made in the virgin blanket of dust, then faced front again and examined the corridor in which she found herself. This one was much like the first and second floor halls, just as richly appointed, as high-ceilinged and as eccentrically inlaid with exotic woods. The carpet had been rolled up long ago and replaced by a carpet of brown dust. The furniture had been removed, she had the feeling that the rooms off the hall would be equally barren.

The air was colder up here than in the lower regions of the great house. When she touched the radiator that walled the entire end of the corridor to waist height, she found that it had been turned off and was icy.

The cry came again, directly ahead of her, across the hall. She went there, the light ahead of her like a sword, and opened the door of the room that lay directly over her own.

The sound rolled over Katherine as she pushed open the heavy door, so near that she jumped involuntarily, as if the sound had possessed a sharp physical impact.

"Who is it?" she asked.

She was answered only by silence.

She took a step forward.

"Is anyone here?"

She waited, took another step.

"Are you hurt?"

The cry came again.

She directed the flashlight beam to the left, passed it along the empty floorboards and undecorated walls where the antique, flowered wallpaper was peeling away in long, yellow-brown, snaky strips.

This time, when the noise came, she realized that it was more to her right, and she began to turn that way when she saw the yellow eyes watching her with cold, evident malevolence, each eye as large as a quarter and as fixed on her as if they were painted.

She almost screamed, but found that her throat constricted so tightly that she could do nothing more than emit a weak, hissing sound that would attract no one to her aid.

The creature moaned again.

Its cry suddenly sounded naggingly familiar, although she could not place it.

The eyes blinked, opened on her again, watching.

Back-stepping toward the door, she finally managed to put the light on the thing and, as she did so, to overcome the unreasonable, clutching fear that had so swiftly taken control of her. She was glad that she had not been able to scream, for she would only have made a fool of herself. All that she faced was a small, brown owl that sat on the bare floor with its wings hunched and its beak open, working out that soft, ululating *whoing* noise.

"Owlsden," Katherine said to the owl.

It blinked.

She laughed just a trifle nervously, then shone the beam of the light around the room again. The ceiling here was open-beamed, taking advantage of the magnificent, polished oak rafters. Two places in those rafters, owls sat looking down at her, chinless as their white chests puffed up over the straight columns of their necks.

They cried out in unison, the great, empty room giving their voices an echo-chamber effect that explained how they had carried to her so well and had pulled her out of sleep.

One of the things she had meant to ask Lydia, but had forgotten, was why the house was so curiously named. Now she would not have to ask. It was a haven for owls, providing in its abandoned third floor a place of refuge from foul weather.

She left the room, closed the door behind her, went to the stairs and descended to the second floor. In a few moments, she was in her room again, tucked beneath the covers.

The owls hooted, as if sending her a special message of their friendship.

As sleep crept up on Katherine once more, she speculated that this small event was representative of the larger conflict of two main approaches to life—her optimism for which she had now and then been chided by other students in college, and Yuri's pessimism which easily made possible the silly superstitions he said he believed. There was nothing in Owlsden to harm anyone. Yes, there were Satanists in Roxburgh or somewhere in the outlying districts, holding their rituals of blood and hate, but one only had to think of them and deal with them as one would with spoiled, nasty children, and there would be nothing whatsoever to worry about.

She was not going to worry about demons, devils, and ceremonial dances of evil.

The owls hooted.

She realized, as she drifted into sleep, that she had already become accustomed to them and that she found the sound of their nocturnal cries somewhat comforting. . . .

## CHAPTER 5

In the morning, the storm was gone, leaving more than twenty inches of fresh, blindingly white snow dumped on Roxburgh and the surrounding countryside. The trees were hung with it, the pines bent under their hoary load, a few of the birches even snapped in two under the tremendous weight. The drifts on the west side of the house were swept up over most of the first floor windows, while the lawn behind was nearly scraped barren of its share of whiteness. The sky was bright and blue, cut through here and there by gray remnants of the storm, or by cloudy pre-monitions of another snow.

Katherine took breakfast in her own room, some fruit juice and a sweet roll. She had never been one for eating heavily in the morning, preferring to skimp even through lunch so that, at dinner, she could indulge herself and still not overeat. Though slim, she knew she had a tendency to add weight quickly if she didn't watch herself.

When she got downstairs, she found Lydia Boland in the library which also served as her "office." The room was lined with bookshelves that ran clear to the ceiling, all packed tightly with an unbelievable number of paperback and hardbound volumes. There was even a stool for reaching the titles on the middle shelf and a rolling ladder whose wheels fit into a tiny track in the ceiling, making it possible to move the ladder wherever one wanted it and then to climb up and easily obtain any volume in the room.

"Good morning!" Lydia said.

She was sitting at a large, pine desk with a massive slab top at least three inches thick, with legs as sturdy as bedposts. It was so huge and masculine that it dwarfed her and made her seem much smaller than she was, smaller than Katherine. This did not, however, make her look more aged, but rather younger, almost like a little girl in her bright yellow dress.

"Good morning," Katherine said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Fine, thank you. And how was your first night in Owlsden?"

"I found out how it got its name," she said.

"Oh?"

"Yes." She told Lydia about her middle-of-the-night adventure.

"How wonderful!" Lydia said. "I forgot to mention them to you. Most girls would have locked their door and pulled up the sheets and forgotten about the noise."

"Maybe my curiosity will kill me some day," Katherine said.

"Don't believe it. Only those people with curiosity ever amount to anything in this life."

There was more pleasant conversation, and then the dictation of a few letters which Katherine took in shorthand and typed on rich, embossed vellum stationery, using the IBM electric that was the only modern thing in the library.

As she was finishing the last letter—Lydia was looking over something in a book she had taken from the shelves—Alex Boland poked his head in the door. "I think I'll be going into town, Mother. Still want Katherine to go with me?"

"Yes," Lydia said. She put her book down and turned to Katherine. "I believe your records say you ski."

"There's a run into town?" Katherine asked.

"An excellent one," Alex said. "About a two mile winding slope that leads gently through the pines and feeds almost directly into Costerfeld Avenue."

"I'd like you to accompany Alex," Lydia said. "Let him show you the town. Roxburgh has been my life, or most of it, and I want you to become thoroughly familiar with it."

"I'll have to change," Katherine said. "Give me twenty minutes."

"Right," Alex said. "I'll meet you outside the kitchen door."

The day was cold but, without the wind, she found it far more endurable than the day before. She

was dressed in blue insulated ski slacks, black sweater, thermal jacket, sturdy boots and toboggan hat. When she came out the kitchen door, she saw Alex standing far off to the south, at the edge of the mountain slope where the first downward angling of the land began. She went to him, kicking at the snow as she did.

He said, "How much have you skied before?"

"Quite a bit," she said. "The orphanage where I grew up was near a resort that used to let us kids in free if we were interested. I was one of the few who were interested, and I spent a lot of my free time there."

He nodded. "This shouldn't be any trouble. Look."

A wide swath of clean snow, guarded by towering pines, lead down the mountainside, cut at one edge by what appeared to be power pylons carrying two thick cables.

"It looks easy enough," she said.

They put on their skis, and Alex went over the edge first, swishing through the clean snow, cutting two shallow runners as he went. She followed close behind, watching him, letting his movements dictate hers as they swept down the snaking trail.

The wind bit at her, whined off her vinyl slacks and jacket, snapped her yellow hair out behind her and tried to tug away the toboggan cap which was strapped beneath her chin.

Snow thrown up behind Alex splattered her goggles. She wiped them off and dropped back fifty feet until she was not bothered by his wake.

The trees flashed by so fast that, if she looked to ei-ther side, they almost seemed like a continuous rail fence of gargantuan proportions.

She felt gloriously free and renewed. One day on the job, and already she knew that she would be happy to be Lydia Boland's secretary and companion for the next fifty years if Lydia happened to live to be over a hundred.

Suddenly, the trail twisted and swept directly down toward the village of Roxburgh, the slope grading into a gentle run at the bottom of which, two hundred feet away, Alex waited beside the last of the tall, gray py-lons. She brought herself to a stop beside him, shower-ing snow over his head.

"Like it?" he asked.

"Wonderful!"

He drew her attention to the pylon beside them and showed her how to operate the simple controls. The cables did not carry electrical power at all, but formed a rudimentary ski-lift to the top of the mountain. One had only to grasp the lower cable, turn on the device and be dragged up the mountainside.

"It can be hard on the arms," Alex said. "But you can stop and rest once or twice and then grab it again. It won't shut off until you reach the top and re-set the controls up there."

"I was so excited about getting on skis again that I never wondered how we would get back. I guess the road isn't open yet."

"Not yet," he said. "But without the wind, the drifting won't be so bad. They'll have everything cleared up by tonight." He sat down in the snow and began to unbuckle his skis. "Come on, let's get into town for a cup of coffee at the cafe. My face is still stinging from the cold."

By the time they had walked into the square, pausing now and then while Alex commented on the town along the way, they were both slightly flushed from the exertion and no longer chilled. They decided to postpone the coffee until they had thoroughly prowled from one end of Roxburgh to the other.

Connecting the four main streets of Roxburgh like robins running from one spoke of the wheel to the other, were narrow, twisting alleyways and dead-end avenues which gave the town a feeling of size that it did not genuinely possess. They explored these streets, stopping to look at unusual pieces of turn-of-the-century architecture: an eight-room log cabin that had recently been renovated into a magnificent home; a stone grocery store and post office combination that, with its sunken windows and recessed double-open en-tryway, looked more like a fort than a grocery; the Catholic Church, which was done all in unpainted nat-ural pine with wooden pegs used for nails, composed of a thousand

fascinating angles and beams and struts, a miniature cathedral large enough to seat a hundred and fifty at one time, capped with such intricate detail as handcarved pew edging and altar panels.

As they walked, Katherine learned that the Rox-burgh family had originally made their money in ship-ping, later in railroads and highway construction. It had been Lydia's father's conceit that the Adirondack wildernesses would swiftly open to the railroads and to the not-too-distant automobile which, he maintained, would cross these mountains on hundreds of road-ways, bringing civilization into the heart of the back-lands. He had been too optimistic. Roxburgh and his land purchases around it was the only investment he had been wrong about. He had permitted his own love of the countryside to unsettle his normal business sense, had built the mansion because he wanted to make it the first cornerstone of a "showplace" town. At least, though his dreams for the land did not come to pass, he was happy here, away from the bustle of high society—a bigger fish than ever, because he was in a smaller pond.

They were climbing a steep, icy sidewalk which, though shoveled and salted, was still treacherous in places, when Michael Harrison turned the corner immediately in front of them, seemed to slip, grasped at Alex for support and sent the other man sprawling into the snow.

"My God, I'm sorry, Alex!" Harrison said solicitously, offering him a hand up.

Alex ignored the hand, made it on his own. He was covered in snow and distinctly comical, though the rage on his face made it impossible for Katherine to laugh.

"That was clever as hell," Alex said.

"Clever?" Mike was perplexed.

"I suppose you'll say it was an accident?" Alex wiped the last of the snow from his face. Despite the cold, his skin was pallid, white with anger.

"It *was* an accident," Mike said.

Alex turned to Katherine. "Come on. What I wanted to show you is only a block further on."

Katherine felt that she was witnessing something that had a history beyond her understanding, but she said, "Alex, I'm sure Mike wouldn't—"

"He would, believe me."

"I'm truly sorry that—" Harrison began.

Alex interrupted him. "Oh, shut up, Harrison."

Mike shut up, though he looked baffled.

"It wouldn't be the first time he's taken an opportunity to humiliate me," Alex told her, teeth clenched through the last few words.

"Really, if—" Mike began, still baffled.

"Come on," Alex said, rudely grasping her arm and trying to propel her past Harrison.

"Wait a minute," she said, holding her ground on the steep walk. She turned and faced Harrison whom they had passed and said, "I don't think the two of you should be fighting, even if you think you have a reason for it. Alex, if Michael apologized—"

"Of course I apologize," Harrison said. "I hadn't meant to—"

"Apologies come easily when they aren't genuine," Alex said. He looked at Katherine, at Harrison, back at the girl again. "But if you would prefer his company to mine—as it suddenly seems to me is the case—then be my guest." He let go of her arm, turned and stalked down the incline toward the center of town which they had already explored, his face twisted in fury.

"Alex!" she called.

He did not turn.

In a moment, he was out of sight around the corner.

"I'm sorry to have caused trouble," Michael said.

"It wasn't your fault." She smiled at him. "What-ever does he hold against you?"

"I don't know," Michael said glumly. "I've *never* known—unless it's that his grandfather started the town, but my father is the one who keeps it alive with his forests and mills."

"But that's a silly thing to hold against you—to make him blow up like he did."

"You know that, and I know that, but try to explain it to Alex. He's a strange man." He looked the

way Alex had gone, then turned to her again. "I hope I haven't put you in a bind with your employer."

"He isn't my employer," Katherine said. "Lydia is. And she seems to like you quite a bit—at least to the extent that she always counters his remarks about you."

"That's like Lydia," he said. "Now, you were on a tour of the town?"

"Yes, was."

"Let me finish it with you."

She frowned. "Maybe I should be getting back—"

"Plenty of day left," he said. "Where were you headed for?"

"The church," she said. "The one that Alex's grand-father built."

"Straight up here," he said, linking arms with her. His manner was warm and confident, and she found herself going with him happily.

The Presbyterian church was of brick, colonial in style, very compact with white trim at the windows and door, and a white wooden cap on the slim, brick bell tower.

"It was the second building in town," Michael explained, "after the grocery and post office—and after Owlsden, of course. It was called something other than Owlsden then, though."

He opened the church door and ushered her into a darkened vestibule, found a light switch.

"It's very pretty," she said.

He closed the door behind them. "It is, isn't it? Very simple and yet somehow reverent. Amazing that the same man could have approved the design for this— and for Owlsden too."

Katherine walked into the church proper ahead of him, moving down the shadowed center aisle between the two sections of high-backed pews, squinting to see in the dim light that washed out of the vestibule behind her. The only other sources of light, even less illuminating than the bare, seventy-five watt bulb in the first chamber, were the tall, extremely narrow, darkly-stained glass windows on either side. The church was rich with the odor of furniture polish and candle wax and worn leather cushions.

She would never have thought, for a moment, that there could be anything in a church to terrify her. Perhaps she should have thought through some relationship between Christianity and Satanism and, therefore, should have recalled the aftermath of the Satanic ceremony which she had stumbled across the day before. But she did not.

Not until Michael turned on the main lights in the church . . .

He found a switch just inside the entrance from the vestibule, flicked it and brought light to the three, massive candleform chandeliers that were placed down the middle of the church, unexpectedly illuminating one of the most grotesque scenes that Katherine had ever come across or even imagined in her life.

The altar was formed around a twelve foot metal cross that occupied the central position of venerability. Hanging from each of the crossarms was a dead dog. Both dogs had been gutted from throat to hind-quarters, and their blood had been splashed over everything. That and the fat, black candles that had been stuck at a few points on the altar and were now mostly disfigured stumps was clue enough as to what had transpired here: the cultists again.

When Michael touched her and called her name soothingly, she screamed and jumped nearly a foot. He put his arm around her and drew her to him, forcibly turned her away from the altar. He said, "Don't look at it, Katherine."

She followed his suggestion and was facing the rear of the church when she said, "Two times in two days . . . It's almost as if they put this here for us—for me to find."

"Nonsense," he said.

She gagged into her handkerchief, then began coughing uncontrollably. Tears came to her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. In the vestibule to which he had slowly been leading her, she said, "But in just two days, I've—"

"Had some very bad luck," he finished for her. "Nothing more than that." But his face was pale.

"Where was the minister when they were doing this?" she asked.

"The church doesn't have a resident clergyman," he explained, still holding her, steadying her. "Our minister travels between four area churches."

“What should we do?”

“I’ll talk to the constable right away,” he said. “Those things can be taken down quickly enough, before the whole grisly story gets around town and draws a crowd. One thing is certain. Now, maybe they’ll realize how close to home this stinking business hits. When their own church has been violated, maybe they’ll feel like doing something for a change, no matter how much Lydia and Alex ridicule the notion that these cultists are dangerous.”

“Can we go now?” she asked, thinking of the sacrificial animals hanging in the church behind her.

“Yes,” he said. He turned her to him and kissed her squarely on the lips. “You’re a strong-hearted girl to have taken all that without fainting.”

Strangely, the simple fact of his kiss did a great deal toward ameliorating the worst of the scene’s impression. She wondered why she should find such solace in a kiss and why, after having just met him, she should react to him so quickly, be so pleased with him. But now was not the time for the answers to those questions. She said, “I may faint yet if you don’t get me out of here.”

He pushed open the church door and helped her down the steps into the cold afternoon air. “We’ll go directly to the constable,” he said. “I’m going to set fire under his apathetic tail.”

## CHAPTER 6

She retired early that night, showered, dressed for bed and lay down to sort out the events of the long and complicated day, trying to put them into some reason-able perspective. She was close to exhaustion, but she felt that she had to come to terms with the rather un-pleasant developments and decide what she was going to do next—remain in Owlsden as Lydia's secretary and try to weather these strange events, or leave soon and search for another job that might be far less remun-erative but easier on the nerves.

One of the first things the constable had done was to call the Bolands and let them know that the Satanists had not only been at work again, but had violated the very church they attended regularly and which Lydia's father had planned and constructed with his own funds. In an hour, thanks to the quick work of the plow that had opened the road that morning and early afternoon, Lydia and Alex were there to look over the damage and assess the insanity of those who had been responsible. Throughout the re-examination of the church, Katherine had noticed a smug look on the constable's face. He was a thin, dark little man named Cartier, and he was not good at disguising an I-told-you-so self-righteousness Lydia had the good taste to ignore but which drew Alex's ire in short order.

The afternoon had been spent in making prelimi-nary plans to catch the Satanists in their work if they dared be so bold about it again. Lydia pledged a sub-stantial sum to the town treasury for the maintenance of a larger parttime deputy force to keep the streets and buildings of the town under constant observation during the night hours.

Michael Harrison, who was sitting beside Katherine in the conference room of the town hall, leaned toward her and whispered, "They made fun of all this until it touched something of theirs."

Though Michael had been quiet, Alex heard him and challenged him on the point. The disagreement soon became a full-fledged argument—though the greatest part of the shouting and gesticulating was on Alex's side. Michael answered calmly, rationally, though sometimes a bit bitterly, only to further infuri-ate Alex by his reserved manner. At one point, Alex struck him as a challenge to a fight and had to be restrained by the constable who was clearly enjoying the confrontation.

After that, the meeting broke up, and Katherine rode back to Owlsden with the Bolands. Lydia at-tempted to relax everyone with gay observations on the weather and the efficiency of the plows but had to give up long before they reached the tall oak doors of the ancestral house. Alex, in a brooding mood, did not say anything at all.

At dinner, Alex had begun a rambling monologue whose subject was almost exclusively Michael Harri-son, opening a vein of anger, dislike and bitterness that was unpleasant to behold. Too, he put forth the opinion that Harrison himself might very well be be-hind these recent Satanic ceremonies and felt—in some way that Katherine could not comprehend—that Harrison was doing this only as a means to get to the Roxburgh-Boland family and embarrass them.

When his mother asked him please to cease that line of conversation, he challenged her on her defense of Harrison and left the table in a huff after upsetting his water glass and breaking the tiny, fragile wine taster beside it.

Lydia apologized for Alex when he was gone and tried to pass off his maniac behavior as nothing more than a case of bad nerves. However, even she did not seem to believe that it was as simple as that, and she excused herself for the remainder of the evening as soon as dessert had been served.

Now, alone in her room, Katherine, considering the drawbacks to life in Roxburgh and Owlsden, began to make a mental list of debits that she had been willing to ignore until the events of the afternoon. First of all, there was this whole cult business, this sacrificing of animals and playing at devil worship. She now saw that it was far more serious than she had at first thought. As Michael said the first time they had talked about it, though Satanism was silly and unbelievable, the adherents of such an odd faith might very well be dangerously mentally unbalanced. And since they held some ceremonies in the forest behind Owlsden, per-haps one was not safe alone, at night, as Yuri had protested—though the danger lay in



mortal agents, not in supernatural stalkers. Secondly, she thought she would not be able to abide Alex Boland's increasingly un-pleasant temperament for long without telling him ex-actly what she thought of his childish outbursts. He seemed to get depressed too quickly, to react too suddenly to even the slightest irritant. And what was this obsession with Michael Harrison all about? At times, Alex was downright slanderous when he talked of Mike. . . . Thirdly, there was the townspeople's underlying envy of the Roxburgh-Boland family which she had not noticed until this afternoon when the con-stant and various other town officials got such a kick out of proving that Lydia and Alex were wrong on the question of the Satanists. Katherine supposed that all wealthy people were subjected to this kind of atti-tude now and again, but, even so, she felt that it proved the existence of a minor streak of hypocrisy in what was reputedly a happy town. Fourthly, there was Alex's treatment of his mother which, at dinner this evening, had ceased to be exemplary and became inex-cusably rude. His use of a few four-letter words at the table had visibly shaken his mother, and his overall temper had thoroughly blighted the evening. If this continued, Katherine could hardly hold her thoughts in, but would be forced to give him a hefty piece of her mind.

Something else that bothered her was the slowly de-veloping relationship between Michael Harrison and herself. In just two days, they had progressed from a casual friendliness to a kiss in the vestibule of the church, a kiss he had seemed to mean whole-heartedly and which she had taken without reserve. She remem-bered, now, how her heart had beaten more quickly when he had kissed her and how the kiss had instantly calmed the terror generated by the discovery of the two sacrificed animals on the altar . . . She had never been one for forming such close attachments in so lit-tle time, and she was afraid that exterior circum-stances were driving her into an affectionate relation-ship with Michael that she did not actually feel. Among strangers, disconcerted by the gruesome events of the past two days, perhaps she was too eager for companionship to think straight. Yet . . . yet a curi-ous warmth stole over her even now, when she remem-bered his arm around her shoulders.

Add one more debit to the list. If she *did* find herself increasingly attracted to Michael Harrison—and if he became increasingly attracted to her as he al-ready seemed to be—it would be all that much more difficult to listen to Alex and his anti-Harrison tirades.

She was about to begin listing the credits attached to remaining here at Owlsden when someone knocked lightly on her door.

“Yes?”

The knock came again, as softly as before.

She got out of bed, drew on her robe and went to the door. She opened it to find Yuri standing in the dimly-lighted hallway.

“What is it, Yuri?”

“There's something I want you to see, if you haven't already.”

“What's that?”

“May I come in?” he asked. He wiped at his forehead, pulling off a film of perspiration. A great deal of white showed around his eyes, and a nervous tic had begun to distort the left corner of his mouth.

Another debit. She had forgotten that Yuri must have some ulterior motive for trying to convince her that he believed in these superstitions.

She opened the door wider, motioned him inside, and closed it after him.

“Come to the window,” he said, “and turn out the lamp as you do.”

She did both things and immediately saw what had brought him here. Down by the edge of the woods, a fire glowed among the trees, and a number of dark figures stood around it. From this distance, it was difficult to see what they were doing, though they all appeared to have their hands raised to the sky as if summoning a spirit from the void.

“How long have they been there?” she asked.

“I think not long—fifteen minutes or half an hour.”

The figures around the fire moved.

“What are they doing?”

He said, “Dancing.”

“They're initiating a new member?”

“So it would seem,” he said. His voice was quavery, as if he were genuinely terrified of the spectacle. His acting was good, she decided, almost too good not to be real.

“If this has happened here twice before,” Katherine said, “why didn't Lydia and Alex call the constable?”

“I don't think they've been aware of the dances,” Yuri said.

“You didn't tell them?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“For one thing, Alex was in town with his friends on the first two occasions, and I did not want to excite Lydia while she was alone.”

“And for another?”

“If I told Alex that the cultists were down there, he'd want to barge in on them by himself. He doesn't fear them, and he's—impulsive. If anything happened to him, I'd have to blame myself for getting him into the act.”

“But surely they've seen these fires—”

“Their bedrooms face the front of the house,” Yuri said. “Besides, even if they were in rooms from which they could watch this—this dance, they might not notice the flames because of the draperies.”

“Let's go get Alex now,” she said.

“I can't allow that,” Yuri said. “If he goes down there and gets hurt—”

“Call the constable then.”

Yuri shrugged wearily. “The cultists will be gone by then. Look, even now the bonfire dances higher, brighter. That always happens just toward the end of the ceremony.”

She saw that what he said was true as the flames leapt high in the cold air, abruptly metamorphosed from orange to green, a hellish sickly color that threw eerie shadows across the snow. Subsiding for a moment, they growled tall again, this time a bluish color like spears of summer sky stabbing at the snow-sodden branches of the nearest trees. Then they fell into orange and leapt up red. Then green again, higher than ever, brighter than before.

“How do they make the flames change color?” she asked.

He shrugged again. “Some special incantation, perhaps.”

“That's silly.”

“What else, then?”

“A handful of some chemical powder might cause that,” she said, biting at her lower lip.

He looked chagrined and said, “Possibly.”

She could not believe, for a minute, that he had not thought of the same thing himself. What was he trying to prove by playing this superstitious Romanian role?

The figures moved in a last frenzy of dance, too fast to make out the details. A moment later, the fire was put out and the night was back to blot out any traces of the ritual.

“I didn't see Satan appear,” she said, watching Yuri closely for a reaction.

“Perhaps the would-be cultist did not appeal to Satan and did not warrant a personal demonic visit. On the other hand, we might just have been too far away to see.”

“Have you ever seen a wolflike creature, a leopard or panther?”

“No more than this,” he said.

“There you are.”

“That doesn't mean there wasn't one down there.”

She turned away from the window and said, “Well, I thank you for letting me know about the show—”

“But you haven't changed your opinion,” he said, smiling sadly at her. “You still think that I'm a nice, quiet old crackpot.”

“I don't think that.”

“But you're not convinced.”

“Not convinced,” she agreed.

“Do you plan to lock your door?”

“Yes,” she said. “I can do that much.”

He nodded and went to the door. His entire attitude was one of the wise man trying to distribute a valued truth which no one else finds the least bit worthwhile. He did not belabor the point as a madman or fanatic might, but retired humbly to await another opportunity to make a point. Only a master actor would think to handle the role that way.

What did that mean, then? That he wasn't acting at all. No, she decided, it simply meant that he *is* a master actor.

“Goodnight, Miss Sellers,” he said. “I hope I haven't disturbed your sleep.”

“Not at all.”

He departed, closing the door quietly.

Katherine looked at the bedside clock and saw that the time was 12:45. At the window, she tried to stare through the syrupy veil of darkness to see if anyone lingered at the perimeter of the woods, but she could not catch a glimpse of anything out of the ordinary, only the soft glow of moonlight caught in the snow.

In bed again, with all of the lights out and her door locked, she finished listing the credits that accompanied her job and compared them with the previously listed debits. She could not decide which group outweighed the other. But, always optimistic, she finally chose to remain on the job for a few more days in order to see if the atmosphere changed at all.

She never once considered that the atmosphere might change for the worse . . .

On the edge of sleep, she had such a crazy idea that it woke her completely, and she sat up in bed. She felt certain that Yuri was playing some sort of game, was trying to convince her that he was something he really was not. Couldn't she also explain Alex's odd behavior in the same way? Couldn't his hatred for Michael Harrison be feigned, his abrupt moods carefully calculated? And couldn't Lydia's almost manic cheerfulness, her beatific acceptance of everything, be cultured, a facade? Everyone in Owlsden might be playing parts in some grand act of ...

Of what?

Then she told herself this was silly paranoia, the kind of thing you might come up with when you were half asleep. Awake, you could see how absurd it was.

She stretched out again, tossed her hair away from her face, hugged the second pillow to her and, listening to the hooting of the owls overhead, soon went to sleep. She had no nightmares.

## CHAPTER 7

Wednesday morning, she ate in her room again, dressed and was downstairs by a quarter of ten. Lydia had left word that she would be in town, talking to the constable about the night patrols to be initiated and that Katherine was free until lunch at one.

Back in her room, she changed into her skiing outfit and went downstairs again, intent on visiting the site of the previous night's bonfire. She wondered what the cultists might have left behind. She did not think this had been a bloody ritual and besides, she was by now rather numbed to the remains of blood sacrifices.

In the kitchen, Patricia Keene was making a fruit salad out of strawberries, fresh peaches, fresh seedless grapes, apples, mandarin oranges and bananas.

"That looks delicious," Katherine said.

The woman smiled and thanked her. "Going skiing?" she asked. The effort of conversation, on even such a small scale, made her uneasy. She was used to being quiet and left alone and preferred that.

"No," Katherine said. "Just out for a walk."

"Not to the woods, I hope."

Surprised, Katherine said, "Yes, down to the woods."

"There was a dance there last night, you know."

"Does Yuri tell you his stories too?"

The woman immediately sensed the skepticism in Katherine's voice and, apparently hurt, lapsed into silence once more. Then she said, in a barely audible murmur, "Just be careful."

Outside, the air was perfectly still, undisturbed even by the smallest breeze, the snow lying at her feet like a burial shroud.

A flight of dark geese crossed the calm, quiet sky, heading north in a clearly defined wedge formation. They looked so free and aloof that she wished, for a moment, she could be one of them.

Even in daylight, the woods at the end of the lawn looked dark and foreboding, the trunks of the trees packed tightly together, forming pools of shadow so deep that they made the snow seem whiter by contrast.

Katherine started walking toward the place where the bonfire must have been and had gone a dozen steps before she realized that she was walking in another pair of footprints—footprints which lead from the trees to the back of Owlsden, marching in the opposite direction. Stooping, she examined the white crust close by and saw that there was no other set of prints that lead from the house to the woods. Besides, the edges of the prints were slightly drifted in—which meant they must have been made the previous night when there had yet been a ghost of a breeze to stir the snow . . . Standing, she placed her hand over her eyes to cut down on some of the intense snow-glare, but she could not see any prints leading from the house. Someone, then, had come out of the woods and entered Owlsden last night.

She looked back at the mansion.

It appeared deceptively calm, smoke curling lazily out of a couple of fireplace chimneys.

Pondering the significance of her unsettling discovery and more than a little ill-at-ease, Katherine stepped aside of the second set of prints and followed them down the curve of the lawn to the perimeter of the woods where she found the site of the bonfire. The snow had been melted in a ten-foot radius, and nearby pine boughs had been badly singed. In the snow surrounding the bare circle, a dozen or more pairs of booted feet had tramped in agitation or excitement.

In the cold morning, with the harsh, snow-reflected sunlight behind her, Katherine found it difficult to believe that primitive rituals had been enacted here. Indeed, it was easier to believe that the bonfire was only a campfire and that the ceremony had merely been a hotdog and marshmallow roast.

She came across red-brown stains in the snow.

Blood.

She looked away from them and went on, slowly circling the site of the fire, staring intently at the

ground for something less gruesome but ultimately more interesting.

The branches of the trees above her began to rustle slightly as the stillness was broken by cool breezes from the northwest.

When she had nearly gone all the way around the charred circle, she found something that stopped her cold and made her want to turn and bolt for the house: in the snow, in full impression, were the paw marks of some animal—a wolf or, more likely, a large cat. The prints lead on for a couple of yards, nine marks in all, then disappeared among the mass of other prints, human prints. She stared at them for a long while, remembering Yuri's warnings. Then since she could not establish any satisfactory explanation, she tried to forget them. It was better to dismiss them altogether, she decided, than to allow herself even to *consider* Yuri's absurd stories.

On her way back to Owlsden, she carefully quartered the large yard, striking first to the left and then back to the right, searching for a pair of footprints other than her own that lead from the house and into the forest. She gained the kitchen door without locating them, and she went reluctantly into the deserted kitchen.

It seemed fairly obvious to Katherine that one of the cultists had a key to the kitchen door and had come there directly after the conclusion of the Satanic ceremonies the previous night. That could indicate that a member of the household was a devil worshiper who had gone to the fire site by a different route in the company of his strange companions, but who had taken the more direct route home again when the ritual was over with.

But she didn't want to believe that. As she mentally reviewed the list of people who lived in Owlsden, she felt certain none of them could be cultists.

The only other possibility was that one of the devil worshipers had illegally obtained a key to the house and had come here last night on some private mission without the knowledge or consent of anyone in the household. A stranger with a key to Owlsden could be more easily dealt with than a member of the household who was also a cultist. One was simple criminal activity, open to the usual rules of deduction, while the other was a problem of psychology completely beyond her ken. She much preferred it to be this way—and, therefore, in her mind at least, it was.

She took off her wet boots and stood them on the rubber mat just inside the door, went upstairs and changed clothes again. As she stood at the full-length mirror, brushing her golden hair over her shoulders, she decided to tell Yuri what she had found at the earliest opportunity. He would know how to handle it without upsetting Lydia—unless the role he was playing required him to respond differently than she expected . . .

Later, when she started out of the room to keep her luncheon engagement with Lydia, she found that she had unconsciously locked her bedroom door, even though it was the middle of the day. She shook her head, silently berating herself, unlocked it and went on her way. Was she beginning to put credence in Yuri's tales?

## CHAPTER 8

Lydia was in an exceptionally cheerful mood at lunch, quite as if she had never heard a single word about the devil worshipers who had defiled her father's church, and as if the confrontation the evening before between her and her son had never taken place. She and Katherine ate lunch alone in the smallest of the three dining rooms: cottage cheese and cinnamon, fruit salad and English muffins, all light but filling.

Katherine did not mention the bonfire or the things she had found during her morning inspection, but she was coincidentally afforded the opportunity to learn how many people had keys to the mansion. At the very beginning of the meal, Lydia handed her a set of keys to all the main locks in the house and said, "Now you can come and go as you please."

"I'll guard them well," Katherine said, tucking them immediately into her purse.

Lydia laughed. "Actually, if Yuri didn't insist, we'd probably have the doors standing open all the time. Locks are a bother in a town the size of Roxburgh where your criminals are numbered on one hand—and are usually nothing more serious than chronic drunk-ards. As it is, we're always having to order new sets of keys to hand out to friends."

"People outside the household have keys to the doors?" Katharine asked, trying to keep her voice light so that the question would seem more like conversational banter than anything more serious.

"My, yes!" Lydia said. "I have a couple of friends that knew my husband when he was alive, and I see they have keys so they can use the books in the library even when the household is closed up for our spring and fall holidays. Then, half a dozen or so of Alex's friends have keys so they can use the projection room or the library or the pool while we're gone. We take three weeks off in May and three in September, to travel."

"I see," Katherine said. Eight keys outside the household. Even if those eight people did not share their keys with others, there were now thirteen suspects who had easy access to the mansion, thirteen including the family and servants who could have been at that bonfire the night before. "Do you think that's wise?" Katherine asked.

"To give out keys?"

"Yes."

"My dear, don't start talking at me like Constable Cartier. I've had enough of him this morning!"

"How did it go in town?"

"Tooth and nail," Lydia said, chuckling. "He would have preferred to have a free reign on who would be earning the overtime money I've put up for increased patrols. Interestingly enough, he already had every man on both sides of his family listed for duty. I had to straighten him out on that, but now I think well actually get some good men working. If you can imagine, he even had his ninety-eight-year-old grandfather listed for six hours overtime duty a night!"

"Sounds like you need a more reliable constable," Katherine said, grinning.

"Cartier is fine," Lydia said. "He is not particularly clever. But he can handle the drunks and the fist-fights, and he can organize a strawberry festival in the square with more aplomb than anyone I can imagine. In this case, he saw a chance to benefit by the community's need, but he was properly embarrassed and penitent when I helped him to see the light." She chuckled again, having obviously enjoyed the morning.

They finished lunch and retired to the library where Lydia looked over the day's mail she had picked up while in town. She dictated two personal notes and signed three blank checks which Katherine was to fill out and mail in payment of bills received. While Katherine was working, Lydia read from a novel she had bought a week ago and was just now getting around to. Afterwards, they talked, mostly about books, until Lydia went upstairs for a pre-dinner nap.

"Dinner will be earlier tonight, at six-thirty," she said before she left. "Some of Alex's friends are due for cocktails and conversation in the recreation room at eight. Alex asked me to invite you in his behalf."

"I'm afraid I'd be out of place—"

“Nonsense,” Lydia said. “I am not going, because I would certainly be out of place in a roomful of energetic young people. But I know Alex would be hurt if you did not attend.”

“All right,” she said.

“Don't be glum about it,” Lydia said. “They're a likeable bunch and easy to get to know. It won't take you long to break the ice.”

Katherine said, “Are these the friends who have keys to Owlsden?”

“Why do you ask?” Lydia inquired, a puzzled frown on her face.

Katherine realized that her approach had not been nearly so subtle as she would have liked—had not been subtle at all, in fact. She said, in an effort to qualify her curiosity, “I just wondered if these were Alex's very best friends . . .”

Lydia accepted that as sufficient explanation. “Oh, I'd say most of these kids have keys,” she said. “But I never thought that they might regard them as status symbols, signs of favor or what-have-you. Perhaps Alex will have to hand out a larger number of keys in order to avoid hurting anyone's feelings. It's silly that such a thing could be considered a sign of special favor instead of a convenience, but I can see that some people might be upset at remaining—unkeyed.”

After Lydia had gone upstairs to take her nap, and after Katherine had finished her secretarial chores—addressing envelopes for the letters she had written, filling out checks and balancing the figures in the household accounts ledger—she went looking for Yuri and discovered that he was in town on business. She was irritated at not being able to tell him about the footprints and about her suspicions that unwanted persons had entered the house during the night, then decided that suppertime would be soon enough.

The information was not that urgent, after all.

“—has no less than five and no more than twenty years to do something about the population problem.”

“Nothing will be done.”

“I agree. Nothing will be done until it's too late for—”

“You're expecting too much of the world leaders when you suppose they're even going to let us all survive long enough to face a desperate population problem. I tell you that—”

Katherine sat in a large, brown crushed velvet easy chair near the fireplace in the recreation room, listening to Alex's friends as they argued about a handful of the world's problems as if they actually had some special sort of answers for them. But that was the bad part of it: they had no answers. All they had was a deep-seated pessimism, always expecting the worst, making gloomy predictions of doom. She did not like them, chiefly for this reason.

Besides Alex and herself, there were four other men and two women in the cozy room, some holding glasses of wine, some eating the hors d'oeuvres that Patricia had placed out for them, some just sunken into the heavily-padded furniture, as if they would never rise up again. Nearest Katherine, on a two-seat divan, were Nancy and Alton Harle, a young married couple who were both dark and quiet except for occasional comments about as pessimistic as anything one could imagine. They had whispered conversations together, smiled a lot, but still managed to come off like ravens bearing news of death. On the divan right after them were Leo Franks and his girl friend, Lena Mathews. He was tall and slim, she short and blonde and quite pretty. They were the most talkative of the lot and held the strongest political opinions, some of which Katherine did not even understand—and didn't think she wanted to. The last two guests were Bill Prosser and John Kline, both of whom had been in Alex's high school graduating class. The group was volatile, quick to react to one another, almost rowdy. She supposed that they had made a sincere effort to include her in everything they talked about, but she did not feel a part of them at all. She felt like a stranger. Whenever she spoke up, it was to make an optimistic observation to counter their unrelieved scorn for the condition and future of the world. Though they listened politely and sometimes even picked up on one of her suggestions and elaborated on it, she had the distinct impression they were only humoring her—that their own bleak outlook on life had not been touched at all by her arguments.

During a lull in the conversation when wine glasses were being re-filled, Lena Mathews asked, "You graduated from Lydia's old school?"

For some reason, it seemed to Katherine that the Mathews girl made her alma mater sound antiquated and out of date. Still, being polite, she smiled and said, "Yes, but not the same graduating class."

Everyone laughed appreciatively.

"What was your major?" Bill Prosser asked.

"Literature."

"Liberal arts?"

"Yes."

Patricia brought in a fresh tray of hors d'oeuvres, bringing with her another conversational lull.

As she left, Nancy asked, "What sort of things do you like to read?"

"Mysteries, love stories, anything," Katherine said.

"I'm partial to ghost stories, novels about the super-natural," Nancy said.

"I like those too."

Katherine sipped her wine. Except for Nancy and her, everyone was silent and still, as if waiting for something. She had the distinct impression that the conversation was building to a pre-planned point.

Nancy said, "Devils and demons, witches and hideous things that crawl around in the night. All of that junk gets to me, for some reason—especially since these crazy Satanists have been operating around Roxburgh."

Lena Mathews came in now, as if picking up her lines in a carefully rehearsed play. Or was that just Katherine's imagination. "I guess you've heard all about that ugly stuff."

"A good bit of it, yes," Katherine said.

"What do you think of it?"

"Excuse me?"

Lena said, "Do you think they really do summon up the devil?" She had come forward in her seat a little, holding her glass of wine in both hands, her eyes curiously alight.

"Impossible," Katherine said.

"Still," Lena said, settling back again, "if you believe in the Christian God, like we do, don't you also have to admit the existence of a Devil?"

"Perhaps," Katherine said. "But though I'm Christian, I can't summon God when I want to. I doubt that the Satanists would have any more luck in summoning *their* master."

A few of them laughed and applauded.

"Good point!" Alton Harle said.

Lena sighed and said, "But maybe the Satanists know the proper chants and all of that ritual stuff."

"That doesn't make sense, though. Why should they know the proper magic words to summon up the Devil when no one knows the proper magic to call up God?" Katherine asked. "If one set of data exists, then the other should be as easily accumulated, don't you think?"

The room seemed to have gotten stuffy, the air still and thick and too warm.

Katherine put down her glass of wine and decided not to drink any more of it tonight.

"I guess so," Lena admitted. "But you have probably just ruined any more supernatural novels I might pick up. They always seemed so real and spooky before. I guess, to continue enjoying them, I'll just suspend my critical judgment and let my emotions carry me away."

"As usual," John Kline said.

Everyone laughed, and that started them off on a new topic. The tension that had lain just below the surface while they had discussed Satanism dissipated in an instant.

Katherine found herself sipping the wine that she had said, only a short time ago, she did not want any more of. She frowned and put it down again.

The room was still stuffy, perhaps stuffier.

She remembered, suddenly, that she had not yet seen Yuri, had not had an opportunity to tell him about the footprints leading to Owlsden from the site of the devil's dance. She felt uneasy about being the



only one with that information.

Paranoia . . .

She looked around at Alex's friends, but she found her judgment had not changed. Gloomy pessimists, a bunch of fault-finders. She did not care for them at all.

And she could not escape the nagging certainty that the whole conversation about Satanists had been care-fully planned, that they had been . . .

Been what? Testing her?

Yes. It seemed almost as if they had posed a num-ber of carefully worded test questions to ascertain where her sympathies lay, if she put any credence at all in superstitions.

But why?

It was as if they were feeling her out to see if she would like to—

“Don't you agree, Katherine?” Alton Harle asked.

She looked up, surprised that she had completely lost the thread of the conversation.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “I seem to be wool gathering. I've had a very long day, and I suppose I should be getting to bed.”

“It's only eleven,” Harle said.

“Yes,” Bill said. “We don't really get moving around here until after midnight.”

And what did that mean? Katherine wondered. Did it imply that these people were somehow connected to the cultists whose ceremonies began after the witching hour? Or did it mean nothing whatsoever, merely an unfortunate coincidence?

“Stay, Katherine,” John Kline said. “It's so pleasant to have a fresh point of view for a change.”

“Just the same,” she said, standing, “I really should turn in now.”

“Next week, we'll get together again,” Alex said.

“How could we survive in this backwoods place if we didn't?” Alton Harle asked.

Goodbyes were said quickly. In a moment, Katherine was standing in the main corridor with the door closed behind her. The air was still heavy and unpleas-ant. She had a sudden urge to lean with her ear against the door and hear if they were talking about her. Real-izing how crude this compulsion was, she walked swiftly towards the main stairs before she could give in to it.

*We don't really get moving around here until after midnight . . .*

*Do you think they really do summon up the devil, Katherine . . . ?*

*Maybe the Satanists know the proper chants . . .*

In her room, with the door locked after her, she re-membered that she had yet to speak to Yuri. She reached for the bolt latch, then thought about prowling the many dark rooms of the mansion in search of him. It could wait. She could talk to him in the morn-ing.

*We don't really get moving around here until after midnight . . .*

She undressed, put on her pajamas and got into bed. At first, she was going to let the bedside lamp burn. Then, when she realized that she must have soaked up some of the gloomy thinking that permeated the con-versation in the recreation room, she reached out an-grily and snapped the light off.

The darkness was not so bad at all. In fact, having overcome the momentary fear, she felt a great deal better. Aside from finding the prints in the snow, and aside from Alex's party, the day had been wonderful. More credits than debits. Tomorrow would be even better. She was sure of that . . .

## CHAPTER 9

Again, Katherine woke because some noise had startled her, and she sat straight up in bed, listening intently to the stillness of Owlsden. The clock on the nightstand beside her read 3:08 in the morning; darkness lay in the room like thick syrup. Had the owls gotten exceedingly loud again? She listened for them, though she was certain that she had been awakened by something else altogether, something—

Like a knifeblade tapped against a hollow bone, someone knocked on her bedroom door, softly, quietly.

“Yes?”

No one responded.

“Who is it?”

When no one replied a second time, she wondered if she had imagined the noise—or if she had misinterpreted its source. Perhaps there wasn't anyone at her door, after all. She looked at the window and saw that nothing was out of place there . . .

The rap came again, softly, lasting a long time.

She got out of her bed and stepped into her slippers. The insides of the slippers were cold and made her shiver—or, at least, that was her own explanation for the tremors that raced up and down her spine.

“Lydia?” she asked.

No one answered.

She put on her robe, carefully buttoned it, taking her time, then she stood by the bed for a few moments, waiting for something more to happen. “Is that you, Alex?” she asked, ashamed at the quaver in her voice but unable to control it. What was she afraid of? “Yuri?”

Only silence.

She flicked on the bedside lamp and waited for the knocking sound to come again. When several long minutes had passed, she went to the door and pressed her ear so tightly against the wood that it pained her a little. She held her breath as she tried to detect the sounds of someone beyond, but she could not hear anything other than the profound silence of Owlsden.

“Who's there?”

When she *still* received no reply, she slid back the iron bolt on the door, gripped the antique knob and swung the portal outward onto the unlighted corridor.

The light from her own room plainly showed that there was not anyone nearby. Perhaps the darkness beyond the stairwell, in the other wing, concealed a watcher. But she did not feel much like walking down there in order to find out. Too, she had an undeniably strong suspicion that that was just what was wanted of her—to walk into the shadows down there . . .

Wondering if, after all, she *had* imagined it, she turned to enter her room and saw what had been done to the outside of her door. A large, dark circle lay in the center of the door, filled with Latin words which had been scrawled hastily in white chalk.

She looked quickly toward the far end of the corridor, hoping to catch someone unawares. She saw only the shadows.

Raising a hand, she tried to wipe away the markings. In the dim light, she had thought that the circle was drawn in a dark-colored chalk, but she now found that it was wet and sticky. Stepping back into her room, she held her hand out before her and looked at the rich brightness of fresh blood which had been used to paint the mark.

She closed the door, locked it with her clean hand, tested the bolt, then went into her private bath and thoroughly washed her hands. She scrubbed the sink vigorously when she was done, so that not a single red smear remained to remind her of what she had just done.

As she looked up to be sure that no blood spotted her face, she was shocked by her expression. Her eyes were too wide, her lips drawn into a thin, hard line, her jaw thrust forward. She realized, at the same moment, that she was gritting her teeth. Bending over, she looked away from the mirror and took

several long, deep breaths. They only helped a little bit.

She washed her face in warm water, then splashed it with cold, dried on a new hand towel from the linen closet. When she looked in the mirror again, she did not look quite so close to the brink of an uncontrolled shriek, but she did not look normal. Her complexion was waxy, pale. The flesh below her eyes was smudged purple-brown, and the eyes themselves were still too open and staring.

"Where's the famous Sellers smile?" she asked her reflection.

But she knew what the trouble was. Always before, she had bounced back from an unpleasant development, swung from fear to joviality in an almost manic-depressive manner. Now, however, too many things had built up, one on top of the other, each more bitter than the last, until they smothered her optimism completely. And now, depressed and fearful, she could not summon even a small part of that bright outlook. Perhaps that meant that her optimism had never been genuine, had been nothing more than a fragile shield against the world and had dissolved swiftly the first time that the world weighed heavily against it.

No, that was as bad as something one of Alex's friends might come up with, a very negative sarcasm that was not really like Katherine and which would do her more harm, right now, than good.

She went to the door of the bedroom, and unlocked it, and looked at the signs again. Then, picking up the flashlight she had used on her post-midnight excursion on the third floor, she went down the corridor to the far wing and found Yuri's door. She knocked lightly, twice, before she could hear any movement inside. A moment later, in pajamas and a wine-colored robe, Yuri answered her knock.

"I've been trying to reach you all day," she said.

He rubbed at his eyes, yawned and brought himself further awake. He said, "Is something wrong?"

First, she told him about the prints she had found in the snow that morning.

"They came *in* the house?" he asked, incredulous.

"I saw the prints leading from the bonfire to the back door," she said. "They didn't lead away again."

"The locks must be changed," he said. That uneasy look was on his face again. Was it a mask, or really a true expression of dread?

"Can it be done tomorrow?" she asked.

"Or the day after," Yuri said.

"It had better be tomorrow."

"Why?" he asked, stepping forward, looking closely at her. She supposed that he had just noticed the color of her face, the smudges under her wide-open eyes.

"They've been in the house tonight," she said.

His voice dropped into a harsh whisper. "How do you know?"

"Come along," she said.

At her door, she stepped back and shined the light on the blood circle and the white Latin words which had both been smeared by her hand.

"When did this happen?"

"Half an hour ago."

"How did you find it?"

"They knocked on my door when they were done," she said.

"They were that bold about it?" he asked. His shoulders were hunched forward, as if he expected to be struck from behind. Katherine looked behind them; there wasn't anyone there.

"That bold," she affirmed. "They even knocked twice when they thought I might not have heard them the first time."

"It's been smeared—"

"I didn't know it was blood," she said. "I tried to wipe it off before I found out."

"I see."

They stood together in darkness, looking at the Sa-tanic symbols caught in the circle of the flashlight's beam. The marks appeared to swell larger and larger as the only focus of attention in the corridor, until she angrily swung the light away from them and pointed it at the floor.

"Well?" she said.

“Well?”

“You are the expert on these things,” she said.

She knew that she sounded angry, but she could not control the tone of her voice very well, not at that moment. She either had to give in to the anger or the fear—and she preferred that her voice sound tight and coldly furious rather than shaky with anxiety. Besides, as far as she knew, Yuri might have been the one who painted the symbols on her door. His sleepy-eyed confusion when he opened his door could very well have been carefully staged. She had suspected him of playing a role long before this, though she hadn't been able to determine his purpose. Had his professed fear of demons and such only been a decoy to prejudice her against considering him one of the enemy when the time came to choose sides?

“Expert?” he said, “Hardly that. I have seen things, learned many odd facts, but—”

“You're the closest to an expert in Owlsden,” she said. “You ought to have some idea of why they broke into the house just to paint symbols on my door.”

“Partly to frighten you,” he said.

“Partly? What's the rest of it, then?”

“I've seen a few of these marks before,” he said, stepping closer to the door and motioning for her to supply him light. “Enough so that I have a general idea of the purpose.”

She waited.

“They've decided that you will be their next—associate.”

“Who has decided?” she asked.

Their voices sounded uncommonly sharp in the quiet of the long corridor.

“The cult,” he said.

“Associate?” she asked, though she knew just what he meant. It was, however, much easier to let him put it into clearer language than to say it herself.

“They've looked you over, passed judgment on you and marked you as a potential convert to their cause.”

“I think their cause is silly.”

“Do you?” he asked. Before she could answer, he said, “If you'll excuse my saying so, it's evident that you've been deeply upset by all of this and that, maybe, you're beginning to wonder whether there could be any truth in it.”

“You're wrong,” she said. “I'm not worried about devils and demons. Just about the people who believe in them, what they might do, what extremes they might go to.”

He shrugged, as if to say that she might not really understand her motives as well as she thought she did.

“Besides,” she said, “I don't even believe, want to believe, or even *sympathize*.”

“Sympathy with the devil is not required,” he said. “If they can manage to put you under the proper spell—”

“I reject that,” she interrupted.

Yuri sighed and said, “Well, then, let me get tissues and water from your room, to clean your door before the blood dries.”

When he had removed the mess and was ready to return to bed, she asked, “Yuri, why have you been pretending with me?”

“Pretending, Miss Sellers?”

“Yes, like you are now. I don't believe this superstitious streak of yours for one minute, and I think you know I don't. Yet you go on playing this role. What do you hope to gain by it?”

He was upset out of all proportion to the question. “I haven't been playing any role,” he said. “I deeply believe the things I told you. I not only believe in them, but I know they are facts. I've seen all this as a child in my mountain village.”

“Okay,” she said, confused by the earnestness of his response.

“Not okay,” he said. “You don't believe me yet. But there is nothing more that I can tell you to change your mind.”

“I’m sorry I upset you,” she said.

As she closed her door, he said, “Bolt it, please.”

She did.

Then she went to bed and turned out the light. She told herself jokes and tried to remember what a bright future she had ahead of her. But the depression re-mained this time, stubborn, more deeply entrenched than any bad mood she had ever experienced before.

During the night, the owls hooted eerily in the raf-ters above.

## CHAPTER 10

A light but steady snowfall had begun early the following morning, coming straight down in the absence of any wind. It gradually smoothed out the tracks and spots in the earlier ground cover, padded the corners of windows and doors.

Yuri knocked on Katherine's door shortly after nine and informed her that Lydia would like her to join the family breakfast at ten. She wished to hear Katherine's story, in detail. According to Yuri, she was terribly upset to think that an intruder had so easily gained entrance to Owlsden.

In the smallest dining room, over shirred eggs, toast, fresh fruit and pastries, Katherine discovered that, though both Lydia and Alex seemed upset over the notion that the sanctity of Owlsden could be so off-handedly violated, neither of them wanted to face up to the most likely explanation for that violation.

"How do you suppose they got in?" Lydia asked at one point, when the discussion had been just about exhausted of new insights. "I checked all of the windows—rather, Yuri checked them—and reported they were still locked from the inside. He says he locked all the doors last night, and he is not likely to forget something like that. Indeed, he almost has a mania about locks."

"Perhaps one of the cultists is a lock-picker," Alex suggested.

"That sounds too melodramatic," Lydia said.

"Perhaps, then," Katherine said, "the intruder was a friend of the family."

They looked at her as if she had not finished a sentence, or as if what she had said was utterly incoherent.

Alex said, "Excuse me?"

Patently, she explained, "It could be possible that the intruder had a key to Owlsden. I understand that a number of your acquaintances have keys and that—"

"Not acquaintances, though," Alex said.

His mother amplified his meaning, "They're friends, not just casual acquaintances."

"Just the same," Katherine insisted, "isn't it conceivable that one of them might be a member of the cult, without your knowledge?"

"No," Alex said quickly.

"You didn't even give the notion a chance," Katherine said. "You didn't even pause to consider the people who have keys."

This time, more to humor her than to give it any real thought, he waited a few moments before speaking. "None of them would get involved in something that silly; They're all realists."

"And, from what I saw," Katherine said, "they're all pessimists as well. Isn't it within reason to conjecture that someone so depressed with the state of the world might turn to odd hopes, unusual beliefs from which they could hope to salvage the future?"

Lydia put down the pastry she was nibbling at, patted her lips with a linen napkin. "I'm afraid I'd have to agree with Alex," she said. "His friends are just not the type for foolishness like this."

"Yours, then," Katherine said, turning directly to Lydia and giving up the previous line of argument. She wondered, as she pressed the point, if she had already said too much, gone too far. No one enjoyed having their friends put down, even by inference.

"My friends?" Lydia asked.

"You said a couple of people close to you have keys," Katherine said. She had stopped eating too. She no longer felt hungry.

"Yes, but they aren't the sort to—"

"Of course they aren't," Alex said. "Besides, they're not young, not a one of them. I can hardly see them stomping about in deep snow, risking jail by breaking into a house—all to pull off some foolish prank."

"I suppose," Katherine said. "But it was something I thought we should consider, at least."

Now, Lydia and Alex relaxed. "Of course," he said. "Consider every angle. That's the only way to

handle it.”

“Do you think I should inform Constable Cartier?” Lydia asked.

“Hardly,” Alex asked. “We don’t want him bum-bling around the house, getting in everyone’s way. Besides, what laws did they break—aside from illegal entry? They didn’t harm anyone or take anything. And what damage they did to the door of Katherine’s bed-room was taken care of with a rag and water. The police wouldn’t have much interest in expending a lot of man-hours to come up with the culprits.”

“The locks really ought to be changed,” Katherine said.

“Only if they came in with a key, and we’ve already decided that—”

She interrupted him, somewhat frustrated with both of them. Her good humor had not returned with the sun, and she was as agitated about circumstances in Owlsden as she had been the previous night. She had never liked people who were gloomy, who faced the future with negative expectations, and she had always felt that only disaster could result from that attitude. Yet, since finding the bloody circle on her door, she had adopted that very outlook. She supposed she would not like herself now, if she were someone else meeting her. She could somehow sense approach of disaster, like a cold wind or the fall of rocks from a cliff-top. She had to regain her optimism or become a victim of the swamps she was helping to create. She said, “We only decided that none of your friends could be involved. But suppose one of them left his key somewhere, on a dresser at home or a desk at the office, perhaps on a restaurant table or in a store. It is conceivable, don’t you think, that someone could have lifted the keys long enough to duplicate them before returning them to their rightful owner?”

“That’s a thought,” Alex agreed.

Lydia was enthusiastic about such an explanation, and she agreed to authorize Yuri to phone a locksmith and have the doors changed that very afternoon. New keys would be made, and their friends would be given copies—with a special warning about the care to be taken with the key.

It all sounded very positive and efficient. Somehow, though, Katherine felt that it wouldn’t do any good at all, because she was increasingly certain that the in-truder had not gotten his key by accident or theft. When she considered the scene in the recreation room the night before, she was certain one of Alex’s friends was involved.

The remainder of the morning, the lunch hour and the early part of the afternoon, she spent with Lydia, answering some correspondence for her and for Alex, who dealt with the family’s financial management, buying and selling stocks and securities with a finesse and caniness that indicated he was a most clever in-vestor. Too, they discussed a number of books and writers, all of which they agreed upon, though offering each other new insights and points of view. Normally, Katherine would have enjoyed the discussion. But these were not normal times.

At 2:30, Lydia dismissed her for the afternoon. By three, she had changed into her ski clothes and made the trek out to the slope, through the curtain of cold, dry snow. She knew that she needed to get away from the house for a while, meet some people from the town and get a bit of fresh mountain air. Then she’d be her old self again, jolted out of her mood by the change of scenery. At least, that’s what she hoped.

She descended the brisk, winding trail at top speed, the wind hard, the snow like a spray of ice in her face, frosting her lashes and brows. At the bottom, she care-fully stacked the skis in the racks, stabbed the poles into a snow mound by the pylon, and went for a walk into town.

At the cafe on the square, where she intended to have a cup of coffee and talk again with Bertha, she found Michael Harrison and a group of his friends dawdling over what they called a “late lunch” but which was obviously a good, long, mid-afternoon gab-fest. Eight of them sat at the long table, three girls and five men, laughing as they worked at pastries and steaming mugs of coffee.

“You’ve got to join us,” Michael said, fetching an extra chair to the already crowded table by the win-dow and jamming it in next to his own, patting it as an invitation.

“I don’t want to interrupt anything,” Katherine said, though she did sit down beside him.

“You won’t be interrupting at all!” he assured her. He motioned to his friends. “These loose-lipped wonders wouldn’t stop chattering for the end of the world.”

“Especially not then,” a tall, blond boy said. His name, she learned later, was Kerry Markwood. “If it

was the end of the world, we'd have to talk twice as fast to be sure that we got everything in!"

As simply as that, she was included in the group and made to feel perfectly at home. Indeed, in one minute, these people did more by their attitudes to make her comfortable than Alex's friends had done in several hours. Introductions were hurriedly made as Michael described each friend in turn with some good-humored insult that brought laughter from all present. Katherine learned their names slowly, however, as the afternoon wore on and the conversation got better and better. There was no unrelieved pessimism here—indeed, hardly a single note of glum-ness. As an antidote to Alex's crowd, these people could hardly be equaled.

Too, she was unaccountably pleased to see that, though there were girls present, they seemed to be with other men, not with Michael. He was as solicitous of her as he might have been of a wife, anxious that she have coffee when she wanted it and that there was always a plate of pastries near her. More than the others even, he was careful to include her in all conversations, and in time he put his arm over the back of her chair, giving the illusion of protection.

The restaurant clock read 6:15 when someone suggested they break it up for the day. Surprised that darkness had crept in without her noticing, Katherine realized that she would be hard-pressed to reach the top of the mountain again and have sufficient time to clean up and make it to dinner with the Bolands.

"Let me take you up in the Rover."

"I don't think Alex would like it."

"You mean you care what he thinks that much?" he asked, his voice suddenly brittle.

"Only as concerns my job," she said.

"He can't object to me driving you home."

She said, "Oh, Michael, you don't know how he can go on about you when the subject comes up. And I have to sit there and listen to it."

He softened perceptibly. "I'm sorry," he said.

They were standing outside the restaurant now, the snow still falling slowly but steadily, a new three inches of powdery stuff on the straight, narrow streets.

"It isn't your fault," she said. "There's no reason for you to be sorry. It's just that he has this obsession, this crazy need to make you look bad. His mother usually calms him down, but I don't think I should get into an argument with him. It's not my place, not in his own house. I almost had a fight with him this morning, and I don't want another near-argument."

"What was it about?"

"I'll tell you in the Rover on the way out to the bottom of the Roxburgh ski slope. If you'll take me there, that is."

The Rover was parked by the grass in the center of the square. In five minutes, they had reached the bottom of the slope, and she had been able to complete the story of the post-midnight intruder who had painted the Satanic symbols on her door.

"I don't think you should go back up there," Michael said, holding her hand as they stood by the pylon where her skis were racked.

"What else can I do?"

"I'd see about getting you someplace to stay here tonight."

"But I *work* up there."

He was silent a moment, looking up the dark ski run. "I suppose that's reason enough to go back. But do you have to go this way, up that damned run in the middle of the night?"

"It isn't the middle of the night," she said. "It's just dark. And if I want to get there in time for supper, I'd better get going now."

She sat down and put on her skis, then stood up and grabbed her poles, flipped the switch that started the ski-lift cables moving.

"You aren't frightened of the dark, going up there through the trees at night?" he asked, making one last effort to dissuade her.

"Not at all," she said. And she realized that, though she had not completely regained her normal mood of optimism, the few hours with Michael's friends had alleviated the worst of the gloom that had



settled over her after the previous night's activities. She truly was not frightened.

He slid her to the cable, her skis making a *shishing* noise in the new snow, and kissed her before she started upwards. It was a languorous kiss that seemed to last forever. "Be careful," he said. Then he stepped back as she grasped the steel line and was whisked up the gentle bottom slopes.

Though the pines seemed to close in on her now and then, as if they were alive and seeking her, she did not lose the moderately rosy glow which his kiss had left with her, and she reached the top of the run fifteen minutes later, weary but safe.

She had just enough time to change, brush her hair and freshen her makeup, arriving in the small dining room only five minutes late for dinner. The conversation was pleasant, lighter than usual, especially since Alex seemed happy to let everything remain trivial. He did not once mention Michael Harrison. Indeed, the only sour note in the evening was when Lydia said the locksmith would not be in for a few days.

"But surely—" Katherine began.

"He doesn't live in Roxburgh," Alex explained. For some reason or other, she thought that his dark eyes were watching her more intently than usual. If he didn't have that air of brooding anger about him, she thought, he would be decidedly attractive—overwhelmingly attractive in fact. "He's a carpenter who works on locks as a sideline, lives about fifteen miles away in another village. If it weren't for this snow, he'd have come. But it has been coming down steadily—and now the radio weather reports call for a greater accumulation than we got a few days ago."

"I see."

"Don't worry," Lydia said. "No one's going to come around bothering us in the middle of a blizzard. The winds are supposed to intensify tonight. It's going to be a real mess. I love it, all of it." She went on to describe some of the record storms of her childhood and enchanted them with a number of anecdotes about life in the mountains before the advent of the auto and the snowplow.

Katherine went to bed early, without seeing Yuri, and was asleep by eleven, exhausted from the skiing, the conversation with Michael's friends in the cafe, the ride up the slope in the cold and wind, the long and delightful chatter over dinner and, later, over cordials in the main drawing room.

The day seemed to have slipped past as if it were greased, a good day all-in-all, one that made her glad she had not opted to leave Owlsden the previous day.

She did not dream but slept so deeply that she might never have awakened—except for the scream of agony that echoed through the house at shortly past two in the morning. It woke everyone and caused the owls to begin hooting in panic above her head . . .

She was out of the bed and into her slippers and robe before half a minute had passed, though she made no move to unbolt the door.

A moment later, someone rattled the knob, then knocked.

"Who is it?" she asked, having a distinct feeling of *deja vu*.

"Katherine?" Lydia asked.

She went quickly to the door, threw the bolt back and opened it. Lydia was standing in the well-lighted corridor, wearing a flowing yellow bedgown, her face weary and lined more than it appeared to be in day-light. Alex stood behind her in a lounging robe and pajamas, his dark eyes swiftly assessing her condition and the state of the room beyond.

"What was the scream?" Katherine asked.

"I thought perhaps it was you," Lydia said. She took Katherine's hand and squeezed it. "After that warning on your door last night . . ."

Alex interrupted, speaking in a clipped, nervous tone. "I told you, Mother, that it was a man's scream."

To the left, Patricia Keene and her husband appeared, blinking sleepily, attired in nightclothes. "Is everyone all right?" she asked.

"Fine here," Lydia said. "What was the noise?"

"Someone screamed," Patricia Keene said. Her husband nodded.

Alex said, "Where is Yuri?"

“In his room?” Lydia suggested.

As a group, they went down the corridor and knocked at his door. When he did not answer, they opened it and looked in. He was not there or, as Alex reported, in his private bath either.

“I think the scream was downstairs,” Mason Keene said. His voice sounded thick, as if he had been drinking and was still a little tight, despite his sleep. Was that something else about Owlsden that had been hid-den from her?

“I’ll go look,” Alex said.

“No,” Lydia said. “We’ll all go look.”

In a close train, they went down the grand staircase and found, almost immediately, that the front door was standing open, a furious whirl of snow pouring in on the foyer carpet. Alex went and closed it, came back and said, “There are footprints in the snow, lead-ing away from the house.”

No one said anything until Katherine finally asked, “What next?”

“We check the rooms down here,” Alex said, lead-ing the way.

They all knew what they were going to find. It was not any special extra-sensory perception, Katherine thought, not something you could call pre-cognition or “fey,” just a deep, animal dread that went even beyond the level of instinct.

In the main drawing room, the furniture had been pushed back to make a circle for the ceremony. The wine-colored carpet was now marked with a number of chalk designs, and several thick, black candles burned on endtables all around. Yuri lay at the edge of the markings, sprawled on his face, his hands out-stretched in front of him as if he were desperately reaching for something. He was clearly dead.

Patricia Keene began to scream . . .

## CHAPTER 11

“And then you found the body?” Cartier asked.

Alex said, “Yes.”

“Where it lies now?”

“Yes.”

“You didn't move it at all?”

“I didn't even touch it.”

Constable Cartier consulted a small, black note-book which he had been glancing at throughout his interrogations of the people gathered in the library. Once, when he passed Katherine's chair and was holding the book lower than usual, she saw that it did not contain any writing at all, that his long and thoughtful glances at the supposedly incriminating list of facts it contained were nothing but staged expressions, phony. Ordinarily, she would have been amused by this, but she could not find a smile as long as Yuri was lying dead in the drawing room, currently guarded over by one of the two deputies that Cartier had brought with him.

“Have you ever seen the knife before?” Cartier asked.

“No.”

“It is an antique knife, as you could have told from the handle, very ornate and lovely,” Cartier said. He looked in his notebook again, looked up when he adjudged a proper amount of time had passed. “It is just the sort of thing one might expect to find in the older rooms of Owlsden, the unremodeled rooms.”

“What are you suggesting?” Alex asked. He was clearly angry at Cartier's smugness.

“I am not suggesting anything,” the constable said, staring at the blank pages of the book. “All that I am doing is making an observation.”

Alex snorted and shook his head. “And it's a muddle-headed observation,” he said. Patiently, as if he were talking to a child, he said, “That knife did not come from Owlsden.”

“Alex, please see to it that you are more courteous to the constable,” Lydia said. She was sitting at her large desk, holding a cup of hot tea in both hands, though she had not, so far as Katherine had noticed, taken a single sip of the stuff.

Alex flashed her an obvious look of exasperation, but he did not say anything further to Constable Cartier.

The policeman turned to Katherine and said, “Miss Sellers, don't you find it odd that the devil's dances, the Satanic markings on your door, and now the murder of Yuri Selenov should all transpire in or around Owlsden?”

“I don't understand what you mean?” She shifted in her chair, uncomfortable.

He said, “Wouldn't it seem to you that there is more to this than a simple coincidence?”

“Of course,” she said. Anyone could see it wasn't a coincidence that someone had been in the drawing room making Satanic ceremonial patterns on the carpet when Yuri surprised them.

“Then, perhaps, someone in this house is a member of the cult that has, for eighteen months, been a nuisance around these parts.”

“Now just a damn minute—” Alex began, rising swiftly from his chair.

“Sit down, please,” Cartier said, suddenly embarrassed, jolted out of his previous delight in this abrupt switch of roles between the once-rich and once-powerful, and himself. He seemed to realize that he was not being entirely fair to them and that his bluntness had overstepped some invisible boundary or other.

“You cannot—” Alex began.

“Alex, sit down, please,” Lydia said.

He looked at his mother, still furiously angry, then shrugged his shoulders and returned to his seat.

“Do you think anyone in Owlsden might be connected with this cult?” Cartier asked Katherine.

She barely managed to avoid looking at Alex as she said, “Perhaps not anyone here—but someone

else who has a key.”

“Oh, for Christsake, we went through all of that before, Katherine!” Alex said.

“Go through it again, for me,” Cartier said. She did, and when she was finished, the constable turned to Alex and Lydia and said, “I would like to have a list of names, everyone who has a key to Owlsden.”

“That can be arranged,” Lydia said.

“To no purpose,” Alex mumbled.

When the constable had gotten the list and had taken time to look it over carefully, he said, “It would seem unlikely, but if we have any lead so far, it is one of the names on this list.” He tucked the list neatly in the notebook and put the notebook in his hip pocket. “I suppose we ought to be going now.”

“Mr. Cartier?” Katherine asked.

He turned, looking infinitely wearier than he had looked only a moment ago, no longer getting much enjoyment out of interrogating the wealthy. “Yes?”

“What will be done with—with the body?”

“We’ll take it along with us,” he said. “We’ll have to put it on ice until the state police have a chance to get into town and take the case from us.”

“Tomorrow?”

He shook his head. “Eight inches of new snow down already and as much as twenty more predicted, all dry as powder and blown by a good wind. In another couple of hours, no one could get up to Owlsden—and in another six hours, no one will be driving in or out of Roxburgh itself, not even the state police.”

“When will they get here?” she asked.

“Depends on the wind once the snow has stopped. Could be as much as a week if the weather’s as bad as it sometimes gets.”

“A week! But what if the same people who killed Yuri are—”

“They won’t come back here,” Cartier said.

“You can’t be sure.”

He smiled. “I can be sure. They’ll know how hot the place is, how dangerous it would be to come here again and cause trouble.”

“But they’ll also know there isn’t anyone here protecting the place. Can’t you go ahead with the investigation until—”

Obviously embarrassed, Cartier interrupted her. “Neither I nor any of my men could handle it properly. We haven’t been trained for things like this, because we aren’t accustomed to anything more troublesome in Roxburgh than drunks and marital quarrels. I’m afraid that we’d only mess up the trail if we started stomping around after clues, and then we’d be in hot water with the state boys. I’ve chalked the outline of the body in the den, to show where it fell, and I’d be pleased if none of you touched anything in that room until the state police can go over it with all their machines. Other than that, we all have to sit and wait out the storm.”

“Couldn’t they send someone in by helicopter?” Katherine asked.

“Perhaps they could, but they won’t. It isn’t that much of a crime to them, one murder. Like I said, a couple of days or a week. Then they’ll be here to handle it.”

He nodded to Lydia and left the room.

“With this snow,” Katherine said, “the carpenter won’t be able to come and change the locks tomorrow, will he?”

“No,” Alex said.

Lydia said, “Don’t worry, dear. I’m sure that Constable Cartier is right. Those terrible people, whoever they were, aren’t going to risk returning to Owlsden in the near future.”

“I hope you’re right,” Katherine said.

“I know I am.”

The police trundled Yuri’s blanket-wrapped corpse past the library door. The sight of it, like a bundle of weeds, caused Patricia Keene to break into low, mournful sobs.

“There now, there now,” her husband said, patting her shoulder and awkwardly trying to cradle her

against his chest. He was not a man easily able to offer consolation or comfort. “It's going to be perfectly all right, Pat. Everything is going to be fine.”

Katherine wished that he were right. But she knew that he was wrong . . .

## CHAPTER 12

The following day, Owlsden was suffused with a morbid air of death, a deep mood of brooding expectancy that ruled out any quick resumption of the routines of daily life. Outside, the snow still fell hard, with nearly twelve inches of new snow draped across the old, softening the land and the house like a burial shroud softens the harsh realities beneath it. Inside, Lydia remained in her room, uninterested in conversation or in going about the details of correspondence. She seemed to have been stricken more brutally by Yuri's sudden death than she had evidenced the night before. Patricia and Mason Keene kept to the kitchen, drinking coffee and talking in low voices—conversations which they ceased immediately when anyone entered their private domain. They were not bothering to produce any culinary masterpieces, for everyone had made it clear that food was not of much interest after the bloody events of the last several hours. Alex Boland went into town, using the ski slope, around ten o'clock and looked to be gone until evening, though Katherine had no idea what he was doing down there. It seemed to her that his time might be better spent in finding some way to secure the doors to Owlsden before nightfall brought a new period of anxiety to all of them.

Katherine remained in her room, like Lydia, and tried to read. When she grew hungry enough to force food into her stomach and keep it there, she nibbled at the things in the refrigerator in her closet. She spent long periods of time at the window, staring out at the clean landscape, the sharp, relentless, white glare of the untouched snow. She found herself methodically adding up the credits and the debits of life at Owlsden, as she had done once before, but she had different results than the first time. The list of debits now far outweighed the credits. It seemed wiser to pack and leave, to go through the unsettling process of locating a new job, than to stay here.

Of course, she would have to stay a while yet. The hard, snapping wind and the huge snowfall dictated a period of isolation before she could make her break for freedom. Even if she could somehow get her luggage down the ski slope, tote it to her Ford where it was still parked in that picnic area and get the car started after it had set several days in the snow, she could not drive out of the valley. She remembered the perilous descent into the valley her first day on the job, and she had no wish to try to make it back up that insanely steep roadway in even worse weather.

And so the day passed.

More wind.

More snow.

She watched them both, watched the woods, thought about the bonfire she had **seen** from this window, the dancing figures, the wolflike tracks in the snow . . .

She washed her nylons in the sink, hung them on the shower rail to dry, painted her nails, nibbled at an apple.

She found herself at the window again, attracted like a moth to a flame, staring at the site of the bonfire which was now covered with snow and as unremarkable as the rest of the land.

She remembered Yuri saying that they had singled her out as the next convert to the beliefs which the cult held dear, that certain spells would be cast and that she would not be able to resist, that she might very well become as they . . .

More wind.

More snow.

In the evening, when darkness had dropped across the snowscape without diminishing the speed of the falling flakes, she went downstairs to the library to choose a book from its richly stuffed shelves. The downstairs was as quiet and chilled as the second floor corridor had been, as if there were no one else in Owlsden but Katherine—or, even more exactly, as if this were not a house at all, but some ancient monument, a burial vault of pyramidal splendor. After twenty minutes of choosing one volume only to replace it when she leafed through it, she found a light romance which seemed just the thing to take her mind off the events in Owlsden. She was stepping out of the library into the downstairs corridor when the

tele-phone rang, crying like a wounded bird in the dead si-lence.

It rang twice before she picked it up from the table only a few steps to her right. "Hello?"

"May I speak to Miss Sellers, please?" It was Mi-chael Harrison.

"This is me, Mike," she said.

"Katherine?"

"Yes."

He sighed, relieved. "I was afraid that you'd be out-side—or that they might not put you on the line."

She laughed softly. Just hearing his voice had done wonders for her, had recalled his warmth, the friendli-ness of his companions at the cafe—and had recalled, not least of all, the way he looked at her and the way he had kissed her only the night before.

She said, "Why shouldn't they let me talk to you? Do you think they're all conspiring against me or something?"

He paused too long for comfort and said, "Not Lydia, anyway."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm afraid to tell you," he said, "for fear you won't believe me, that you'll get angry with me."

"Never," she said, surprised at the boldness in her tone.

Again he paused, considering his choice of words. "If I were to have the Rover up there at eleven this evening, do you think you could have your luggage outside, waiting for me—without letting anyone know what you are up to?"

"Michael, this is hardly a time for jokes that—"

"No jokes."

She thought a moment, said, "*What* is the matter?"

"You know how Alex is prejudiced against me," he said.

"Only too well."

"I hope you also understand that I would never talk against him just to ruin his character or for spite. I would not behave the way he does."

"I know you well enough to understand that," she said.

"Then understand that I fully believe what I'm about to tell you is the truth."

"Tell me, then, for heaven's sake!"

Michael took a deep breath as if to fortify himself for the explanation, or as if he still was afraid she might not believe him. "I have some fairly convincing evidence that Alex Boland is a member of that Satanic cult which has been causing so much trouble lately."

"Alex?" she asked, stunned at the possibility. She had been willing to consider his friends—but not the son of her employer himself. Those who did awful things were always strangers, not people you knew. People you knew were better than that, unable to com-mit crimes. Or was that nothing more than her optimism working against her again?

"Alex," he confirmed. "And not only does it seem that he's a member of the cult, but that he's the head of it, the chief priest."

"I can hardly see why—"

"These people don't need reasons that normal peo-ple would understand," Michael said. "They operate in another dimension altogether, on a plane of lesser sanity."

"Still—"

"Think, Katherine!" he demanded. He sounded des-perately concerned for her. She remembered the kiss, the way he had been so protective about her in the cafe . . . "Think of all that's happened in Owlsden since you've come there—including Yuri's murder. Doesn't it seem likely that someone in the house is a cultist?"

"You mean—Alex might have—"

"Killed Yuri."

She did not reply.

She *could not* reply.

All that she could think of was Alex Boland's un-pleasantly negative outlook on life and the strange,

pessimistic conversation of his closest friends . . .

“Are you there, Katherine?”

“Yes.”

“Will you be ready by eleven?”

“It won't be easy. Couldn't we wait until morning. . . .” Even though she was frightened badly, she did not want to admit that what Michael had told her might be true.

“Then leave your bags,” he said. “Just come along with me and look at the evidence. If you don't think it incriminates Alex, I'll take you right back to Owlsden. But I don't believe you'll want to go back, not after you see what I've seen.”

“Can't you tell me on the phone?” she asked.

“It loses its dramatic impact that way. I'm not taking any chances on under-selling this to you. I want you to see it, to be as frightened as I was—as I am.”

“I'll be outside at eleven,” she said.

“Not in front of the house.”

“Where, then?”

“At the top of the ski slope,” he said.

“You can bring the Rover up that way?”

“As easy as the road,” he said. “Maybe easier.”

“I'll be there.”

“Take care.”

“I will.”

“Eleven.”

“Sharp,” she said.

She hung up and turned around to go upstairs, the book in her hand forgotten now, and she confronted Alex who stood only a dozen feet away, as if he had been listening.

“Going out?” he asked.

His eyes seemed darker and more intense than ever.

“In the morning,” she said, thinking fast. She tried desperately to remember how much she had said, what details he might have learned from hearing one side of the conversation. “If Lydia doesn't have anything for me to do.”

“Going with Michael Harrison?” he asked.

“Yes, as a matter of fact.”

How long had he been standing there? How much did he know, and how much was he guessing at? Had he heard her mention his name . . . ?

“I wish you wouldn't, Katherine.”

“You've got an obsession about him, haven't you?”

“No. I just know him better than you do.”

“Your mother thinks he is—”

“I know him better than she does.”

“Well, I like him.”

“Katherine, I honestly believe that he is capable of almost anything.” He stepped into the center of the hall, his arms spread slightly at his sides, as if he were pleading with her. Or as if he were blocking the way so that she could not get past him unless he permitted it.

“Must you always think the worst of everyone and everything?” she asked, a bit too harshly. She was goaded on by fear as well as by anger. “You never look at the positive side, the bright side of anything, Alex. Sometimes, you're absolutely morbid.”

He seemed shocked by the evaluation, but he recovered quickly as she took a step toward him, his hands still slightly open at his sides. “Are you going skiing with him?”

She hesitated, realized that he must have overheard something to do with the rendezvous point. It would be better to admit to this much so as not to make him doubt her word that the meeting was not until the following morning. “Yes, skiing,” she said.



“Maybe I could go along, make it a threesome,” he said, though it was surely the last thing in the world he would enjoy.

“Maybe you could,” she said, rather than antago-nize him. Since she *wouldn't* be going skiing with Michael in the morning, what harm did it do to agree with Alex now?

“What time?” he asked.

“Eleven.”

“At the slope?”

“Yes.”

He stepped out of her way and smiled at her. “I’ll be there just to prove that I don’t always look on the gloomy side of things—and to show you I can get along with anyone, even Michael Harrison.”

“Good!” Katherine said, smiling cheerily. The smile was utterly false. She wondered if he could see that, and she looked at him as she passed him on her way to the stairs. His eyes were black, hard and very intense, but it was impossible to tell what he was thinking.

Upstairs, she locked her door.

It was twenty minutes of eight. More than three hours to wait until she could get out of Owlsden. She knew, now, that she would be greatly relieved to get out, even if Michael’s “proof against Alex did not convince her. She had a premonition, however, that she would be thoroughly convinced . . .

## CHAPTER 13

When Katherine had first entered the orphanage at the age of eight, she had had a run-in with Mrs. Coleridge on her third day there.

Mrs. Coleridge was a heavy set, severe woman who wore her hair drawn away from her face pinned in a bun on top of her head. Her eyebrows were thick, her lips thin and set. She never smiled at anyone, and she had a long list of dos and don'ts by which every child in the institution had to abide or suffer punishment. One of her rules was that every child should go through a period of mourning after they arrived, before actually entering into any of the activities of their new life. While Katherine had looked forward eagerly to a picnic scheduled for the third day of her stay, Mrs. Coleridge was shocked to find that she had any notion of enjoying herself so soon.

In her large, dimly lighted office on the ground floor of the main residence hall, Mrs. Coleridge took the young Katherine to task. "Your mother and father have only been gone a little more than a week," she said, looking meaningfully at the child.

Katherine said nothing.

"You know our rules here?"

"Some of them," Katherine said quietly.

"Maybe you know that we feel that two weeks of mourning are required before you can join right in with the other children."

Katherine had nothing to say.

"You'll go to chapel, of course, and to Sunday evening prayer, but as for a *picnic* . . ."

"I want to go too," Katherine said.

The woman looked at her, scowled. "I don't think that I have made myself perfectly clear, child."

"I'll sneak along, even if you won't let me go," Katherine said. She was growing bolder now, and she stood up in front of her chair, as if to confront the older woman. She was a small, delicate girl with a wistful look about her that made her seem somehow older than she was. She was *so* delicate, however, that she looked as if a strong wind might crush her.

"You'll do just what you're told to do," Mrs. Coleridge replied. She was more than ready to be the crushing wind in this case, for she actually enjoyed disciplining the children, enjoyed it more than anyone but Mrs. Coleridge herself could know. She stood up too, fingering the handle of the desk drawer where she kept the switch she used on unruly children.

"I'll go," Katherine insisted.

Screwing up her face, Mrs. Coleridge said, "Don't you have any respect for the dead, child? Don't you miss and love your parents?"

Tears had come into Katherine's eyes then, and she said, quietly, "I loved them a lot, a whole lot."

"Then—"

"I *have* to go on the picnic," Katherine cried. "You have to let me! If I'm not happy, I'll be sad. And when you're sad, awful things happen. If you're happy, if you stay happy, nothing can go wrong!"

Mrs. Coleridge took the switch from her drawer. "Don't yell at me, young lady."

"Daddy was always looking out for bad things, expecting bad things," she went on. "He said the flood would ruin the farm if it came, ruin everything for us. He was sad all the time. And then—then it came and was even worse than he expected."

Mrs. Coleridge tested the switch against her palm, and she said, "Be quiet, Katherine."

"No! You have to understand, Mrs. Coleridge! Don't be so sad, don't always think that bad things will happen, because—then they *will*!" It was not easy for a child, almost eight years old, to frame the essence of such a philosophy, and she was frustrated with herself for not being able to reach the older woman with the truth of what she thought.

"Come here," Mrs. Coleridge said, frowning. Her face was full of ugly lines when she frowned.

Katherine got her spanking shortly thereafter.

But the next day, she sneaked away on the picnic with the others. The house parents chaperoning the affair never reported her disobedience to Mrs. Cole-ridge, for they sympathized with her desperate search for happiness.

From that moment on, Katherine's life had been shaped by the principle of optimism.

Until Owlsden.

Owlsden had bled away her positive outlook over the period of only a few days until now, alone in her room, she could summon forth only one optimistic image: Michael Harrison. He represented hope to her—not only hope of getting away from this cold, dark house, but hope of returning to her former attitude of cheerfulness. Mike was always happy, it seemed, al-ways full of hope for the best. Perhaps, with him, she could manage to regain her optimism and face life as she had always faced it before: with hope for the next day. With Michael, everything would return to normal again. She could still recall the warmth of his kiss . . .

As if she had been placed outside the normal stream of time, the minutes passed in agonizingly slow order, each one stretched into an hour.

She tried to read the book she had carried up from the library and could not get interested in it, tried to eat something and could not, tried to nap and could not keep her eyes closed. She kept wondering if some-one had unlocked and opened her door while she was not looking, and she would open her eyes to survey the room and be certain of her solitude.

At a quarter past nine, only an hour and a half since she had spoken with Michael, the lights in her room shut off, plunging her into a deep and disquieting darkness.

She rolled out of bed and slipped into her shoes, felt her way to the door. Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, though there was nothing out of the ordi-nary to be seen.

At the door, she listened carefully.

For a moment, there was only silence. Then, Lydia called out to someone—and was answered by Mason Keene.

“—all over the house,” he finished saying.

Katherine opened her door and found the second floor corridor in complete darkness.

“Lydia?” she called.

“Here,” the older woman said. She sounded as if she were only a few yards farther along the hallway. From the quaver in her voice, it appeared she was more than a little on edge. She sounded, too, as if she expected someone to leap at her from the unrelieved darkness in the almost windowless corridor.

“What's happened?” Katherine asked. She kept her back to the door of her room, her hand against the doorjamb to keep her position in mind.

“I think, perhaps, that a fuse has blown,” Mason Keene said, drawing closer to her, though still invis-ible.

She wished that she could see him. She did not like the idea that his eyes might have adjusted to the dim-ness more readily than hers and that he had an advan-tage, for she had now come to fear nearly everyone in Owlsden, even the reticent Keene couple.

“Or else the power lines are down,” Lydia said.

“Heaven forbid,” Keene said, almost at Katherine's side now.

“Has that happened before?” Katherine asked, squinting in the direction that Keene seemed to be coming from.

“Now and again, during the most rugged storms,” Lydia said. “And this one seems to be a beauty, doesn't it? Listen to that wind.”

Katherine realized how loud the wind was, even within the thick walls of the mansion. For a time, she had lost the sound of it, had let it become a gentle background roar of which she was unaware.

“Well,” Lydia said, “we'd best break out the supplies of candles and get used to living primitively for a while.”

“I've found a closet,” Mason Keene said a moment later, pulling open a poorly oiled door close at Kathe-rine's left hand. “I'll have some light for us in a moment.”

“Poor light, but something anyway,” Lydia said. She sounded as if she would dearly welcome even

the meagerest relief from this Stygian dark. What, exactly, was she afraid of? Alex?

"It's not the lack of light, but the lack of heat that we'll soon begin to notice," Keene said. "The furnace starts up electrically, you see. So we'll have to build fires in the fireplaces downstairs and keep to as few rooms as possible."

"How long will it take them to fix the lines?" Katherine asked.

Lydia sighed. "They can't start until the snow stops and the roads are at least partially cleared. We're going to have to rough it for a couple of days."

"Isn't so bad, once the big fireplaces are in use," Keene said. "And we have plenty of firewood to see us through. Yuri always made sure to keep a stock . . ." His voice ran out like an old-fashioned phonograph when he realized that Yuri was no longer among the living.

As they waited in silence and darkness for Mason Keene to strike a match over a candle wick, Katherine thought that the entire thing was more sinister than either Lydia or the servant realized. Just possibly, someone had deliberately stopped the power flow into Owlsden. Just possibly, someone wanted a dark house in which to operate. And, just possibly, she was not slated to finish out the night here, let alone a couple of cold days ahead . . .

A match lighted.

Orange flame cast light upwards over Mason Keene's features, twisting them into a parody of a human face. When he turned to them and smiled, the smile more resembled a leer than anything more reassuring. That was only the fault of the distorting flame, of course.

He touched the match to a candle wick and enlarged the circle of blessed light to include both of the women.

In a moment, they each had a candle, looking strangely like the celebrants in some religious rite.

"Let's go find Alex," Lydia said. "He'll know what to do about this."

Unless, Katherine thought, he's the one who already *did it* . . .

## CHAPTER 14

"There we go!" Alex said, stepping back from the mammoth fireplace in the library.

Blue flames leapt up from the pile of twigs and danced across the bark of the larger logs, their strange color attributable to the chemical starter that Alex had used.

Katherine thought of the eerie blue flames that had soared out of the bonfire down by the woods when the Satanists had been engaged in their devil's dance . . .

"Heat!" Lydia said, rubbing her hands together. "You know, despite its elaborate design, Owlsden holds heat no better than a cardboard box—maybe worse. The furnace went off no more than half an hour ago, and already the place is freezing!"

"Imagine what it was like in the early days, before they even had an electric furnace," Alex said.

"Father was slightly crazy," Lydia said, shaking her head and laughing. The laughter seemed genuine, as if the adversity and the feeling of camaraderie that it generated had perked her considerably.

Everyone was in the room, except for Mason Keene who had found a flashlight and gone into the basement to check the fusebox. Now, he returned and said, "Power lines are down, unfortunately. All the fuses seem in order."

"I was afraid of that," Lydia said.

After a long moment of silence when everyone watched the bright flames beyond the hearthstones, Katherine said, "Is it really windy enough to bring the lines down?"

"More than enough," Alex said. "Why do you ask?"

She shifted uncomfortably on the small sofa on which she sat and looked at him, trying to read the expression in his dark eyes. Then she said, "It occurred to me that someone might have cut the lines."

"On purpose?" Lydia asked.

"Yes."

"But whatever for?"

She shrugged. "Why would they want to use your drawing room to hold a Satanic ceremony? Why would they kill Yuri to keep him from identifying them? Nothing else these people have done makes a whole lot of sense."

Patricia Keene made a moaning noise low in her throat and cuddled closer to her husband. He cradled her awkwardly, but he really looked as if he would have preferred to have the roles reversed and let *her* comfort *him*.

"It bears some thought," Alex said, watching her intently.

"Not from me," Lydia said. "I don't want to dwell on anything that gruesome."

They sat for a long time in silence, while Alex nursed the fire and built it to a peak that was easily maintained by the regular feeding of dry logs into the yellow-orange mouth.

"Mason and I can get a fire started in the dining room and kitchen hearths," he said. "Pity we can't go into the drawing room and use that one as well. Even so, we ought to have the bottom floor fairly warm in a few hours."

Katherine looked at her watch and saw the time was ten minutes after ten o'clock. She said, "I think I'll go up to my room and get into some warmer clothes. I feel pretty chill right now."

Alex turned away from the fireplace and picked up the flashlight that Mason Keene had been using earlier. He approached her, smiling, and said, "I'll help you find your way upstairs, Katherine."

"That's not necessary."

"But I don't mind. I don't want you tripping and falling. If anyone hurt himself here, we'd be hard-pressed to get him medical help."

"I'll take a candle," she said. "I'll be just fine." She hoped she didn't sound as desperate as she felt. The last thing she wanted was to be alone with Alex Bo-land, in a darkened house, for even a brief moment.

"Don't be stubborn," he said, taking her elbow in a gentlemanly manner. "It will only take a minute

to—”

“I insist,” Katherine said, pulling her arm away from him. “You and Mason have to see to the other fires. That’s the most important thing right now, isn’t it?”

He didn’t say anything but looked down at her wrist—at her watch. Had he seen her glancing at the time a moment ago? And what could he make of that, even if he had seen it?

“Okay,” he said at last.

“Be back in a minute,” Katherine told Lydia.

She picked up one of the candles in a brass holder with a wax-catch that flared out around its hilt, and she left the room. She walked sedately toward the stairs but, once on them, took the risers two at a time.

Strange shadows played on the walls around her, loomed in front and shrank into blackness behind.

At the top of the staircase, she turned around and held the candle out before her, barely lighting the last flight of steps. If anyone had followed her, he was now waiting beyond the turn at the landing, on the flight below this last one, where she could not see him. She turned and started down the hall toward her room, the candlelight carrying only six or seven feet in front of her.

She was halfway down the hall when she heard something close at hand: a floorboard squeaking as someone stepped on it without being aware that it was loose beneath the carpet. She stopped, stood very still and slowly turned in every direction, looking for movement, a glimpse of light.

She could not see anyone.

“Anybody there?”

When she got no answer, she went on.

She closed and bolted the door to her room and lighted the ornamental candles on her hutch and triple dresser. Satisfied that there was no one in the room, closets and attached bath, she began to change clothes.

Her watch told the time: 10:22, little more than half an hour until she must meet Michael Harrison at the top of the ski run. If she had previously had any doubts about sneaking away from Owlsden during the night, they had been destroyed by this sudden deprivation of light and by Alex’s increasingly suspicious behavior—Where had he been all day, until after darkness had fallen, in town arranging something with his friends? And why his insistence to accompany her to the second floor, to get her alone long enough to . . . ?

She zipped up her ski jacket and pulled the toboggan cap down over her ears. She was ready to go.

Picking up the candle in the brass holder, she blew out those that burned on the hutch and the dresser, and she went to the door. As she slid the iron bolt out of place, she heard someone on the other side of the door—taken quite by surprise as he had been listening at the keyhole—scurrying quickly down the long corridor. When she swung her door open and stepped into the hall, she heard another door swing shut farther along toward the head of the stairs. Though the sound had carried well in the still house, it was not possible to figure out which door it had been.

The stairs seemed an eternity away, but she struck out for them just the same, flinching uncontrollably as she passed each room and expected to be accosted by someone hiding in one of them.

She was halfway along the corridor when, not so very far behind her, a door squeaked open and someone stepped into the hall, hot on her trail again.

She turned swiftly and held the candle high and forward, but she was too far away to illuminate anything. For a moment, she considered taking several quick steps back the way she had come, thereby surprising and trapping the stalker in the open where she could learn his identity. The only thing that held her back was the certain knowledge that she would not like what happened after she had pulled off this little coup . . .

Turning again, she walked toward the steps more quickly than before, went down them two at a time with the inescapable feeling that someone was only inches behind her.

Near the bottom of the steps, she reluctantly blew out her candle so that none of the household would see her leaving.

Moving cautiously along the main hall, aware that she faced danger in front as well as behind now,

she passed the library where the two women waited. She felt certain that the stalker was still behind her, watch-ing and waiting for the proper moment to make his move. She passed the dining room where she could hear Mason Keene speaking to someone else. She as-sumed he must be talking to Alex and that surprised her. She had assumed that it was Alex behind her, waiting to trip her up.

Of course, Alex did not have to be the only one of the cultists in Owlsden, did he? He might easily have stationed one of his friends upstairs in the event that she tried to slip away from them.

She stepped into the kitchen, turned and shut the door. She stepped quickly to the table in the center of the room, fumbled around until she found a wooden chair, turned and placed the chair against the door so that the back of it was braced under the knob.

She waited.

Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the darkness and fully used the shallow snowlight that came through the big windows.

Had she been imagining the stalker? Had there really been someone behind her, or had she—

Someone tried the door, not boldly, not normally— but stealthily, as if he half expected it to be locked.

Katherine turned and went quickly across the kitchen.

Behind her, someone was cautiously putting a shoulder to the door, trying to pop the brace loose with a minimum of noise.

You'll be with Michael in a few minutes, she told herself. Everything will be fine then. He'll take care of you; he'll joke with you; he'll make everything bright and fine.

She opened the kitchen door, stepped into the wind and snow, closed the door behind her, and was in-stantly relieved that she had taken the first major step in her flight from this strange house.

## CHAPTER 15

When she had gone only twenty steps from the kitchen door, her eyes watering from the fierce assault of the wind, her face numb with cold, Katherine began to wonder if the loss of power had, after all, been due to the storm. Inside Owlsden, she had become accustomed to the continuous growl of the elements without really understanding how furious they really were. The first snow had been a spring shower compared to this thunderstorm of a buzzard. She could not see more than another step in front of her, and she guided her-self as much by instinct as by anything she came across in the way of landmarks. The snow was well over her knees except where the wind had scoured it away to drift it elsewhere, and she was required to expend an enormous amount of energy to make any headway at all. Why hadn't Michael told her how rough it would be? The heavy insulation of her ski-suit did not keep her as toasty warm as usual; chills ran up her spine as the most severe blasts seemed somehow to cut right through the quilted fabric and dry the thin sheen of perspiration on her body.

Twice, she turned and looked back toward the house to see if anyone were following her, but the first time she knew she wouldn't have seen him even if he was—and the second time, she could not make out the lines of Owlsden, though it must have been fairly close still.

She doubted even Michael's driving ability to force the Rover up the mountain in this—and then she stopped thinking along those lines. She could not afford to doubt Michael. He might be her only chance.

She had been counting her steps in the event she had to attempt to retrace her path, and for this reason she knew that it was the fifty-seventh step on which she floundered and went down in the cold, soft snow. Her foot slipped on something beneath the snow and twisted under her just as the wind shifted slightly and pounded down on her in a brutal gust. She threw her arms out in a vain effort to break her fall, and she sprawled full-length in the snow.

For a moment, all sound ceased.

Everything was deadly silent.

She lay still, wondering what had happened, whether she was conscious and even, for a second, if she might be dead. But she could hear her heart thumping rapidly; she could hear that much, and that much was enough. She realized that she could not hear the wind because her head was cushioned in deep snow that filtered the keening wail above her.

She lay there for a moment, sucking in wet, cold breaths, recovering the strength to get up again.

This was only the second time she had faced a major battle with the elements, and her mind was suddenly drawn back to that other time, when she was seven years old . . . the water rising slowly across the farmyard and moving relentlessly in on the house . . . her father wading through it toward the barn, carrying the buckets with which he hoped to bail out the machinery pit where the tractor lay. At all costs, the machinery must remain dry, all thirty thousand dollars worth of it . . . everything in the house already moved to the second floor . . . her mother going after her father to help . . . Katherine alone at the second floor bedroom window, watching them . . . then the water . . . not just rising slowly any longer . . . a sudden wall of it, as if something had burst farther up the valley . . . her father looking up in horror . . . throwing the buckets down . . . yelling at her mother . . . her mother frozen there, watching it as her father ran toward her . . . then the water, every-where the water, sweeping over the both of them . . . Windows shattering downstairs as it blasted into the house and gushed almost to the top of the stairs in one sudden explosion of terrifying noise . . .

In the snow outside Owlsden, Katherine got to her feet. It had occurred to her that she might find lying in the snow much too pleasant and, when the critical moment came, be as unwilling or as unable to move out of the path of death as her mother had been.

She started out again, colder than before, cold clear through to her bones. She was shivering so badly that her teeth chattered together, and there was nothing she could do to stop them.

Suddenly, ahead, a flashlight flickered in the dark-ness.

She stopped, squinted, lost sight of it.



“Hey!” she shouted.

She thought, for a moment, she might have circled back to Owlsden without being aware of it and might now be calling to those who were out searching for her from that end.

It didn't matter; she had to find help.

“Hey!”

She stumbled forward, went down to her knees again, struggled up and went on. “Michael!”

The light flicked again, closer.

“Hey!”

This time, it stayed on.

A moment later, she nearly crashed into them and knocked them down as they loomed out of the snow-storm directly in front of her: Michael Harrison and the tall, blond friend of his whose name was Kerry Markwood. She went forward, into his arms, and leaned against him as she recovered her breath.

“It's worse up here than in the valley,” he said, talk-ing loudly so she could hear him above the storm. “When we got here and saw how awful it was, I began to worry.”

Her mouth was dry. She wanted to scoop up a hand-ful of snow and eat it, but she knew that was the wrong thing to do. She needed something hot, coffee or tea. She hoped it wouldn't take them long to get into town.

“Are you all right?” Kerry Markwood asked.

“Fine,” she said.

Michael smiled. “I was afraid they might not let you go.”

“I *was* followed,” she said.

The two men looked at each other, obviously con-cerned by that.

“If s all right,” she explained. “I lost him.” She de-scribed, rapidly, how the stalker had followed her through the house and how she had foiled him at the kitchen door.

“Great girl!” Michael said. “You really are some-thing!”

“Now,” she said, “where's the Rover? I'm freezing to death out here.” She shuddered to make her point.

Even with most of his face hidden by the red tobog-gan hat he had drawn firmly down around his ears, and even with the neck scarf that hid his entire chin, he managed to look embarrassed. “I'm afraid I am less of a driver than I thought,” he said.

“You couldn't make it?”

“Only a third of the way.”

“But how did you get here, then?”

“We picked up skis and used the lift.”

“We can't ski down, though,” Katharine said. “Not in this weather.”

“We'll walk it.”

“Are you serious?” she asked.

“It won't be hard,” Kerry Markwood assured her. “I know these woods as well as my own back yard. We'll cut into the trees over there, until the pines are so thick that the snow isn't very deep under them. Then it ought to be a cinch to follow the mountain to its base and strike back to where the Rover is parked.”

“Well . . .” she said, trying to express all of her doubts in the single word.

“Would you rather stay here?” Michael asked.

“I guess not.”

“Come on, then,” he said. “You follow Kerry, and I'll be right behind you.”

The blond boy lead them across the brink of the mountain to the other side of the ski run, then into the trees. The sound of the wind changed, became a dis-tant sougning high overhead, no longer a biting force on all sides.

Soon, they turned and struck down the slope, guided expertly around the worst briar patches and through the most confusing thrusts of limestone by the Markwood boy who moved as surely as if he were leading them across someone's living room. When the way grew treacherous, the two men helped

Katherine forward, and she did not fall once under their careful ministrations.

In a few minutes, they came to a large circle in the trees where the snow seemed to have been beaten down by a number of booted feet, though Markwood kept the flashlight beam too high for her to be certain of that. Here, in the middle of nowhere, for no reason that she could readily discern, they stopped.

“I’m not tired,” she said.

“Nor I,” Markwood said cheerfully enough.

“Me either,” Michael said, and laughed.

“Then why—”

Michael pulled off his scarf and pushed his toboggan hat slightly off his forehead now that the cold was not so fierce. He said, “This is as far as we go. For now, anyway.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Somehow, she wished that the wind were not so distant, that it was still all around them and that it could drown out his words. She knew she was not going to appreciate what he had to say.

“This is where we meant to bring you,” Markwood said. “Here and no farther.”

“Is this where the evidence against Alex can be found?”

Abruptly, other people began to appear around them, stepping out from behind trees and rounded teeth of milestone. None of them spoke or made any noise as they came forth. She recognized many of them from the long afternoon of conversation in the cafe.

“Michael?” she asked, turning to him for an explanation.

“Meet the family,” he said. “We don’t go any farther, Katherine, because this is where the family is— and this is where the dance is soon going to take place.”

## CHAPTER 16

Katherine stared at him, sure that it must be a joke or that she had misunderstood. "The cult?" she asked, finally.

"The family," he corrected. "We are a family in Satan."

"It can't be!"

"But it is."

"Michael, you're too sensible to—"

He frowned. "What makes you think that Satanists are not sensible? Do you believe that Christianity holds the only true answers and that the rest of us are madmen? Well, it isn't so, not at all. There are alter-nate paths through this life, and we have simply cho-sen one of them in preference to the road most trav-eled by."

She did not know whether he realized he was distorting a poem by Robert Frost, but the irony of the similarity of thought was almost funny. Almost.

"Let's begin," Michael said.

The others moved toward the center of the circle and began to clear away some of the snow. Still others carried in dry wood which they must have brought along with them, and they began to prepare material for a bonfire.

"Then Alex isn't anything you said he was."

"Not a Satanist, no."

"You lured me out of Owlsden on the pretext of—"

"Don't be indignant, Katherine," he said, smiling benignly on her. "You'll thank me later tonight, when you've been taken into the family."

"I don't want to be in your crazy family," Katherine said, taking a step toward him, hoping to plead a case he would listen to.

"Not now, of course. But later."

"Never."

"When you've seen Him, when you've understood Him, you will thank me, Katherine."

She ignored his rantings and said, "I fail to see how you can force me to become a member of the family against my will. When the ceremony is over, what's to keep me from leaving here and going straight into Roxburgh, to the authorities?"

"You won't."

"Will you—kill me? Like you killed Yuri?"

"Of course not! Yuri got in the way when he wasn't supposed to be. You're different. We want you. And once you've danced with Him, you'll be happy to be-long to the family, to be constantly possessed by Him and to face the future as His."

"I don't believe I'll feel that way at all."

"Just wait."

She saw, in Michael's eyes, the flame of the fanatic which cool reason could never hope to quench. Why hadn't she seen that same flame before? Why had she only seen love, affection, understanding and good humor in those incredibly blue eyes? Had he been a tremendously good actor or—and she felt this was more likely—had she been too blind to see anything but what she wanted to see?

As hard as it was to face, that last must be true, for she had not only misjudged Michael Harrison. She had misjudged his friends. And she had apparently misjudged Alex and his friends also. And, finally, she had misjudged Yuri, poor Yuri. She had been so cer-tain that he had been playing a role that she had easily overlooked the real man. He was a college graduate who still believed in ghosts and demons and vampires. That had seemed like such an odd combination that it had to be false, and instead of trying to understand why he should be a man of such conflicting facets, she had discarded the notion that he might really be what he appeared to be.

How could she have been so wrong, so often? In the back of her mind, a tiny grain of an idea began to form, so small she could not make much of it. But she knew that, if she survived this night, she would see that idea flower and would come to understand herself better than she ever had before.

“Already,” Michael said, “you seem softened to the idea.”

“No.”

He looked beyond her, at the members of the family who were making the arrangements. As he did so and his eyes seemed to glaze for a moment in a curious look of mindless anticipation, Katherine steeled herself to break through any interference she might receive, and she ran past him toward the edge of the forest and the open expanse of the ski run which she knew lay just beyond.

She got a dozen steps before someone shouted.

She kept running, pumping her legs up and down, came out of the trees and plowed into the thick blanket of snow on the run, bulldozed her way ahead despite the resistance she received. Fear drove her, and that might give her an edge over the rest of them.

Hands grasped desperately for her, snagged at her clothes but were torn loose as she ran even faster, sending up a thick, white spray of snow in her wake.

“Damn you!” someone hissed close by her right hand.

She looked over as she ran, and she saw Kerry Markwood keeping pace with her, his face strained tight, lips skinned back over a set of white, even teeth.

When she looked to the left, she saw another young man on that side. He was tall and muscular, easily over six feet and over two hundred pounds, and he did not seem to mind the chase at all. Indeed, he seemed to be enjoying it, because he nodded his head and smiled at her as he put on a burst of speed and pulled ahead of her.

Suddenly, the ground turned up, rolled above her, slammed down hard upon her face, placing the sky at her back like a heavy bowl of water.

She shook her head, blew snow from her nostrils and got her hands under herself, palms flat on the snow. She sucked in a deep breath and pushed herself up.

Kerry Markwood and the muscular boy took hold of her, one on either arm, and they would not be shaken loose.

“Damn you,” Markwood said, though not as furiously as he had when he was giving chase.

“Easy girl, easy,” the muscular boy said. His fingers dug into her arm like spikes into soft wood.

They led her back to Michael who stood at the edge of the woods, his hands limp at his sides.

“Almost,” she said.

She felt better for having tried something, anything, even though it had not worked.

“Where did you hope to get to?” he asked.

“Anywhere else,” she said.

“Back to Alex?”

“It would be better with him than with you,” she said.

“That’s a lie!” he snapped, his face suffused with blood in the white glow of the flashlight. In his voice, she heard a more obsessive hatred than she had ever heard from Alex Boland. He said, “I told you we wouldn’t hurt you.” His voice was so cold and brittle that it frightened Katherine.

She did not respond.

Michael raised his hand and, in one utterly vicious sweep that was too fast for her to avoid, he slapped her across the face.

Her head jerked back. Her mouth sagged open as a flash of white and yellow pain exploded across her forehead. That was the first time she had ever realized that pain had a color. She wondered if there were different colors for different kinds of pain.

The hand came around again and struck her more gently than it had the first time. At least, it *seemed* to strike with less force, though that might only have been because she was too numb to properly interpret its impact.

However hard it had been, it was quite hard enough, for it knocked her down as if her knees were jelly. The two boys let go of her arms.

“Sisters!” Michael called to some of the women in the cult. “Come fetch your future relative.”

She tried to get up again.

She couldn't manage it.

Darkness fell around her like the great, black wings of a bird, and she did not know anything else that hap-pened for a while . . .

## CHAPTER 17

Fire.

Heat, little smoke.

Figures moving in the rippling currents of hot air, distorted like figures in funhouse mirrors . . .

Voices.

Singing? No, chanting.

Katherine came fully awake and found that she was sitting in the snow not half a dozen steps away from the bonfire. The heat from it had flushed her face. Her hands were behind her, as if propping her up, but when she tried to move them, she found that they were tied together rather securely. The circulation in her hands had been affected, and her fingertips tingled un-pleasantly.

"How are you feeling?" Michael asked, appearing suddenly before her and smiling as if they were still close, as if nothing untoward had past between them.

"You hit me."

"I truly do apologize for that," he said, the smile fading to be replaced by an expression of shame.

"I'm sure."

"But I am!" he said. "You see, I was so certain you would welcome the family, be enthusiastic about join-ing it. I was willing to accept a slight rejection. But a major denial got to me. Again, I apologize."

"You're insane."

He laughed again. "Why? because I believe in Satan? You really don't think that He will show up to-night, that He will rise out of the earth to dance with you."

"No. Not for a minute."

"But He will. And once He has, there will be no more misunderstandings between us."

She said nothing.

He stood up. "I have to begin the main part of the ceremony now. Are you comfortable enough?"

"Untie my hands."

"In a while," he said.

"When?"

"When the dance begins." He turned and walked away from her, took a position in a circle of crimson cloth which had been stretched out in the snow on the north side of the fire.

Katherine wondered if anyone in Owlsden could see the glow from the fire, then decided there was no hope of that. It was not only shielded by the trees on this side of the ski run and the trees on the other side, but by the dense sheets of snow as well. If they stood by the windows for an hour, they would be lucky to see even a spark. Michael had been careful to place this devil's dance farther away from Owlsden than the pre-vious three had been.

Michael had begun to chant, his arms raised in a pleading gesture to the leaping flames before him, his toboggan hat off, his yellow hair lying wetly across his broad, handsome forehead.

The other cultists seemed absorbed in the crazy ritu-als, and Katherine wondered if it would be possible to rise up and edge carefully backwards into the shadows of the trees, out of the circle of the bonfire's glow. If she could slip out of their sight, she could go any of half a dozen different ways and, surely, lose them in the storm and the night. All she would need was a two minute head start, two minutes before they saw she was gone . . . But when she started to get cautiously to her feet, a hand grasped her shoulder from behind and pressed her back down.

"Don't move, please," a voice said behind.

She was under the eye of a guard.

After that, she could do little but watch Michael lead the cultists through their mad brand of worship. She made a genuine attempt to understand what he was saying, but she found the twisted, consonant-choked language he was using completely alien to her. It was not Latin, exactly, but something beyond Latin, something that sounded incredibly, incomprehensibly ancient.

At regular intervals, the women in the cult came forth, one at a time, carrying small black jars from which they spooned herbs and incense into their priest's hands, then stepped quickly out of his way, bowing at him like an oriental woman in the presence of her most respected elder male relative. Then Michael said lines of verse over the handfuls of herbs and tossed them into the center of the bonfire while the rest of the celebrants echoed a chorus or two of a rhyming song in that same old language.

Perhaps it was only her imagination, but Katherine thought that the fire, at times, *bent*, leaned towards Michael as if it were seeking the next batch of spices before he was ready to supply them. And when it consumed the herbs, it also seemed to expand as if pleased with the offering.

That was impossible.

She directed herself not to think like that any more, for she knew that she had no chance of escape if she once let herself be caught up in their fantasies.

She wriggled her hands together in the rope that bound them, but she could not feel any loose ends.

Uneasily, she wondered when the devil's dance would begin, and if anyone in Owlsden would notice her absence in time to come looking for her in the woods.

One of those questions was answered a moment later as the cultists began slowly to form into a train that circled and re-circled the bonfire, one stationed just a few feet behind the other.

Michael came to her and helped her to her feet.

"You can still let me go," she said. Her voice was weak, cracked with strain, the first indication she had given them that she was paralyzed with fear. She could remember, in all too gruesome detail, what they had done with the kitten in the barn, and she could not help but wonder if she were truly being initiated into the family or if she were being offered as their first human sacrifice.

He ignored her and said, "You will join the dance now. And when it is finished, you will be one of us, because you will have danced with *Him*, and you will *want* to be in the family."

"I won't dance," she said.

Gently, he pushed her forward, though she tried desperately to hold her ground.

"It will be a beautiful experience, Katherine," Michael said, touching her gently on the cheek with the tips of his ungloved fingers, as if he were testing the unblemished texture of her skin.

"No."

He shoved harder.

She stumbled forward, almost fell, regained her balance just as she was caught up in the ring of Believers, found herself moving along with them as they shrieked and moaned the odd litanies, though she was not able to maintain their neat rhythm.

She stopped and attempted to push through them toward the open space beyond the fire.

Abruptly, on either side of her, two cultists appeared, one woman and one man, both with a switch in hand. The switches were much like the one that Mrs. Coleridge, of the orphanage, had always been so quick to use: thin, long, dwindling at the tip, perhaps a stiffened willow lash or the younger shoot from a birch branch. They began to herd Katherine, swatting her repeatedly about the head and shoulders until she had no other choice but to continue around the fire with the worshipers.

"Help!" she shouted.

That was no good. Her throat was so dry, her energy levels so low, the noises of the chants and the storm so strong, that she could barely hear herself.

She struck out at the switch-bearers again and again, continually missed them.

The pace of the dance seemed to be picking up, as did the choppy rhythm of the religious chants. She was moving faster herself, her face and neck stung by the thin, hard, relentless reed whips; the bright fire whirled by on the lefthand, showering sparks up like bright ephemeral butterflies while the dark, black-brown-green forest passed in a jumble of stark impressions off to her right.

"Move!" the male herder said.

"Faster!" the woman said.

She was not so terrified as she had been at the start, for she was swiftly growing too weary for terror. Her arms felt like lead weights, while her legs seemed too insubstantial to support her at all. She barely had the energy to stay on her feet, after her battle with the wind and the snow when she had fought her

way from Owlsden to the head of the ski run to keep her rendez-vous with Michael Harrison. Too, she had the strong feeling that none of this could actually be transpiring, that it was all much too silly and childish to be real. A dream. A nightmare. And with that notion hovering at the back of her mind, the terror was cut even further until there was nothing at all to occupy her mind but the plodding steps of the dance. If she danced, if she cooperated and moved forward around the fire, then it would all be over sooner than it otherwise might, and she could go home and rest . . . and wake up from the dream . . .

“Move!”

“Faster!”

The chants were manic now, pitched in higher voices, the words coming so fast they tumbled over one another.

Then she saw something so incredible at the perimeter of the dancing circle that it shattered her mental lethargy in the instant and filled her with the energy of pure, unrelieved horror. Her heart speeded, and her throat constricted in the initial puckering of a scream.

“Faster!”

“Move!”

The flames danced along with the worshipers, rising and falling in their rhythm, surged higher and suddenly changed color: blue.

The thing that prowled beyond the dancing circle now kept pace with Katherine, with no other dancer but her, its fierce red eyes fixed upon her face. Its stare was obsessive, cold and patently evil. She did not want to think about it, to acknowledge it, but she had no choice in the matter. It was a wolf . . .

No, not a wolf, she told herself as it padded along beside her, not a dozen feet away. Just a dog.

The switches came down harder than ever.

“Faster!”

Just a dog.

She passed Michael. He was not dancing, but he was chanting even louder than the others, holding a book in his open hands as if he were a minister with the Bible. She was sure, whatever the nature of the tone, it was not the Bible.

“Move!”

The wolf seemed to be grinning at her. Its jaws gaped, revealing rows of huge, white teeth, the red maw beyond them, the lolling tongue. It was clearly a wolf, not a dog, and one of the largest wolves that she had ever seen, nearly as large as a man, with shoulders broad enough to carry the weight of a rider.

Now, that was an insane thought. Who would want to ride a wolf?

The fire changed color once again, crackling loudly as some chemical was tossed into it: green . . .

A nightmare, nothing more, had to be.

The wolf raised up onto its hind paws for a brief moment, quite as if it were attempting to stand like a man, and then it fell back, unable to perform the feat

Somewhere close at hand, something made a strange, low rumbling noise. When Katherine tried to locate it and understand it, she realized that she was listening to the scream that had been trapped in her throat but which was now issuing from her as an agonizingly hoarse moan.

Fire: orange.

“Move!”

She tripped, did not fall, wished that she *had* fallen, found herself moving forward again. Her body obeyed the thumping drive of the chants as if she had been en-tranced and had no control over herself.

The wolf tried to leap onto its hind feet again, failed again, dropped onto all fours.

It watched her.

She could sense an approaching end to the ceremony, and she did not want to face the ultimate moment. It couldn't happen, of course. The wolf was only a wolf, not a manifestation of a demon. Still, she did not want to reach the point of the ceremony.

The wolf tried to stand a third time. This time, it actually achieved its purpose, whirled about with the music of the worshipers' voices, leaping clumsily forward on its hind feet, watching her intently, watching . . .



She tried to mutter a prayer, but she could not get the words out—as if something were preventing her from praying.

The wolf howled and—

Everything came to a sudden, unexpected halt as a shotgun blast exploded in the trees and echoed deafen-ingly through the thick trunks of the pine trees. The moment the echo died sufficiently for him to be heard, Alex Boland shouted: “Don't move!”

## CHAPTER 18

The fire continued to burn, though it did not leap quite so high or sputter nearly as bright as before, providing a properly eerie, flickering orange-yellow illumination for the final act of this unconventional drama. In its soft glow, the cultists stood with their hands at their sides, their faces slack, shoulders stooped forward as if they were weighted down with burdens that no one but themselves could see. They were physically exhausted from the long dance, emotionally exhausted by the frenzy that had so completely possessed them, and mentally disconcerted by the abrupt termination of the ritual which they had intellectually anticipated would reach a satisfying conclusion. Not a one of them made a move toward Alex where he stood directly behind Michael with a two-barrel shotgun slung across his arm and his finger on the trigger. It was not so much that they were afraid of him or of the gun, but more as if they did not even believe he was there. They had not caught up with the present, not mentally and emotionally, and they were still several minutes in the past, living through the colored flames, the heat that poured from the bonfire, the chants, the dance, the wolf . . .

The wolf.

Katherine looked quickly around, stepped to the right to peer beyond the flames, but she could not see the wolf anywhere. Had it really been there in the first place, she wondered, or had it been nothing more than a figment of her imagination, generated by her fatigue?

"Are you all right, Katherine?" Alex asked.

She nodded.

Apparently, Alex did not see the slight movement of her head, for he asked the same question again, his voice much more strained than it had been the first time. "Katherine, are you feeling all right?"

"Yes," she said.

She knew that she should walk over there and stand beside Alex, but she did not have the energy right now. Besides, she was depressed at the prospect of having nowhere else to turn except to the pessimistic, always-brooding Boland boy. What had happened to the world these last few days? What had happened to the happy people she had always found wherever she went?

"You weren't asked here," Michael said, slowly turning to face Alex who stood only a couple of feet away from him.

"Was *she*?" Alex asked, indicating Katherine with an abrupt nod of his head.

"Yes."

"In full knowledge of what was going to happen here?" Alex asked, clearly disbelieving.

"In full knowledge," Michael said. He turned to face Katherine and smiled. His eyes were bright blue again, his face in an easy pose, his smile broad and winning. But in his eyes still, no longer shielded from her, was that fanatic gleam. "Isn't that so, Katherine? Didn't you come here to join the family?"

"No," she said.

"Katherine, you knew all along that—"

"You're lying, Michael," Katherine said.

He took a step towards her.

"Stop right there," Alex said.

Michael stopped.

When Katherine spoke again, her voice sounded faint, very distant and weary, almost as if it were someone else's voice issuing from her throat. "I know that you're lying, and Alex knows it. It can't do you any good now."

"*I am not lying!*" He spoke slowly, enunciating each word with care, clearly on the brink of complete insanity. His plans had been brought down around his shoulders, his schemes demolished in one penultimate moment, and he could not cope.

"Yes," Katherine said gently, as if she were talking to a child. "Yes, Michael, you are."

His face suddenly twisted into the ugly lines that she had seen earlier in the evening, during the

ceremony. He turned to look at Alex and then began to shout at him. Unexpectedly, he tossed the Satanic bible into Alex's face and simultaneously dived forward.

"Alex, look out!" Katherine shouted, too late to warn him.

Alex went down as Harrison twisted his legs out from under him, struck the ground hard, his head bouncing on the needle-carpeted, snow-sifted turf. The shotgun angled crazily upwards as it went off the second time; the shot pellets tore through the low branches with a crackling noise like crumpled cello-phane, and a shower of pine needles fell down on the grappling men.

Katherine looked around the bonfire at the other cultists, wondering how long it would take them to re-alize that they could rush the struggling pair, separate them and quickly subdue Alex. He would not have a chance against nearly a dozen of them. For the moment, however, the cultists seemed mesmerized by the battle between the two men, their arms still limp at their sides, their faces oddly colored by the dwindling fire, their breaths beginning to make smoke rings on the swiftly chilling winter air.

She looked around for a club, an unburned log or something pointed that would do as a weapon, but she could not see anything that might help her.

Alex had rolled, carrying himself atop Michael Harrison, and was trying to get his hands around the larger man's throat. Harrison's neck scarf, however, was a perfect shield against strangulation. In a moment, Harrison had turned the tables again, kicking up, throwing Alex sideways and coming down hard atop him again.

Katherine took a step toward them, realized she would only get in Alex's way and hinder him.

She looked back at the cultists. They did not move, but how long would they refrain from taking part in it?

Michael struck Alex full in the face with his fist, reared back and struck again.

For a moment, it seemed as if Alex sagged into unconsciousness, but then he screeched inhumanly and heaved up, freed his hands which had been pinned under Harrison's weight, and tore at the man's scarf, found the ends of it and began to pull them in opposite directions.

Almost strangled, Michael Harrison yelped sickly and reared back, tearing loose of Alex's grip and rocking onto his feet. He turned, bent to the ground and came up with the unloaded shotgun, reversing it in his hands so that he held the end of the long barrel and could use the heavy stock as a club. As he raised it, preparatory to striking down at Alex's head, another shot slammed through the dense woods like a mallet against a block of iron—a rifle shot this time, not the louder boom of a shotgun.

Michael froze with the gun raised in the air and looked beyond Alex at the woods. Two other men had stepped out of hiding, training loaded weapons on him.

The first was Alton Harle.

The second was Leo Franks.

"That's enough," Harle said to Michael. "Drop the gun to your side, please, without making any quick moves."

Michael still held the gun, disbelieving.

"Drop it," Franks said.

Finally, he did.

"You all right, Alex?"

Alex got to his feet, shook his head and wiped absentmindedly at the blood that trickled out of his nose. "Okay, I guess."

"Better get the shotgun."

"Right." Michael made no move to harm him as he bent and picked it up, brushed the snow from it and slung it under his arm,

"And you better join us, Katherine," Harle said.

Numb, Katherine walked across the clearing and stood next to Alex. She felt him put his arm around her waist to help support her, and she realized that she must look as exhausted as she felt. She leaned against him, looked up at him and smiled, though she could not be sure if the smile was more of a grimace than intended. She said, "Thank you." In the face of all that he had just been through, most of it on her

account, that seemed like a painfully inadequate response. Un-fortunately, she couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.”

“We'll be in a warm house soon.”

“I'd like that.”

She realized that she *would* like it, even if it was Owlsden that they were returning to. Suddenly, the old mansion had become a haven from the world, no longer a place to be left behind at any cost. How could she ever have been so foolish as to flee it in the first place? Its walls offered a security that, at the moment, she could not imagine finding anywhere else in the world.

The cultists were still ranged around the almost de-pleted fire, in the same places where they had ceased their dance, like figures in a carved tableau. Slowly, the trance seemed to lift from them, weariness and anxiety settle in. They glanced at one another, shuffled their feet on the trampled snow and looked distinctly worried. Still, none of them appeared to have the slightest notion of rushing at the three men who were aligned against them. Either their Satanic religious fervor was not so strong as it had once seemed to be— or they were the sort who could not function as a group in the absence of a strong leader.

And their leader was no longer strong.

Michael had changed. When Katherine looked at him where he stood only a few feet away, she was shocked by the metamorphosis that had taken place in his face and in his carriage. His blue eyes only stared over her head now, glassy and faraway, as if they viewed another world than this one. His mouth was slightly open, his lips working even though he did not speak. He looked like a retarded child who could do nothing for himself, his hands at his sides, fingers slack, shoulders slumped forward. When faced with his final defeat, he had shattered.

“Michael?” she said.

He did not respond.

“Michael?”

“I don't think he hears you,” Alex said.

Michael, as if in confirmation of what Alex said, did not even blink his large, blue eyes.

“How awful,” Katherine said, looking away from him.

Alex made his arm tighter about her waist, as if giving her a bit of his own strength. “Let's hope that he hasn't gone completely over the edge. I'd like to hear him explain what he thought he was doing with this whole Satanic thing. I'd like to know why he killed Yuri.”

“We better be going,” Alton Harle suggested.

Alex nodded, then turned to the cultists. “We're going out of the woods, toward the ski run, cut directly across that. It's hardly snowing at all now; we've only got the wind to fight. We'll be back in Owlsden in fifteen or twenty minutes. You will all stay in a group, well ahead of us. I urge you, please, to behave your-selves all the way home.”

## CHAPTER 19

Since the telephone wires were on the same poles as the power lines, Owlsden had been cut off from out-side communications simultaneously with its loss of light and heat, and it was not possible for them to ring up Constable Carrier and arrange to have him assume responsibility for the prisoners. Leo Franks donned skis and went down the slopes into town to rouse the policeman from his bed and to arrange for a couple of deputies to make the return trip up on the ski lift.

All of the cultists except Michael Harrison were herded into the library where Mason Keene and Alton Harle kept a watch over them with two loaded shot-guns. Katherine thought that, from the expressions on their faces, it was clear that neither Keene nor Harle would hesitate in pulling the trigger if that was their last recourse to keep the mob in line. Michael was taken to the dining room downstairs, where the other fireplace was in operation, and he was placed in a chair against the wall where Alex could ram a rifle squarely on his chest.

"Is that necessary?" Lydia asked.

"Yes," Alex said. The tone of his voice brooked no debate, but she was not the sort of woman to be easily dissuaded.

She said, "But he doesn't even seem to be aware of us."

"It could be an act," Alex said.

Lydia said, "You can see that it is no act. It's genu-ine enough. That poor boy is no longer with us."

By heating the milk at the fireplace, Patricia Keene had made hot chocolate for those who wanted it. Katherine held a mug of it now and sipped cautiously at the steamy liquid, slowly thawing out as it ran down her throat and warmed her stomach.

"How do you feel?" Lydia asked her.

"Better," she said.

"What an ordeal!"

"Less than it might have been if Alex hadn't chanced along."

Alex snorted good-naturedly. "It wasn't chance, be-lieve me. I knew that something could happen tonight, what with a major snow coming, and Yuri dead only a day. I went into town this morning and brought Alton and Leo back with me after dark, hid them both up-stairs so that, if the house was being watched, they might pass by unseen."

"Then it was one of them that followed me upstairs, when I was getting ready to leave Owlsden tonight," Katherine said.

"Alton, in fact," Alex said. "He admitted to me that he had been clumsy about it, and he looked like a whipped dog when he reported that you'd fooled him at the kitchen door. God, did we scramble then!"

"How did he know to follow me, though?" she asked.

"It was easy enough to see that Michael had con-tacted you on the phone, just before the power black-out, and that he had told you something to get you out of Owlsden. I heard enough of the conversation to tell that, and I guessed that he was warning you against me."

"He was."

"He's always hated me," Alex said.

Katherine said, "It seemed to be the other way around, though, as if you hated him for no reason."

"I disliked him, because I knew that he couldn't be trusted. All through school, I'd been the subject of his scorn and his clever plots to humiliate me. No one ever believed he was purposefully humiliating me, be-cause he was so careful and so cunning about it."

"Like when he knocked you down during our walk the other day," she said, holding the warm mug in both hands.

"Like then, yes."

"I thought you were crazy for thinking it was more than an accident."

"I know what you thought, and I was angry with you for siding with him, even though I should have

realized how bad I was making myself look and how logical his story seemed to be. But you can be sure that he saw us going up that street, circled to another block, went up faster than we did, turned a corner as planned and—boom, down I go in the snowbank.”

Michael appeared not to hear any of it, and he stared at that other world more intently than ever.

“He seemed so positive, so cheerful,” Katherine said. She was still having a battle with herself, trying to come to terms with herself and gain an understanding of why she had so woefully misjudged nearly everyone involved in this affair.

“And you are naturally disposed to like everyone with that sort of attitude,” Alex said. He was not being sarcastic or even scornful, but genuinely sympathetic.

“Isn't everyone?” she asked.

“To some degree.”

“Well, then—”

“But not to the degree you are so disposed,” he added. He looked at her and smiled, his dark eyes flickering with a reflection of the fire in the hearth. “Or to the degree that mother is. You are both chronic optimists, two of a kind.”

“Alex, really! Give us more credit for judgment than that!” Lydia said a bit huffily. “Not *chronic* optimists.”

“Yes, chronic. Neither of you wants to admit that there could be anything nasty in anyone. You want to see the world as one big rosy playground where everyone loves everyone else and where the evil people are always strangers that you'll never meet.”

Katherine was struck by his concise summation of her entire life-philosophy, but Lydia was less impressed. She said, “Isn't that a nice way to see the world, though?”

“No,” he said. “Because the world really isn't that way, and wishing that it were will not change it one little bit.”

“He's right,” Katherine said. “I disliked him and his friends solely because they were more pessimistic than optimistic. And because of that difference, I immediately categorized them, labeled them, decided they were capable of evil only because they were different than I was. And because Michael was so friendly, so optimistic, I liked him and thought he could do only good. I wasn't using my head, just my heart, and I see now that's no way to get through the world.”

“Because,” Alex elaborated, “not everyone who smiles and is nice to you has decent human motives. A smile can be a front far more easily than a frown can be, a prop to make you think the way the other person wants you to think.”

“You sound positively cynical,” Lydia said.

“No, just realistic,” he said.

Katherine said. “I think it's going to be good for me to be around you, Alex. You'll provide me with an outlook that I obviously need.”

“And it'll be good for me to be around you,” he said, smiling at her. “Sometimes, my pessimism may get just a bit *too* strong, as you have pointed out.”

She blushed but could not control it and quickly took a sip of her hot chocolate.

Then she looked at Harrison.

His mouth was open, and he was breathing heavily, but his eyes still dwelt beyond the walls of the room.

There was a sudden resurgence of the sound of wind as the kitchen door was opened at the end of the corridor only a few feet beyond the room in which they waited, then the sound of several men slapping themselves to beat the cold from their clothes, then voices.

“They're here,” Alex said. “Patricia, would you go see to heating more milk for the Constable and his men?”

“Right away,” the pretty woman said, leaving the dining room in a rustle of pajamas and fluffy dressing robe.

A moment after she had gone, Constable Cartier entered the room, followed by two deputies and Leo Franks. “Colder than the North Pole out there,” he said, nodding at Lydia.

“Patricia's gone to make hot chocolate,” Lydia said. “She'll have it in a few minutes.”

Cartier smiled, then looked at Alex who held the rifle in his lap, pointed at Michael “I hope you know what you've done, son.”

“And what have I done?” Alex asked.

“For one thing, you've taken the law into your own hands,” Cartier said, unzipping his thermal jacket.

Alex tensed visibly, then slowly relaxed as he said, “And what would you have had me do, wait until they had a chance to murder Katherine like they did Yuri?”

“Be careful of your accusations,” Cartier said.

“They're facts.”

“I hope you have proof—”

Leo interrupted. “I didn't take the time to tell him the whole story, Alex. Perhaps you'd better fill him in.”

“Sit down,” Alex directed. “It'll take a minute or two.”

Cartier looked directly at Michael for the first time and said, “Mr. Harrison, you'll have your own chance to tell us what happened whenever this one is finished with his . . .” His voice trailed out as he saw the va-cant stare in Michael's eyes.

“You see?” Alex asked.

Cartier nodded and sat down, while his deputies remained standing on either side of the dining room doors. “You had better tell me everything that hap-pened,” the policeman said, as if it were his own idea to begin that way.

Alex did just that, told it concisely and finished just as Patricia returned with four mugs of hot chocolate for the newcomers. For a while, no one said very much as the cold men sipped the chocolate and let the shivers drain out of them.

Then the constable turned toward Katherine and said, “Will you verify what he's said—in court if nec-essary?”

“It's all true,” Katherine replied. “Of course I'll ver-ify it.”

“Well, well, well,” he said, raising his mug and finishing the hot chocolate in several long gulps.

“What now?” Lydia asked.

Cartier looked at Michael. “I supposed we have to transport him and his entire crew down the mountain—though I'd like to wait here until morning before trying that.”

“No problem,” Lydia said. “There are plenty of bedrooms if you don't mind sleeping in the cold—or you can curl up on the divans down here.”

Cartier nodded, yawned. “I dread telling his father,” he said. “I'm going to have a fight on my hands to make him believe a word of it.”

“He'll believe,” Lydia said. “He only has to look.”

“Well . . .” Cartier said, standing up, stretching.

Alex said, “Wait.”

“Yes?”

“Aren't you forgetting something?” Alex asked.

Cartier wrinkled his brow in concentration, wiped a hand across his face as if to pull off some film that was keeping him from seeing things properly. “What?” he finally asked.

“Aren't you going to question him?”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“I thought it could wait.”

“I'd prefer to hear what he'll say now.”

Cartier looked at Michael. “Maybe he won't say anything.”

“Maybe. But if s worth a try. I want to know why he was messed up in the Satanic stuff.”

“Those people won't have good reasons,” Cartier said. “You expect them to have it all logically worked out? They won't. They're a bunch of crazies, more or less.”

“Just a few questions,” Alex insisted.

Cartier looked at Lydia, saw that she was not going to help him this time, hitched a chair up in front of Michael Harrison and said, "Okay, just a few. Got any in mind?"

"See if you can get him to talk first."

Cartier passed a hand in front of Michael's eyes, grunted when they didn't blink. He said, "Mr. Harrison? Mike?"

Mike did not respond.

"Mike, can you hear me?"

Harrison blinked rapidly, twice, as if something were in his eyes, but gave no indication that he even knew there were other people in the room with him—or, indeed, that he was in a room in Owlsden.

Cartier put one hand on the man's shoulder and let it rest there a moment as if he hoped that alone would cause some reaction, then gently shook Michael until it was plain to everyone present that he was not going to generate a response that way.

"Mike," Alex said, leaning forward and assuming command of the interrogation without being asked.

Harrison stared into another reality.

"Mike, this is Alex Boland."

"Alex, please be careful," Lydia said, pulling her robe closer to her. "Don't upset him."

Alex persisted. "Mike, are you listening? Do you know who I am?"

Harrison's gaze appeared to shift, to draw back from the edge of eternity to a point much closer the reality of this moment, of this room and these awful circumstances. But that might have been a momentary illusion, something that they all *wanted* to see and therefore had thought they *did* see.

"Mike?" Alex, continued. "Do you remember the fight we had in the woods, just a little while ago, when you were going to smash my head in with the butt of the shotgun?"

Harrison smiled, only briefly, the corners of his mouth twisted up in a quirky show of humor, and then he subsided into his stupor again, his shoulders even more slumped.

"You almost had me then," Alex said. "Didn't you, Mike? You were only seconds away from killing me."

To everyone's surprise, Michael Harrison answered him, though his expression had not changed, remained static and flat like a painting on cardboard. "Almost had you."

"You're getting there!" Cartier whispered, excited at this very different sort of chase.

Alex put his gun on the table and drew his chair closer to Michael, hunched his shoulders to make his manner more confidential.

"Be careful," Katherine said.

Alex turned, looked at her, winked without humor, looked back at his subject. He thought a moment, phrasing his next question, and said, "You would have liked to kill me, wouldn't you, Michael?"

"I've . . . always wanted to . . . kill you," Michael said.

His face was still bland, pale as snow, his stare distant and unrelated to his words. It was almost as if his eyes and his body existed on a different dimensional plane than this one, while his voice was the only projection of himself that could reach through the veil and contact them.

In fact, Katherine thought uncomfortably, his whole demeanor was less like that of a man in a catatonic trance than like that of a soul halfway to hell, calling back across the abysses of death or possession . . .

"Why did you want to kill me?" Alex asked.

He got no answer.

"Why, Michael?"

As if it were an unspeakably agonizing chore to divulge his motives, but also as if he were compelled to do so, Michael began to speak, his voice low and tight, his eyes focused on hell. "They named the town after you, didn't they, after your grandfather? And there you were, on the old mountaintop, in this goddamned castle, looking down on all of it like a baron or a lord, respected by everyone. They don't respect my father, because they fear him. Fear and respect are two utterly different things, and neither thrives very well in the presence of the other, no matter what the armchair philosophers tell you. My father hires and fires, and they fear him and consequently respect none of us ..." He paused, wrinkled his



nose as if he had smelled something rancid. “Of course, my father generates fear in everyone he knows, whether or not he employs them. That was another thing I never could understand—why, on top of everyone's respect, you should have a family that loved you. My mother's dead, you know. And my father . . . doesn't love, not anyone. I still have marks on my back and bottom where he took the strap to me years ago . . .” Again, his voice trailed away, but again he began the subject anew. “In school, it was Alex Boland with the good grades, the best grades, always just a hair better than mine. I tried to beat you out in everything, but I was always second best—unless I tied you in a test with a perfect score, and that wasn't the same as triumph, not at all . . .”

Katherine listened, feeling sad and slightly ill as Michael catalogued all the things in which he had taken a second place to Alex, listing things that others would have considered triumphs of a first order but which he—in his obsessive competition of which Alex was never fully aware—put down as defeats.

“But why the Satanism?”

Michael licked his lips. “It was a way.”

“A way to what?”

“Strike back.”

“At me?” Alex asked.

“Yes.”

“You don't believe in that stuff—”

Michael's voice changed, grew more urgent, even while his gaze remained distant, unseeing. “I *do* believe. We have successfully summoned *Him* forth many times.”

“Satan?”

“Yes.”

“I don't believe it.”

Michael shifted in his chair, as if he were sitting on tacks and was in considerable pain. “You saw the wolf.”

“Did I?”

“K-Katherine did.”

“What wolf is this?” Alex asked.

“The wolf at the dance, in the woods, earlier to-night. It's *Him*, a manifestation that human eyes can accept.”

Cartier drew back, blinked, looked at Katherine and then, clearly not believing a word Michael said, shook his head sadly.

“Suppose you actually did summon the devil,” Alex said. “How could you use him to hurt me?”

“By having Him possess Katherine, to begin with,” Michael said.

Katherine shivered, tipped her mug of hot chocolate to her mouth and found that it was empty, put the mug on the table and looked back at the interrogation.

Michael said, “From the moment I watched you showing her the town, being oh so solicitous, I knew you were interested in her, that you liked her more than a little.”

Alex looked down at the floor, glanced quickly at Katherine and then away. “And you'd steal her away. That was my first punishment.”

“Yes.”

“What else?”

“When we had enough members in the cult,” he said, “I planned to summon up fire spirits. I planned to destroy Owlsden.”

“I see,” Alex said.

“It would have been a pleasure to watch all of you burn to death,” Michael said. He laughed shortly, like the bark of a dog, then slipped back into his semi-coma.

“Enough?” Carrier asked.

“Almost.”

“Finish it, then.”

Alex said, “Where did you get the key to Owlsden?”

"The carpenter in Saxonby, the one who does your work here, makes your keys."

"He gave them to you?"

"Hardly," Michael said. "But he orders his lumber from my father. I delivered it a few times, learned where he kept his master keys, found the one tagged for Owlsden and, when he was out of the shop, stole in and made myself a few duplicates."

Michael sighed and turned away from the other man. He said, to Carrier, "Okay. He's yours from now on."

Later that same evening, Alex asked Katherine into the kitchen, where they sat alone at the table, in the glow of the fireplace, and sipped two more mugs of hot chocolate. At first, she thought that there was something he wanted to discuss with her, but soon she realized that he just enjoyed her company and that he wanted to ramble on about anything that came to mind.

They had been there about an hour when she said, "Did you see a wolf in the woods tonight?"

He looked at her, held her gaze. "I saw a dog, a German Shepherd."

"It looked more like a wolf to me," she said.

He shook his head negatively, insistently. "It was a dog, probably belonged to one of them. We'll know in a couple of days, when they've all been properly questioned."

"But," she persisted, "it acted so strangely for a dog, getting onto its hind feet like that. It almost seemed to be—dancing."

Alex rose and went to the window, looked out at the mounds of snow. She joined him as he said, "A trained dog, then."

"Perhaps it really—"

Without warning, he turned and slipped both arms around her, drew her against him. "Am I being too bold?" he asked.

She laughed softly. "No."

He leaned forward, placed his lips on hers and kissed her for a long while. "Too bold now?"

"No," she said.

He kissed her again.

When they broke apart this second time, she said, "I can't help but feel that the wolf was more than a dog that—"

"Now," he said, interrupting her, "you're the pessimist, and I'm the optimist. How did this reversal of roles come about so quickly?"

"Really, Alex, the whole thing scares me."

"Let me tell you an old superstition."

"I've heard enough of those lately, thank you."

He kissed her nose and said, "This one is different. There is an old superstition that states that no evil can touch a man—no werewolf claw him, no vampire bite him, no devil claim him—if he loves someone and if someone loves him in return. Therefore, with a little time and a little trust, I think we can safely forget about the wolf. It won't be able to touch us."

"Now," she said, "you're getting a bit too bold."

"I am?"

"Yes," she said. "But tell me the same story tomorrow and see if I find it less forward than I do now."

"Do you think you will?"

"That's a distinct possibility," she said.

"I'll tell you that story every day from now on, if necessary," Alex said. "Since you work here, I've got a captive audience."

The snow had ceased altogether, and the wind was far less furious than it had been a few hours earlier. A pair of owls departed the rafters of the house, hooting as they began a search for prey. The sound of their hollow voices carried to Katherine and Alex and seemed, in their gentle way, to be presentiments for a more peaceful, happy future.



If your dealer does not have any of the MAGNUM EASY EYE CLASSICS, send price of book plus 10 cents to cover postage to MAGNUM CLASSICS, 18 East 41st Street, Room 1501, New York, N.Y. 10017.

ADVENTURES OF PINOCCHIO by Carlo Collodi	.95
AESOP'S FABLES by Aesop	.95
ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND & THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS by Lewis Carroll	.95
AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS by Jules Verne	.95
AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN by Benjamin Franklin	.95
BLACK BEAUTY by Anna Sewell	.95
CALL OF THE WILD by Jack London	.95
"CAPTAINS COURAGEOUS" by Rudyard Kipling	.95
CHRISTMAS CAROL by Charles Dickens	.95
EREWHON by Samuel Butler	.95
FIRST MEN IN THE MOON by H. G. Wells	.95
FRANKENSTEIN by Mary Shelley	.95
GREEN MANSIONS by W. H. Hudson	.95
HAMLET by William Shakespeare	.95
HANS BRINKER; OR, THE SILVER SKATES by Mary Mapes Dodge	1.25
HEIDI by Johana Spyri	.95
HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES by A. Conan Doyle	.95
INVISIBLE MAN by H. G. Wells	.95
ISLAND OF DR. MOREAU by H. G. Wells	.95
JFK: A COMPLETE BIOGRAPHY 1917-1963 by William H. A. Carr	.95
JUST SO STORIES by Rudyard Kipling	.95
KIDNAPPED by Robert L. Stevenson	.95
KING SOLOMON'S MINES by H. Rider Haggard	.95
LEGEND OF SLEEPY HOLLOW & OTHER STORIES by Washington Irving	.95
LOOKING BACKWARD by Edward Bellamy	.95
LUCK OF ROARING CAMP & OTHER STORIES by Bret Harte	.95
MACBETH by William Shakespeare	.95
MASTER OF BALLANTRAE by Robert Louis Stevenson	.95
MASTER OF THE WORLD by Jules Verne	.95
NORTHANGER ABBEY by Jane Austen	.95
O. HENRY'S SHORT STORIES by O. Henry	.95
PERSUASION by Jane Austen	.95
PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY by Oscar Wilde	.95
POE'S TALES OF MYSTERY & TERROR by Edgar Allan Poe	.95
PRISONER OF ZENDA by Anthony Hope	.95
RED BADGE OF COURAGE by Stephen Crane	.95
SOLAS MARNER by George Elliot	.95
STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL & MR. HYDE & OTHER STORIES by Robert L. Stevenson	.95
TIME MACHINE by H. G. Wells	.95
TOM SAWYER by Samuel L. Clemens	.95
TOM SAWYER ABROAD & TOM SAWYER DETECTIVE by Samuel L. Clemens	.95
TREASURE ISLAND by Robert Louis Stevenson	.95
TURN OF THE SCREW & DAISY MILLER by Henry James	.95
UP FROM SLAVERY by Booker T. Washington	.95
VICAR OF WAKEFIELD by Oliver Goldsmith	.95
WAR OF THE WORLDS by H. G. Wells	.95
WHITE FANG by Jack London	.95
WIND IN THE WILLOWS by Kenneth Grahame	.95
WONDER BOOK by Nathaniel Hawthorne	.95
WONDERFUL WIZARD OF OZ by L. Frank Baum	.95

